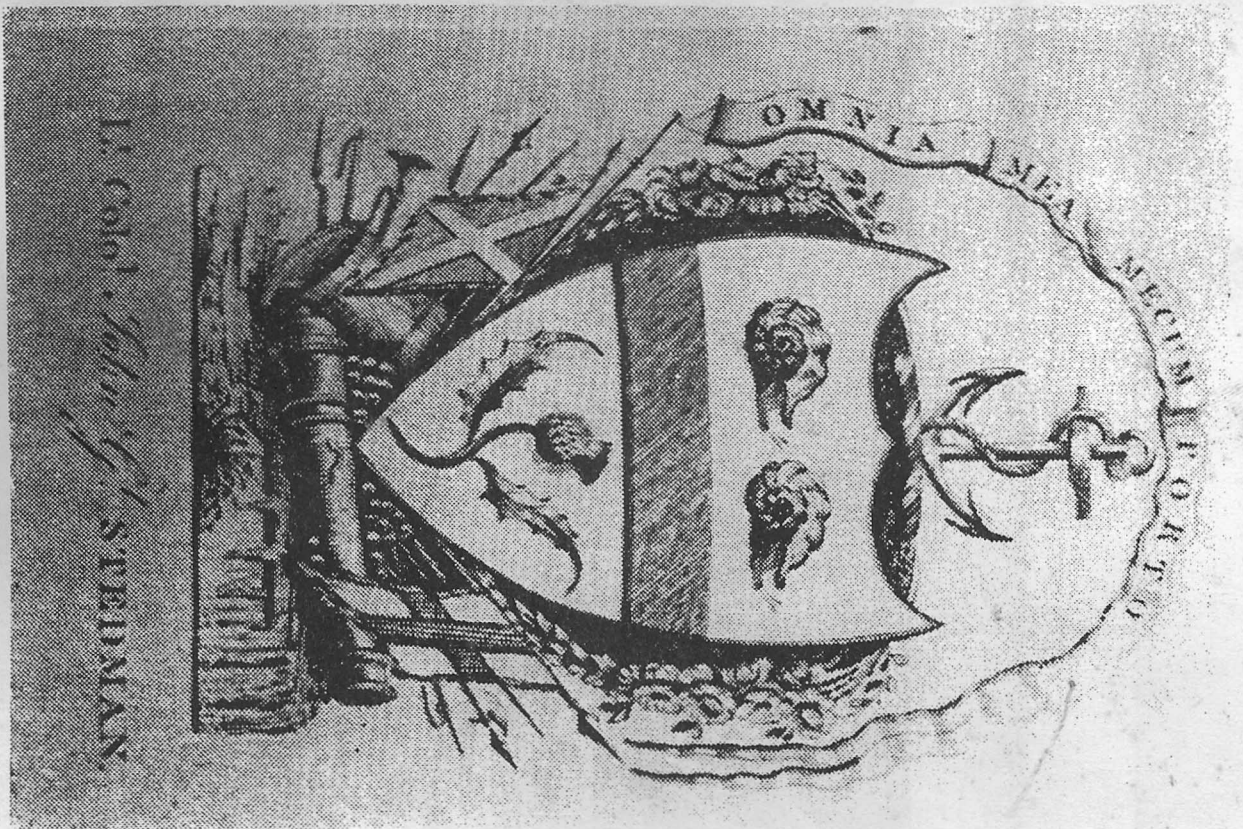


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L. Colol. John G. STEDMAN



CAPTAIN JOHN GABRIEL STEDMAN

ST. MARY'S CHURCH
BICKLEIGH



MAJOR WILLIAM GEORGE STEDMAN



CHARLOTTA MARGARETTA STEDMAN
née Hoffman

10 NOT TAKE

My parents must have been determined that I would learn about John Gabriel Stedman, since I was given his name at my baptism. My mother was always fascinated by his life, and had acquired copies of both of Stanbury Thompson's books about him. In 1992 my husband Peter and I travelled down to Tiverton to find out what we could about him, and were delighted to be welcomed into his wonderful Queen Anne home, Hensleigh House, by the then owners who were in the process of selling and thought it appropriate that one of his direct ancestors should purchase it!

