

Joseph Knight: Scotland and the Black Atlantic

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Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.

Ben Okri, *Birds of Heaven*

A quotation from Ben Okri's *Birds of Heaven* – written in the context of a Nigeria wrestling with postcolonial nation building – opens James Robertson's *Joseph Knight*.^[1] This theme of a nation facing its own historical truths points to the drive of Robertson's historical novel: to open up the established national narrative of Scotland to the black Atlantic issues of slavery, rebellion, race and class. Scottish involvement in the slave trade and slave produce has long been an uncomfortable area for a nation which prides itself on being built on ideals of liberty. Thus, the Scottish presence as plantation owners and overseers in Jamaica and the presence of black slaves in Scotland have both been largely forgotten. Indeed, Carla Sassi establishes that amnesia is a central theme of the Caribbean in Scottish literature.

One forms the impression that generations who were directly acquainted with the history of slavery in the West Indies and who, after its abolition, were keen to quickly shed historical responsibility for its horrors, performed an act of willed amnesia, followed by an (un)willed one by subsequent generations... The West Indian imperial connection, quite obviously, stood for aspects of Scottishness that did not invite either pride or celebration.^[2]

Robertson's *Joseph Knight* is centred on the amnesia of John Wedderburn who attempts to reinvestigate the story of his slave whom he had forgotten for over twenty years. The investigations of Archibald Jamieson who digs deep into the Wedderburn family's history reflects Robertson's own investigation into Scotland's forgotten chapter. To do so he must uncover the memory of Scottish entanglement in the Caribbean and destabilise national platitudes of liberty. In a dream, the lawyer MacLaurin imagines a drunkard prattling on a familiar refrain:

The oaf was deaving him with the kind of sentiments many Scots found hard to resist: 'Aye, sir, we've aye been hot for liberty. We focht for it against the English wi Wallace and Bruce, and we'll fecht for it against the French. It's in oor banes, it's in oor banes. Of course we'll fecht for the freedom of the Negroes, sir. We're Scotsmen. It's in oor banes. (p250)

In his dream, Maclaurin challenges the familiar national narrative with evidence from the Caribbean:

It's Scots that run the plantations...the place is rife wi us. Look at the names...He whipped the cloot from its place and began to thrash the drunkard about the face with it, a blow for every name: 'Wedderburns!' *Skelp!* 'Wallaces!' *Skelp!* 'Aye, Wallaces' *Skelp!* 'Kerrs!' *Skelp!* 'Campbells!' *Skelp!* 'MacLeans!' *Skelp!* 'Gordons! Gillespies! Grants!' *Skelp! Skelp! Skelp!* (pp. 250-1)

As Maclaurin batters 'the drunkard' around the head, Robertson appears to be battering his reading public in an attempt to shake off the complacency of the established national narrative and face the truths of Scottish history.

Indeed, more recent historical research by Alan L. Karras, Michael Fry, Tom Devine, Douglas Hamilton and Iain Whyte^[3] amongst others has highlighted the role of Scots in Caribbean slavery which has thereby begun to destabilise Scotland's overwhelmingly white historiography and its supposed innate democratic racial conscience. Robertson explores similar territory by uncovering a forgotten episode in Scottish history, the 'Knight v Wedderburn' trial which has great postcolonial significance in modern, multi-cultural Scotland and demands that the black Atlantic inflects the Scottish national narrative. Robertson offers a startling development by connecting black slavery to the battle of Culloden. Following the defeat, the Jacobite John Wedderburn fled from Scotland to Jamaica where he regained his fortune through his plantations. On his return to Scotland he brought with him a young black slave, Joseph Knight, to serve him at home. Knight, however, eventually took his master to court to win his freedom at the High Court in Edinburgh in 1778. A sensational case in its day, it occupied the minds of such as Samuel Johnson and James

Boswell who prepared arguments for Knight's court case while Lord Kames sat on the panel of judges.^[4] Thus, Robertson's narrative weaves a black thread through the orthodox national narrative of Jacobite rebellions, Culloden, and Enlightenment Edinburgh. He employs two contrasting comparative representations: firstly, between the defeated Jacobite rebels and the defeated slave rebels in Jamaica; secondly between the servants and colliers of the Scottish working class and black slaves. Such representations, whose effectiveness will be discussed later, bring into focus the often avoided topic of Scots' involvement in the slave trade and the British Empire at large.

Historical analysis of the role of Scots in the British Empire has been uneven. Michael Hechter's notion that Scotland was a colony of England, although it remains a feature of popular discourse, has been largely discredited in academia.^[5] However, Scotland still tends to disavow its imperial past. David McCrone claims Scotland was 'a successful junior partner in the wider process of British imperial colonialism'.^[6] However, this notion of a 'junior partner' fails to face up to the *dominant* position of Scots, despite population size, in certain areas of imperial administration, such as Henry Dundas in the East India Company, and essentially evades full responsibility for the nature of the British Empire. Indeed, Michael Fry's *The Scottish Empire* collects huge quantities of evidence on the leading role of Scots throughout the British Empire only to draw blithe conclusions about the benign nature of Scots in dealings with colonial subjects in comparison to their English counterparts. Scots, he argues, were 'traders, not raiders'.^[7] The implied moral superiority of such a 'commercial empire' does not stand up to scrutiny when it is remembered that in the Caribbean the trade taking place was the slave-produced sugar and tobacco trades. Although troubled by the activities of Scots in the Caribbean, Fry can excuse the profiteering on slave plantations as, 'this was, in an exotic setting, the normal Scottish quest for self-advancement.'^[8]

Robertson's two contrasting comparative representations between, on the one side Scottish gentry and their servants, and black slaves on the other, challenges this conception of imperial Scotland in the established national narrative and is best served by an 'Atlantic' perspective. Knight crosses the Atlantic twice from Africa to the Caribbean to Europe as a slave. Indeed, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* offers cultural historians a route out of the narrow conceptual boundaries of national criticism.

