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REVIEW ARTICLE

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ON STEDMAN'S *NARRATIVE*, SURINAME SLAVERY, AND EDITING

John Gabriel Stedman, Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam. Transcribed for the first time from the original 1790 manuscript, edited, and with an introduction and notes, by Richard Price and Sally Price. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988. xcvii + 708 pp. ISBN 0.8018.3416.3

John Gabriel Stedman, Reize naar Surinamen [...] naar het Engelsch. [Red. Jos Fontaine.] Zutphen: Walburg, 1987. 176 pp. ISBN 906011.527.9

Stedman's *Narrative* is among the most famous contemporary works on colonial Suriname, and indeed on Caribbean slave societies. The account of his Suriname adventures – including participation in desperate military campaigns against the Maroon guerrilleros, absolutely disgusting firsthand experiences with slavery, and a love affair with the slave Joanna – has gone through over twenty editions in six languages since the publication of the first edition of the *Narrative* (London, 1796).¹ Most of these editions were published prior to the 1840s, that is, in the period when slavery was still dominant in most of the Caribbean region. Even though Stedman was no abolitionist himself, his *Narrative* certainly strengthened the case for abolition of the degrading 'peculiar system' of slavery.

Stedman wrote the *Narrative* on the basis of the diary he kept in Suriname. Comparison of the two long ago made clear that the book represented a bowdlerized version of the story of Stedman's Suriname years. Each subsequent Stedman edition, based on the 1796 'original', often included more modifications for the worse. Thus, Stedman's writings came to be mutilated throughout. The new Price and Price edition of the *Narrative* finally redresses the situation, offering a version of the *Narrative* that is evidently more in tune with the author's real experiences and feelings, and with his other writings.

As it turns out, the 1796 'original' was a censored edition of the manuscript Stedman completed in 1790. The authentic, hand-written original was only recently rediscovered; the preparations for its publication began

¹ John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative, of a five years' expedition, against the revolted negroes of Surinam* [...]. London: J. Johnson, 1796, 2 vols.

in 1798. During the next ten years, the Prices spent an enormous amount of time, effort, and imagination on the first edition of Stedman's work to leave his original intact, except for changes imposed by the author's self-censorship.

In a long introduction, the editors reconstruct the history of both the manuscript and the book. They also point out the major differences between the 1790 manuscript and the first edition of 1796. The latter is characterized by a consistent 'improving' of 'Stedman's direct, sometimes coarse soldier's language' (p. lii). A comparison of the 1790 and 1796 versions indeed confirms the Prices' observations regarding the 'flatness' of the latter. The editor, hired as a 'literary dry-nurse' (p. xlviii) by Stedman's publisher, certainly tried to spare the delicate senses of the British reading public.

Further, the 1796 edition glossed over Stedman's own behaviour as well as that of the white population in general, particularly in sexual matters. Whereas the manuscript seems to say that Suriname's white men were right in preferring black and mulatto women over the – according to Stedman – mostly ugly white women, the 1796 book, apart from adding (lighter-skinned) Amerindian women to the former category, suggests that this preference is mainly a necessity arising from the dearth of white women (1790/1988: 49, and 1796, I: 27-8). More specifically, an 'indiscretion' of Stedman's in an acquaintance's home ('I f--k one of his negro maids'; diary, cited on p. lix) had already been left to the reader's imagination in the 1790 manuscript ('I shall beg leave to draw a Sable Curtain over it', 1790/1988: 43). The 1796 edition denies any form of intercourse and depicts the female slave as an impertinent 'black tormentor' (1796, I: 20-1). Yet the great pretender here may arguably not have been the editor, but Stedman himself. After all, 'as a middle-aged gentleman established with his wife and children in the English countryside' (p. xxxv), he had already taken care to omit references to most of his (and other people's) sexual escapades in the 1790 manuscript.

