

An Introduction to William Gilbert (1763–1825?)

***The Hurricane*, and other works [1]**

William Gilbert's claim to fame rests on the vigorously self-annotated poem *The Hurricane* he published in Bristol in 1796. Bristol between the years 1795 to 1798 was the birthplace of Romanticism, where Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth and Robert Southey were all being published by the young Joseph Cottle. Gilbert and his poem received an affectionate but cautious welcome from these first generation Romantics, all of whom knew him personally at this time. Wordsworth wrote admiringly in *The Excursion* that Gilbert's extensive notes to *The Hurricane* included 'one of the finest passages of modern English prose'. Southey described Gilbert as 'the most insane person I have ever known at large' but conceded that his poem though 'incomprehensible' had 'passages of exquisite Beauty'. Coleridge pronounced it 'a strange poem' but garnered a 23 line fragment from it for his short-lived periodical *The Watchman*. [2]

The Hurricane: a theosophical and western eclogue is a 450 line blank verse poem set on the island of Antigua where Gilbert was born into a planter family in 1763. [3] The action of the poem is apparently straightforward; in the eerie stillness that precedes a hurricane a young solitary poet-narrator invokes 'LOVE'S AND NATURE'S offspring pure' to join him in the 'bower of Love', and has his wish granted when a ship is wrecked by the storm. The sole survivor of the wreck, a 'mildly-beaming angel form', called Elmira, is rescued by him from the beached wreck during an interval of calm, and he takes her back to his secluded shelter. The crew had abandoned ship, leaving Elmira and her mother to their fate, and all were drowned with the exception of Elmira who was asleep in her cabin.

Gilbert's notes explain that all this is to be understood symbolically. The poem 'is grounded on, a THEOSOPHICAL view of the relation between AMERICA and EUROPE' and 'all Countries have a specific Mind, or determinable principle'. The interacting principles of the four continents correspond to the four elements and (crucially, but not pointed out by him) cardinal points and signs of the zodiac. These correspondences are best viewed in a table:

Africa	Fire	East	Aries
Asia	Earth	South	Capricorn
Europe	Water	North	Cancer
America	Air	West	Libra

According to Gilbert the directional change of the hurricane that first blows from the east and then from the west, corresponds to the European invasion of America which, by transporting African slaves westward, has unwittingly transferred spiritual power to this new western continent and inspired the American revolution. This power has now turned eastward to bring revolution to Europe. A spiritual force emanating from the hidden heart of Africa has thus been, according to Gilbert, behind the American and French Revolutions, which were the preliminary stages of humanity's progress towards millenarian fulfilment.

His reputed madness, the oddness of his language, and the obscurity of his symbolism has not encouraged readers to persevere. But his system of hermetic geography is a unique synthesis of many sources, occult and astrological: the drowning of Elmira's mother and her rescue and final apotheosis represent this battle of continents. The passage describing Elmira's emergence from the shelter after the hurricane illustrates his use of symbolism:

All the Isle, the conquered ocean,
Lay before her ...
Her God is in her heart in Love and Bliss;
And through the Isle and air SHE LIVES. [4]

The ocean (water: Europe) which drowned Elmira's mother is defeated by air (the hurricane: America) and becomes the 'conquered ocean'. Elmira, identified with air ('through the Isle and air SHE LIVES') is the renewed spirit of America, who has now gained godlike supremacy as a result of her ordeal.

'A Solitary Effusion in a Summer's Evening', the 108 line poem published with 'The Hurricane', is his only other known poem of substantial length. It's a reasonable piece of Gilbertism, but the antithetical pairing of the 'Man of Nature' and the 'Man of Art' it puts forward is conventional, and pales beside his treatment of the same theme in his notes to *The Hurricane*. This is the passage singled out for praise by Wordsworth, where Gilbert's 'Man of Mind' who 'walks along the River of Amazons ... or contemplates from a sudden Promontary, the distant, Vast Pacific' (69) is contrasted with the fashionable beaux of London society.

