

# An inhuman custom

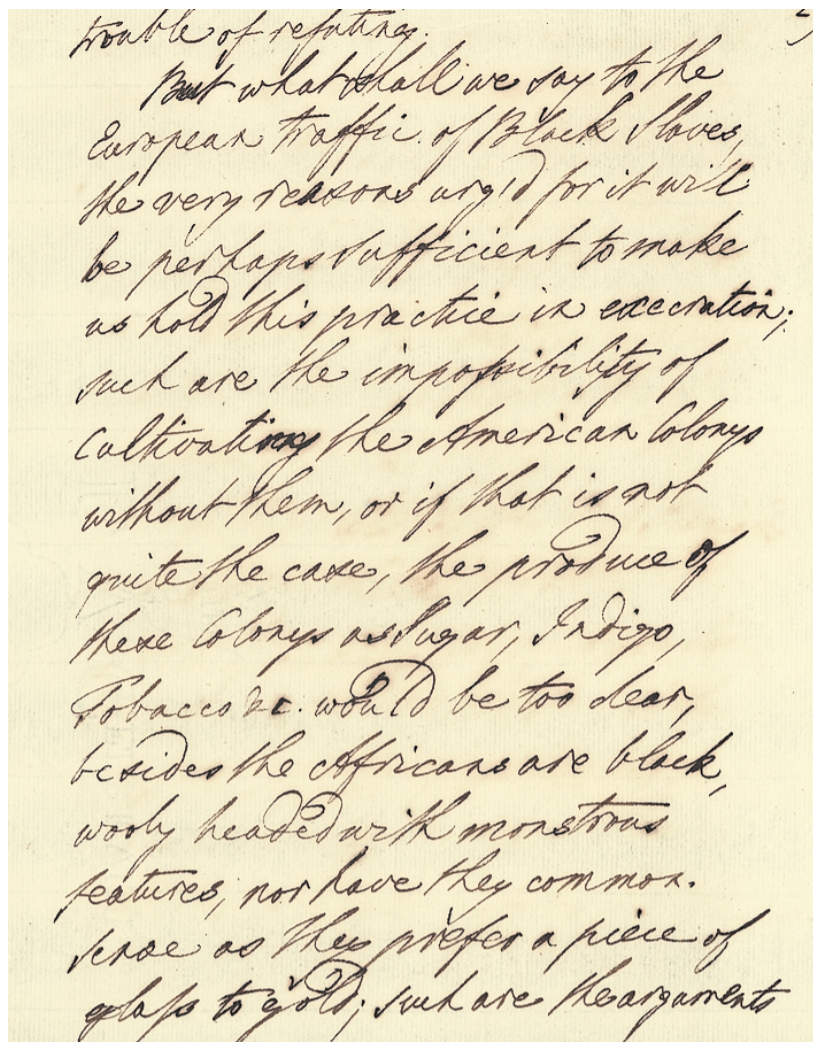
An archival discovery reveals what the young George III thought of slavery

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**T**HE 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 his 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 Duchess of Sussex might attest. Behind the show’s salutary switch is the claim that Charlotte herself had distant African ancestry. Evidence for this may be tenuous but it has turned popular attention to the Georgian monarchy’s links with colonialism and slavery (“Queen of Hearts”, *TLS*, August 20/27, 2021).

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



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

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 Quashey 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, publicly or privately, against slavery 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 of “essays” in the archives at Windsor Castle recording George’s eclectic 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 princely 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 loix* 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 loix* in which Montesquieu 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

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demanding 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”.

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 Tolerating Slavery* (1769). 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 had anticipated his Montesquieuan arguments in the privacy of his educational essays.

“Of Laws relative to the Nature of Climates” briefly placed 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 “convinced abolitionist”, as Andrew Roberts does in his new biography (reviewed on October 15, 2021), but the prince did convincingly ventriloquize Montesquieu by undertaking a thought experiment unprecedented in England at the time. It was not inevitable that a reader would extract an abolitionist message from *L’Esprit des loix*: 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. 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 human nature 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 philanthropy”. 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 1799, 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-Sigismond Frossard, Beilby 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

**B**ESIDES THE LAWS we have hitherto trac'd relative to the nature of Governments we shall find upon examination that there are some of a kind independant of Government, but that have at the same time so strong an influence over a Nation that the Legislative must in some measure be directed by them; climate & soil afford strong instances of this assertion, nothing is more certain than that the natural disposition of the body is affected by Climate, that the tempers & Characters of different Nations are strongly influenc'd by it, the Laws therefore should conform to the Climate in indifferent things, & correct the effect of it in others; thus the Law prohibiting the use of Wine in Countries where it has noxious qualitys, those which encourage Work & industry where the intense heat inclines Men to idleness & inactivity, are excellent; but of all the effects of air & Climate none appear so singular as that of Slavery in all the warmer Countries; it will be worth while to examine this thoroughly, both in the Civil & Political light.

The almost universal establishment of Civil Slavery in the hot regions of Asia, Africa, & America, & the abhorrence of it under the more temperate Zones is apparent to every one, but yet the causes of it have been hitherto little examined.

