

Tom Ellen: a Malayan in Cumberland and the Caribbean in the later 18th century

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COMMEMORATION in 2007 of the ending of the British slave trade was, understandably, almost exclusively centred on the 'Guinea Trade'. Nevertheless, it is clear that in 18th century Cumberland, acceptance of slavery and slaves was commonplace even though the county is often thought of as peripheral to the British slave trade. Cumbrians were deeply involved in the African trade – as traders operating from Cumbrian and other ports, as owners or overseers overseas, as owners/employers of people of African descent in Cumbria, or as producers and consumers of slave-connected products. It is, however, important to acknowledge that Cumbrians also owned people from non-African countries. One such was Tom Ellen – 'boy' or 'servant' to Joseph Senhouse (1743-1829), of the Netherhall family – part of whose story is recorded in the Senhouse archives held in the Carlisle office of Cumbria Archives Service.¹

In common with many of their contemporaries from all social groups, the Senhouse family had the problem of successfully placing younger sons in gainful employment. The eldest son inherited the main estate of Netherhall, together with its encumbrances which, in Humphrey Senhouse's (1731-1814) case, included the costs of his mother's generous annuity, and of developing the new town of Maryport – named for his mother, Mary, a daughter of Sir George Fleming, Bishop of Carlisle. Lacking the funds to purchase property, the younger Senhouses were to be settled into, hopefully, lucrative professions.² The third son, William (1740-1800), recorded in his *Recollections* that 'it was thought proper to send me to Sea, and make a Voyage of Trial' on a trading voyage to Virginia, organised by John Senhouse of Whitehaven. He subsequently joined the Navy, a career he thoroughly enjoyed. Joseph, the fourth son, also went to sea, but in the service of the East India Company – his father, Humphrey Senhouse (1705-1770), had a one-sixteenth share in the *Earl of Middlesex*, one of the vessels in which Joseph sailed. Both careers had, however, stalled by 1770, largely through lack of funds to purchase further promotion, but Sir James Lowther's patronage – a reward for Senhouse political loyalty – resulted in William's appointment to the chief customs post for Barbados and the Leewards, with the presumption that he in turn would be able to suitably appoint Joseph. Lowther also expected William to find posts for other young men for whom he was patron. William and Joseph sailed for Barbados at the end of 1770 and, in the late April following, Joseph took advantage of the sale of land in islands acquired by the British Crown. He bought uncultivated land surrounding an existing coffee plantation on the coast of Dominica near Roseau, the capital, where William appointed him to the customs post on the incumbent's death. Joseph then acquired the ten acres of leasehold coffee from its French owner, Bartholomew Roseau. By 1773 Joseph had ten slaves on his 303 acres, of which 40 acres were planted with coffee. He initially kept Roseau on as his overseer at a salary of £75 local currency a year plus his keep.³

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|------|---|--|--------|------|--|----|------|
| 1771 | Money rec ^d . for my son Joseph Senhouse | | | 1771 | Money laid out for son Joseph | | |
| | | | 15 0 0 | | Laid out in clothes for Thomas Ellen upon his going to Barbadoes | 8 | 8 5 |
| Mar | Rec ^d . from my son H: S. half a years interest for 750, at 4% ^{per} C ^d due y ^e . 12 of Jan ^y . | | 15 0 0 | | To Mr. Fleming for Beding for his Voyage | | 11 8 |
| Apr | Rec ^d . of my son H: S. half a years interest for 750, due July y ^e . 12 | | 15 0 0 | | To the same for some Board 9 weeks at Whitehaven | 8 | |
| 1772 | Rec ^d . from my son H: S. half a years interest for 550, due Jan ^y . 12 | | 11 0 0 | Nov | John Nelsons bill for y ^e . Turtle feast | 4 | 4 |
| 1772 | Rec ^d . from my son H: S. half a years interest for 550, due July y ^e . 12 | | 11 0 0 | | Carryd over | 13 | 12 1 |
| | Carryd over | | 52 0 0 | | | | |

FIG. 2. Mary Fleming Senhouse's cash book showing expenditure for Thomas Ellen

Philip Nelson accompanied Tom to Whitehaven, where he then lodged with Roger Fleming for two weeks, while awaiting embarkation.⁵ Fleming also supplied Tom's 'Beding for his Voiage'. His box was taken to Whitehaven by the carrier. There was another bill, for the sum of £3 4s. 0d., to Mr. Hodgson – unfortunately with no explanation. Joseph does not appear to have reimbursed his mother until 1775, when he recorded, 'Cash paid on account of Thos: Ellen. £9 8s. 0.'; and 'paid John Nelsons bill for Turtle feast at his ho: £4 4s. 0d.'⁶

