Marcus Rainsford


No doubt many of the readers of this journal are familiar with Marcus Rainsford’s An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti (1805). And those who have not read the full text have probably seen the vivid engravings that are some of the most recognized images of the Haitian Revolution. While only twelve in number, they have inspired scholarly attention and repeated reproduction because of their sympathetic treatment of people of African descent; dignified portrayals of revolutionary leaders and locals contrast starkly with the cruelties exercised by French soldiers on black and colored inhabitants. For scholars, these prints temper the derogatory depictions by white writers, especially those of the last phase of the war, when the revolution in Saint-Domingue broke away from France and became a battle for freedom and independence.

The book’s representations beg the questions of how this white British soldier came to see the revolution in less denigrating terms than most of his peers and why he decided to put his rendition into print. This excellent edition by Paul Youngquist and Grégory Pierrot helps to answer these questions, and in so doing, makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the Haitian Revolution as an Atlantic event. The first reprinting in over two centuries, it is faithful to the original, including the entire account, the engravings, and Rainsford’s extensive appendix, which contains everything from an Abbé Grégoire letter and a transcript of Ogé’s testimony to the Haitian Declaration of Independence and the program from the coronation of Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Although long, the variety of materials and the editors’ conscientious presentation result in a useful resource, not only for academics, but also for students who, in one convenient volume, can explore a diverse set of primary materials in English about the Haitian Revolution. Like other recent reissues of key texts from this era, An Historical Account does both scholarly and pedagogical work.

What makes this volume particularly insightful are the fine introduction and the thorough annotation of the original text, which contextualize Rainsford and by extension, suggest how the Haitian Revolution affected Britain and vice versa. As the editors’ biographical sketch demonstrates, Rainsford was a product of the British Empire. Born in 1758 in Ireland as the second son in a family with English roots, he enlisted in the army in an effort to find his fortune. He saw action in Charleston during the American Revolution and
was subsequently stationed in Jamaica for a spell before returning to England. There, he tried his hand as a poet, but the French and Haitian revolutions (as well as debt) encouraged him to revive his military career. Sometime in 1796 he ended up in Saint-Domingue as part of the British attempt to occupy the colony; after their defeat, he moved on to Martinique, but by 1800 he was back in England.

Rainsford drew on his experiences in Saint-Domingue to establish the credibility of his account to English audiences. But his authorial presence was also central to his main literary goal. Youngquist and Pierrot maintain that at the heart of An Historical Account is Rainsford’s desire to craft an epic. In the Haitian Revolution, he identified a story worthy of an epic—centered on a fight for freedom from slavery, and the romantic conventions of the genre dictated that he place himself, as narrator, within the action. Importantly, he casts the Haitian Revolution as an inheritor of British liberty, a product of the Glorious Revolution of the late seventeenth century. The emphasis on the British antecedents to Haitian freedom explains, to a certain extent, his negative portrayals of French soldiers and leaders. As Youngquist and Pierrot show, Rainsford goes so far as to represent Toussaint Louverture in military dress reminiscent of British uniforms. This is Rainsford at his most radical; as he wrests the Haitian Revolution from its French context, he attributes to black revolutionaries the noble characteristics usually reserved for white men.

Youngquist and Pierrot point out that, for all his ideological boldness, Rainsford had limits. His generous view of the Haitian Revolution did not lead him to advocate for the abolition of slavery, and his attitude toward black men was often paternalistic. He loathed French republicanism and defended staunchly the British Empire. In fact, Rainsford argued that in light of the Haitian Revolution, Britain should concentrate on building a stronger empire. Since, under the right conditions, men and women of African descent could exhibit the qualities associated with good British imperial subjects (hardworking and family-oriented), the British should temper slavery so that these attributes could come to the fore to create more stable colonies. Rainsford’s tortured ideological gymnastics reveal the lengths to which white onlookers went to fit the Haitian Revolution into their extant worldviews.

Thanks to their thoughtful contextualization and diligent research, Youngquist and Pierrot illuminate Rainsford’s remarkable text as a literary and historical achievement steeped in a specifically British perspective. There are a few missteps; occasionally I wished they had appropriated different expository terms (for example, “vodun” rather than “voodoo”), and I noticed some historical infelicities (Marie Antoinette was not guillotined in January 1793).
However, these quibbles should not take away from the significant accomplishment of making Rainsford’s *An Historical Account* more accessible—literally and interpretatively—for specialists and non-specialists alike.

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