

Occasional Paper: “Negro-driver” or “Illustrious Exile”: Revisiting *Illustrious Exile: Journal of my Sojourn in the West Indies* (2006)’

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In 2004, Kofi Annan gave the inaugural Robert Burns Memorial Lecture on the theme of ‘The State of the World and Brotherhood of Man’ at the UN headquarters.^[1] On that occasion he declared that the words of ‘A Man’s a Man for a’ that’ should form the basis of a universal plea for tolerance in the face of prejudice and ignorance. There can be no doubt that Burns articulates the grievances and sorrows of the ordinary individual. In his poetry and correspondence, however, we read of his interests not just in universal ‘man’ but in the particular politics of the eighteenth century. Writing from Ellisland in 1789, the poet thanked Helen Maria Williams for sending him a copy of her own poem on the Slave Trade.^[2] He describes it as ‘excellent’ and says that he read it ‘with the highest pleasure’.^[3] During the course of some minor technical quibbles he mentions ‘the wrongs of the poor African’ and ‘the unfeeling selfishness of the Oppressor’ engaged in ‘this infernal traffic’.^[4] One verse of her poem describes a crewman on a slave ship who has a kind heart, for which Williams gives him credit. But Burns questions his place in the poem, for despite his apparent ‘generosity’ he is ‘not only an unconcerned witness but in some degree an efficient agent in the business’.^[5] ‘Efficient agents’ in the slave trade become the target in his vitriolic ‘Ode, Sacred To The Memory Of Mrs Oswald Of Auchencruive’, referring obliquely to the huge fortune made by her late husband from his trading in slaves: ‘See these hands ne’er stretched to save, / Hands that took, but never gave’.^[6] In a letter to Dr Moore, Burns wrote how ‘she was detested with the most heartfelt cordiality’,^[7] and that she was surely bound for perdition, where her ‘Ten thousand glittering pounds a-year’ would be of no comfort to her. However, the actual source of her ‘bursting purse’ is not directly stated.^[8]

What can we infer about the attitude of Burns to the politics of slavery? It is reasonable to suppose that he opposed the slave trade. What is not so easy to determine is how he viewed the people he understood as ‘Negroes’ or ‘Africans’, their place in the world, and the new world in the

Caribbean that was being made as he wrote. Burns invariably uses the word 'slave' in a figurative sense. For example, in a 1792 letter to William Nicol he signed himself 'thy devoted slave'.^[9] The reference to the 'coward slave' – in the first verse of 'A Man's a Man for a' that' – refers to one who would willingly debase himself and allow himself to be dominated by another. Hence his famous rhetorical question, 'Wha sae base as be a slave?'^[10] The use of the word implies an element of complicity and cowardly acquiescence, and may have nothing to do with the contemporary trade in captured Africans.

Questions of slavery and society are contentious, even provocative. But they would be hardly worth raising if it were not for something that happened to Burns in 1786. He had determined to emigrate to Jamaica and his letters indicate that preparations were well under way: he had obtained a post as book-keeper on a sugar plantation near Port Antonio, the passage had been arranged and he had put his affairs in order. He fully intended to sail from Greenock with Captain Cathcart on board the *Bell* on 20 September, bound for Kingston. As it happened, the Kilmarnock Edition of his *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* was a great success; he headed for Edinburgh, and the voyage was forgotten.^[11]

A year later, in August 1787 he returned to this aborted future and wrote a long letter to his friend Dr Moore. Thinking back to what might have happened if he had gone to Jamaica, he casually remarks that in that case he would have been 'a poor negro-driver':

Before leaving my native country for ever, I resolved to publish my Poems.---I weighed my productions as impartially as in my power; I thought they had merit; and 'twas a delicious idea that I would be called a clever fellow, even though it should never reach my ears a poor Negro-driver, or perhaps a victim to that inhospitable clime, and gone to the world of Spirits!^[12]

It is hard for us to reconcile the iconic figure of Robert Burns with such an occupation, and harder still when we think of how, a few years later, he berated Helen Maria Williams for finding excuses for a man who was 'not an unconcerned witness but in some degree an efficient agent in the business'. How could someone who had willingly signed up to be a 'poor negro-driver' later write with such passionate intensity about 'the unfeeling selfishness of the Oppressor'?

