T L S

An inhuman custom

An archival discovery reveals what the young George III thought of slavery

DAVID ARMITAGE

The racial reckoning of the past two years has spared few pillars of British national life from scrutiny. Stately homes and statues, colleges and churches, museums and banks have all been examined for what the National Trust calls “direct and indirect links with colonialism and historical slavery”. One major institution has kept mum so far on such matters: the monarchy. This should not be surprising. As the Guardian revealed last June, the Queen and the Royal Household were quietly exempted from legislation covering racial and gender discrimination for more than forty years. Prince Charles’s reference in Barbados last month to “the appalling atrocity of slavery, which forever stains our history” broke the silence but obscured the monarchy’s role in that history. Barbados became a slave society in the seventeenth century largely due to the aptly named Royal African Company, chartered by Charles II with its brother, James, Duke of York, as its governor and largest shareholder.

Where facts are lacking, fiction and speculation fill the gap. The Netflix drama Bridgerton (reviewed in the TLS, March 5, 2021) challengingly portrays Regency Britain as a mixed-race monarchy. Bridgerton’s diverse cast, led by Golda Rosheuvel’s charismatic Black Queen Charlotte, could hardly differ more from the present-day royal family, as the Georgian monarchy’s links with colonialism and anti-slavery passages George had highlighted. It was therefore ironic that the slaveholder Jefferson, in his original rough draft of the US Declaration of Independence, charged the king with waging “cruel war against mankind itself, violating it’s most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a labour system. Nonetheless, the free peoples of the temperate zone would maintain their liberty even if Asia and Africa suffered “the same servile fetters”.

Before 1760, no one in the anglophone Atlantic world, save for the American Quakers Benjamin Lay and John Woolman, had so thoroughly debunked pro-slavery ideology. No English abolitionist would draw as heavily on Montesquieu until Granville Sharp in his Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Toleration Slavery (1789). And only a young Scots lawyer, George Wallace, went so far as to argue in 1760 that “an institution, so unnatural and so inhuman as that of Slavery, ought to be abolished” immediately, using the same chapters from Montesquieu larded with French quotations. Wallace dedicated his System of the Principles of the Laws of Scotland to the Prince of Wales. He could not have known George would have anything to say on the matter.

Fortunately, this is one area where the Crown is letting in more daylight on its history. In recent years, the Royal Archives, in tandem with King’s College London and the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, have made materials relating to the Hanoverian kings, their households and their families, more widely accessible through the Georgian Papers Programme. Manuscripts formerly closed to all but a handful of well-connected scholars are now available to more researchers at Windsor Castle and increasingly online via digitization. The historians Brooke Newman and Suzanne Schwarz have already shown that the Royal Archives contain much material to illuminate royal connections with slavery in the long eighteenth century.

The Georgian Papers include revealing items such as a petition to George III from the Black circumnavigator John Quahasey and the future King William IV’s correspondence while serving with the Royal Navy in the Caribbean, as Prince Charles would later do. Most striking so far may be the evidence that George III was the first British monarch known to have argued, in a speech, against the slave trade and the slave trade. That comes from a 200-page manuscript in the Georgian Papers, “Of Laws relative to Government in general”, found among the thousands of pages written in the archives of Windsor Castle recording George’s ecletic reading before and after he became king. In his late teens and early twenties, George followed a rigorous curriculum of modern languages, the classics, geography, political economy, law, mathematics, natural philosophy and, above all, history set by a series of tutors and his main intellectual mentor, John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute. This prince education shaped the future king’s mind and taught him practices of information management he would use for the rest of his reign. He learned how to digest, paraphrase and expand on his reading to make knowledge his own. The longest product of that process was “Of Laws relative to Government in general”, a comprehensive précis of the French jurist Montesquieu’s L’Esprit des lois of 1748.

Like his regal contemporary, Catherine the Great, George excerpted and elaborated on Montesquieu to guide his own thought. One 2,000-word segment, innocuously entitled “Of Laws relative to the Nature of Climates”, first discussed by the American historian John L. Bullion, is published in full here for the first time. In it, the Prince of Wales drew on three books of L’Esprit des lois in which Montesquieu well weighed the arguments for and against slavery and the slave trade, historically, sociologically and satirically. The Frenchman described slavery as unequally distributed across the globe according to climate – hence the title of George’s chapter, taken from one of Montesquieu’s own. It was less common in the temperate zone of Europe than the torrid zones of Asia, Africa and the Americas but, because it was an offence against the law of nature, it still demanded justification wherever it appeared. Montesquieu refuted traditional explanations for enslavement, derived mostly from Roman law, and ridiculed more modern defences of African enslavement, from alleged agricultural necessity to bodily differences.

