

## A Surinamese Marriage

John Gabriel Stedman and Joanna

52

[ J E R O E N  
D E W U L F ]

In support of the image we in the Low Countries have of ourselves as being tolerant people I should like to cite René Descartes. How fine it sounds when, in his *Letter to Balzac*, the father of rationalism poses the rhetorical question about Holland: *'Is there any other country with so much freedom, where you can sleep so untrammelled by cares?'* It is with less pleasure that we cite in this context that other French free-thinker, Voltaire, when he talks, in *Candide*, about the Dutch policy on slavery. In the course of his travels Candide finds himself in Surinam, where he starts up a conversation – in Dutch no less – with a slave. The poor man is lying half naked on the ground and is minus both his left leg and his right hand. *'Is it Mr Vanderdendur who has done this to you?'* asks Candide. *'Yes Sir,'* replies the slave, *'that is the custom here. The only thing they give us to wear is a pair of linen drawers, twice a year. If we are working in the sugar refineries and get a finger caught in the mill, they cut off our hand; if we want to run away, then they chop off one of our legs. Both those things have happened to me. This is the price we pay for your sugar in Europe.'*

### Slave uprising in Surinam

Anyone who reflects on the identity of the Netherlands, and for convenience's sake sweeps colonial history under the carpet, is bound to get a distorted picture. Completely contrary to the truth, Holland still often fancies itself as an innocent newcomer where a topic such as multiculturalism is concerned. In fact few European countries have such an extensive and intensive historical past when it comes to intercultural contact.

This being so, it is remarkable that a Surinamese-Dutch woman could become famous in the Anglo-Saxon world while back in the Netherlands hardly anyone has heard of her: the slave Joanna. In 1991 the British author Beryl Gilroy wrote a bestseller entitled *Stedman and Joanna – a Love in Bondage*, and Mary Louise Pratt, a leading light among North American experts in Cultural Studies devotes a whole chapter of her influential study *Imperial Eyes* (1992) to the vicissitudes of Joanna's life. This unusual degree of attention is certainly connected to the great interest, both in the United States and in Great Britain,

Captain John Gabriel Stedman.



in the history of slavery, itself a consequence of the influence exerted by post-colonial studies. Moreover, the fact that Joanna was a mulatto makes her interesting as a so-called 'intermediate figure', as a hybrid link between black and white.

Our source for Joanna is the memoirs of John Gabriel Stedman (1744-1797). Stedman was born in Dendermonde of a Dutch mother and a Scottish father. When he was sixteen years old he enlisted in the Scottish Brigade of the Dutch Army. His wild life-style caused him so many problems that in 1772 he volunteered to go to Surinam. There he saw service in the campaign against the uprising of the maroons, runaway slaves. The slave revolt in Surinam was a direct consequence of major changes that had occurred at the end of the seventeenth century. Whereas up to that time the plantations had been relatively small and



Cruelty towards slaves in Surinam.



seldom had more than ten slaves, the huge demand for colonial products on the European market made Surinam interesting to investors; and they wanted to make as much profit as they could in as short a time as possible. So Surinam was flooded with new slaves from Africa, so-called 'salt water slaves', who could be put to work on plantations where the real owner was rarely, if ever, present. Before this plantation owners had still been inclined to take a paternalistic attitude to their slaves. Now things changed drastically; the degree of abuse and exploitation was such that Surinam acquired the dubious reputation of being the most abominable place on earth and slaves from Curaçao, for instance, quaked with fear at the thought of being sent to Surinam as a punishment.