The Hurricane's mix of verse and prose needs to be treated as a whole. The notes are not subsidiary to the verse, they are essential to the full work's hybrid vitality. Like Dante's *Convivio*, *The Hurricane* is a prosemetric work. [5] When Gilbert reaches a rhapsodic state, his writing can suddenly lift off, his prose rising into majestic rhythms, before breaking up into dottiness a page or so later. It's this precariousness that is peculiarly Gilbertian. He could be characterised as the Syd Barrett of Romanticism: an inseparable tangle of genius, eccentricity and madness. 'I knew him well, and look back with a melancholy pleasure to the

hours which I have passed in his society when his mind was in ruins', wrote Southey looking back more than 20 years later.

Of Gilbert's other writings, his *Conjuror's Magazine* articles are the most significant. They frequently prefigure things he was later to say in *The Hurricane*. Their contents – magic, astrology, argument buttressed with biblical quotations – hark back to the seventeenth-century, and show how the hermetic tradition mutated in London during the apocalyptic mystical resurgence that coincided with the French Revolution. Gilbert can usefully be compared and contrasted with William Blake and self-styled prophets of the time such as Richard Brothers. Marsha Keith Schuchard's essay '[Rediscovering Gilbert](#)' opens up several lines of enquiry into that extraordinary world.

The Life

William Gilbert was born in Antigua, probably on 1 October 1763 (see [birthdate](#)), the seventh and youngest child of Nathaniel Gilbert, a third generation Antigua plantation owner. His father held two conflicting positions in his society. In addition to being a barrister who served for some years as the speaker of the island House of Assembly, he was the first to introduce the Methodism of John Wesley to the island, by preaching first to his family and slaves on the island, and then establishing a Methodist Society that included black and white members. In this capacity he is to be found in most histories of Methodism. Nathaniel Gilbert shared the emerging moral objection to slavery, but he (and descendents) retained ownership of their slaves, and although he was concerned for their welfare, accounts of his opposition to the institution of slavery should be treated with caution. [\[6\]](#)

William grew up with his parents on their estate in Antigua until he reached the age (typically about seven) to be sent to England for education. He boarded in Shropshire as a pupil of the Reverend Thomas Hatton, near an extended Gilbert family circle of uncle and aunts. A diary kept by William's sister Mary recorded her struggles with 'levity' as a 14-year-old, and shows the intense domestic programme of prayer, preaching and instruction these children were subjected to. She died in 1768, aged 17, and an edifying account of her death was published with extracts from her diary and an introduction by John Wesley. After the death of yet another sister in their care (again published in a religious pamphlet) their aunt and uncle and the remaining three sisters returned to Antigua. A year later after the death of their father in 1774, William and his brother also returned home. A run of hurricanes and drought on the island had brought the estate into debt and William as second son had limited prospects. In February 1779, at the age of 15, he joined the Navy, starting his service under Captain Elphinstone on *The Perseus*, a 20 gun warship. [\[7\]](#) The fact that he served for less

than three years suggests it was impulsive – his mother had died in 1777, and his brother seems to have gone off the rails at this time ('Gross violations of the law of God' was the intriguing phrase used). [8] He thus saw action on the English side during the revolutionary war against America, and was present at the siege of Charleston.

He ended up in England after his naval service. He is commonly described as a barrister, but there is only an eighteen-month window for any legal training in England, and no trace of this has been found. He sailed to Antigua from England in March 1783, after peace had been made with America, and had sufficient ability, or connections, to be appointed Clerk to the Antigua House of Assembly in December of that year. [9] He held that office until June 1786, combining it with a practice as a Counsellor at Law. [10]

Gilbert's only known case started in January 1786 when he was acting as counsel to a Major Browne who prosecuted a junior officer by Court Martial. The fact he was chosen at the age of 22 either speaks highly of his abilities, or of the undesirability of the task. Browne was unpopular with his regiment and with the Antiguans. The case was difficult; the Army officers forming the Court heckled him during the trial and ostentatiously favoured the defendant. The presiding Judge was unable to control them and, more importantly, allowed them to dictate what was entered in the official transcript.