Tom arrived in Barbados in mid-April 1772, and on 24 July Joseph Senhouse wrote to his own mother in Carlisle, in reply to her letter sent at the end of May which he had received the evening before. After updating her about his 'little property' in Dominica, and progress on the confirmation of his customs post at Roseau, he assured her that he wanted to delay the receipt of his legacy from Aunt Thompson. His plan was to make a profit on the exchange rates,⁷ and he wrote:

'Tom Ellen arrived here above three months ago, as you would find by my last letters. Bragg drop't him in Antigua and a sloop that chanc'd to come from thence soon after landed him here, he is

highly pleas'd with the kind mention you make of him, and was truly glad to hear his Missy, Missy Gale and her little folks were all well. the complaint in his Legs broke out afresh soon after his arrival here, but by bathing in the sea, and the assistance of a few medicines, he has for some time past been perfectly well. Im pretty certain this Climate will agree much better with his constitution then England.⁸

It would seem possible that Tom had originally been left with the Senhouse family, and was only sent to Joseph because he was unwell. He would certainly not have been the only black 'servant' in the Carlisle area at the time – the Misses Waugh had a black boy serving their guests at their musical evenings at Tullie House.

There are a smattering of references to Tom Ellen in Joseph's letters and accounts, which give an indication of his life in Barbados. He continued to need some medical attention: on 4 December 1775 Dr. Holloway was paid £1 5s. 0d. 'for bleeding Thomas Ellen'.⁹ He had perhaps, although there is no mention of him in Joseph's *Memoir*, accompanied Joseph on his trip to England, as on 4 November Joseph recorded paying eight guineas for 'Thomas Ellen's passage from England in *Richmond* Capt. Birch . . . plus Bedding Shirts Jackets 19/-'. On Christmas Day 1776, at William's plantation the Grove, Joseph gave Charles, a 'servant' who seems to have been assigned to Joseph, and Thomas Ellen, three shillings and one and a half pence each. The other House 'servants' received eighteen shillings and ninepence between them, so a total of £1 5s. 0d. on Christmas boxes. On 30 December Joseph paid W. Trahern for making '6 shirts for T. Ellen and 2 p[ai]r Drawers for self 18/9'. There is no mention of Tom Ellen in Joseph's accounts for his trip to England the previous summer, so it would appear likely that Tom stayed behind at the Grove. There is also no mention of clothing for Charles – just Tom, being dressed as befitted a gentleman's personal servant or page.¹⁰

In January 1776, Tom Ellen was included in Joseph's valuation of his various assets: under the figures for the plantation and for the Customs post, there were ten 'seasoned Negroes', and – finally explicitly stated – 'Thomas Ellen a Slave Boy, by birth a Malayan, value £35'.¹¹

On 20 August 1776 Joseph Senhouse paid John Adamson 'For Cash advanced Thos Ellen in my absence £2. 18s. 6d.'; Gill and Perry supplied a pair of pumps and a pair of shoes for £1 1s. 3d. in November and, in December, £2 1s. 4d. 'Expence acct . . . on acct of T: Ellen'.¹² Charles Walrond had also been paid 11s. 3d. (Dominica currency) in November, for making Tom a coat and breeches, and altering a waistcoat; and Mrs Trahern made six shirts for Tom and '2 pr. Drawers for self'.¹³

Things were changing, however. By October 1776, Joseph had decided that his plantation was uneconomic to run as he had been doing, and sold part of it to a Mr Laing, the latter buying £250-worth of 'New Negroes'.¹⁴ Joseph was also well aware that William was unable to procure a government post for him, or rather, one that was going to produce the remuneration he required.

Matters had gone badly wrong for Tom Ellen by the following summer: on 14 July 1777, Joseph paraphrased, as a record, his letter 'to desire Simon Lee will deliver

my Boy Thos: Ellen to the care of Mr: Duer [his attorney] at Dom[inic]a: and any expence: he or Capt: Gilbert may have been at for his passage &c I would willingly pay him whenever he pleases'. Five days later, he wrote to his Dominica manager, Mr Llewelin, informing him that he had appointed two attorneys to oversee his plantation on his returning to England. A problem he had to settle was Tom Ellen's future, so 'Desired when Tom Ellen arrives he will employ him in the House and Garden only, & not in the the Field except in picking Cotton, but never to suffer him to taste strong Liquors as he was addicted to drinking, which was the reason of my sending him there with hopes of reformation. & never to let him be idle if possible.' He asked Mr. Duer to 'send Tom Ellen to Lowther Hall as soon as he arrives'.¹⁵

Joseph's attorneys had the power to 'place on my said Estate white Servants for the Management thereof, from time to time, and as often as they shall be wanted, and to remove and displace such Servants as may Misbehave and are not fit to be continued or employed in the said Estate'. No doubt that would have applied to Tom Ellen also. On 8 January 1778, Joseph wrote from Barbados to Llewelin that 'It gives me pleasure to hear Tom behaves better than he did, I hope he has seen his error & will reform, he will be the only person benefited thereby. His Cloaths &c shall be sent to him by an early oppty: now you give me hopes of his good behaviour.' Had Tom not behaved, would he then have been sold – and thus not needed his clothes? One wonders with what clothing he had been sent there.