Although a first attempt to flee meant the immediate severing of the Achilles tendon, and a repeat offence the amputation of a leg, more and more slaves risked attempting to escape. There is even a case known of a plantation where on the evening before their flight the slaves defiantly sang '*Massa, ta marra joe no sa wi morro, miauw*' ('Master, tomorrow you will see us no more, miaow') under the very nose of their overseer, who understood not a word of it. Unlike the local Indians, however, the escaped slaves could not survive in the jungle, and they therefore settled in the vicinity of plantations which they made unsafe with their raids. Often the plantation owners were virtually powerless against the maroons; at that time there were about 25 slaves to one white person, while in some plantation districts the ratio could be as high as 1:60. The only solution lay in negotiation, with the result that the maroon settlements became de facto independent and the local 'grandman' even received a subsidy from the government. Long before the United States gained its independence, the Americas contained numerous 'free mini-states' such as Djuka (1760) and Saramaka (1762) in Surinam. However, the subsidy made the maroons dependent on the government, so that they felt obliged to refuse to allow new escapees into their settlements. Because this made escaping more difficult, the slaves on the plantations had an even harder time than before. The result was wholesale slave uprisings; in 1763 a revolt in Berbice (which is now in Guyana, but at that time was in Dutch hands) could be suppressed only with extreme difficulty and in 1765 the so-called Boni war began in Surinam. This new threat caused Governor Nepveu to bring in troops from the Netherlands in 1773 and 1775, and when this proved insufficient a daring, but eventually successful, tactic was applied: setting blacks against blacks. The 'Negro Free Corps' was created, known to the people at large as the 'redimoesoë' or redcaps: slaves who were prepared to fight against the maroons in exchange for their freedom.

### John Stedman's memoirs

One of these soldiers who had come out from the Netherlands was John Stedman. He was to participate in various campaigns against Boni's men, eventually spending four years in Surinam. His task was to harry the maroons relentlessly, so that they never had the opportunity to settle anywhere. Although this strategy exacted a high price – only a few hundred soldiers returned alive to the Netherlands – it produced results: in 1777 Boni fled across the Maroni river to French Guiana.

Stedman kept a journal during his Surinam adventure, which provided the basis for his book *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796). Three years later Johannes Allart published a Dutch translation: *Reize naar Surinam, en door de binnenste gedeelten van Guiana*. Stedman's memoirs are very different from his original journal. In 1784 he had married (a Dutch woman) and his wild escapades in Surinam were no longer appropriate to the respectable citizen he had now become. Yet the adaptations he made were by no means sufficient for his London publisher, who decided to scrap Stedman's declarations of love for Joanna and his impassioned wish to be able to marry her in a Christian ceremony. Instead, the emphasis was on Joanna's sorry situation. Stedman's positive assessment of the Saramaka and Djuka people was also omitted; they were now depicted as a primitive gang. Finally,

all those passages that could be considered immoral were scrapped, not only those concerning Stedman's own behaviour, but also his devastating criticism of Christian hypocrisy in a slave state.

As a result the final version was so far from the original text that Stedman complained, in a letter to his sister-in-law: '*My book is full of lies and nonsense.*' Although Stedman was not himself an opponent of slavery, his account of the



Expedition against  
the maroons, 1775.

appalling way in which slaves were treated led to his memoirs becoming a standard work of the abolitionist movement. The love story of Stedman and Joanna even became a popular literary theme and was copied in Germany (*Die Sklavin in Surinam* by Franz Kratter in 1804), France (*Adventures d'Hercule Hardi* by Eugène Sue in 1840) and the Netherlands (*Een levensteeken op een dodenveld* by Herman J. de Ridder in 1857). William Blake's engravings which had been used as illustrations in the book also made no small contribution. These shocking images aroused a wave of indignation: How was it possible for a nation that called itself Christian to be capable of such a thing?

