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Essay

Reluctant Biography, or the Visual and Spatial Revision of Key Colonial/Imperial Narratives

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Abstract

Imperial and colonial history has mostly been founded on the tradition of writing biographies of great men, and more rarely, great women. These lean inherently towards the aggrandizement or hagiography of individuals who, particularly in the early decades of life, may deserve no such attention. Yet for postcolonial and decolonial progression, the unattractive necessity of revising the lives of such influential individuals remains. We cannot now change or eliminate the archive's overwhelming propensity to amplify (and thereby value and embolden) elite voices and experiences, but we can turn down the volume by placing key episodes firmly within an individual's relevant or entire life experience, by reading the other less explicit motives for travel or collecting and by focusing on silent absences rather than noisy presences. Sara E. Johnson's 2023 book 'Encyclopédie Noire: The making of Moreau de Saint-Méry's intellectual world', is presented as a 'communal biography' of one such great imperialist, by intentionally, and sometimes creatively, adding in the actors, voices and narratives missing from the sources and archives of European colonial history. In trying to methodologically undermine how imperial biography has traditionally sidestepped complicity or guilt, Johnson attempted to paint a more complete picture of the societies, enslaved or not, in which such elite men operated. Landscape history and architectural history play important roles in such essential revisionism because they can add provocatively spatial dimensions to colonial lives and experiences. As people are profoundly affected by the environment(s) in which they operate, particularly at key tipping points in their lives, spatial and environmental analysis can undermine traditional biography by focusing on where key life decisions were made, leading to a broader cognizance of why they were made. An individual's spatial position, whether resident or absentee, at home or abroad, with family or without, reveals nuances in mentality that traditional analysis can miss. Taking the life and letters of Pierce Butler, Irishman, US Senator, signatory of the US constitution and the owner of a substantial estate of land and enslaved people in Georgia, as a case study, this article argues for the creative reimagining of biography as a fundamental postcolonial corrective to colonial and imperial history. Butler's transnational identity, sometimes Irish, sometimes not, collapses any neat mapping of a grand national narrative onto one man's life. The extraordinary level of detail provided by the correspondence also demands a more conventional or traditional history, one focused on individual identity, motive and relationships, that cannot be effectively discounted because of a landscape or architectural focus.

Keywords: biography; spatial; plantation; enslaved; landscape; postcolonial; transnational; history; identity; letters

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1. Writing History: Methods, Sources and Voices

To write history is frequently to write biography, even if reluctantly, because little is as revealing of a specific time, place and character as a personal letter. Most biographers are indebted to letters for recreating an individual's mentality and, by extension, that of the society in which they operated. Much history is founded on the biographies of great men (and more rarely great women) because, despite biography's tendency towards hagiography, the need to dissect the interests, motives and impacts of influential individuals remains. The biographer's difficulty is compounded by most archives' propensity to amplify such elite voices, with few remaining traces of those who lived or worked with elite individuals every day. Creative spatial, visual and environmental analysis can undermine the limitations of traditional biography by focusing on where key life decisions were made, leading to a broader cognizance of why they were made. As people are profoundly affected by the environment(s) in which they operate, particularly at key tipping points in their lives, an individual's spatial position, whether resident or absentee, at home or abroad, with family or without, reveals nuances in mentality that traditional analysis can miss. Sara E. Johnson's recent book 'Encyclopédie Noire: The making of Moreau de Saint-Méry's intellectual world' attempted to write a 'communal biography' of Moreau de Saint-Méry, one such great imperialist, by deliberately inserting, using creative means as necessary, the actors, voices and narratives missing from the sources and archives of European colonial history [1]. In trying to methodologically undermine how imperial biography sidestepped complicity or guilt, Johnson reaches for a more complete understanding of the societies, enslaved or not, in which such elite men operated. The images she created to illustrate the biography (in collaboration with various artists) are intriguing in their structure, colouring and composition. By provocatively retouching and thereby recalibrating existing portraits of Moreau de Saint-Méry or by sometimes refusing to use his portrait at all, while preferencing the spatial positions and imagined faces of those who surrounded and supported him, Johnson critiques accepted biographical traditions and methodologies. By explicitly demonstrating the absence of key source material, the images advance the case for a more creative history of imperialism and a more analytical and questioning illustration of biography, where traditional methods have proved inadequate and misrepresentative [2].