Browne's prosecution failed, and the triumphant defendant with support from other officers promptly prosecuted Major Browne in his turn. Gilbert had to sail to England with Browne, to support his claim that the Antigua trial had been flawed, and that the official transcript was incorrect. Gilbert's six days of testimony during this second trial at Whitehall in London were crucial to Browne's case and challenging; he needed to tread very carefully to avoid criticising his seniors. Browne was exonerated, largely thanks to Gilbert. The case was reported in the *Universal Register* and Gilbert published a pamphlet on the case afterwards. Robert Southey, when a prospective law student in 1797, described this as 'a celebrated cause in the annals of Military Law'. [11]

According to the publisher Joseph Cottle, who met him in Bristol not long afterwards, Gilbert decided to remain and work in England, and it was the loss of his next case that led to the onset of his mental illness.[12] According to Cottle, Gilbert became obsessed by the Christian injunction to 'Sell all thou hast and distribute to the poor [... and] tumbled everything he had in his room, through the window, into the street, that the poor might help themselves; bed, bolsters, blankets, sheets, chairs.[...] Two or three other extravagances convinced his friends that confinement was indispensable, and they placed him in Mr. Richard Henderson's Asylum, at Hanham near Bristol'. [13]

If Gilbert's madness is measured in terms of his need for confinement, the year's stay at Henderson's asylum in 1788 is the only recorded instance, and during that period he was allowed to walk into Bristol accompanied by John Henderson, the owner's son, and he was also allowed to visit London. [14] This degree of freedom is both a credit to Henderson's regime and a sign that Gilbert made a quick recovery. John Henderson was a brilliant and wayward figure, teaching Latin at the age of 8 to pupils in John Wesley's Kingswood School. He rejected the brilliant career expected of him by evangelical sponsors such as Hannah More to study magic and astrology at his father's asylum. He died in November 1788 at the age of thirty-one. Gilbert describes Henderson calling his attention to the meaning of the number 666: a risky topic to propose to someone being treated for religious mania. [15]

There is a family tradition recorded by Sir George Gilbert Scott that immediately after the Revolution Gilbert 'went to France to ally himself with Robespierre and the rest, but took fright, I fancy, when he got nearer and returned.' [16] How 'near' he was before he returned is not enlarged on. Dover? Calais? Paris? Scott's old-bufferish 'I fancy' only serves to increase the vagueness.

Gilbert's next appearance shows a radical change of direction, and almost certainly the influence of John Henderson. He moved to London and his writings and advertisements in the *Conjuror's Magazine* between 1791 and 1793 show that he had mastered all manner of occult sciences, and was pursuing a career as an astrologer and magical talisman maker in London, where he was a part of the millennial occult underground that believed the French Revolution was a sign of the imminence of God's kingdom on earth.

There are parallels between Gilbert's African identification and the Swedenborgians in London whose *New-Jerusalem Magazine* reported a new divine dispensation brewing in the unexplored heart of Africa. [17] William Blake had links with this same milieu, and his reference in *America a Prophecy* (1793) to 'the image of God who dwells in darkness of Africa', has convincingly been linked to the same source. [18] Gilbert went further than any of these, claiming in *The Hurricane* to have a spiritual kinship with Gibberti, a country to the east of Abyssinia now known as Djibouti. His clinching argument was the co-incidence of name (See [Gibberti](#)).

The best known period in Gilbert's life is between 1795 and 1798 when he lived in Bristol. The first trace of his reappearance in Bristol is his autograph poem 'The Aurora of Human Happiness' written in Cottle's Bristol Album on 26 May 1795. These are the years in which his writing of *The Hurricane* and his association with the first generation Romantics have given him his small measure of fame. It's unfortunate that Cottle's unreliable memoirs written late in his life have been our main source of information about Gilbert – his testimony

is known to be doubtful, and his inaccurate dates have corrupted many a learned footnote. A note written by Coleridge in the margin of a book published in 1826 is representative of the way the Romantics were to remember 'poor Gilbert' later. Surprised by an unexpected mention of William Gilbert, Coleridge writes: 'Bless us! I was *most* intimate with poor Gilbert, who was as mad as a March hare, & who has written letters to me referring to & prolixly repeating conversations of mine which not only never had, but never *could* have taken place!' [19]

