

Poltimore Poet

By Miranda Harvey Community Researcher TOSFOR

The poet John Codrington Warwick Bampfylde was born in 1754 into the powerful and prominent Westcountry family, the Bampfylde of Poltimore House on the outskirts of Exeter. However, there is another history revealed in the poet's name, the ancestry of his mother Lady Jane Bampfylde neé Codrington traces itself to the Codrington Sugar Barons of the Caribbean whose money and power across the West Indies and in England derived from the profits of sugar and slavery. Whether John Bampfylde knew about his Codrington family history and its connections to the slave trade is unknown but this ancestral link takes on a deeper resonance with the discovery that John published a poem against slavery in 1778.

Successive generations of politicians emerged from the house of Poltimore including John Bampfylde's father Sir Richard Warwick Bampfylde and his brother Sir Charles Bampfylde, both long serving MPs for Exeter. Ten years after the publication of John's anti-slavery poem, his brother Sir Charles Bampfylde MP headed a list of 250 Subscribers published in the Exeter Flying Post pledging financial support to the London branch of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The list appeared in the Flying Post shortly after the historic visit to Exeter by Thomas Clarkson, Leading Abolitionist and founder of the Society who spoke at the Guild Hall in November 1788.

A gifted musician and poet, determined to follow the path of the artist, John Bampfylde stood out from his clan. Educated at Winchester and Cambridge, he rejected the course set by his family, that of becoming a lawyer. Aged 19, he broke with Poltimore to adopt a humble rural existence, living as a tenant, amongst farmers and villagers in the beautiful Teign Valley near Chudleigh, which he captured so eloquently in his poetry.

Mentored by his friend Mr. William Jackson of Exeter, successful composer and organist at Exeter Cathedral, John Bampfylde explored his natural talent as a musician and wrote songs and poetry in the sanctuary of his remote Teign Valley surroundings. Straying from his aristocratic background to live this free-spirited lifestyle was met with disapproval by his family who would have been likely to consider it John's duty as the second son to pursue the legal path set out for him. It would seem that his despatch to London shortly after his father's death in 1776 was non-negotiable and it was here in the capital city that John's spiral into misfortune began.

Through his friendship with the well-connected Mr. Jackson and bearing the Poltimore name, John Bampfylde would have had easy access into the upper echelons of London society, especially among those with connections to Devon. He made the acquaintance of Miss Mary Palmer who was the favourite niece and sole heir of the famous painter and fellow Devonian Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792).

John fell passionately in love with her, what Mary's true feelings were for the young poet remains a mystery, although it is known that she rejected his marriage proposal and latterly became intimidated by his relentless pursuit of her. Sir Joshua would not have approved the match of his dearest niece to an erratic second son thus far without real prospects and little more than idealism and poetic sensibilities to recommend him. John's love for Mary became an obsession, the *amour fou* or 'mad love' that defies all reason. The course was set for John's descent into self-destruction; he began to lead a dissipated life in the city and his behaviour became increasingly unpredictable, sometimes violent. He infamously smashed the windows of Sir Joshua's London residence at Leicester Fields, when he was refused admittance to see Miss Palmer, for this act he was dealt a short spell in Newgate prison.

The Reynolds portrait of John Bampfylde with his friend the satirist George Huddesford was completed in 1778 which was also the year in which John Bampfylde published his collection of poetry 'Sixteen Sonnets'. Although dedicated to his beloved Mary, the sonnets were not mere paens to Miss Palmer. The poet's reflections on love feature here but also matters of social and moral conscience. Such an example is Sonnet VIII "On the Abbé Reynall's History of the Establishments in the East and West Indies".

The voluminous history created by the French writer Abbé Guillaume Thomas Raynal (1713–1796) was the work of many Enlightenment era writers. Slavery, commerce, religion, and the customs and culture of indigenous peoples are discussed from the perspective of the French Enlightenment. This book helped develop the framework for the abolitionist movement in the second half of the eighteenth century. Raynal and his collaborators argued that slavery was contrary to nature and therefore universally wrong. For its challenge to colonial policy and the inhumanity of slavery, the book was banned in Raynal's native France, and at the time of the poem's publication Raynal was already living as an exile in Germany.