I want to develop the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective.^[9]

The interconnectedness of Europe, Africa, America and the Caribbean is so often overlooked by national criticism which has seen cultural inter-mixture as peripheral to a monolithic national narrative. Furthermore, Linebaugh and Rediker have emphasised the centrality of the multi-ethnic 'Atlantic Working Class' in shaping the rise of capitalism and the modern global economy. They employ the Hellenic myth of 'the Many Headed Hydra' to express the varied threats to the building of state, empire and capitalism. Hercules battled against this sea-monster, but whenever he severed one head, two would grow in its place.

From the beginning of English colonial expansion in the early seventeenth century...rulers referred to the Hercules-hydra myth to describe the difficulty of imposing order on increasingly global systems of labour. They variously designated dispossessed commoners, transported felons, indentured servants, religious radicals, pirates, urban labourers, soldiers, sailors, African slaves as the numerous, ever-changing heads of the monster.[\[10\]](#)

The transatlantic, transnational, transracial nature of the threats to the capitalist, colonial states is crucial to this novel in which Knight runs away with a Scottish servant girl and is supported in his court case by the colliers of Fife.

Alison Games details how the Atlantic approach grew out of the innovative research of the slave trade by historians such as Philip D. Curtin:[\[11\]](#)

This approach, unfettered by state borders, pursues the logical lines of the (slave) trade, and puts people at the centre, tracking the transmission of all elements of culture, from political identity to material goods to language to religion, all around the Atlantic basin.[\[12\]](#)

This article concerning 'Scotland and the Black Atlantic' may seem not to have escaped the fetters of the nation-state. Indeed, Games proceeds to detail David Armitage's criticism that much Atlantic history is not truly 'circum-Atlantic', taking the Atlantic as a whole. Rather, it is 'trans-Atlantic', with a comparative approach; or 'cis-Atlantic', examining a particular place within an Atlantic context.[\[13\]](#) However, in my defence, such a seemingly 'cis-Atlantic' approach is necessitated by Scotland's befuddled sense of its own role in the development of Atlantic trade, particularly in relation to the expansion of the British Empire. Furthermore, applying an Atlantic approach specifically to Scotland will be extremely useful in destabilising received wisdom of Scotland's past and in exploding some lingering myths about 'national character'.

Joseph Knight, indeed, provides a postcolonial re-imagining of Scottish history. As seen above, not 'postcolonial' in the sense of Scotland as a nation liberated from colonial rule, but a moment after the high period of empire, where the writer is able to look back and take stock of a history concerned with empire, race and class. As far back as the 1920s Scottish Renaissance writers sought to distance themselves from the pernicious nature of the British Empire. MacDiarmid's rejection of England's political and cultural hegemony in the United Kingdom incorporated an anti-imperial stance. Scotland as an abused country within the Union had more affinity with other colonised nations: the empire was the work of the English and the Scottish ruling classes; while working-class Scots had more affinity with and sympathy for colonised peoples. Thus, in 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle' the imagined revenge of black colonial subjects swarming over civilisation which caused such anxiety for literary modernists is not feared but welcomed:

Ahint the glory comes the nicht
As Maori to London's ruins,
And I'm amused to see the plicht
O' Licht as't in the black tide droons.[\[14\]](#)

The speaker can stand back with a grin, secure in the knowledge that Scotland is outwith the scope of imperial vengeance. While the anti-imperialism in such writing is clear, it is not enough to claim special dispensation for Scotland and suggests a failure to face up to the truths of Scottish history. On slavery MacDiarmid remains largely silent.

In contrast, modern writers have signalled a willingness to inquire deeper into issues surrounding Scotland, empire and race. Carla Sassi places Joseph Knight in the literary current of Robbie Kydd's *The Quiet Stranger* and Andrew O. Lyndsey's *Illustrious Exile*. The former imagines a detached Scottish observer of slave societies in Tobago while the latter imagines that Robert Burns did actually take up the post of 'negro driver' on Jamaica where he was bound until the publication of the 'Kilmarnock edition' provided a more palatable route out of poverty. Sassi warns that such narratives risk developing a late-twentieth century 'master-narrative' of subaltern Scots, linguistically and culturally inferior within the Union having 'an easier "cross-cultural" communication' with subaltern black slaves.[\[15\]](#) This 'master-narrative' risks recreating a complacency in an essentially good Scottishness. Robertson's *Joseph Knight* wrestles with this very issue in his two comparative representations which take into account class divisions within Scotland as well as racial divisions. The major theme of race shapes the very structure of *Joseph Knight*; it is divided into four parts entitled 'Wedderburn', 'Darkness', 'Enlightenment', and 'Knight'. The two middle parts suggest a movement from a Hegelian idea of the 'darkness' of slavery into the 'light' of the Enlightenment. Taking the skin colour of Wedderburn and Knight into account, this creates a chiaroscuro structure of white-dark-light-black. This structure is reflected in the

novel's opening description of the Wedderburn estate near Dundee: 'Ballindean's policies stretched out before him: the lawn in front of the house, the little loch, then the parkland dotted with black cattle, sun-haloed sheep and their impossibly white lambs' (p. 3). Beneath the seemingly idyllic Scottish scenery, the binary colours recall a bitter racial battle which scarred the landscape. *Joseph Knight* revisits that forgotten battle.