As the Prices argue, the 1796 *Narrative* moreover subtly distorts Stedman's feelings towards Joanna. The 1796 edition downplays Joanna's beauty and Stedman's passion for this mulatto slave, while emphasizing the social distance between the two lovers. Thus the lover Stedman is transformed into a patron, the self-assured and desirable Joanna into an unfortunate but noble slave. The white man is seen to be in control. When Stedman finally sails for home, leaving Joanna behind – at her own decision – it takes him some time to get the better of his '*Passion*' (1790/1988:606). The editor tuned down this (fiery?) 'passion' into 'melancholy' in the book (1796, II:381). Commenting on the news of Joanna's death in 1790, Stedman mentions two possible causes of death: poisoning 'by the hand of Jealousy & Envy', or 'a Broken heart' (1790/1988:624). The book mentions only the first of these options, probably regarding poisoning or

being poisoned as being more typical of blacks than dying of a broken heart (1796, II:401). Yet here again, Stedman's own 1790 manuscript had provided a pointer, for instance by passing over his formal 'Suriname marriage' to Joanna in silence (p. xxv).

Finally, Price and Price argue that the 1796 edition significantly distorted Stedman's views on slavery and race (pp. lxi-lxv). Judging from the 1790 manuscript, Stedman was no abolitionist, yet, in characteristic late 18th-century ambivalence on the matter, did emphasize the human nature of slaves (hence, in theory, racial equality), and at least pleaded for 'amelioration' as a prelude to a distant abolition of slavery. The 1796 book, by contrast, was edited 'in the direction of a rigid proslavery ideology' (p. lxii). References to the human quality of the black slaves indeed were frequently neutralized or omitted altogether here. Thus the 1790 statement 'that the africans are not so intirely destitute of morality and even Religion as a number of ignorant Europeans imagine' (1790/1988:72-3) is skipped in the book (1796, I:64-5). The same goes for a number of remarks about slave revolts being a logical outcome of the maltreatment of slaves by cruel planters (1790/1988:75 and 1796, I:69). Likewise, the editor ignored Stedman's bitter comments on the disastrous demographic development of Caribbean slave populations ('thus in 20 Years two millions of People are murdered to Provide us with Coffee & Sugar', 1790/1988:533, missing in 1796, II:279).

Yet the argument may be carried too far here. As for racism, Stedman's depiction of his one-night bed companion (see above) may be an illustration. Certainly, the 1796 edition invents the story that Stedman was unhappy about 'this unexpected, and (*from one of her colour*) [*my italics*] unwelcome salutation' (1796, I:20-1). But he had already been joking in the 1790 manuscript about the flat nose of this 'wousky'², who was 'black as the Devil' (1790/1988:43). As regards comments on slavery, the editorial policy of the 1796 book itself was to a large extent inconsistent. Certainly some things were deleted; yet other passages, notably those carrying antislavery messages, were rephrased without substantial changes (compare 1790/1988:557 with 1796, II:309-10), or intensified³; and yet others were even added, such as: 'What will not men do to be emancipated from so deplorable a state of subjection?' (1796, I:84-5, absent in 1790/1988:86). Could it be that the mildly radical, abolitionist publisher Joseph Johnson and the editor William Thomson, a writer of proslavery tracts, perhaps *both* had a hand in the editing of Stedman's text?

² 'Wowski, a "comic" female character - black, ill-mannered, slow-witted - in *Inkle and Yarico*, a very popular opera by George Colman the Younger produced in London in 1787', as the Prices explain in a characteristically thorough annotation (p. 632).

³ Price and Price (p. lv) provide the telling example here of Stedman's editor 'increasing the size of the weight attached to a female slave as a punishment from "3 Score or upwards" to "at least a hundred pounds"'.

The publication of the *real* original of Stedman's *Narrative* is a major event for Suriname enthusiasts and Caribbeanists alike, even though perhaps the divergences between the 1790/1988 and the 1796 edition say more about contemporary British society than they alter the extant picture of 18th-century Suriname. The editing, annotation, etc., have been done with enormous care and expertise by two well-known anthropologists and Maroon specialists, who have dedicated the book 'to Stedman's maroon adversaries who staked their lives on the attainment of freedom, justice, and peace'.