Translated into English in 1776, the book's notoriety quickly made it a bestseller.

That John Bampfylde dedicated a sonnet to Raynal tells us that the poet's encounter with this book influenced him and by publicly supporting it, he was nailing his colours to the mast in support of the anti-slavery movement. This poem has its place in the canon of eighteenth century anti-slavery poetry alongside the poems of such literary luminaries as Coleridge and Southey, who both admired the work of John Bampfylde.

Tragically, John Bampfylde was not to fulfil his potential as a poet or musician. Aged just 24, he succumbed to mental illness and was confined to a private mental asylum in London for the rest of his life. He was institutionalised for twenty years, recovering his mind briefly at the end of his life, but by then he was already dying of consumption. The pathos of his return to lucidity only to have to face his own mortality closes the story of John Bampfylde who died at the age of 43. Much of the poet's life remains an enigma which makes the 'Sixteen Sonnets' he published shine all the more brightly.

GALLERY



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(i) George Huddesford and John Codrington Warwick Bampfylde, mezzotint, (circa 1778), after Sir Joshua Reynolds' portrait. The poet John Bampfylde is on the right, his close friend the satirist and artist George Huddesford on the left. This double portrait of friendship between two talented and contrasting young men is the only known image of the poet John Bampfylde. The original oil painting is in the collection of the Tate Gallery.



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(ii) Mary (née Palmer), Marchioness of Thomond (1751-1820) by Samuel William Reynolds, after Sir Joshua Reynolds mezzotint, published 1821. John Bampfylde's 'Sixteen Sonnets' begin with the quarter page homage: "To Miss Palmer, these sonnets, which have been honoured with her approbation, are dedicated by her very sincere and devoted humble servant, JOHN BAMPFYLDE". This ethereal and muse-like image of Mary perhaps embodies the idealized vision the young poet had of her.



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Mary (née Palmer), Marchioness of Thomond by William Bond, after Sir Thomas Lawrence, stipple engraving (1794-1795). Mary and her sister came to live in London with their bachelor uncle Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1773 after the death of their father Sir John Palmer. Mary married Murrough O'Brien, 1st Marquess of Thomond (1726-1808), on the 25th February 1792. Sixteen years her senior, Murrough O'Brien was an Irish peer, soldier and politician with a love of high-living, gambling and drinking. Another significant male figure in Mary's life was the Irish politician, author and orator Sir Edmund Burke who was her guardian. Mary was the chief beneficiary of Sir Joshua Reynolds' estate (estimated at £100,000) and was able to pay off her husband's debts. She had no children and died in 1820, leaving the remainder of her wealth to her younger sister Theophila.