The chapters are each based in a particular time and location moving the action forward and backward in time and space, a technique Robertson also used to good effect in his first novel, *The Fanatic*.^[16] These intersections underline the trans-Atlantic links between the battlefield of Culloden, the plantations on Jamaica, and the country estate in Fife. This is in marked contrast to the most famous novel concerning Culloden, Scott's *Waverley* whose chapters are laboriously chronological. The contrast in technique highlights Robertson's 'Atlantic' approach. In his influential discussion of chronotopes, Mikhail Bakhtin points out that Rabelais' texts, similarly, have a concept of life as an international, public affair which, 'unfolds under the open sky, in movement around the earth, in military campaigns and journeys, taking in various countries'. Bakhtin argues that Rabelais' technique allows the

disunification of what had been traditionally linked, and the bringing together of what had traditionally been kept distant and disunified, is achieved...via the construction of *series* of the most varied types, which are at times parallel to each other and at times intersect each other.^[17]

The series he identifies are the human body, clothing, food, drink, sex, death and defecation: earthly, corporeal subjects vital to the value of the individual in the rise of 'Renaissance man'. Rather than such individual chronotopes, Robertson intersects slave plantations, the estate at Ballindean and the offices of Enlightenment lawyers to bring together what had previously been 'distant and disunified' in the Scottish self-conception. The intersection of chapters entitled 'Dundee, May 1802' and 'Jamaica, 1762' underlines the connection between the wealth of the noble Wedderburn family in their stately home in Fife to the toil of black slaves in the Caribbean. Furthermore, there is minimal character development. John is always the austere 'Black Scot', James is the reckless 'Red Scot', and Knight is taciturn and monosyllabic throughout; a characterisation which avoids the 'sentimental identification' of much earlier abolitionist literature. Rather than the characters, it is the chronotopes which change. A scrolling background behind relatively static characters which emphasises, not the individuals, but the intersection and exchange of philosophies and ideas in the movement of bodies across the Atlantic.

This technique of static characterisation is captured visually in the central motif of the painting of the three Wedderburn brothers in Jamaica which still hangs above the fireplace at Ballindean,

their features instantly recognisable half a century later. Yet there is another figure as John's daughter, Susan, points out: 'It's very dark on that porch yet it's the middle of the day....Joseph Knight is there too. Or he once was. Papa had him painted out after the court case' (p.17). This brings into focus the dramatic irony of John's satisfied comment to Joseph, recorded in Sandy's diary, on completion of the painting. 'John says to Joseph do you see your self, you will look out from that picter for a hunderd yrs and never age a day' (p. 149). Joseph does continue to look out, though John could no longer bear to look at him. Thus, although the unchanging nature of the characters is captured in the portrait, the painting itself becomes a mutable form with the erasure of the figure, and hence, painful memory of the black slave.

The inspiration for the painting in *Joseph Knight* may be the *Glassford Family Portrait* which hangs in Glasgow's 'People's Palace'. Glassford (of Glassford St in Glasgow's Merchant City) was a famous tobacco merchant who had black servants in his household.^[18] It was fashionable in the eighteenth century to be depicted with black servants; in the National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh hangs a painting of the Jacobite Duke of Perth, James Drummond, who was depicted with a black servant boy wearing a metal collar complete with a padlock around his neck.^[19] In the mid-eighteenth century Archibald McLauchlan painted the Glassford family on a huge canvas in opulent surroundings. ^[20] However, in the space behind Glassford there was a profile of a black 'manservant' which subsequently became obscured. Controversy surrounds this figure, it was initially suggested that the servant had been deliberately painted out, perhaps due to nineteenth-century abolitionist sentiment. However, excavation work found that although Glassford's first wife was certainly painted out in favour of his second, the slave figure, rather, had been allowed to fade into the background.^[21] Whether deliberately painted out as in Robertson's fiction or faded from view as in the *Glassford Family Portrait*, the story of such paintings stands as a metaphor for the project of 'Scotland and the Black Atlantic': 'Joseph Knight remained at Ballindean, yet was always missing, visible yet invisible, present yet absent' (p. 25). That the figure of the black man has become obscured and forgotten is relevant not just to the painting but also to Scottish historiography. Indeed, Jackie Kay, who has explored issues surrounding Scotland and the Black Atlantic^[22], writes in an article, 'Missing Faces', that, 'Marking the abolition is also marking the missing faces: the people buried at sea, the deaths in the tobacco and sugar fields'.^[23] A depiction of exiled Scots and their African slave, executed in Jamaica, transported back across the ocean to hang on the walls of a country estate in Scotland, represents an 'Atlantic' artwork. Our attempts to restore the identity of the black figure reflect the re-examination of the hidden history of Scotland's role in the Atlantic slave trade which has faded from history.

Robertson's contribution is to link the aftermath of Culloden with Jamaican slave plantations and to compare and contrast the Jacobite rebels with Jamaican slave rebels. The prevalent historical

focus is on Jacobitism as a challenge to the nascent British state. Murray Pittock details how sceptics and romantics alike are bound together in a Whig view of history, constrained both by national historical narratives and presentism:

Romantic readings of Jacobitism ultimately do nothing to challenge the sceptics because they accept the marginalization and detachment of the Jacobite past from the mainstream of historical development. Not only do they present the Stuart cause as high drama of a colourful kind; they also implicitly show it as doomed to fail. It is also almost always detached from its international perspective: far from Jacobitism being a movement with widespread sympathy and support in Europe, it becomes a struggle of loyal Highlanders alone to restore their injured Prince. [\[24\]](#)