Biography is generally written and published for the country where the relevant individual is considered to have had the most impact. National historiography may also present profoundly differing viewpoints on each country's great men. Take Napoleon, for example, in his portrayal by either the British or the French. Yet writing biographies of men (or women) who are *not* great in one's home country may pay dividends, avoiding, in particular, any overtly mono-national history. The corresponding double revolutionary Pierce Butler (1744–1822) was born in Co. Carlow, Ireland, emigrating to the United States in 1766. He became an American Founding Father while remaining an avowed supporter of the United Irishmen, who rose against the British administration in Ireland in 1798. He was also elected the first Senator of the state of Georgia and became the 'owner', eventually, of some six hundred enslaved persons scattered across his many Georgian plantations. Sometimes an Irishman, sometimes an American senator, he swivelled his nationality throughout his life to suit his interests. This case study will exemplify what happens when we write the biography of an alien nationality rather than our own, and touch upon the ethical requirement to present, or at least not ignore, viewpoints far from our own, without appropriating their position. In general, the bias towards hagiography of both the individual and the nation is reduced, transnational themes and elements naturally increase and some of the more shadowed and oblique facets of an individual's life may

be unexpectedly exposed. These may be social, spatial, artistic and personal, becoming unexpectedly economic and political because of the altered viewpoint.

Unlike some Irish revolutionaries, such as Theobald Wolfe Tone and Archibald Hamilton Rowan, who made commendably ethical judgements about slavery when they arrived in America, Pierce Butler exhibited little concern with the institution. Partly a consequence of his marrying Mary Middleton of the planting family of South Carolina in 1777, he gradually increased the number of his enslaved persons, and the plantations upon which they worked, over the course of his lifetime. His wife's dowry enabled him to become one of Georgia's leading planters and slaveholders and one of its wealthiest absentees [3]. Shapeshifter extraordinaire, he presented himself as a radical supporter of revolution in Ireland and, in a more muted way, Philadelphia. His direct writings on slavery, a system from which he benefitted profoundly, may generally be found in his transatlantic correspondence, where he was at pains to present himself as an improving republican. In Georgia, where his plantations were eventually concentrated, he was (according to himself) a benevolent planter, his absenteeism (rare in Georgia) allowing him to claim an 'out of sight, out of mind' insouciance, or occasionally regret, regarding enslavement in his letters to Ireland, a position that was harder to uphold in the suburbs of Philadelphia (Figure 1). It collapsed utterly in the stream of letters he wrote and received from Roswell King, his appointed agent/manager for his estate in Georgia. These were impressively mined, analysed and illustrated by Malcolm Bell in his 1987 biography 'Major Butler's Legacy; Five Generations of a Slaveholding Family' [4]. What this paper aims to explore is how a white, Irish historian might approach the material from a transatlantic perspective, thereby contributing to the revision and expansion of Pierce Butler's biography over time. It also aims to interrogate the process by which historians illustrate their work, questioning how the spatial and visual skills of an architect/landscape specialist might be more effectively employed. I began this process in my 2023 book 'Landscape and Revolution in Ireland and the United States, 1688–1815' [5], which explored comparative revolutionary ideologies and their transfer into landscape design. Irish designed landscape technology and management paradigms, particularly absenteeism, a stalwart theme in Irish history, were evident in Butler's design of the sea islands of Georgia. But an 'alien' nationality can be treacherously out of sync with the 'national' cultural context (both past and present) under review, and transnational biography cannot avoid the presentation, and more questionably, the interpretation, of contexts and environments far from one's own.