But Stedman's *Narrative* is not just a book about slavery and the campaign against the maroons in Surinam, it is also a love story, the story of Stedman's

love for Joanna. Like many men who lived in the colony for a considerable time, Stedman took a local woman. This in itself was nothing exceptional. We are familiar with the phenomenon also from Indonesia, where such a woman was euphemistically called a *njai*, housekeeper. In Surinam these women were for the most part slaves. Yet the relationship could be given a semi-official character by means of a special form of marriage, a 'Surinamese marriage'. This dif-



ferred from a normal marriage in that in this case the bride had to be bought, the marriage was only temporary in nature, it was solemnised not by a religious ceremony but by a secular one, and it was also open to married men. In his memoirs Stedman sketches an idealised picture of the fifteen-year-old Joanna: not only is she wondrously beautiful in appearance, but she is also goodness personified. The tale of her origins is a powerful piece of romantic tragedy: she is apparently the daughter of a white 'gentleman' and a slave. Because the owner of the slave would not allow him to buy this daughter's freedom, her unknown father died of a broken heart. A short time later the wicked slaveowner went bankrupt and fled in secret to the Netherlands, leaving his wife behind alone. Her only recourse was to sell all the slaves, including Joanna.

Arrival of new slaves  
in Paramaribo, 1775.

Thereupon Stedman decided to buy Joanna on impulse. However, she refused on the grounds that in Europe her inferior position would bring disgrace both on herself and on Stedman. Stedman's chagrin was so great that it made him ill. Fortunately, Joanna eventually came to him and begged him to take her as his wife. There then followed a 'Surinamese wedding' and the couple went to live in a country house (built by slaves). Stedman romanticises their relationship as a perfect love, crowned by the birth of their son Johnny. When he left their separation was final. According to Stedman this was because Joanna wanted to remain with her slave family; according to another source it was because he was unable to pay the purchase price demanded.

Apart from its romantic exoticism, what is striking about this relationship is that Stedman did not see racial difference as an obstacle to the development of

Joanna.



true love. He continually emphasizes that for him Joanna is not just a woman, and that he really would have preferred a Christian marriage. Consequently he does not stylise her into a white beauty, but admires the unique and perfect loveliness that has come from the mixing of black and white.

*She was perfectly straight with the most elegant Shapes that can be view'd in nature moving her well-form'd 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 were large and full of expression, bespeaking the Goodness of her heart. With Cheeks through which glow'd / in spite of her olive Complexion / a beautiful tinge of vermilion when gazed upon – her nose was perfectly well formed rather small, her lips a little prominent which when she spoke discovered two regular rows of pearls as white as Mountain Snow – her hair was a dark brown – next to black, forming a beauteous Globe of small ringlets, ornamented with flowers and Gold Spangles – round her neck her Arms and her ancles she wore Gold Chains rings and Medals – while a Shawl of finest Indian which was negligently thrown over her polished Shoulder gracefully covered part of her lovely bosom – e petticoat of richest Chints alone made out the rest bare headed and bare footed she shone with double lustre carrying in her delicate hand a bever that the crown trim'd rown[d] with Silver – The figure and dress of this fine Creature could not but attract my particular notice.*

Here Stedman mingles white and black characteristics into perfect beauty: Joanna has the rosy cheeks and small nose of a white person, but it is her dark eyes that show the goodness of her heart, while her lips and curly hair also indicate African origin.

## **The mulatto as creation of the devil**

What Stedman presents here as the perfect mix was abhorred in most colonial literature. Usually mulattos were regarded as degenerate bastards, as raffish, lazy and untrustworthy people.

In the Middle Ages the question of what happens if people of different races beget a child was still pure speculation. For instance, in *Parzival* (1210) Wolfram von Eschenbach thinks that the child of a white man and a black woman looks like a magpie: black with white patches. In the sixteenth century people tried to get round the problem by saying that 'half-castes' were actually unnatural because they were infertile. Hence the term 'mulatto', which comes from the Spanish and Portuguese 'mula': mule. Offspring of a stallion and a jenny-ass, the mule is capable of living its life but is incapable of reproducing. Because this theory of infertility was contrary to reality, racial ideologues such as Louis Agassiz added a correction in the nineteenth century: half-castes are not immediately infertile, but their fertility declines from generation to generation. Therefore their only hope of survival as a group lies in a continual fresh infusion of 'pure' blood, preferably that of a white person.