Slavery in general seems to be the right which one man acquires over the rights & fortune of another; this state is in its own nature bad, & obnoxious both to the Master & to the servant, to the first from the unlimited Authority he enjoys, which gradually accustoms him to Voluptuousness, Anger, severity cruelty, & a savage ferocity, all which by degrees deprive him of every moral Virtue, while the unhappy slave is from other causes under as miserable a situation, since he has it not in his power to do any one thing through a motive of Virtue.

In Despotick Countries a slave & subject are nearly on a par, but in Monarchys a manly spirit should ever be supported which cannot be under the Weight of Chains, & in Republics 'tis directly contrary to the Nature of the constitution, whose ruling principle is equality;

The Roman Civilians have found out pity to be the origin of slavery, & this three different ways; first, Prisoners of War made slaves say they preserve their lives that were forfeited by the Laws of Nations; secondly debtors ill treated by their Creditors were permitted by the Civil Law to avoid their Creditors by selling their Liberty; thirdly they affirm'd that the Children of slaves are by the Law of Nature subject to the same state with their Fathers; but all this reasoning is false, War does not justify killing prisoners, the sole right acquir'd by the Conqueror is to secure the person of the Conquer'd, & prevent him from doing harm, the murdering of Prisoners in cold blood is held in abhorrence by all Nations; as to the second case if a free Man cannot kill himself least he rob the country of his Person, how much stronger does it not hold with regard to the giving up his freedom; public Liberty consists in the Liberty of every private Citizen, which in the Roman state was really part of the sovereignty, for a Roman to sell his Citizenship is scarcely possible to be conceiv'd, nor can the Civil Law that authorizes the division of goods among Men, rank without the greatest absurdity amongst those goods a part of the Men who were to make this division; if these remarks are true the third case cannot exist; for in denying the possibility of the Parents being slaves, we prevent entirely the question relating to the Children.

A Malefactor may be put to death Lawfully because the very Law by which he is punish'd, was made for his security, the benefit of which he himself enjoy'd before he enfring'd it, not so the slave,

the Law of slavery can never be beneficial to him, & is therefore contrary to the fundamental principles of all society,

It has been said that a person rearing a poor helpless Infant acquires a dominion over him, but this can only hold while it is incapable or [sic] earning its own livelihood; infants are at first supported at the breast, from their leaving off that alimient to the age they may be fit for service is so short a space that he who supports them during that interval can never be said to give them a just equivalent for their freedom.

Slavery is equally repugnant to the Civil Law as to the Law of Nature; a Slave is no Member of Society, he cannot therefore be restrain'd by Laws in which [he] has no interest, from attempting to procure Liberty by flight; the legal authority of the Master only can prevent him.

The pretexts us'd by the Spaniards for enslaving the New World were extremly curious; the propagation of the Christian Religion was the first reason, the next was the Americans differing from them in colour, manners & Customs, all which are too absurd to take the trouble of refuting.

But what shall we say to the European traffic of Black slaves, the very reasons urg'd for it will be perhaps sufficient to make us hold this practice in execration; such are the impossibility of cultivating the American Colonys without them, or if that is not quite the case, the produce of these Colonys as Sugar, Indigo, Tobacco &c. would be too dear, besides the Africans are black, wooly headed with monstrous features, nor have they common sense as they prefer a piece of glass to gold; such are the arguments for an inhuman Custom wantonly practic'd by the most enlightened Polite Nations in the World; there is no occasion to answer them for they stand self condemn'd.

Whence then shall we deduce the true origin of the right of slavery; it must be founded in the nature of things, & if so some cases exist to show that foundation; one readily occurs deriv'd from the free choice a person makes of a Master for his own benefit, which forms a mutual convention between the two partys, thus in all Despotick Countries people make no difficulty of selling themselves; political slavery making the loss of Civil Liberty extremly easy; thus the Muscovites whose Liberty is not worth keeping sell themselves continually; thus the principle Merchants at Achim barter their freedom for the protection of some great Lord, & indeed in all these reched Governments, freemen have no better resources than that of becoming slaves to tyrants in Office.

There is another origin of slavery reconcilable to reason which subsists in Countries where excessive heat enervates the body, & creates such indolence that nothing but the fear of chastisement can oblige Men to any Laborious duty; this comes the nearest to what some call natural slavery; but suppose it admitted in its full force, it is still limited to particular parts of the Globe, for in all others no labour is so severe but free. People may be found to undergo it, & in real truth there is no climate on the Earth where with proper encouragement the most painful drudgery may not be exercis'd without slaves; but in some unhappy Countries the Laws produce indolence & inaction, which very situation of mind & body never fails to give birth to or encourage Slavery.

Let this suffice with regard to Natural Slavery; let us next examine the relation between the Political kind of it & slavery.

We have already observ'd great heat enervates Men's bodys & effeminates the mind; but that a colder air gives universal vigour let us apply this to the known parts of the Globe & we shall find that

Asia has properly no temperate Zone; for in Turkey, Persia, India, China &c. the transisition [sic] is immediate from a hot to a cold climate, whereas in Europe the temperate Zone is extensive, & tho 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 oppos'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 oppos'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 seperate 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 opperate, & 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 subdu'd 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 bread 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 fetters 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. ■

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