William Gilbert: Son of a Saintly Slave Owner [1]

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IN MARCH 1790, at a time when the emerging abolitionist movement was waging a fierce public debate against the defenders of slavery in preparation for an Abolition Bill to be put before parliament, a letter from William Gilbert on the "African Slave Trade" appeared in the *Bristol Mercury*.[2] Gilbert starts by setting out the justifications offered by the "West-Indians", including the well-worn argument that the enslaved Africans benefit by being offered instruction in "Morality, Civilization and Religion". He then goes on to demolish their claims, and denounces these "Dealers in Slaves and Souls of Men" as "Epicures in Assassination and Oppression".

Such forthright expressions of abolitionist sentiments are common enough at this time, but Gilbert's denunciations are complicated by the fact that he himself belonged to a slave owning family, and was entitled to a share of the income derived from the substantial slave plantation in Antigua that had been in his family for three generations. His elder brother the Reverend Nathaniel Gilbert currently owned the plantation. Their late father Nathaniel Gilbert senior was renowned among the Methodists through letters he had written to John Wesley about his preaching, which were published between 1780 and 1783. These revealed that Nathaniel senior was the founder, in Antigua, of a Methodist society that was the first such society on the American continent. He also preached to slaves: an innovation that was opposed by his fellow planters on the island.[3] There are signs that neither of the Nathaniels was comfortable about the institution of slavery. Nathaniel junior stayed away from Antigua: he lived in England as an absentee landlord except for a brief stay in Sierra Leone in 1792, where he served as chaplain to a new colony of freed slaves. One purpose of this colony was to subvert the transatlantic slave trade.[4] Nathaniel senior's misgivings about slave ownership, and the difficulty his image as a saintly slave owner caused for his intensely religious son William, are the topic of this essay.[5]

Prior to writing this letter, William had spent a year in an asylum for the insane near Bristol, and it seems clear from the many descriptions of him that

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[2] *The Bristol Mercury,* 1 Mar 1790. For the progress of the English abolitionist campaign see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975) 343-468; and for the Bristol setting Madge Dresser, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port* London: Continuum, 2001), 129-161. 'Abolitionism' in the 1790s meant the campaign to stop the transatlantic slave trade, even if some believed this implied full emancipation of slaves (See Davis, 408).

[3] Letters from or about Nathaniel Gilbert: *Arminian Magazine* 3 (1780) 330-2, 387-9; 5 (1782) 159-60, 384-86, 605-7; 6 (1783) 329-31, 388, 445, 501-2; 9 (1786) 567-8.

[4] Ellen Gibson Wilson, *John Clarkson and the African Adventure* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 53: purpose of colony; 84ff: Nathaniel Gilbert as chaplain.

[5] For clarity the two protagonists William and his father Nathaniel will be called by their first names hereafter.