Roswell King's letters to Butler survive in greater numbers than those of Butler to King, but they are sufficient in number to construct the tone and content of the correspondence and the relationship between both men and the people they controlled. Butler is always an absent presence in King's letters, which inadvertently reveal the power dynamics between absent master, resident manager, the five enslaved male drivers and the more than 200 enslaved men, 200 enslaved women, the many, many children, the sick and the healthy, the old and the young, that lived on Butler's plantations. The letters also record a game of spatial chess, mostly played from Butler's suburban mansion in Philadelphia, from where Butler moved his many pawns, rooks and Roswell King about the islands of the Altamaha River delta, Georgia, to increase his profits in absentia. King also manipulated the enslaved spatially, moving those of whom he approved to the pleasanter areas where they performed less dangerous work. The letters also reveal, inadvertently and obliquely, something of the character and motivations of five of the enslaved people who worked for Butler on his Georgian plantations. This is but a meagre haul out of the hundreds whose lives depended on Butler and King's largesse, but the relative rarity of such sources means that discussion cannot be confined to purely architectural or landscape considerations. How people relate

to each other is important for all histories; how they think, and how that thinking is affected by one's environment, a fundamental consideration.



Figure 1. Detail showing the underlined (in blue) positions of St. Simon's Island (where Butler's Hampton plantation portion was located) and Philadelphia on Carrington Bowles, 'A New and Accurate Map of North America', London, 1768, Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, G3300 1768 .B4.

As a committed revolutionary in two continents, Butler frequently railed against the injustice of inherited position in his letters. In America there had been 'no Royal Family on the spot- not hosts of pensioned flatterers—no hereditary Nobility—no interested, fatheaded Bishops & rectors [6].' A revolution's benefits were also reciprocal. If France had profited from the American Revolution, Americans 'in return' were 'benefitting in some degree by their success' as it worked as a 'small check on the Aristocratick part' of America's government [7]. Yet he had little issue with the inherited character of matrilineal chattel slavery, nor with how many male enslaved drivers seem to have bequeathed their own positions to their sons. In 1804 King was 'thinking to let young Morrison drive under

his father' [8] and the Butler lists of the enslaved show clear lines of descent from father to son in driver positions.

Pierce Butler, unlike his counterparts in Europe, who mostly benefitted from many income sources, could not afford to ignore what happened in Georgia, because the bulk of his wealth depended on the success of his plantations there. Butler's Island became the jewel in his plantation network, and a plan of just that island was published in Fanny Kemble's 'Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839' in 1863 (Figure 2). The correspondence is profoundly spatial in its subject matter; most of the letters are concerned with the landscape's optimum design—where the dykes should go, what crop would grow best, how citrus avenues should line the banks, where the various mills and machines should go, what sort of foundation to use and how the enslaved labour force should be managed to complete all such works. King and his five principal drivers could, through their consequent action and inaction, make or break the Butler fortune, and by extension Pierce Butler's power in Philadelphia, Washington DC and at a further remove Dublin and London. If the power dynamic went badly awry, or if Butler and/or King's orders were openly subverted or refused, such micro-risings, if not revolutions, by black people on the plantation, threatened the whole Butler enterprise. The 1802 'Cotton Statement' sent by King to Butler revealed that there were then five principal drivers on the Butler estates—Bram, Santee, Sambo, Morris and George [9] (Figure 3). These black enslaved men had been placed in invidious positions, as they had to carry out the work of discipline and punish their fellow black and enslaved people for the absent white master and resident white manager. The relationships such an insidious, hierarchical and delegated system created between an enslaved worker and his or her enslaved driver may be partially discerned in the correspondence but are considerably more opaque:

> *'. . .there appears to be no difficulty between the Drivers and people at this time. and it would allways be the case if one could have the truth to act upon. but a Driver is more absolute than the Deay of Algears: it is very Dificult to find a negro that dare tell upon them: so that one can git the truth.'* [10]