It was not until the publication by Professors Richard and Sally Price of John Gabriel's "**Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam Transcribed for the First Time from the Original 1790 Manuscript**" in 1988, and my sister Juliana's contact with the editors that our family became aware of the descendants of John Gabriel's brother, William George Stedman, whom we have visited in Germany on several happy occasions. I decided, knowing a little about John Gabriel, that he would approve of his descendants, relatives and admirers celebrating his life and work and dedicating a memorial to him in Bickleigh Churchyard during this millennium. I hope we have done justice to him.

John Gabriel's father Robert was a Scotsman, who bought a commission in the Scots Brigade, a mercenary regiment, in Holland. In 1735 he was posted to Bergen op Zoom, a garrison town near the frontier between Holland and the Netherlands, where he met and married Antoinetta Christina Van Ceulen who had connections which enabled Robert to gain promotion in the army. John Gabriel was born in 1744 at Dendermonde in the Scheldt, Antoinette's ninth child and the first to be born alive. In 1755 he was sent to Dunfermline in Scotland to be educated by his uncle Dr John Stedman. He had a very unhappy two years there, returning home in 1756 aboard a collier. On 14 July 1760, at the age of 16, he took a commission as ensign in General John Stuart's regiment in the Scots Brigade in defending various Low Country outposts. In a response to a call for volunteers to serve in the West Indies, John Gabriel, now aged 28, left Holland for Surinam on Christmas Eve 1772 on the frigate *Leelust*

with the rank of captain, and arrived there on 2 February 1773 where he remained for just over four years. He was part of a corps of 800 European volunteers – professional soldiers trained for the battlefields of Europe – who were sent to Surinam by the Dutch States General.

The Dutch of Guiana were famous for their hospitality: “I had a general invitation to visit...in more than twenty respectable families”, but he did eventually move into his own quarters, a small unfurnished house, infested with rats; but very soon, “The ladies supplied me with tables, chairs, glasses and even plate and china in abundance; and the gentlemen loaded me with presents of wine, porter, cyder, rum and sugar, besides a quantity of most exquisite fruits”. He was also offered a carriage complete with black boy to carry an umbrella over him!

The first indirect mention of Joanna, a slave at the plantation, is on 1 March 1773 when after supper at Mr Beeltsuyders he leaves feeling unwell and writes “Receive a cordial and two fine oranges from a mulatto girl”. On 23 April we read in his diary “J(oanna) comes to stay with me” And on 8 May “Give my wedding (to Joanna).” On 8 May he waxes lyrical about her:

“Rather more than middle Size-She was perfectly streight with the most elegant Shapes that can be view’d in nature moving her well-formed Limbs as when a Goddess walk’d-Her face was full of Native Modesty and the most distinguished Sweetness-Her Eyes as black as ebony...her nose was perfectly well-formed rather small, her lips a little prominent...her hair was a dark brown-next to black, forming a beauteous Globe of small ringlets, ornamented with flowers and Gold Spangles”.

“Surinam marriage”, as was the wedding of John Gabriel and Joanna, was both well defined and widespread in the colony, and from the perspective of those who knew John Gabriel and Joanna, it clearly served to delineate the terms of their relationship. A decade after he left Joanna, and several years after her death, Stedman seems to have dealt with this awkwardness simply by denying that his situation fitted the mould of other marriages” between Europeans and slaves in the colony. In the 1790 “Narrative,” he repeatedly stressed that he had intended to make Joanna



JOANNA

his legal Christian wife in Europe; and at the same time, he chose not to mention this special "Suriname wedding". In denying that his relationship with Joanna was the product of its colonial time and place, John Gabriel drew on the then-current European sentimental ideals to elevate it, in retrospect, to an example of pure and faithful love. But all good things come to an end and on 1 April 1777 John Gabriel left Surinam leaving a moving description of his departure, with Joanna weeping inconsolably as he left. Joanna died on 5 November 1782 from the effects of poison and was "buried under the groves of orange trees where she had lived". Their quadron son, Johnny, was sent to John Gabriel in England together with £200, the profits of Joanna's business activities, to be cared for.