Sixteen Sonnets¹
John Bampfylde

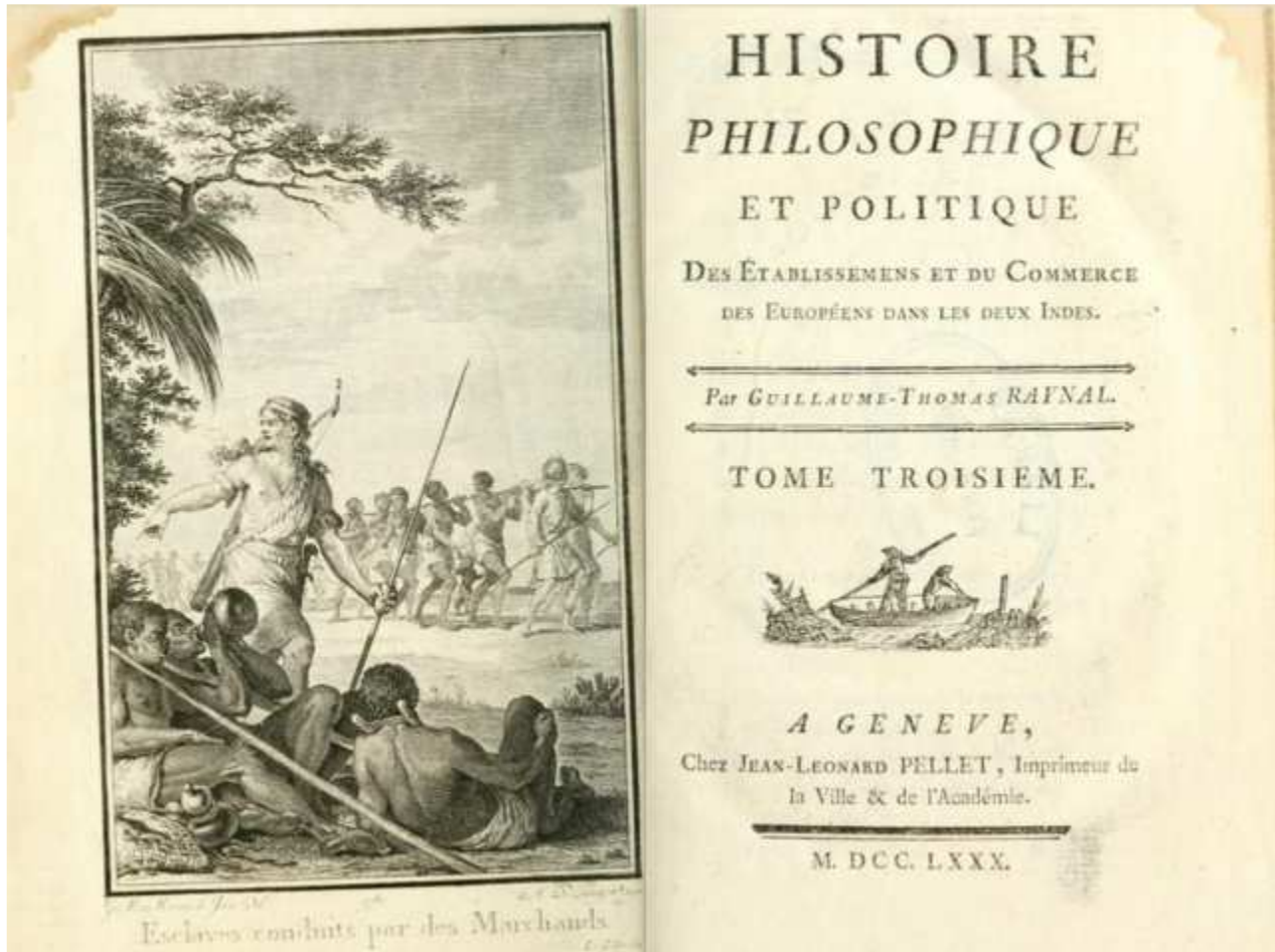
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Sonnet VIII

**On the Abbé REYNALLS's History of the
Establishments in the East and West Indies.**

Friend to the wretch, great Patron of Mankind,
Born to enlighten and reform the age;
Whose energetic and immortal page,
From Nature's laws, hath every art combin'd
Of mildest policy; whose soul refin'd,
Melts at the Slave's big tear, with generous rage
Dares to assert his rights, his griefs assuage,
And mould to industry the savage mind.
Tutor'd by thee, the nations blest shall see
Unbounded Commerce, Wealth and Peace arise,
And Truth, and spotless Faith, and Liberty:
Nor shall thy latest moment want the meed
Of praise and joy serene, which virtuous deed
Procures from Heaven for the Good and Wise.

¹ London: Printed by J. Millidge; and sold by D. Prince, of Oxford; Messrs. Merrill and Co. Cambridge; and D. Browne, at Garrick's Head, in Catherine Street, in the Strand. 1778. [Price One Shilling]



Frontispiece “Esclaves conduits par des marchands” [Slaves driven by merchants] and title page of the third volume of Raynal’s ‘L’Histoire *philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* [A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies] J.-L. Pellet, Genève, 1780



Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington: engraved portrait attributed to Dupin [178-] of French writer Abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal with a map of Virginia.

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