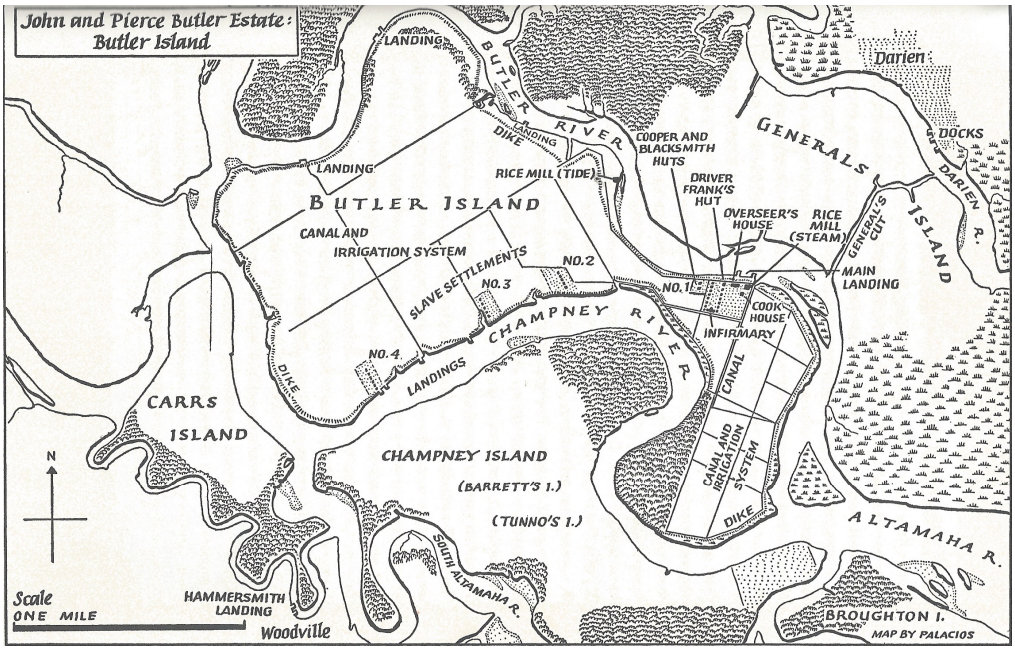


Figure 2. Drawing of Butler's Island by Palacios from nineteenth-century plan of Butler's Island, from Fanny Kemble, 'Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839' (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984).