The subsequent military endeavours of once-despised Highland regiments in the service of the British Empire did much to rehabilitate their reputation and construct a romantic, militaristic Highland identity. Pittock details the complex interpretations of this identity through the ages, finding both mythologisers and demythologisers unsatisfactory. Commenting on the incorporation of Jacobitism into the national narrative of Scottish liberty, Pittock concludes, 'Over-emphasis on the radical or egalitarian qualities of Scottish cultural and intellectual life...are signs of a trend which surely grievously underestimates the power and centrality of Scotland's role as coloniser, not colonised, or even (as sometimes seems implied) entirely absent in spirit from the British Empire.'[\[25\]](#) Indeed, Bruce Lenman in the *Jacobite Clans of the Great Glen 1650-1784* underlines the irony of racial discourse where Highlanders who had once been equated to 'savage tribal barbarians' being used to fight the Native Americans in the expansion of the British Empire during the Seven Years' War.[\[26\]](#) Robertson similarly widens the scope from national narrative to, here, transnational black Atlantic issues. This undermines so much of the victim status of Jacobitism by linking the fall-out from the Battle of Culloden to the sugar plantations in the West Indies. This is not to say that Robertson underestimates the severity of the reprisals following Culloden. John's father, found guilty of treason in London, was brought out before a baying London crowd, hung until he was nearly dead, brought down, his stomach slit open, his bowels taken out, placed in a bucket and burned before his eyes. The brutality of the reprisals did much to secure the retrospective justification of the Jacobite cause.

The Wedderburn sons escape to Jamaica where their previous Jacobite transgressions are forgotten in a Caribbean society where the racial discourse of skin colour is being codified. They learn the gradations of blackness, such as creole and mulatto. There is, however, no gradation for whites, 'In the purity of your race, if you were white, lay your salvation' (p. 51). The message is clear: in Jamaica, your identity as a political criminal worthy of execution at home is subsumed

into your identity as a white man. The change in their fortune is stark as in England the reputation of all Scots as incorrigible Jacobites was growing, and Cumberland 'shared the crudest and crassest of contemporary anti-Scottish prejudices'.^[27] In Jamaica, however, their Scottish accents prove to be acceptable medical qualifications, as they earn money masquerading as doctors. Yet, Robertson also suggests continuity in their new positions in the realm of memory. The gore John saw at Culloden steels him against the misery and deformity he will come across as a plantation doctor (p. 63). The amnesia which will later obscure the memory of plantations does not afflict Culloden. In Scotland the Wedderburns had been men of property, descendants of the fifth Baronet of *Blackness*, now, as James points out, in his new form of slave-owner John has become the first Baronet of *Black-ness* (p. 70). Thus, Robertson brings out the ambivalence of their position as noble rebels. The Wedderburns were a landed family yet they formed an armed uprising against the Hanoverian state. Therefore, their experience of revolt against authority might be supposed to translate into understanding or sympathy towards slaves who rebel against authority in Jamaica.

However, the difference between the two groups is brought into sharp focus by the description of the slave revolts which are depicted, significantly, as a natural phenomenon.

He did associate rebellion with heat, as if it came *from* the heat, from tropical storms. Was that how it had been- an indefinable substance boiling up in the clouds, seeping through the air as the rains approached?...Had that been its sound rattling through the ripening cane fields, grumbling all among the slave huts, whispering over the house roof at night. (p. 109)

The effect of 'rattling', 'grumbling', and 'whispering' creates a sinister soundtrack as this immaterial force of rebellion amasses at the door of the plantation house. John's besieged imagination is unable to comprehend the material reasons for revolt: the mistreatment of the slaves by the planters. Instead, their rebellion must be attributed to the weather, or to atavistic cultures innate to their 'race' born across the Atlantic: 'Someone, possibly Underwood, made a remark that circulated with the unease: trouble among the slaves, wherever and whenever it broke out, started not in Jamaica, but in Africa' (p. 109). This tribal, elemental force of nature originating in the 'dark continent' is quite different, John explains, from the Stuart cause which was about 'honour' and 'loyalty'.

Even now, so many years after it, he was always punctilious in describing the Forty-five as a *rising*. To call it a rebellion was to debase the cause and its motives, to make it sound like something quite different. He had never been a

rebel; nor had his father. When he thought of rebels, he thought of slaves. He thought of Joseph Knight. He thought of Tacky. (p. 108)

The distinction drawn between the Jacobite *rising* and Tacky's slave *rebellion* on Jamaica in 1760 is significant. While 'rising' has connotations of a legitimate struggle of people who have been kept on their knees rising to their feet in a justified revolt against an oppressive power, 'rebellion' connotes an illegitimate, unjustified usurping of proper authority. Ironically, the modern reader would consider Tacky's rebellion to fall within the definition of a legitimate rising. The rising started with slaves symbolically shaving their heads and John questions three of his slaves why they have done so:

'Why did you do it?'

'Not feel well.'

'You not feel well either, Mungo? Cuffy? You all sick?'

Cuffy nodded his head very slowly. 'Yes, massa, we all sick,' he said. 'We all sick and we all tired.' (p. 112)

The Wedderburns, however, fifteen years after the forty-five have no sympathy for the slave rebels and are incapable of interpreting the coded reason for revolt. 'They're just idle', Sandy declares, 'imbeciles' (p. 113).

Significantly, this conversation takes place in the chapter entitled, 'Ballindean, May 1802/ Jamaica 1760', thus, not only intersecting but merging the chronotopes of Scotland and Jamaica in a single chapter which discusses the painting, the forty-five, and Tacky's rebellion. Indeed, Robertson invites us to draw parallels between the reprisals following Culloden and Tacky's rebellion. Holed-up in an old woman's cottage a young John Wedderburn removed his soldier's jacket in fear of the butchery of the Duke of Cumberland: 'She signed that he must throw the tunic on the fire. He did so, watched it smoulder then catch and blaze. With a stick he stabbed at it, a cuff, a sleeve, the collar, till the evidence of his visit was all gone' (p. 42). In Jamaica, the captured slave rebels are caught and brutally executed. John questions his slave hanging from a gibbet. His name 'Cuffy' recalls the description of the slow-burning tunic and John cannot help but use a Jacobite phrase.