Gilbert suddenly disappeared from Bristol in July 1798. Cottle and Southey were both convinced that he was intent on travelling to the Gibberti in Abyssinia, and Southey wrote a hasty letter to a contact in Liverpool asking him to patrol the docks and alert 'the captain of any African vessel about to sail that Mr. Gilbert is deranged that they might refuse to take him.' [20] When Southey wrote his *Life of Wesley* in 1820, he assumed Gilbert was dead, referring to his friendship in a footnote to an account of Nathaniel Gilbert's preaching in Antigua. [21] Unfortunately Cottle learned from a niece of Gilbert's that he had lived to read and resent what he perceived as Southey's slur on his sanity, and had sailed to 'Charleston America' where he lived until he died in about 1825, after his disappearance from Bristol. This may be another instance of Cottle's faulty memory or a mishearing. No trace of William Gilbert survives in Charleston South Carolina archives. In November 1798 his sister believed he was in the West Indies, and his brother's 1807 will placed him in Antigua. Sir George Gilbert Scott however, recorded a family tradition (from that same sister) that Gilbert spent the rest of his days in America. [22] Sudden mysterious disappearances were a regular feature of his life and in July 1798 he clearly excelled himself in this respect. The hunt continues.

Conclusion

The 1990 publication of a facsimile edition of *The Hurricane* in the Woodstock Books *Revolution and Romanticism* series, was a sign of renewed interest in this marginal figure, but its introduction also revealed the paucity of knowledge about him, ('little is known about his life'), and a belief that his poem was 'only-partly-construable'. There remains work to be done to answer this last point, but the discoveries made in the last ten years concerning Gilbert's background in magic and astrology show the way forward. Biographically, as a West Indian living in England among radicals and revolutionaries, partly on an income derived from the family sugar plantation, he is one of a generation who had to adopt a dual attitude to slavery, and his idealisation of Africa is probably a sign of this psychological pressure. The intense form of his religious upbringing, reflected as it is in the form of his

breakdown, is likely to have been an aggravating cause of the mental instability described by his friends and evident in his own writings, but this is the quality that gives the best of his prose its vulnerable innocence:

In the course of a *lonesome pilgrimage* through the World, which was unavoidable to one, who saw in a light different from ALL THE WORLD, and so much stronger that he could not possibly forego it—I have been obliged to do every office for myself and others. I have taken in their turn, the high-ways and hedges, not to say the ditches and brambles, FOR I HAVE NEVER BEEN BELOW THE MARK IN ANY UNDERTAKING; and then ascended to sweep cobwebs from gilded ceilings. [\[23\]](#)

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This essay is dedicated to the memory of Desmond Nicholson, Antigua historian and conservation campaigner, who died 24 January 2006.

Notes

[1] References fully cited in [works and bibliography](#) will be abbreviated here.

[2] William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. Ernest De Selincourt (Oxford, 1966), 727-8.

[3] See [birthdate](#) for arguments in support of 1 October 1763.

[4] *Hurricane*, 37.

[5] Dante, *Il Convivio (the Banquet)* tr. Richard Lansing (New York, 1990). Each book of Dante's work starts with a short poem, followed by a long philosophical commentary that completely outleaps it. Lansing (xv) describes this hybrid form as prosemetric. The term suits *The Hurricane* perfectly.

[6] Vere Langford Oliver, *The History of the island of Antigua... from the first settlement in 1635 to the present time*, 3 Vols. (London, 1894-99) 2:12 gives family tree. I am indebted to Robert Glen for his views on the Gilberts' attitudes to slavery. Nathaniel Gilbert's life and mission is given in a multitude of secondary sources. See [appendix](#).

[7] *An Extract of Miss Mary Gilbert's Journal* (Chester: 1768). See also *A Short Account of the Life and Death of Miss Alice Gilbert* (London, 1798). For financial problems see 'Obituary of Rev. Nathaniel Gilbert', (*Christian Observer* 6 (November 1807), 769-772); William's aunt by marriage, Mary Gilbert, was forced to return to Antigua in 1781 when funds dried up (Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies* [etc.] 3 Vols; (1808-11), 2:432); For William's naval career see [CM 24 \(1793\) 516-](#)

[9](#) confirmed by National Archive (NA hereafter) ADM 36/8172. William left The Perseus at Charleston on 31 March 1780, and his subsequent movement has not been traced.