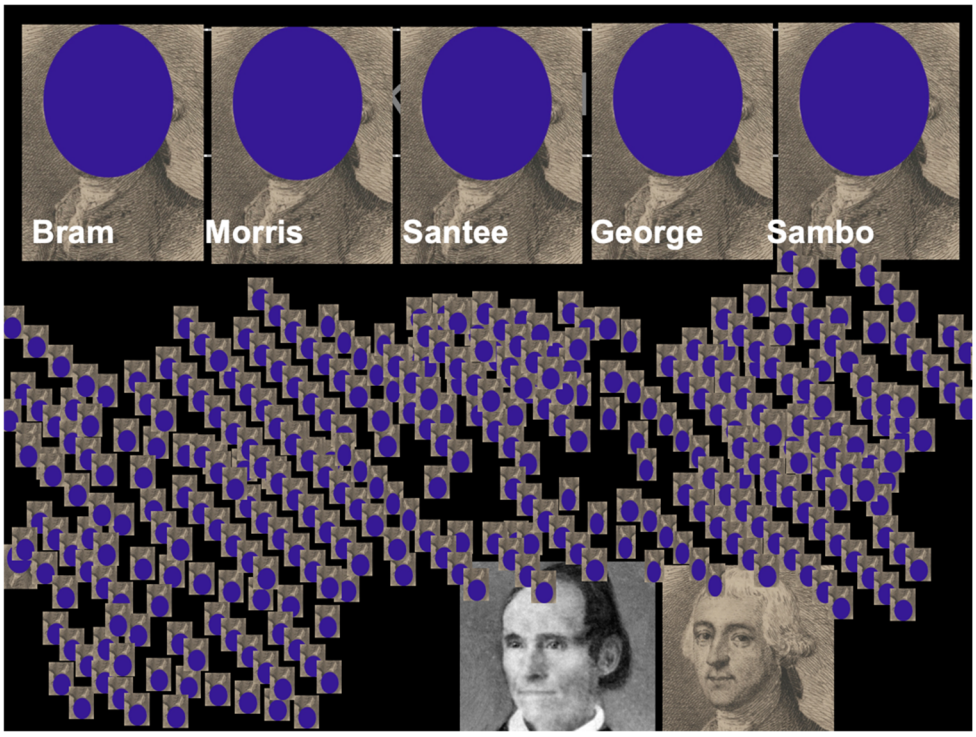


Figure 3. A composite diagram-portrait of the Butler Georgian plantations' occupants incorporating an undated watercolour of Roswell King, Courtesy University of Georgia Archives, Vanishing Georgia Collection, ful0522, and a print (ca. 1810–1890) of Pierce Butler by Max Rosenthal, NYPL Digital Library, New York Public Library.

2. Bringing Sambo into Focus

Of all the drivers, the most established was Sambo, because he and Pierce Butler had been acquainted a long time; Sambo was one of the slaves transferred to Georgia from Butler's wife's plantations in South Carolina. He is first mentioned in a rare letter of Pierce Butler's to his fellow planter Thomas Young (rather than to a professional manager such as King) in 1794, four years after his wife's death. Butler was beginning the slow and back-breaking (for the enslaved) work of converting the low, sandy and waterlogged sea islands of Georgia into some of the world's most profitable plantation landscapes by means of an intricate lattice of dykes, ditches, canals, sluice gates, and embankments. He began on the appropriately named 'Tide Island' (subsequently Butler's Island) where he meant to have 'twenty workers to remain constantly ditching', and Young was asked, as a favour, to 'take a run' to the island on Butler's behalf to 'see what Sambo ha[d] done'. Although Sambo had been in situ for ten months, Young reported that he had not done even 'three months work'. Butler begged Young to put 'a sober Overseer on the Island' in Sambo's stead because his orders to Sambo had been 'not to clear any Land 'till he had first dammed it in, yet' Sambo had gone ahead and 'cleared a few acres'. This Butler 'totally disapprove[d] of, because it m[ight] cause grass', which was presumably harder to eradicate than the existing flora. Young was pressed to write further to Butler 'of Sambo, and if he ha[d] been negligent [11].'

From the beginning Sambo was evidently his own man, ignoring, or at the very least revising, any instructions he received from Philadelphia. Some nine years later he was still working away on Tide Island, but King was by then in charge and had been since 1802. Initially their relationship began well. After the hurricane of October 1803, 'Sambo took all his hands [enslaved workers] . . . to keep the tide out of the three lower rice squares', but King thought that if Sambo had instead 'cut the banks & let it in, he would have done great service'. Because Sambo's work had 'kept the water out so long it strained the banks

so much', King estimated that it would 'cost a vast of labour to repair them'. But Sambo was still generally approved of by King in October 1803: 'But his intentions were good & his people faithfull (so much for want of judgement) [12].' Butler's response was to write back in some alarm, suggesting that Sambo should be 'displaced', but King refused to move Sambo from Tide Island and procrastinated in his response for three weeks when he wrote that they could not hope to 'find a Driver that w[ould] equil him' in managing the enslaved. His evident capacity as a driver led Butler to contemplate placing him as 'Captain gen[era]l over all'. But King considered that because they 'plant[ed] so largely of Rice', Sambo should remain spatially fixed, and focused, on Tide Island [13].

Three years later, King's relationship with Sambo took a turn for the worse. When the 'most able & stoutest Men' were 'not in good temper' he 'blame[d] Sambo', possibly for being violent towards them, but because it was 'so difficult to find out the ground work of Difficulty among Negroes' he became 'very cautious' about how to proceed [14]. He also informed Butler, who prided himself on his benevolent attitude towards his enslaved, that Sambo had 'been so sharp on the Negroes' that King had had 'to check' him [15]. By August 1806 King considered that 'all the fault found with [Butler's] rice must be the fault of Sambo'. Despite King having 'taken all the pains a man could take to make Sambo sensible how to beat rice in summer to keep it cool by running it through the wind fan', Sambo had not followed orders. King claimed (erroneously) that he had 'always vindicated the cause of Sambo' but that he would 'never take his part again'. Sambo's 'intentions' were no longer 'good' and his 'faults' were 'numerous [16].' Drink was also mentioned [10]. Sambo stood no chance against King's sustained campaign against him. Conducted entirely by letter, it was impossible for Sambo's own voice to register.