At Maestricht, on the 2 February 1782, John Gabriel married Adriana, daughter of Adrian Wierts Van Coehorn. His eldest son, George William was born in London in 1784 and was killed while on active service in 1803 while boarding a French Privateer off Cuba; The other children, were Sophia Charlotte (1787-1821) who married my great-great-great-grandfather, John Cotton; Robert Adrian (1789-1849) who fought with distinction at the battle of Aliwal against the Sikhs in the 1846 Indian War and died at sea; Maria Joanna (1793-1864), who married Capt. Horace John Aylward of the Royal Artillery; and John Cambridge (1796-1824), Captain of the 34th Light Infantry, E. Indian Company who was born just before John Gabriel's death.

After he returned to Holland, John Gabriel rejoined Stuart's regiment and was shortly afterwards appointed to captain. When the Scots Brigade was disbanded he returned to England. The brigade was reformed in 1793, he was promoted to major, and three years later to lieutenant-colonel to the command of a regiment in garrison in Gibraltar. However, just before he embarked, he suffered such severe injuries in an accident that he was unable to take up his post.

With Adriana, Johnny and the young George, John Gabriel moved to Devonshire where the climate was supposed to be most suited to persons whose health had been undermined by hard service in the tropics! He was well pleased with his purchase of Hensleigh House, near Tiverton,



CAPTAIN ROBERT STEDMAN



ANTOINETTA CHRISTINA STEDMAN
née Van Ceulen

Devonshire as he wrote in a letter to his sister Lottie: on 1st September 1785: "I live on a hill, a beautiful modern house, stables, remise (coach-house), large gardens, best fruit, a park, a bleach, (a place for bleaching clothes?) 2 courts, a flower garden, terrace, cockpit, field with potatoes, turnips, hay etc., thousands of mushrooms, a view of 100 miles around, a capital farmer for a neighbour, a pack of excellent hounds at my service".

Johnny was sent to Blundells School in Tiverton, and then to the Navy where he remained, as John Gabriel recorded, until 27 November 1791, "John is now just 17. He is sail'd to Jamaica with Capt. George Young, on board the Amity Hall. He goes before the mast for 20/- per month". On August 30 1792, he wrote to his brother William George:

"I received the fatal tidings that my dear Johnny is no more, who was on his fifth voyage, lost out of the ship's boat at Jamaica, after swimming a considerable time".

John Gabriel had already written this letter to Johnny, which he had put away with several mementoes to be delivered after his own death:

My dear John,

As the last good I can do for you in this world I joyn to the little trifles I have left you, the few lines which I beg of you often to read, for my sake, who always loved you so tenderly. Above all things, fear God as the Supreme Author of all good. Love Him in your heart and be religious, but detest every tincture of hypocrisy. Regard your neighbours, that is all mankind, of whatever nation, profession, or faith, while they are honest, and be ever so, yourself, it is the best policy in the end, depend upon't. Guard against idleness, it is the root of every evil to which bad company gives the finishing stroke. Love economy without avarice, and be ever thyself thy best friend. Fly from the excesses of debauchery which will rot thy body, while they are a cancer to thy mind. To keep both sound, follow my words. Be never behind—hand

*with thy correspondence
with thy lawful creditor
with thy daily occupation
or with thy conscience
and thy soul shall enjoy peace*

With air, exercise, diet, and proper recreation, thy body shall possess health and vigour. Dear John, should fortune frown, which depend upon it, sometimes it will do, look around on thousands more wretched than thyself, who perhaps less deserve to be so, and be content. Contentment is better than gold. Wish not for death, it is a sin, but scorn to fear it, and be prepared to meet it every hour since come it must, while the good mind smiles at its sting and defies its point. Beware of passion or cruelty, but rejoice in being good-natured, not only to Man, but to the whole creation without exception. Scorn to hurt them but for thy food, and thy defence. To be cruel is the portion of a coward, while to be brave, and humane, goes hand in hand, and pleases God.

Obey with pleasure those set over thee, since without knowing how to be obedient no one ever knew how to command.