Firstly, there were thousands of Scots already well established in Jamaica. Cromwell had exiled large numbers of Scottish prisoners of war to the colony in the mid-seventeenth century. They were later followed by deported criminals and Covenanters, and finally by those who, like Burns, would have been prepared to travel to the colony as indentured servants, book-keepers, or simply

in search of a better life. In 1763, it was estimated that a third of the white population of Jamaica were Scots.^[13] Like Barbados, Jamaica has its St Andrews parish, and Scottish surnames and place-names are common. The plantation at Port Antonio was managed by Charles Douglas, the brother of Dr Patrick Douglas of Old Cumnock in Ayrshire, who owned the plantation – and its slaves – and who offered Burns a position there. So this would by no means have been a voyage into the unknown.

Secondly, it is unlikely that he would have regarded the move from Scotland as a permanent one. Despite Burns's poetic description in 'Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary?' heat, humidity, malaria, mosquitoes and yellow fever often made the colonies uncomfortable and potentially hazardous places. He had been told as much by a Jamaican couple whom he had met at the home of Dr Douglas.^[14] His salary of £30 was modest, but his accommodation would have been provided, and on the plantation there would have been little opportunity to spend money. It is fair to suppose that, like many other young men of the time, he anticipated making the return trip to Scotland after a few years with a useful sum in his pocket.^[15]

Of course, this is pure conjecture: there are no real facts with which to connect Scotland's national poet more solidly with the Caribbean. However, I feel a particularly strong interest in the issue. I am an Ayrshire-born Burns enthusiast who spends substantial periods of time in the West Indies. The publication in 2006 of my novel, *Illustrious Exile: Journal of my Sojourn in the West Indies*, was part of my effort to consider the legacies of colonialism, slavery and Scottish colonial activity.^[16] In it I began a creative engagement with the question of how Burns would have reacted to the realities of plantation life. But when I started on the book several years ago the 'negro-driver' reference had not been widely picked up; perhaps it had been avoided. The novel was published by the Leeds-based Peepal Tree Press, home of prize-winning literature from the Caribbean and Black Britain, and I cannot speak highly enough of the support and encouragement I was given by Jeremy Poynting and Hannah Bannister, not to mention their courage in accepting a first book from a white author. In Scotland the reaction has been muted. One newspaper declined to review the book, but hinted that they might carry a prominent news feature on it – but only on the condition that I would go on record as accusing Robert Burns of being 'a racist'. In any construction of Scottish stories there are evasions and omissions, and the slave trade has been one of them. From the outset my novel presents the reader with a familiar character of whom we have preconceptions and expectations. It tells a story, but it also recounts real historical events, and uses Burns in this difficult and controversial context to confront his own assumptions. My 'biofiction' sets Burns on a journey across the Atlantic uncertain of what he is going to find on the other side. He is an idealistic and optimistic 27-year-old who, in his haste to leave Scotland, has not fully thought through the consequences of his decision.

It is written in the first person, in the form of a diary, conveniently 'discovered' in the late 1990s. Just as Burns's letters vary greatly in tone and content, so do the diary entries. My own role in the book is ostensibly that of editor, which gave me the opportunity to supply an introduction, footnotes, a bibliography and a glossary. This was not *faux* scholarship for its own sake: I was concerned that as a piece of historical reconstruction the novel should be as accurate as possible, and that the reader should see it as more than just a work of speculative fiction. The phrase 'illustrious exile' is one that Burns uses in verses about Bonnie Prince Charlie entitled 'Birthday Ode for 31st December 1787':

Afar the illustrious Exile roams
Whom kingdoms on this day should hail,
An inmate in the casual shed
On transient pity's bounty fed
Haunted by busy Memory's bitter tale![\[17\]](#)

I felt it was appropriate as a title since on the West Indian plantations everybody was an exile of some kind, voluntarily or otherwise. My fictional version of the poet takes up the phrase, not to describe royalty without kingdom, but an enslaved man within plantation society:

Illustrious exile on a foreign strand
Bereft of honour or acclaim;
No refuge from his dark despair:
As one who should taste freedom fair
Is ground to servitude and shame –
A wretched menial in a foreign land.[\[18\]](#)

In writing the book my models were the published letters of Robert Burns. These are a delight to read. His writing's deeply personal nature enabled me to create what I hope is a credible Burns *alter ego*. Those familiar with his letters will see where I have borrowed and adapted ideas and turns of phrase. For example, I pick up Burns's notion of the 'scale of good wifeship' that appears in a letter from 1792.[\[19\]](#) But the letters could not provide the full context: in relation to gender it would not have been honest to write this book without including the issue of sexual exploitation in the colonies, which intersected with endemic racism. Jamaica was a pigmentocracy and a succession of mixed-race children could, through generations, lead through a pseudo-scientific spectrum of increasingly 'acceptable' skin tones, via mulatto, quadroon, octroon, mustafee and mustafino, to pure white descendants. Burns's reputation as a lover would have made it easy for me to represent him as an inveterate womaniser. However, Burns is, in my biofiction, shocked by the way in which some of his plantation colleagues treat young black women, but he is unable to

stop this or stand outside it. Plantation society and the plantocracy, together with the enormous commercial interests it served, were infinitely more complex and powerful than Burns – real or fictional – could possibly have imagined. It would have been facile and unconvincing to have my version of Robert Burns confront and defeat slavery, and emerge as a heroic crusader alongside Wilberforce and Clarkson. As a ‘negro-driver’ and an ‘efficient agent in the business’ I decided that he would have found it difficult to extricate himself from the structures of plantation society.

From 1786 to 1791 he is at the Douglas plantation at Port Antonio. I portray Charles Douglas as an ameliorationist who detests cruelty. However, Douglas accepts without question the principle that schemes for ‘improving’ people must inevitably depend on making ‘them’ more like ‘us’.^[20]

The negative effects of this colonial notion of ‘improvement’ persist, and Ambrose, a Negro overseer in the novel, takes up this point. He has been a slave in white households and has acquired an education which he has found it necessary to conceal. However, he eventually feels he can confide in Burns. Speaking of white men, he says:

‘In dressing us in their clothes; making us use their language; converting us to Christianity, and binding us to their laws, they do little more than patronise. You assume, though you may not perhaps realise it, that *equality* means black people resembling white ones so closely that no difference remains, except for the colour of their skin. We must become like them. But does this not also beg the question that the ways of the white man are superior? Does it not deny us the dignity of a culture and an identity to call our own? Would I ask you to adopt the habits of Negroes?’

‘I had not thought of that.’

‘Of course not. You assumed it without thinking.’^[21]

Ambrose’s point is important, for its relevance is not diminished even today, when stereotypical notions of ‘them’ and ‘us’ – British and Caribbean – are still to be found. As the same character observes:

Where is my native land? [...] Saint Domingue? France? England? This benighted colony? Or perhaps a place in Africa where I have never been and whose name I do not even know? I have been a stranger in every land I have ever lived in. Where can I call home? Who are my people? [...] But now I am just one black man amongst countless thousands who are everywhere and who belong nowhere. We are your slaves for now – mere possessions – but your children shall inherit us and our unmet desires Robert.^[22]

This wide and lasting inheritance is something that the colonists and the British public at large had not properly anticipated. Readers of Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* will recognise the literary, cultural and historical implications of 'native land', but the fictional Burns is only able to imagine in the vaguest terms the terrible legacy that slavery would leave.