Perhaps two minor critical notes may be added here. Firstly, Price and Price in their introduction perpetuate the historiographical myth that Suriname 'had earned a solid reputation even among such rivals as Jamaica and Saint Domingue, for its heights of planter opulence and depths of slave misery' (p. xiii). This is mythical not because the claim cannot be true, but because it has never been substantiated, and methodologically probably cannot be proven. In fact, Stedman himself, together with Voltaire, was one of the originators of the myth. But what if Voltaire had been living in London, rather than in Amsterdam, before writing his *Candide*? And what if the adventurous Stedman had happened to have sailed to St. Domingue – which was about to experience the slave revolution leading to the establishment of the first free black republic in the Americas, Haiti – rather than to Suriname? Would they still have chosen Suriname as the target of their criticism? The answer may very well be in the affirmative, but should not be taken for granted.

Secondly, the editors have done an admirable job in reconstructing the history of the text and its author, in annotating the text, in identifying most of the sources of the literary citations scattered throughout the 1790 manuscript (and unfortunately omitted in the 1796 book), and even in providing complete botanical and zoological identifications. Probably it would have required another herculian effort, but it would certainly have enhanced the value of this otherwise superb publication, if the notes throughout the text could have indicated significant divergences between the manuscript and the first, spurious edition. I for one would gladly have traded in the botanical, zoological, and perhaps even the literary citation identifications for this.

The *Narrative*'s sad pre-1988 editorial history⁴ only began in 1796. Two years later a French edition⁵, with all sorts of mostly minor

⁴ Stedman himself at times was so disgusted with the editing of his manuscript that he wrote: 'My book mard intirely [and] printed full of lies and nonsense' (p. 1). This remark referred to another edition based on the 1790 manuscript, which was censored to an even worse degree than the book published in 1796. This post-1790 and pre-1796 edition was destroyed immediately upon publication on Stedman's insistence. The 1796 book represented an uneasy compromise that Stedman could live with (p. li).

⁵ John Gabriel Stedman, *Voyage à Surinam et dans l'intérieur de la Guiane* [. . .]. Paris: F. Buisson, 1798, 3 vols.

changes⁶ and several new and not very relevant appendices, was published. The French translation provided the basis for a Dutch edition, which was published in 1799-1800.⁷ The latter, understandably used more by Surinamers and Dutchmen than the original, copied the errors and omissions of the French translation, and added more of its own.

The following examples may illustrate the editorial process. When Stedman, shortly before his departure from Suriname, finds his efforts to have Johnny, his son by Joanna, christened frustrated by the Reverend Mr. Snyderhaus, he swears 'that I would sooner see him [Johnny] die a heathen than allow him to be Christened by such a Pityfull Blockhead' (1790/1988:600). This interjection is included in the 1796 book (II:374), but is found in a neutralized version in both the French (1798, III:201) and the Dutch (1800, IV:37) editions. Likewise, the statement 'this Beauteous Maid was mine' (1790/1988:100-1) is altered to 'this excellent creature was mine' (1796, I:104) and to 'cette excellente fille fut à moi' in the French version (1798, I:140), whereas the Dutch text contains the detached version 'bleef dit uitmuntend meisjen by my' (1799, I:144; 'this excellent girl stayed with me'). The latter version thus has completely 'stripped' the original of its sensual connotations.

Errors abound in the Dutch translation. So Joanna becomes Stedman's 'overwinst' (1799, I:146), that is, 'excess profit', instead of his 'conquest' (1790/1988:101 and 1796, I:101) or 'conquête' (1798, I:141-2). Even her famous portrait is mutilated by mirrorwise reproduction (1790/1988:89, 1796, I:after 88, and 1799, I: after 122). And where Stedman has 'heard a poor Sailor wish to God he had been born a Negroe and beg to be imploy'd amongst them in Cultivating a Sugar or Coffee Plantation' (sic! 1790/1988:97 and 1796, I:99), this is rephrased rather ambiguously in the French edition (1799, I:33) and outright wrongly in the Dutch, which says: 'ik heb zelfs een matroos hooren noemen [...]' (1799, I:136-7), as though Stedman had not overheard the sailor himself, but was commenting on the basis of hearsay only.