'Why did you do it?'

'I tole you, massa. I tole you back then. Me sick, me tired.'

'No, not your head, you fool. *Why did you go out?*' (p. 121) (my emphasis)

In Scottish historical usage to 'go out' means, of course, to join the Jacobite army. Yet, despite the Jacobite slip, suggesting a parallel between one set of rebels and another, two heads of the

same hydra, there is no question of lenient treatment. Another slave leader is placed over red hot coals where he slowly burns alive, first his legs, then arms, then his body (p. 121). Viewing the brutal execution, James simply says, 'I've seen worse' (p. 123). In that phrase he recognizes the parallels with his father's own execution, but shrugs them off at the same moment. Indeed, John feels no remorse, no guilt because his rebellious side went up in smoke too, long ago when he burned his tunic in the cottage near Culloden.

However, in his second comparison, Robertson suggests there are stronger connections to be made between the Scottish working class and black slaves. Such a connection is not without difficulties as it risks recreating a celebratory 'master-narrative', this time between subaltern working-class Scots and black slaves. Thus, Robertson takes care to depict the varying nature of Knight's reception when he arrives in Scotland in the third part of the novel where some of his fellow servants refuse to speak to him. Yet, a different dynamic is opened up from the previous binary positions of black slave and white master. Working at Ballindean amongst the Scottish house servants, this 'quiet, deep, thoughtful man, not coarse at all; handsome, clean, soft-voiced and smooth' (p. 211) catches the eye of a maid, Annie Thompson, who is depicted as a strong female character, articulate and fiercely class-conscious. The difficulties this relationship faces cut across classes as it is accepted neither by Wedderburn nor all those around Annie. Annie's mother on seeing the constable arrest Knight states: 'I'm wae for ye and Joseph, and nae man should be treated in that way, but ye mairrit on a black man and ye maun thole the consequences' (p. 206). While her brother-in-law Chae 'would not come into the house because of the "blackie"' (p. 207). Yet, the bond Annie feels with Joseph goes beyond physical attraction and speaks to her sense of class-consciousness:

The story was that he had been plucked from ignorance and savagery by Sir John, had been hand-plucked to be raised from field bondage to a position of trust and safety. But Ann, never having benefited from charity, had an ingrained suspicion of such tales. She did not believe that many people, least of all the rich, did things out of the goodness of their hearts. If Joseph had been plucked from anything, it was not from ignorance but from his home, not from savagery but from his family. (p.212)

Annie's sense of sympathy with Knight and her instinctive mistrust of the narrative of benevolent master come, crucially, from her not dissimilar class position: 'She understood this because the gentry used the same kind of terms to describe people like her' (p. 212). Annie and Joseph would steal a few moments at the end of their labours and Joseph would tell her of Jamaica, stressing the commonality of the exploited on both sides of the Atlantic:

Things about Sir John and his brothers, and the terrible cruelties he had seen, and the kind, harsh, feeble, strong, miserable, humorous, brave, bitter people that the slaves were. They were people just like all of them there at Ballindean, he said, good and bad in unequal, changeable portions, leading lives that the white people in the great houses never even knew about. That, too, was like Ballindean, like anywhere – there were the great and rich and there were the rest of the world and a gulf like the ocean lay between the two. (pp. 212-213)

At a stroke the Atlantic Ocean which unites oppressed groups on opposite continents, also encapsulates the distance between rich and poor whether on sugar plantations or in Scottish manor houses. Robertson's depiction of the relationship operating along the faultlines of class, race and gender must be viewed in the context of twenty-first century ethnic rapprochement. Yet, the historical reality of their marriage suggests his depiction of a strong-willed female character, unwilling to be obedient in her servitude is not in the realm of sheer fiction.

Furthermore, contemporary Scottish colliers, bound for life to their masters, experienced a form of perpetual servitude. Robertson employs a well-established depiction of these colliers who have long been portrayed as a 'race apart'. Tom Johnston's description invites parallels with black slaves:

Buried in unconsecrated ground; some of them wore metal collars round their necks; they were bought and sold and gifted like cattle...they were wholly unlettered; they developed a jargon of their own...in every old mining district in Scotland local tradition still tells of how the 'brown yins' or the 'black folk' allowed no stranger near their habitations.[\[28\]](#)

The comparison to *chattel* slavery is clear, and the metal collar might recall the portrait of the Jacobite Duke of Perth, James Drummond, whose black servant wears a metal collar. Robertson portrays Knight's cause as intertwined with their plight as dirt poor labourers in brutal, inescapable working conditions. The recent court decision to 'emancipate' the colliers from their peculiar bonds of servitude would act as a precedent and influence the judges in Knight's own court case.[\[29\]](#) Indeed, the arguments heard over their situation hold many parallels with the debates over the abolition of slavery.

The driving motivation in the movement for change had not been the liberation of the oppressed labourer. Instead an argument had raged between conservative and modernising masters. The former resented any outside

influence in the way they exploited their coal reserves. The latter were keen to open up mining to a much larger workforce, subject both wages and prices to competition and make far larger profits. Only by destroying the old labour system, which was in effect a closed shop, could this be achieved. (pp. 247-248)

The recently emancipated colliers of Fife had not forgotten the parallels with Knight's case. These deprived colliers had the clarity of vision to recognise the trans-racial connections of their plight. They put together what little money they had to donate to Knight. 'They see him as a fellow-sufferer' (p. 249), explains the lawyer Maclaurin.