Now, my dear boy, love Mrs. Stedman, and her little children, from your heart if you ever had a love for your dead father who requested it. She has most tenderly proved a help to thy infant state, while thou art a brother to her helpless little ones. Prove also a parent and a guardian by your kind conduct. Let your good sense keep peace and harmony in my dear family, then shall the blessings of Almighty God overspread you, and them, and we, together with your dear mother, my beloved Joanna, have a chance once more to meet wherein the presence of our Heavenly Benefactor, our joy and happiness shall be eternal & compleat, which is the ardent wish, the sincere prayer, and the only hope, of your once loving father, who, my dear child, when you read this, shall be no more, and rests with a heartfelt affection to eternity.

Yours....

John G. Stedman.

*Henseley House, in the county
of Devon, Jan. 14th 1787.*

P.S. Let not your grief for my death overcome you, but let your tears my Dear! Flow with manly moderation, and trust that I am happy.

During these years John Gabriel was busy preparing his Narrative on Surinam which was almost completed in 1795. John Johnson his publisher asked William Blake to engrave some of John Gabriel's paintings of the flora and fauna of Surinam.

"He had, for example, been working for some time, in a somewhat desultory fashion, on the engravings for John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative*

of Surinam, from which an element of Blake's tiger might have emerged. He despatched the first batch of illustrations for this book in December 1792 and a second batch a year later upon his right breast.... In fact Blake executed some of the more gruesome of the book's illustrations, including the 'Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave', 'The Execution of Breaking on the Rack' and 'A Negro hung alive by the Ribs to a Gallows'. They are powerful images indeed, with the dense cross-hatching on the bodies of the slaves intensifying the effect of their tortured figures against an unengraved background... His friendship with Blake flourished, even as it soured with his publisher; Stedman called Johnson a 'Jacobin scoundrel' and one 'who I would now not Save from the gallows', and the fact that Blake maintained his friendship with him suggests difficulties in his own relationship with Johnson. It will later become clear that he was not altogether impressed by him. But there were also aspects of Stedman's life that must have awakened some sympathy in Blake — Stedman had wanted to be a painter, but his apparently violent and impetuous temperament did not make him a suitable subject for tuition. His desire for artistic excellence was in any case thwarted by his need to earn a living, and he had become a soldier. He also seems to have had the faculty of second sight, at least according to Fuseli, who reported that Stedman had once seen a fairy on his way to dinner with Johnson in St Paul's Churchyard. In one of his diary entries, Stedman recorded, 'Saw a Mermaid' — although this is less likely to be the fabulous creature herself than a curiosity exhibited at one of the fairs or taverns, like the stuffed mermaid displayed at the Turk's Coffee House in St James's Street some years later. But the resemblance to Blake might be thought to end there: Stedman was also a staunch monarchist, an anti-Jacobin and, despite his own experiences in Surinam, a supporter of slavery if not necessarily the British slave trade itself. He was also a man whose views were loudly expressed, and it is peculiar that a man who could damn Joseph Johnson as a 'Jacobin' found himself so at ease in Blake's company..." (Blake by Peter Ackroyd)

It was not until May 1796 that John Gabriel could say, "The printer writes me that all, all, all is well and printed to my mind and wishes." The following year he died, on 5th March 1797, leaving a widow and five children.

In his will John Gabriel gave instructions that he was to be buried by the side of Bamfylde Moore Carew, the King of the Beggars who had been born in July 1693 at Bickleigh Manor-house, near Tiverton and who died there 6 July 1759. Perhaps he felt that their wanderings made them kindred spirits, but, knowing John Gabriel as I do, I think it was Bamfylde's flamboyant style that appealed to him. In the event his instructions were not carried out and they lie at opposite ends of the graveyard. But his burial, 7 March 1797 was certainly picaresque!

A description of the Burial of John Gabriel Stedman from the memoirs of Archbishop William Temple (1881-1944):