In Edinburgh the real Burns became infatuated by Agnes M'Lehose – Clarinda – and they had a relationship for about four years, which remained platonic, though Burns would have wished otherwise. Agnes was married, but had left her husband James on the grounds of his cruelty towards her. James had gone to Jamaica where he obtained a position as a lawyer. Agnes followed him there in 1791, hoping to reconcile, but this proved impossible since James had formed a relationship with a free mulatta, and fathered a daughter, Ann Lavinia M'Lehose. I introduce them as characters in the book, where Agnes's arrival at Port Antonio precipitates a disastrous chain of events that compels Burns to leave Jamaica, and the remainder of the story is set in 'Demerary' in the harsher, less regulated Guianas – now Demerara, a region of Guyana, but at that time a Dutch colony. He finds himself in another plantation run by a Scot. Readers should not be surprised by this. In 1800 there were sugar plantations in the colony called Edinburgh, Glasgow, Strathspey, Perth, Dundee, Caledonia, Hibernia, Aberdeen, Dunkeld, Montrose, Dumbarton and Annandale, and many of these survive as village names. A Donald Stewart is recorded as the owner of Plantation Dunoon on the West Bank of the Demerara in 1759, the year in which Burns was born.^[23] Although the colony was nominally Dutch, there was widespread settlement from other European countries, not least Scotland.

Eventually he flees into the dense rainforest interior, accompanied by a young Amerindian woman who acts as a psychopomp, leading him on a spiritual journey into a real and symbolic 'heart of darkness'. It was hard to avoid being influenced by Wilson Harris here, particularly his use of allusion and metaphor, and his masterly evocation of the interior in *The Guyana Quartet*. As the journal reaches its last few pages the colony has been taken over by the British (who will later name it British Guiana) and he is in the remoteness of the jungle being cared for in a Wai Wai village, in the grip of the fever that will eventually kill him. But for the first time in his life he is truly free. Jeremy Taylor writing about *Illustrious Exile* in the *Caribbean Review of Books* focused on 'the exile or expatriate groping for a new grounding and a new source of being. The book suggests that exile can be left behind, [...] and that there are rites of passage for those rare individuals and societies that want to cut away cultural impositions and arrive at some sort of Caribbean authenticity'.^[24] At the same time, I want to challenge notions of a narrow authenticity driven by nationalism. Like Jackie Kay, I feel it is important to address the historical omissions in the Scottish collective memory.^[25] However, the novel is not always charged with such serious interests. Burns was a master of humour, and I welcomed the opportunity to write such poems as 'Jan van Leyden: A Tale' which is a ribald re-telling of 'Tam O' Shanter' with a much less fortunate

outcome. There is also an account of Burns's ineffectual attempts to make a haggis with local ingredients.

Recent research continues to reveal links between Scotland and the Caribbean: 'Among the Sutherland-born planters was John Ross of Golspie who, when he died in Inverness in 1849 at his home, Berbice Cottage, was described as "chairman of Caledonian Bank", "founder of Inverness savings bank" and a local benefactor'.^[26] He was one of many Scots who had gone to what is now Guyana to make 'very rapid and splendid fortunes'.^[27] The place-name Inverness is found in Guyana, in neighbouring Suriname, and twice in Jamaica. Barbados has its Scotland district. Glasgow has its Jamaica Street. There were many who never set foot in the Indies – the merchants, the bankers, the manufacturers; the shipping magnates – who were culpable. My Robert Burns is compelled to question himself deeply on questions of race, slavery and empire and then act. In the book he has a moment of terrible epiphany: 'Slavery cannot be undone. We have sown the seed, and the fearful harvest thereof shall be as bitter ashes in our guilty mouths'.^[28] Equally though in this alternative life journey is a drive towards self-discovery and social change. Kofi Annan was right in highlighting the continuing relevance of Scotland's national poet. As we approach the 250th anniversary of his birth, we should remind ourselves of Burns's philosophy, summed up in a letter to Mrs Dunlop in 1789:

Whatever mitigates the woes, or increases the happiness of others, this is my criterion of goodness; and whatever injures society at large, or an individual in it, this is my measure of iniquity.^[29]

NOTES

[1] Kofi Annan, 'The State of the World and Brotherhood of Man', <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/sgsm9112.doc.htm>. Accessed on 20 July 2008.

[2] Helen Maria Williams (1761-1827), 'On the Bill Which Was Passed in England For Regulating the Slave-Trade' (1788), in *Revolutions in Romantic Literature: An Anthology of Print Culture, 1780-1832*, ed. Paul Keen (Peterborough, ON.: Broadview Press, 2004), p. 323.

[3] Robert Burns, letter to Helen Maria Williams, [late July or early August] 1789, in *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2 vols, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson and G. Ross Roy, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), vol. 1, pp. 427-431 (p. 427).