However, Christopher Whatley has urged caution regarding this representation of colliers. He points out that their position which was certainly a form of serfdom has been exaggerated over the years and it was far from consistent throughout Scotland: 'That on several estates the children of coal workers were considered to be life bound too brings the Scottish experience within the margins of a slave system... Yet the temptation to overstate the argument should be resisted'.^[30] The parallel with slaves does not stand up to scrutiny: Whatley cites the relatively high wages and the evidence of mobility of labour between collieries. He finds the portrayal of brutish colliers a 'race apart' to be the product of a Whiggish historiography and even the use of the metal collar, that symbol of ownership, is unsubstantiated. Although many reproductions exist only one original has been found which was not necessarily used on a coal worker. Certainly, Robertson's emphasis on the parallels between the Scottish working class and black slaves is not unproblematic. In the light of Whatley's argument, Robertson's portrayal of the colliers is drawn from a skewed historiography. His willingness to accept the portrayal reveals his wish to set up a parallel between oppressed classes. The description of the encounter between a collier and Knight to hand over the money collected to fund his court case should be read in the context of a modern compensation for historical crimes: an attempt to make amends for a history of abuse with an alternative, positive encounter between oppressed groups: 'He said he was sorry for the smallness of the sum, but he hoped it might help. Joseph nearly wept at that. The collier said, "We aw ken, man, dinna be feart, we aw ken"' (p. 372). While the limitations of Robertson's comparative representation must be remembered, nevertheless, the colliers' sense of trans-Atlantic working-class solidarity is beyond doubt. Whatley makes no mention of the colliers' assistance to Knight or, indeed, his predecessor Davie Spens – a slave to a West Indian merchant of Fife who absconded when his owner wished to send him back to the Caribbean. Given shelter by a local farmer in Wemyss, the nearby colliers, salters and farmworkers donated generously to his cause. However, the merchant died before the case came to court. 'Spens returned to work for the Wemyss farmer and became a popular local figure'.^[31] Thus, this is repeated historical evidence of the Atlantic working class, where colliers banded together to offer

a black slave their support both moral and financial. Following the court case Knight drops off the historical record, obliterated from history like he was in the painting. Robertson imagines him going to join those same colliers at Wemyss in Fife where Davie Spens had lived.

It was a sair, sair life but it was true, he was one of them, a collier...They saw him black, they knew him black, and it didn't make them hate him or love him, they just accepted him. And he understood why this was.

Slavery. It had set them together against their country, against the world. (p. 372)

Although the declaration of slavery may be exaggerated, this seems a satisfying literary conclusion drawn as it is from the previous examples of solidarity.

Moreover it is possible that the trans-Atlantic figure of Paul Robeson served as a modern inspiration. The African-American actor and singer was a sensation in Britain in the 1930s, starring on stage and screen including a play about Toussaint L'Ouverture, penned by C.L.R. James. His rich baritone singing voice was instantly appreciated amongst the male voice choirs of the South Wales coal miners. Robeson stated, 'It was in Britain – among the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish people of that land – that I learned that the essential character of a nation is determined not by the upper classes, but by the common people, and that the common people of all nations are truly brothers in the great family of mankind.'^[32] As a communist, the film, *The Proud Valley*, allowed him to portray his feelings of working-class fellowship. Made in 1941 it reflects that era's attempt at 'ethnic rapprochement' during WWII. He plays an unemployed ship's stoker searching for work in the coal mines of South Wales. Impressing the choir leader, Dick, he is taken on at one pit not least for his singing ability. His presence as a black man is objected to by one character but Dick responds, 'Sure, we're all black down that pit'.^[33] This is echoed in the novel by James Boswell as he considers Knight's fraternity with the colliers: 'They're certainly about the same colour' (p. 122). It appears the coal dust can have an equalising effect which suggests the miners' peculiar potential to overcome racial prejudice. Jeffrey C. Stewart has argued that this film represents Robeson's shifting Atlantic consciousness.^[34] To the question of what are oppressed blacks to do there are several possibilities. One can emulate the oppressor such as Booker T. Washington, or influence and appropriate current theories such as the Harlem Renaissance engagement with modernism. Yet, Robeson's experience of bonding with the Welsh miners, an encounter outwith the experience of the vast majority of his African-American contemporaries, opened up a class consciousness to mediate his racial identity. Descending into the coal pit with them suggests an attempt to mine a new identity, one which might be termed an 'Atlantic working class identity'. Robeson would retain strong links with the working class

communities he met throughout Britain, performing fundraising concerts for trade unions in Cardiff, Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh. In an act reminiscent of the colliers' donation to Joseph Knight, at a concert in Edinburgh's Usher Hall, the Scottish National Union of Mineworkers presented a cheque for £300 to Robeson's causes. [35] Furthermore, it was a resolution passed at the Scottish Trade Union Congress in 1954 which initiated the 'Let Robeson Sing' campaign to have his passport reinstated.[36]

The potential in working class communities to overcome racial prejudice does not mean they should be mistaken for a utopia and Robertson does not portray it as such at Wemyss. Knight can feel alone, his unhappiness can occasionally affect his view of his own children who he sometimes considers 'diluted' in their mixed race. Yet, the difference between this situation and the contemporary eminent philosopher David Hume's idea of blacks as 'naturally inferior' is clear. [37] These are possibilities generated by the connection between the oppressed servants and colliers and the black slave, two heads of the same hydra united in their resistance: the Atlantic working class opens up the possibility of a better world.