The Rev. R.B. Carew once told me an interesting story. Mr. J.S. Cotton, late editor of the Academy (*and son-in-law of John Gabriel*), had written to me as a former contributor, invoking help for an article on Col. Stedman, which he was inditing for the Dictionary of National Biography. Stedman was supposed to have been buried at Bickleigh, and obedient to Mr Cotton's wishes, I posted down to the village and inspected the register which was deposited in the rectory. Mr Carew was then almost blind, but the butler and myself succeeded in unearthing the desired entry viz: 1797, John Gabriel aged 52, March 7th. This settled, Mr Carew, always the essence of kindness, took me out into the adjoining church-yard, showed me where Stedman was buried, and told me that he knew of that extraordinary person of whom I had previously never heard or read of. Stedman, he said, had distinguished himself in two ways: by writing a book on Surinam, and marrying a half-caste called Joanna. Before he died, he expressed a wish to be interred as our kings and queens were formerly, at midnight, and by torch-light, and of all the odd things, he wanted to lie at Bickleigh, side by side with Bamphylde Carew, for whom, as a kindred spirit, he probably felt particular esteem and admiration. Now Carew is buried in the churchyard, under the window of the south aisle, which is next the chancel, while Stedman lies on the opposite side of the church, immediately beyond the vestry door. Why his body is not laid to rest in the spot he had chosen is not known for certain. Perhaps it had been anticipated by some humble parishioner, whose bones could not be

disturbed, perhaps the rector was unwilling to be a party to a kind of post-mortem comedy. But the Bohemian touch was not wanting. The rector, it seems, was commonly known in the village as *maister*, and an old thatcher, who lived in a cottage opposite the south gate of the churchyard, and who had been present on the occasion, informed Mr Carew, that *maister* and his curate, Mr Walker, having to sit up on a cold night to perform the ceremony, comforted themselves in the approved fashion. The cordial took effect on *maister*, and he had not proceeded far, when turning to Mr Walker, he said hastily, "Here! – you bury him!"

John Gabriel completed his Diary with the following words:

"Let one poor Sprig of Bays around my head
Bloom while I live & point me out when dead

While long, long, may you live & be happy in this Bless'd Island, accumulating wealth with honour & Surrounded with victory, till the Lowest subject amongst you shall have Ascended to the highest pinnacle of unfading glory –

I do hope that you all, the descendants, relatives and admirers of John Gabriel Stedman, will feel that in this year 2000 we have properly celebrated his life as soldier, adventurer, diarist and loving father and by dedicating a tombstone to his memory in Bickleigh churchyard, where his bones lie buried, ensured that he now has a memorial worthy of all his endeavours.

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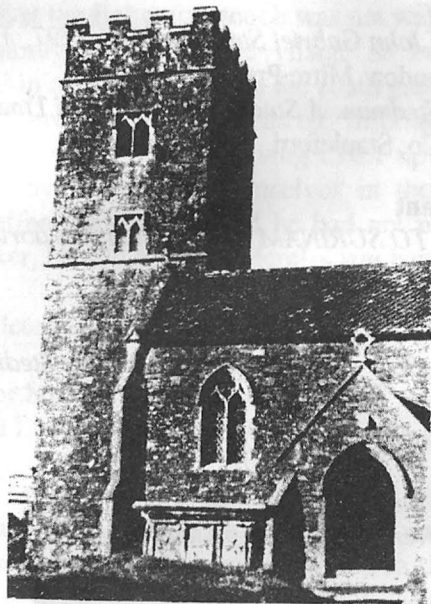
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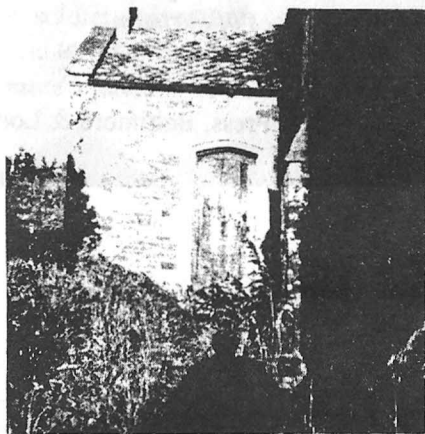
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I have used all of these references freely, without permission, and I hope that these authors will accept that this has been a labour of love as part of our celebration of John Gabriel Stedman, with no pecuniary advantage.

Margaret Sarah Stedman McManus, Winchester, 2nd August 2000



St. Mary's Church, Bickleigh



Actual burial place of John Gabriel
beyond the vestry door
St Mary's Church, Bickleigh

In Memory of
JOHN GABRIEL STEDMAN
1744 ~ 1797
of
Hensleigh House, Tiverton
Soldier, Adventurer and Diarist
who is interred nearby