In Stedman's accounts, however, Joanna was in no way portrayed as a degenerate being. In this respect his positive attitude to racial mixing coincides with that of Jan Gerhard Wichers, the one governor of Surinam (from 1784 to 1790) who deliberately wanted to promote a middle class consisting of mulattos.



His thesis was that neither white nor black felt any natural ties to Surinam, but this would be different with mulattos. Therefore he had concrete plans (though they were never actually carried out) for a so-called 'mulatto-breeding project': whites should be encouraged to produce children by black slaves, who would then be freed by the payment of a hundred guilders per child to the owner.

Wichers was an exception with this theory. It is true we find similar ideas with Governor Joan Maetsuyker during his period of office in Ceylon (1646-1650), but in general racial mixing was regarded as reprehensible. Moreover, slavery was a new phenomenon for the Dutch, unlike the Spaniards and Portuguese who had been used to (black) slaves from the time of the Moorish occupation of the Iberian peninsula (711-1492). Whereas in Spanish and Portuguese colonies slaves were treated as a kind of 'primitive children' (and also received an 'education' of a kind in both language and religion), in the Netherlands people fell back on the Bible. Supporters of slavery such as Johannes Cocceius connected it with Noah's curse on Canaan (Gen. 9:25-27) or sought passages in which slavery was referred to without disapproval (Lev. 25:44-46, Ex. 21:20-21), whereas opponents such as Gisbertus Voetius emphasised the fundamental likeness between all people and regarded slavery as a form of theft (Dt. 24:7, 1 Tim. 1:10). Enlightened writers such as Elisabeth Maria Post, Haafner and Hogendorp were also critical. None the less, as a rule slaves were seen as not entirely human, and in any case as chattels. Or, as Thomas Lynch, the late seventeenth-century Governor of Jamaica, once put it: *'For the Dutch Jesus is good, but trade is better.'*

So Stedman's hymn of praise to a mulatto woman is clearly exceptional. Despite this, we must be cautious in our judgement. If we compare Stedman's memoirs with what his journal says about his relationship with Joanna, we get an entirely different view of things. That shows Stedman as far from the romantic youth whose heart beat only for the chaste Joanna. Rather, after arriving in Surinam he tried new girl-slaves out in bed on an almost daily basis – sometimes two or more at the same time – before he finally decided on Joanna. In



Stedman, Joanna and  
their son Johnny.

the journal one looks in vain for passages full of moral indignation over Joanna's lot, we are told in much more detail about the bargaining that took place with the girls' go-betweens, in which Joanna's mother is shown to have been a particularly talented haggler. Instead of the burgeoning of romantic love we are faced here with a regular cattle-market, in which the tragic situation of women in slavery is only too clearly apparent. This gives the story of Stedman and Joanna a double significance: on the one hand their relationship symbolises the power of love that makes it possible to overcome racial barriers, while on the other it is made painfully clear that in a colonial system without freedom there can be no question of true love.

After Joanna's death in 1783 Johnny left Surinam and went to live with his father in England. There he became a sailor, but shortly afterwards lost his life in a shipwreck. He drowned halfway between the black world of slavery and that of the white colonisers. ■

The first translation was published by Johannes Allart himself in Amsterdam. In 1974 this Dutch translation was reprinted by S. Emmering (Amsterdam) and furnished with an introduction by R.A.J. van Lier. In 1987 the Walburg Pers (Zutphen) brought out a new edition compiled by Jos Fontaine under the title *Reize naar Surinamen*. The original translation appeared recently in an internet production by Jeroen Hellingman in the context of the Gutenberg Project ([www.gutenberg.org/etext/8099](http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/8099)). In 2003 Leon Giesen and Marcel Prins made a documentary on John Gabriel Stedman for Ikon. It appeared under the title *Stedman*.

All illustrations taken from *Reize naar Surinamen* (Zutphen, 1987).