But although there were no other African faces around him he was not alone. He was surrounded by the faces of men who had also once been slaves, near as damn it. They were all around him, and when they went down to the shore and into the earth together there was a joining of their souls that was like no other feeling. (p. 353)

At this time of chattel slavery where binary racial identities were being forged, deep in the mines, an alternative Atlantic working class identity could also be forged.

Indeed, Knight's speech captures the mobility of the Atlantic working class. For Robertson to reproduce Knight's speech raises inevitable questions of an inappropriate ventriloquism. Yet, to conclude the novel with Knight not speaking at all would have been strange, and the little he says is deeply revealing.

I will not attempt to reproduce the sound of Mr. Knight's voice. (It) was a veritable patchwork. There was, if I may express it in this way, a rich Jamaican ground, overlaid with Scotch sounds and occasional Scotch words, probably pronounced in the tones of Dundee or Perth; and I daresay the stitching may have been done with an African needle. Listening to him was like listening to a ship's company all speaking at once, yet in a kind of harmony. (p. 322)

Robertson's description of Knight's voice as akin to a 'ship's company' is significant in terms of the Atlantic working class. Gilroy emphasises the importance of the movement of the ship in

connecting the separate chronotopes on distant sides of the ocean: 'Ships were the living means by which the points within that Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected'.^[38] Moreover, Linebaugh and Rediker's concept of the 'hydrarchy', underlines the centrality of ships in early capitalism, both in terms of the organisation of the maritime state from above, and the self-organisation of the sailors from below. Indeed, they have argued that the system of labour on a ship with large numbers of workers performing complex and synchronised tasks in a dangerous environment under strict hierarchical conditions makes it a prototype of the factory.^[39] Consequently, the conditions of the ship produced its own forms of contestation from below, such as strikes, marronage and piracy: 'The ship thus became both an engine of capitalism in the wake of the bourgeois revolution in England *and* a setting of resistance'.^[40] Moreover, the workforce drawn or forced into such a dangerous and harsh line of work, whether in merchant or government shipping, came mostly from the poorest and most ethnically diverse populations. The resultant 'motley crew' of English, African, Irish, Scottish, Portuguese, Dutch or lascar brought together their own forms of radical tradition in an internationalist grouping of the oppressed, leading Ruskin to conclude, 'The nails that fasten together the planks of the boat's bow are the rivets of the fellowship of the world'.^[41]

The site of the ship in *Joseph Knight* serves as a fitting conclusion to this discussion. The slave ship crossing from Africa to Jamaica inscribed the codes that would define Joseph's life: armed white men controlling shackled black men below deck with 'the surface brutality of the white men, the submerged threat of retaliation of the black men' (p. 349). There began also the sexual abuse of slave women by white men: 'The sailor smiled, leant over...quite gently, he cupped the hand under her breast. She started away and his other hand, dangling the cosh, came over and seized her shoulder' (p. 350). The second crossing from Jamaica to Scotland suggests a resistance to these violent, unequal relations destabilising the binary codes of master-slave and even sexuality. 'Out there on the ocean, rules of behaviour – codes of ownership and obedience – reshaped themselves' (p. 365). Knight and Wedderburn share a cramped cabin together. Wedderburn teaches Knight card games and even gives lessons in reading and writing until Knight becomes violently seasick and it is Wedderburn who cares for his slave.

And then, after what seemed like weeks, Joseph began to piece together what had been happening to him. He had been sick, over and over and without any ability to direct what forced itself through his mouth. He had soiled himself. He had soaked his sheet with sweat. And each time he had done these things, someone had cleaned him. Someone had wiped his brow, sponged down his body. Someone had gently raised his head and helped him to drink. (p. 367)

Wedderburn sat by his side, holding his hand, praying, 'Please God, do not let him die. Almighty God and Jesus Christ, do not take Joseph from me...on and on for hours' (p. 367). Such a scene suggests an attempt to make amends for historical injustices. 'Out there in the Atlantic, master and slave were reduced to this simple humanity: one man caring for another' (p. 367). The relationship goes further, 'He took Joseph's left hand in his two, brought it to his mouth, kissed it' (p. 369). While on the slave ship the two hands of the sailor held the woman and the cosh, here Wedderburn's two hands help to make amends with a kiss, suggesting a further inflection of normative codes. However, significantly given the theme of amnesia, although Knight is too weak to resist the kiss his memory serves him well and he rejects the gesture.

And afterwards, when the tempest died away and he began to recover, he did not forget it. He remembered it and he understood it...He remembered the kindness Wedderburn had shown all through the terrible time of bad weather and sickness, and he despised it. (p. 369)

It did not matter that a slave owner was kinder or more enlightened than another; it is the claim of ownership which 'destroyed any possibility of goodness between them' (p. 369). It is Knight's voice, representative of the multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual Atlantic working class which spelled danger for elites all across the Atlantic with its inherent accent of resistance and revolt which reminds us that no easy postcolonial reconciliation between Scots and slaves is possible. Robertson does, however, point to the hidden history of the Atlantic working class which, although it could be the site for horrendous racial strife, also contains a radical tradition which deserves more attention. In the final count, such a narrative as this takes a major first step in facing up to historical truths and establishes the forgotten site of the Caribbean as a vital element in any future considerations of 'Scottishness', destabilising, as it does, the established national narrative, platitudes of liberty, and myths of 'national character'.

NOTES

[1] Ben Okri, *Birds of Heaven* (London: Phoenix, 1996), p. 21 and James Robertson, *Joseph Knight* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003).