Thereafter, there is no record. We know that the land itself had gone back to the wild by 1826, but of what happened to any of the other slaves and to Tom Ellen, there is nothing.¹⁶

In the deposited Senhouse archive there is no explanation of who Tom was, nor his precise status, until five years after his arrival in Barbados, when he was valued as a slave. In the registers of the Chapelry of Maryport for 5 November 1770, however, is recorded the christening of 'Thomas Ellen an East Indian Youth.' The boy was, as was commonly done, named for his owner's home – Ellen was the name of the river running through the Senhouse estate and Maryport.

Where and when he was acquired as a child by Joseph is not stated – presumably on one of his East India voyages between 1762 and 1766. The Company officials whom he met with in Bencoolen commonly owned slaves, and Henry Fletcher, Captain and owner of the East Indiaman, the *Middlesex*,¹⁷ with whom Joseph had sailed to the East Indies, had his own Indian 'servant', Richard Fletcher.¹⁸ There is no record of Tom's age – 'boy' could mean anything, but 'youth' perhaps implies he was in his teens when equipped for the voyage to Barbados. The difficulties involved in trying to identify 'Indian' 'servants' in Cumberland in the later 18th century are exemplified by the entry in the Dearham Burial Register for 15 April 1773, which simply records Rosetta 'an Indian Black', who died from smallpox.

The paternalist, seemingly concerned, tone of Joseph's letter to his mother after Tom Ellen's arrival in Barbados, illustrates the ambiguities of Tom's treatment – and perhaps illustrates a difference in attitudes towards slaves from the east from that

shown towards those from Africa. It may, of course, merely have been due to the fact that Tom was young and had been living as a servant in a large extended family. His lighter physique later meant that he was worth less.

When in the service of the East India Company in 1766, Joseph bought a copy of 'Oroonoko', whether Aphra Behn's novel or its adaptation as a popular play by Thomas Southerne is not stated in his accounts. Either way, 'Oroonoko' was by this period beginning to be seen as an anti-slavery work, but reading it clearly did not affect Joseph's personal willingness to own slaves.

Joseph gave Christmas boxes to the superior house slaves at the Grove, as he would have done to the senior servants in an English country house, recording the sums in his accounts. He accepted the realities of slave ownership, and assuaged any feelings of conscience by his belief in the mental inferiority of the African: after the gardener at the Grove cut his wife's throat, he remarked, 'It is something extraordinary, these accidents do not so oftener happen, among a set of people, who's Passions, are so much stronger than their Reasons.' While he recorded various instances of brutality shown towards slaves on other plantations, he did not link these with any critique of the slave system. No doubt Joseph would have felt that he had behaved both justifiably and humanely by disposing of Tom Ellen in the way he did – to his own plantation, with orders that he was not to be overworked – rather than selling him. It could, however, be argued that Tom probably had little market value in a sugar plantation economy.

Joseph's brother William was later to tell his sister-in-law Kitty, that his own relationship with his slaves was a counter-argument to that of Wilberforce;¹⁹ but his 1797 letter to Joseph shows he shared the commonly held belief that the African slaves were rather simple-minded. He regarded his slaves as part of his family, he was *pater familias* in the Roman manner. He accepted the institution of slavery as natural, but disliked overt cruelty which would have disturbed the paternalism of his own methods. Being a resident owner meant he had a personal relationship with many in his workforce, trusting maids with his children's care and expecting loyalty in the same way as he would have done from the servants at Netherhall. The Senhouse archives do not include plantation accounts, so whether slave collars and branding irons were part of expenditure at the Grove cannot be known. We have William's perspective, and no evidence of his workers' view – not even of numbers of runaways.