Sambo's downfall was theft, if the sale of the produce of enslaved labour can be regarded as a simple matter of property law. This led Pierce Butler, despite his loyalty to Sambo, which arose from their long acquaintance, to abandon him to King's judgement. Sambo's innate independence and rebellious nature, coupled with King's written reports of Sambo's mistreatment of other enslaved people, proved too much for Butler to either deny or defend, and far away in Philadelphia, he could not ask Sambo directly to account for his actions himself. This was another insidious benefit of absenteeism for the absentee, that when called upon to make such a judgement, it was possible to delegate the decision to one's manager or agent. Butler never had to look Sambo in the eye and take sole responsibility for his actions. The manager could also absent himself easily within the nested structure of Butler's plantation complex. By 1808, it contained four principal plantations: Hampton (on the oldest and largest sea island), Tide Island (which lay in the Altamaha River, known subsequently as Butler's Island, Figure 1), Experiment and Little St. Simon's Island. King's management duties meant that he rotated between them, reporting to Butler from each portion in turn. Butler's absenteeism had also ensured that there was no Big House, no all-seeing centre, from which to read and control his Georgian plantation complex. An estate manager's overwhelming power and control over the enslaved ensured that if King wished to place one such as Sambo in a specific area that King never visited, it was easily done.

By November 1806, 'old Sambo' was 'too old a Rat to be caught in a common trap', according to King. The matter in question was that the enslaved had had 'recourse to the Corn House key' and were stealing from the plantation's food stores, which they then sold in the nearby town. Sambo was immediately suspected by King, who adjudged him, in the absence of any judicial process for the enslaved, as 'ripe for an example' and communicated to Butler that it would be worth $10,000 to the estate 'to make an Example of him'. King 'could without the least remorse put irons on him [Sambo], and send him away from his Wife, Children, and Relations not ever to see them again' [17]. But the example King eventually made of Sambo was worse: Sambo was not only demoted from the driver's

position and sent away from his family but was swapped by King in a cohort of Butler's slaves that he exchanged for a cohort of his own. This gave King complete control over Sambo's future; he no longer had to explain anything to Butler, and Sambo became part of a moveable gang of enslaved men that King rented out to other men's plantations that were short of labour. Some 18 months later, Butler regretted this 'exchange of negroes' with King remarking that Butler 'must have chosen very poor ones if they [were] not as good as you gave' and singling out 'old Sambo' as one who did not 'deserve to breath the air of the United States' [18]. But Butler must indeed have felt some considerable guilt for the 'exchange' that had occurred, and he forced King to swap back 'John for Sambo' [19].

Sambo also comes into focus when compared to the other enslaved drivers in the King/Butler correspondence because if Sambo was the plantation revolutionary, his fellow drivers Bram and Morris were very evidently not. For King, Bram was 'the best driver for business and in short the best driver every way [20]' and, unlike with Sambo, he and Morris 'did not disagree in what ever way we plant' [21]. Morris's 'intentions' were 'generally so good' that King would 'not quarrel with him' while Morris's 'exertions to git work done' were commendably 'great'. King also 'like[d]' Morris 'very well' and it was only Morris's 'Numberless Blunders, oweing to Ignorance, carelessness and forgitfullness' that sometimes occasioned 'a little Ill nature towards' Morris from King. Morris was competitive, ambitious and proud of his work—the ideal driver. If a dyke broke in, 'it would about kill' Morris 'in his Old age to meet with that misfortune—and it' was 'useless to pretend to say that there [was] anyone more skillful in banking against water than Morris' [22].