A photographic reprint of this Dutch edition with a valuable introduction

⁶ A major omission here was (a translation of) the 'Elegy to a sailor', the poem Stedman had added to the 1796 book. (In fact, the 'Elegy' was perhaps the only improvement on the 1790 manuscript in the 1796 edition. Most of the poetic quotations in the manuscript were omitted in the book.) This poem was written in memory of his son Johnny, after his recent death by drowning in a shipwreck off the coast of Jamaica (1796, II:401-3).

['...]

Soar now, my angel, to thy Maker's shrine

['...]

There view thy mother-and adore thy GOD:

There, Oh! my Boy!-on that celestial shore,

Oh! may we gladly meet-and part no more!!!'

⁷ John Gabriel Stedman, *Reize naar Surinamen, en door de binnenste gedeelten van Guiana* [...]. Amsterdam: J. Allart, 1799-1800. 4 vols.

by R.A.J. van Lier was published in 1974.⁸ Another Dutch edition was published in 1987. This latter is the second *Narrative* edition under review here. The book, edited by Fontaine, looks fine – better than the 1974 reprint. Also, the transcription of the original Dutch has been done with care. This is the good news. The bad news is that this edition only perpetuates the sad editorial fate of Stedman's *Narrative* further. The editor has omitted extensive sections, and even whole chapters of the 1799-1800 'original' Dutch text without any indication or explanation. Most botanical and zoological descriptions are missing. What is worse, many of Stedman's – admittedly erroneous – digressions on the ethnography of the area and about plantations have been left out.⁹ To top it all off, the editor has added a bewildering English-language summary, excluding important information and including bits of personal 'humour' and, worst of all, of plain fantasy.¹⁰ Stedman would have howled with rage. Fortunately, some of the other volumes in this series of fine Walburg reprints had less 'witty' editors.¹¹

To return to the real *Narrative* – the Price & Price edition, apart from its other merits, is a beautifully presented book. Unfortunately the price of over a hundred US dollars is almost prohibitive. However, an abridged paperback edition is on its way (pp. lxxxii-lxxxiii). This edition has the (working?) title *Stedman's Surinam: Life in an eighteenth-century slave society*. Since Richard and Sally Price are the Stedman experts *par excellence*, one would hope that one of their next moves will be to publish *Suriname's Stedman*. Their introduction to the definitive *Narrative* has made it abundantly clear that Joanna's lover deserves a serious biography.¹²

⁸ John Gabriel Stedman, *Reize naar Surinamen en door de binnenste gedeelten van Guiana. Opnieuw uitgegeven naar de oorspronkelijke editie Amsterdam 1799-1800 met inleiding en aantekeningen door prof. dr. R.A.J. van Lier* [. . .]. Amsterdam: Emmering, 1974.

⁹ To give a short (and probably not complete) list of omissions that should not have occurred in this Dutch edition: Chapters 2, 3 and 4 have been left out completely, as have the passages 1799, I:270-8, 1799, II:73-80, 137-9, 158-206, 286-288, and 311-6, 1800, III:17-8, 145-51, 158-70, 200-1, and 230-82, and finally 1800, IV:8-9, 10-25, and 61-3.

¹⁰ One example may suffice. An old slave warns Stedman against alligators and piranhas saying, when swimming, 'you run the risk [. . .] of their Snapping off[f] a Limb', etc. (1790/1988:127). Subsequent editions maintain the 'limb' as such (1796, I:143), or as 'membre' (1798, I:190) and 'een of ander lidt' (1799, I:195). But this editor makes up a story about a fish 'known to bite off a woman's breast or a man's genitals in one mouthful' (p. 165). And sure enough, this disgusting piece of fantasy is ascribed to the 'elderly Negro', not to the vagaries of the editor's imagination.

¹¹ The Walburg Press has published similar (Dutch-language) reprints of P.J. Benoit's *Voyage à Surinam* (1839), Maria Sibylla Merian's *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium* (1705) and August Kappler's *Zes jaren in Suriname* (1854).

¹² Not the bowdlerized version of his life presented in Stanbury Thompson's *The journal of John Gabriel Stedman, 1774-1797* (London: The Mitre Press, 1962) and *John Gabriel Stedman: A study of his life and times* (Stapleford: Thompson, 1966).