One is left to doubt, however, that Tom Ellen would have appreciated his later description as Joseph's 'faithful Malay slave', who would have served to 'remind [him] of other days'.²⁰ Whether field slave or servant dressed in breeches and pumps, Tom's legal status did not change. As slave-owner, Joseph had total control over Tom's life and death no matter what use he was put to. Joseph's abandonment of his property and Tom's demotion from favoured 'servant' to 'Malay slave', worth only half an African slave, was precipitated – or excused – by his over-consumption of alcohol. What to do with an adult who had outgrown his cute boyhood, was a problem faced by many slave owners, from Pepys to Fleming. Owners often blamed the problem on the slave, who was not supposed to become intransigent or turn to alcohol. The solution was to rid

oneself of the embarrassment and minimize loss on the asset by selling the liability on as a labourer. The disadvantage of owning non-African slaves like Tom, however, was their unsuitability for the kind of labour exacted on plantations.

Notes and References

- ¹ I am grateful to Mr J. Scott-Plummer for his permission to use the Senhouse records. A good background account of 18th century Cumberland families, including the Senhouses and Lowthers, can be found in Edward Hughes, *North Country Life in the Eighteenth Century, vol. II Cumberland & Westmorland 1700-1830* (Oxford, 1965).
- ² The second son, George (1738-93) was encouraged to pursue his artistic talents, but then required lifetime expenditure and care, dying in an asylum. See Mary E. Burkett, *George Senhouse of Maryport, 1739-1793* (Skiddaw Press, 2004).
- ³ CRO(C) D/Sen/10/Box 194B, various of Joseph Senhouse's account books. William married in Barbados and acquired one of his father-in-law's sugar plantations.
- ⁴ There was also a four guinea payment on Joseph's behalf, for 'ye Turtle feast'. Joseph – then in Barbados with William – had sent both turtle and instructions to his eldest brother Humphrey for the entertainment of his friends at John Nelson's inn at Maryport.
- ⁵ The Flemings were Whitehaven merchants with dealings with North America, both via Whitehaven and Liverpool. In early 1786, Henry Fleming sent a 15-year-old boy slave, Sam Oates, back to Virginia to be sold. He had bought him, aged between three and four, from the widow of another Cumbrian who had settled in Virginia. The boy had been his page when he returned to Whitehaven on the outbreak of war against British rule, and then worked in Lord Muncaster's stables, and finally in a local tavern. Having stolen some minor article, Fleming had forced the boy to agree to being resold in Virginia – with a bad character – by one of the Yates family, a relation of the Appleby headmaster who taught the Washington boys. Sam was only to be given his clothes when the ship *Venus* (Captain Flinn) was well out to sea. CRO(C) D/Lons/Box 1841: Henry Fleming's letter book.
- ⁶ CRO(C) D/Sen/11/2 Box 194B.
- ⁷ To Humphrey's consternation, Aunt Thompson enriched the younger sons, instead of the elder as had been expected.
- ⁸ CRO(C) D/Sen/5/5/1/5/2.
- ⁹ CRO(C) D/Sen/10/Box 194B: Cash Book.
- ¹⁰ CRO(C) D/Sen 10/Box 194B.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, Journal 1 January 1776.
- ¹² CRO(C) D/Sen/10/Box 194B: Cash Book.
- ¹³ CRO(C) D/Sen/10/Box 194B: Waste Book 1776-88.
- ¹⁴ Joseph asked Mr Duer, and Dr Nibbs 'if necessary', to check them over. This was presumably part of his scheme, put into action in March that year, to plant 40 acres in cotton, under an experienced cotton overseer, as well as restocking with six each of heifers and sheep, and poultry. He also abandoned the building of a new house, clearly not intending to have need for it.
- ¹⁵ Joseph had originally named his plantation Ellenborough Hall, but later changed it to honour his patron, Sir James Lowther.
- ¹⁶ In May 1826 the Hon. H. Laidlaw of Roseau, Dominica, wrote regarding the plantation to Richard Armitstead, Whitehaven lawyer, who had been in Dominica to arrange the sale of his father-in-law's plantation: 'Since I had the pleasure of seeing you, I have made some enquiry respecting Sir Joseph Senhouses property in this Island which is, as I informed you to the northward of Conll. Bruce Estate and completely overgrown with trees and underwood – my Brother does not know of any offer ever being made on the Part of the Proprietors of Castle Bruce and I am quite sure that they are not at all inclined to purchase more land.' CRO(C) D/Sen/10/Box 194B.
- ¹⁷ Joseph's father was one of the shareholders, owning a one-sixteenth share.
- ¹⁸ Henry was a younger son of the Fletchers of Clea Hall, Westward, who inherited by default, becoming Director of the East India Company, an M.P., and knighted. Richard Fletcher was baptised and buried at Westward Church.
- ¹⁹ CRO(C) D/Sen/5/5/1/33, (March 1787).
- ²⁰ Edward Hughes, *North Country Life*, 335.