George paraphrased three-quarters of “Of Laws relative to the Nature of Climates” from Montesquieu’s original French and supplied the rest in his own words. He sutured together his predecessor’s arguments to affirm that slavery was “equally [sic] repugnant to the Civil Law as to the Law of Nature” and dismissed “the reasons urg’d for the slave trade as ‘perhaps sufficient to make us hold this practice in execration’. Yes, there were historical cases of voluntary enslavement and, yes, certain climates did encourage slavery’s emergence as a labour system. Nonetheless, the free peoples of the temperate zone would maintain their liberty even if Asia and Africa suffered “the same servile fetters”.

A page from “Of Laws relative to the Nature of Climates” by George III

From “Of Laws relative to the Nature of Climates” briefly previewed the Prince of Wales in the vanguard of contemporary arguments against slavery and the slave trade. It would be going too far to call George a “convincing abolitionist”, as Andrew Roberts does in his new biography (reviewed on October 15, 2022), but the prince did convincingly ventriloquize Montesquieu by undertaking a thought experiment unprecedented in England at the time. It was not inconceivable that a ruler would enunciate an abolitionist message from L’Esprit des lois: when Thomas Jefferson excerpted the same sections for his legal commonplace book in the late 1770s, he ignored the anti-slavery passages George had highlighted. George, therefore ironic that the slaveholder Jefferson, in his rough draft of the US Declaration of Independence, charged the king with waging “cruel war against mankind itself, violating it’s most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere.

Later in life, George was no abolitionist. He reportedly set his face against legislative interference with slavery anywhere in his empire and opposed reform of the slave trade as “false phylanthrop”. His family was also split on the issue. His son, William, Duke of Clarence (later William IV) made his maiden speech in the House of Lords against abolition in 1790, while the king’s nephew, William Frederick, Duke of Gloucester, supported the anti-slavery movement and, in 1808, received the Liverpool abolitionist William Roscoe’s remarkable memorandum against the slave trade, also now in the Georgian Papers. Perhaps most intriguing of all is the king’s consort and close intellectual companion, Queen Charlotte. Her 4,000-volume library contained multiple editions of Montesquieu as well as anti-slavery pamphlets by Anthony Benezet, Benjamin-Sigismund Frossard, Belilby Porteus, James Ramsay and Granville Sharp. Windsor and London are already proving to be fertile sites for investigating the Crown, colonialism and historical slavery in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There is surely more to be uncovered about stains on the monarchy’s history, especially as the inquiry comes closer to the present.
Of Laws relative to the Nature of Climates

A newly discovered essay by George III, c.1755–8

Asia has properly no temperate Zone; for in Turkey, Persia, India, China &c. the transition [sic] is immediate from a hot to a cold climate, whereas in Europe the temperate Zone is extensive, & the reigning over very different Climates, the difference of heat to cold as we travel from South to North is insensible, so that the Air of each Country nearly resembles that of the one joining to it, from their situation it should & actually does happen that in Asia, the strong Nations are oppress’d to the weak, the Warlike, brave, & active, border immediately on the timorous indolent & effeminate, the first form’d to conquer, the latter to be conquer’d; but in Europe the strong are oppress’d to the strong, & the contiguous Nations have nearly the same degree of courage; we say nearly because even under this temperate Zone the martial spirit is more observable in the Inhabitants of baren Mountains, than in those that cultivate the more fertile plains, tho’ perhaps a few Miles only separate them, but to return this state of things makes Asia weak, & Europe formidable, fixes slavery in the first, & makes it impossible for Liberty to encrease, but disperses freedom to the East, & that more or less according to particular circumstances for however it may appear lost for a while as in Russia, Denmark &c. the Climate will oppose, & bring it back again under happier auspices.

History will abundantly prove the Theory we have laid down, the greatest part of upper Asia has been subdued thirteen times thrice in the early ages by the Scythians, then by the Medes follow’d by the Persians, afterwards by the Greeks, the Romans, Arabs, Moguls, Turks, Tartars, Persians, & Asghans; Europe on the contrary has afforded but four great changes, the Roman Conquest, the irruption of the Northern Nations, the Empire of Charlemagne & the Norman Invasion, but how different were these from the Asiatic conquests; the Europeans breath’d Liberty, conquer’d like free men, & impart’d more or less that invaluable blessing to those they vanquish’d while the Eastern Nations bred up in Slavery, conquer’d like Slaves subduing others to reduce them under the same heavy Yoke with themselves.

Africa enjoys the same sultry climate & the same servile fettiers with Asia,

America has been so destroy’d by the Europeans that it becomes very difficult to get at the true genius of the Inhabitants; but the little we can discover of it appears to suit our principle, the petty Nations there that Inhabit the Mountains call’d Bravos by the Spaniards maintain their Liberty to this day, while the mighty Empires of Peru & Mexico exist only in the Histories of that proud inhuman people’s conquest.

© Royal Archives/Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021