[\[8\]](#) *Christian Observer* op cit, 769.

[\[9\]](#) CM 9 (April 1792), [383](#), gives month of travel . Appointed Clerk 11 Dec 1783, resigned 5 Jun 1786 (NA: CO 9/42).

[\[10\]](#) David Lemmings, *Professors of the Law: Barristers and English Legal Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2000), 203-247 gives examples of relaxation of standards for colonial legal practice. Gilbert was 'Bred to the colonial bar' according to *Retrospective Review*, 160. The Court Martial transcript designating him 'Counsellor at Law at Antigua' also suggests a colonial status.

[\[11\]](#) For Antigua trial see NA WO 71/103. For follow up trial see *The Trial of John Browne, Esq. Major of his Majesty's 67th [etc.]* (London, 1788). Reported in the *Universal Register* (See *The Times Online* Aug 15 - 20 Oct 1787), with Gilbert achieving a subheading on 13 Sep 1787 p.3; Issue 848 Col A. 'A striking feature in Mr. Gilbert's evidence on Major Browne's Trial'. For Gilbert's pamphlet see [works](#). Southey's comments in *New Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. W. C. Curry, 2 vols. (New York, 1965), 1:120).

[\[12\]](#) Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections; chiefly relating to the late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2 vols. (London, 1837), 2:66.

[\[13\]](#) *Cottle*, 2:325 and 2:314.

[\[14\]](#) CM 2 (Sep 1791), 46-8.

[\[15\]](#) CM 7 (Feb 1792), 220-4. John Henderson's influence on Gilbert as occultist (a role downplayed by Cottle in his account) is confirmed by an unpublished Robert Southey letter dated 1 August 1822 brought to my attention by Tim Fulford. It will be included in his forthcoming edition of Southey's *Letters*, 'The only Astrologer whom I happen to have known was a Gentleman x a scholar, & <a man of genius> but decidedly insane. -[...] He learnt it from John Henderson, who sported with his own powerful intellect about as much as he delighted to do with the weaker minds of others.' (MS: University of Rochester, Rare Books Library, A.S727 1:8)

[\[16\]](#) Sir G. G. Scott, *Personal and Professional Recollections* (London: 1879), 36.

[\[17\]](#) *Hermetic Geography* , 88-9. Schuchard, passim.

[\[18\]](#) *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York, 1988), 52. See Schuchard

[\[19\]](#) *Collected Works of S T Coleridge Marginalia*, Ed H. J. Jackson & George Whalley, 6 Vols. (Princeton University Press, 1980-2001), 3:990. The book is Samuel Noble's interminable defence of Swedenborg, whose interminable title I will here abbreviate to *An Appeal in behalf of the Views of the Eternal World and State [etc.]* (London:1826). [\[20\]](#) Letter 26/7/1798 from R Southey to William Roscoe, Liverpool Central Library MS. 920 ROS 4672 (unpublished transcription by kind permission of Paul Jarman). There is also a published transcription in *TLS* 21.46 (20/3/1943), 139. My thanks to Lynda Pratt for drawing my attention to this.

[\[21\]](#) *Life of Wesley*, 2:230.

[\[22\]](#) *Cottle*, 2:318. Elizabeth Gilbert (Sister) to Mary Fletcher 19 Nov 1798 asks for MF's prayers 'in the behalf of our family here & particularly for him who is in the W. Indias'. The only other male family member was in England at this time, and her wording suggests topical cause for concern. (John Rylands University Library Methodist Archive Research Centre FI 3/1/9.). Will of the Rev. Nathaniel Gilbert: (NA, PROB 11/1472) (Thanks to Robert Glen). G.G.Scott 37 -'He subsequently went to America as the only country with the government of which, he could feel satisfied.'

[\[23\]](#) *Hurricane*, 103.