[4] Burns, letter to Helen Maria Williams, p. 430.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 430-31.

- [6] Robert Burns, 'Ode, Sacred To The Memory Of Mrs Oswald Of Auchencruive', *The Complete Works of Robert Burns* ed. James A. Mackay (Ayr: Alloway Publishing, 1986), pp. 342-343.
- [7] Robert Burns, letter to Dr Moore, 23 March 1789, in *Letters*, vol 1, pp. 385-386 (p. 386).
- [8] Robert Burns, 'Ode, Sacred To The Memory Of Mrs Oswald Of Auchencruive', pp. 342-343.
- [9] Robert Burns, letter to William Nichol, 20 February 1793, in *Letters*, vol 2, p. 183-184 (p. 184).
- [10] Robert Burns, 'A Man's a Man for a' that', in *Complete Works*, p. 500.
- [11] Burns first mentions his forthcoming journey in a letter to John Arnot of Dalquatswood in April 1786: 'I intend to earth among the mountains of Jamaica', *Letters*, vol 1, pp. 33-37 (p. 37). His song 'Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary?' is also dated to around this time.
- [12] Robert Burns, letter to Dr Moore, 2 August 1787, in *Letters*, vol 1, pp. 133-146 (p. 144).
- [13] David Dobson, 'Scottish Jamaica Testaments', *The Scottish Genealogist*, 35.1 (March 1988), www.scotsgenealogy.com/online/scottish_jamaica_testaments.htm. Accessed 20 January 2008.
- [14] See Robert Burns, letter to James Smith, [14 August] 1786, *Letters*, vol 1, pp. 47-48. It describes his meeting with 'Mr and Mrs White, both Jamaicans'. Burns had originally intended to travel to Savannah-la-Mar, but they assured him that the overland journey to Port Antonio would be expensive, and that he might run the risk of contracting 'pleuratic fever', *Letters*, vol 1, p. 47.
- [15] See Gerard Carruthers. 'Robert Burns and Slavery', *The Drouth*, 26 (2007), 21-26.
- [16] Andrew O. Lindsay, *Illustrious Exile: Journal of my Sojourn in the West Indies* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2006).
- [17] Robert Burns, 'Birthday Ode for 31st December 1787', *Complete Works*, pp. 303-304.
- [18] *Illustrious Exile*, p. 346.
- [19] Robert Burns, letter to Mr Cunningham, 10 September 1792, in *Letters*, vol 2, pp. 145-148 (p. 147).
- [20] Drumming and dancing were commonly banned as the nervous colonial authorities tried to stamp out any manifestation of 'primitive' culture that physically excited the slaves. See Mark Knowles, *Tap Roots: The Early History of Tap Dancing* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002) p. 39, where he refers to the contents of the Negro Act of 1740.
- [21] *Illustrious Exile*, p. 320.
- [22] *Illustrious Exile*, p. 322.
- [23] See J. Graham Cruickshank, *Pages from The History of The Scottish Kirk in British Guiana* (Georgetown: Argosy, 1930).
- [24] Jeremy Taylor, 'You can't go home again', *The Caribbean Review of Books*, 9 (2006), http://www.meppublishers.com/online/crb/past_issues/index.php?pid=3000&id=cb9-1-28.
- [25] Jackie Kay, 'Missing Faces,' *The Guardian*, Saturday 24 March 2007. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview25>. Accessed 20 July 2008.

[26] David Alston, 'A Slave called Sutherland', *The Northern Times*, 28 September 2007, p. 7, http://www.northern-times.co.uk/news/fullstory.php/aid/2744/A_slave_called_Sutherland...html.

Accessed on 13 October 2008.

[27] David Alston, "'Very rapid and splendid fortunes"? Highland Scots in Berbice (Guyana) in the early nineteenth century', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 63 (2006 for 2002/4), pp. 208-367.

[28] *Illustrious Exile*, p. 369.

[29] Robert Burns, letter to Mrs Dunlop, 21 June 1789, in *Letters*, vol 1, pp. 418-420 (p. 419).