[2] Carla Sassi, 'Acts of (Un)willed Amnesia: Dis/appearing Figurations of the Caribbean in Post-Union Scottish Literature', *Caribbean-Scottish Relations Colonial & Contemporary Inscriptions in History, Language & Literature* (London: Mango Publishing, 2007), p. 142.

- [3] Alan L. Karras, *Sojourners in the Sun* (London: Cornell University Press, 1992). Michael Fry, *The Scottish Empire*, (Edinburgh: Tuckwell Press, 2001). T.M Devine, *Scotland's Empire 1600-1815*, (London: Allen Lane, 2003). Douglas J. Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750-1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005). Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the abolition of black slavery, 1756-1838* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).
- [4] For documents relating to the trial see the online resource at <http://www.nas.gov.uk/about/071022.asp>; accessed 13/9/08.
- [5] See Neil Davidson, *Origins of Scottish Nationhood* (London: Pluto Press, 2000) for a dismantling of Hechter's *Internal Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1975).
- [6] David McCrone, 'We're A' Jock Tamson's Bairns: Social Class in Twentieth Century Scotland', T.M Devine and R.J Finlay (eds) *Scotland in the Twentieth Century*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 103.
- [7] Michael Fry, *The Scottish Empire* (Tuckwell Press: Edinburgh, 2001).
- [8] Michael Fry, 'A Commercial Empire' in *Eighteenth Century Scotland: New Perspectives*, ed. by T.M Devine and J.R. Young (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 1999) p. 63.
- [9] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 15.
- [10] Peter Linebaugh and Markus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), p. 4
- [11] Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).
- [12] Alison Games, 'Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities', *AHR Forum*, <http://historynews.wordpress.com/2007/06/23/ahr-forum-on-empires-in-the-atlantic-world/>; accessed 13/9/08.
- [13] David Armitage, 'Three Concepts of Atlantic History' in *The British Atlantic World*, ed. by Armitage and Braddick (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), pp. 11-27.
- [14] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle' in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Alan Riach and Michael Grieve (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 90. [Lines 1974-77]
- [15] Sassi, p. 175.
- [16] James Robertson, *The Fanatic*, (Fourth Estate: London, 2001) moves between the Edinburgh of the seventeenth century and the millennium.
- [17] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel' in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 84-259 (p. 170).
- [18] For images of the family portrait see *Scotland and the Slave Trade: 2007 Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act* <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/03/23121622/5>; accessed 13/9/08.
- [19] *James Drummond, 2nd titular Duke of Perth, (1674-1720) with an unknown black slave*, by Sir John Baptiste de Medina, oil on canvas, c.1700, Edinburgh National Portrait Gallery.

- [20] *Glassford Family Portrait*, by Archibald Mclauchlan, c.1767, (1.98x 2.21m), People's Palace, Glasgow. Glasgow's October 2006 'Black History Month' drew widespread attention to this painting. <http://www.theglasgowstory.com/image.php?inum=TGSE00539>; accessed 13/9/08.
- [21] Senior conservator, Polly Smith, believes the figure was not painted out but faded into the background. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/glasgow_and_west/6466591.stm; accessed 13/9/08.
- [22] See Jackie Kay, *Trumpet* (London: Picador, 1998).
- [23] Jackie Kay, 'Missing Faces', *The Guardian*, 24 March 2007. Available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/mar/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview25>; accessed 13/9/08.
- [24] Murray G.H. Pittock, *The Myth of the Jacobite Clans* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 5-6.
- [25] Pittock, pp. 121-2.
- [26] Bruce Lenman, *The Jacobite Clans of the Great Glen 1650-1784* (1984; London: Methuen, 1995), p. 195.
- [27] Bruce Lenman, *The Jacobite Risings in Britain 1689-1746*, (Scottish Cultural Press: Aberdeen, 1995), p. 265.
- [28] Tom Johnston, *A History of the Working Classes in Scotland* (Glasgow, 1929); as quoted in Christopher Whatley, 'The Dark Side of the Enlightenment: Sorting Out Serfdom', in *Eighteenth Century Scotland: New Perspectives*, pp. 259-75 (p. 262).
- [29] Their 'emancipation' owed much to the idea of 'freeing up' labour as developed in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1777), so (as Marx argued) 'surplus value' could be created.
- [30] Whatley, p. 262.
- [31] Peter Fryer, *Black People in the British Empire* (London: Pluto Press, 1988), p. 206.
- [32] Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (New York: Beacon Press, 1998), p. 48.
- [33] *The Proud Valley*, dir. Penrose Tennyson, CAPAD (for Ealing Studios), 1941.
- [34] Jeffrey C. Stewart, 'The Black Adam: Paul Robeson in *The Emperor Jones* and *The Proud Valley*', paper delivered at 'African American and the Celtic Nations Conference', Swansea University, April 2007.
- [35] The BBC reported 'Abe Moffat presented a cheque for £300 collected at Scottish pits for the coloured peoples' struggles'. (BBC Written Archives Centre). The *Daily Worker* of 16 May 1949 added 'Robeson was supported by the Lesmahagow miners' choir and Kilsyth Colliery Band'. Both quoted in Allan L. Thompson, *Paul Robeson Artist and Activist on Records, Radio and Television*, (Northants: Allan. L Thompson: 2004), p. IVb.
- [36] Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (London: Pan Books, 1991), p. 424.
- [37] See David Hume's notorious footnote in 'Of National Character' (1748), *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, Vol. III (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), p. 228.

[38] Gilroy, p. 16.

[39] Peter Linebaugh, 'All the Atlantic Mountains Shook', *Labour/Le Travail*, 10 (1982), 87-121, and Markus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[40] Linebaugh and Rediker, p. 144.

[41] Linebaugh and Rediker, p. 151.