Older slaves, who knew well how enslavement worked, tended to become more unpopular with Butler and King over time, because their knowledge of the system logically increased their expertise in how best to exploit or subvert it. Age also rendered the enslaved inherently less valuable and thus of lesser concern. When King had no way to punish 'Old Bram . . .[the] Old rascal only to stop his clothing' in 1803, he did however subsequently relent, and then also gave Bram shoes. The treatment of the enslaved children, by the same logic, arguably improved over time. Children also escaped some of the calculated delegation of enslavement's most notorious and distressing 'work', particularly that supervised by the drivers. By 1811 there were '175 under 10 years of age' on the Butler plantations, and King wrote of the 'Custom', for their 'parents to feed them in part, out of th[eir]own stock, of th[eir] own making'. The ambiguity of ownership present in the theft and subsequent sale of crops 'of their own making' discussed above is here compounded by the additional horrible irony of the children being the obvious 'produce' of their parents' 'making'. Oblivious to the revealing overlaps in his terminology, so expressive of his mentality, King reminded Butler that the little enslaved were such 'very valuable stock' that it was 'necessary to take great care of them [23].'

Sources of management inspiration across plantation design, if initially reflecting some Irish proclivities for absenteeism, manuring and drainage, often responded to a change to any plantation's choice of dominant crop. The move to sugar across the American South in the early nineteenth century, in part a response to Saint Domingue/Haiti's 1791 revolution that had led to a dramatic global drop in sugar production, encouraged Butler and King to look to the Caribbean for inspiration and particularly to Jamaica. Initial doubts about sugar's ability to 'grain well' in the United States were deflected by the reassurances that they could always make rum instead. William Carnachan, a veteran of '12 to 16 years in Jamaica', advised King that more sugar could be made in Georgia than in Jamaica and of a 'quality equal to any in the World' [24]. Another probable Jamaican, a Mr. Walcott, thought Georgian sugar 'equal to the first rate sugar of Jamaica' but even Roswell King found his praise 'a little extravagant [25].' Sugar was accommodated onto the Butler plantations because rice and sugar cane were considered to do 'well together'.

Their harvest times did not coincide, and rice was 'in the barnyards in due time for cutting cane' while the rice-beating that followed its harvesting could wait until they were 'through with sugar making'. But the Caribbean plantation management paradigm for enslaved people was also generally admired and emulated, with King reassuring Butler in 1812 that he was 'as capable of managing [the enslaved] as well as a Creolenaen' [26]. Many Caribbean islands contained Butler plantations, not least those of the French empire, and the Butlers' wider family networks need further research. The recent digitisation of the French compensation lists by the project 'Repairs' shows that of all the Franco-Irish families that were compensated for their former property in Saint Domingue, the Butler families probably benefitted the most and were thus the most financially successful over time [27].

3. Illustrating Biography

Illustrating biography is usually achieved by including portraits of the biography's subject (often on a book's dustjacket or cover), paintings or photographs of the houses in which they lived, and family trees, the last so that the complex web of human relationships can be described and referred to quickly, often in appendices. It is completely constrained by material that survives in the archives, whether public or private. These usually contain only what a family has decided and/or selected to have recorded for posterity, with many lacunae where material was destroyed or judiciously edited away. In her recent book 'Encyclopédie Noire: The making of Moreau de Saint-Méry's intellectual world' [27], Sara Johnson creatively reimagined a portrait of Saint-Méry by surrounding his portrait with the enslaved and significant persons that were generally absent from the relevant source and from any previous biography of Saint-Méry. The shadow-figures of the enslaved remain abstract and diagrammatic; they are not characterized, but their presence makes their absence from traditional illustrations profoundly evident. In revealing the illustrative bias of much biography by visibly correcting it, Johnson managed to accommodate two 'ways of seeing' Saint-Méry within one biography [28].

For the built environment professions, the primary sources are predominantly visual, founded in the many traditions of drawing and rendering space and place. For such disciplines, Johnson's work is a salutary reminder of visual absences more generally—the drawings and plans that are not made, the spatial relationships that are not described. For any absentee context (arguably all imperial contexts), the geographical and travel distance between the various nodes of power is important. Where someone makes a decision is significant because it defines knowledge of context—of the real environment and the people affected. Residency is always important because more drawings are made for absent masters than for those in situ, and the spatial contexts considered to be important from Philadelphia (or London, or Dublin) are generally not those most inhabited by a plantation's residents. While we have plans of the house Roswell King wanted Pierce Butler to build for when he came so rarely to Georgia, we have none of the gardens where the enslaved (and King) grew their own food. What creative drawings might imagine the wider space of the plantation—not the interior 'room' views of Johnson's biography, but those of the wider landscape? Was its 'Experiment' portion shielded with planting from the main house because it was the punishment destination? Did it contain more channels and dykes (and lethal deadly snakes) because it was not intended for women and children, or was it only designed to grow a potentially better type of rice? Could a recent photograph of Butler's Island be creatively retouched to imply what it once contained (Figure 4)? Should we actively correct Aaron Burr's assessment of this landscape (when hiding out there after his duel with Andrew Hamilton in 1804) as one 'present[ing] no scenes for a painter' [29] by imagining the environment that its owner had (for many reasons) no wish to represent? Figure 1 illustrates the first step in this process: positioning the protagonists

at some five states or some 800 miles apart. This is the distance that separated Butler from King and Sambo, and that derived the Butler plantations' representation in letters (many) and drawings (few). The letters might then underpin the creation of some absent drawings, strengthened by site survey and choices of scale, colour, proportion and composition.



Figure 4. Google Maps Street View photograph of Butler's Island in 2017.

In the same spirit, how to illustrate a biography of Pierce Butler and Roswell King by accommodating some portraits of the many enslaved people they controlled? Illustrations are powerful aids to any narrative and can sometimes overwhelm its thrust (and a reader's subconscious trust). Perhaps by placing the five lead drivers in dialogue with Butler's and King's portraits and by communicating visually, if impossibly, the hundreds of other lives they shaped and organized (Figure 3)? And by reversing the patriarchal bias of a standard family tree, placing those whose lines of descent have been irredeemably broken by the Middle Passage at the top of the image? While applying again to the University of Georgia's Archives for permission to reproduce for this article the sole known portrait of Roswell King, I was required to fill in a form. I had successfully achieved permission to reproduce this portrait in 2023 and again was required to answer: 'What each image will be specifically used to interpret?' This gave me pause. Why would I use a mediocre watercolour to make King's character presentable? That of Butler was in the public domain—so adequate, if probably doctored in Butler's favour, for my purposes, which perhaps should include the freedom not to have my interpretation approved of by a university. I then considered creatively reimagining King's portrait as a traced line drawing of his principal features but have decided to retain the watercolour in Figure 3 as it contained more accurate and contemporary information than any I could produce.

This illustrated micro-history of Pierce Butler, Roswell King, Sambo, Morris and Bram, their relationships with each other and to a lesser degree, Santee and George, is intended to suggest how the revision of key colonial/imperial narratives might be accomplished through biography in the future. It has attempted to represent dispassionately what can be gleaned about the five lead enslaved drivers on Pierce Butler's plantations from the correspondence. It has tried to demonstrate how the revision of colonial and imperial narratives might interrogate the hierarchy implicit in most images, leading occasionally towards a more imagined, but still critical, historical methodology. As this reluctant biography of two disagreeable but very powerful men proceeds, some corrective will be required, and if it cannot be found in the archive, then it will supplement the archive with thoughtful illustrations, as per the methodological example provided by Sara Johnson's work. Some of these might be more spatial, taking in a wider landscape context and imagining its character. Personal letters invariably correct hierarchies, and their connected truisms, because, first and foremost, they reveal the complicated individuals who made such plantation worlds. They go some way in answering any historian's most fundamental

question: 'What on earth were they thinking?' And by extension, seeing, designing and making.

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