

In this etching *High Life Below Stairs* (1799) servants ape the vices of their employers



CASTING OFF THE SHACKLES

An American slave in London

Julie Flavell, whose new book is a portrait of 18th-century London as the capital of America, tells the tale of American colonist Henry Laurens and his slave Robert. As she reveals, their visit to Britain's capital in 1771 turned into a struggle that would test Henry's commitment to liberty and prove the most critical battle of Robert's life

SLAVES "touch our country and their shackles fall". So wrote English poet William Cowper, smugly and inaccurately, in 1785. Cowper was one of many who believed that the landmark Somerset Decision of 13 years earlier had ended slavery on English soil. The case had in effect freed the recaptured runaway slave James Somerset, who had been brought to England by an American official. In fact rather than ending slavery in England, the decision

merely made it a crime to force slaves to return to the American plantations against their will.

But slaves coming to England from the American and West Indian colonies did not always wait for legislation to better their situations. Well before the Somerset Decision, complaints about ungovernable slaves in the capital of the empire were finding their way into the London papers. This peculiar form of servant trouble, imported from Britain's New World possessions by plantation owners who brought their bondsmen with them to the metropolis, reveals far more about the personal experiences of slaves in Georgian London than any high-profile courtroom trial.

A record of conflict

The power struggles that ensued between masters and slaves once in London took place behind the closed doors of elegant West End homes, and their details are largely lost to historians. But when colonial plantation owner Henry Laurens brought his black servant Robert Scipio to London in 1771, he left a rare record of a conflict that tested both his authority as a slave owner and his commitment to liberty as an American patriot. It also revealed why Robert Scipio saw the capital of the empire as a place of opportunity.

Henry Laurens was a leading figure in his native South Carolina. He was an Atlantic merchant and the owner of five plantations and hundreds of slaves. When American colonists began their historic protest against British taxes, Henry became a public defender of colonial rights.

With sensibilities to the rights of English colonists, Henry Laurens could not be indifferent to the injustices of

slave owning, and privately he admitted that to "save the honor" of America, an abolition of slavery was necessary. But he also understood that slavery was all too necessary if one were a wealthy rice planter. As compensation, Henry took pains over the living conditions of his slaves, meticulously seeing to their needs and using a system of control that incorporated rewards as well as punishments.

Once or twice he tested his system by offering freedom to a few individual slaves, who knew better than to accept. "I will venture to say, the whole are in more comfortable circumstances than any equal number of peasantry in Europe," he pronounced smugly. It was easy to sustain his illusions in his closely controlled plantation world. When Henry agreed to bring along his body servant, Scipio, on a trip to London, he was confident that whatever servant trouble other planters might have in the metropolis, it would not happen to him.

The slave Scipio was a favourite. His purchase had been an act of philanthropy in Henry's eyes, for it had rescued him from the notorious slave compounds of the West Indies. Henry believed the lad required close supervision. He must be told, not asked, to perform his duties; he must never be given money, for it brought out the worst in him. But these decrees were made in a spirit of good-humoured paternalism. By the time Henry decided to take his three sons to England for their education, Scipio had reached early manhood in his master's service. He entreated Henry to bring him along, and Henry assented, saying "no stranger could serve me so acceptably as he can".



Aston Hall in Shropshire. The slave Robert Scipio went to prison after burgling this country residence

The Laurens household arrived at Falmouth in October 1771. If Scipio's shackles did not fall when he stepped onto English soil, he did shed one badge of slavery – he changed his name to Robert. Classical names like Scipio and Cato were associated with black house servants from the plantations. Robert wanted to fit into his new environment, and Master Henry agreed, failing to see this as a portent of a growing spirit of independence.

Henry was to find that his system of plantation management quickly fell apart once he reached his West End lodgings. In the hurly-burly of Georgian London, Robert could easily play truant when he ran the daily errands that took him from Henry's residence near Downing Street into the crowded City, or to the elegant new houses in Oxford Street. And in London Robert had constant access to money. Tipping servants was such a deeply-rooted practice in the metropolis that foreigners complained at the expense. "Money does him no good," groaned Henry, but he was helpless to prevent it.

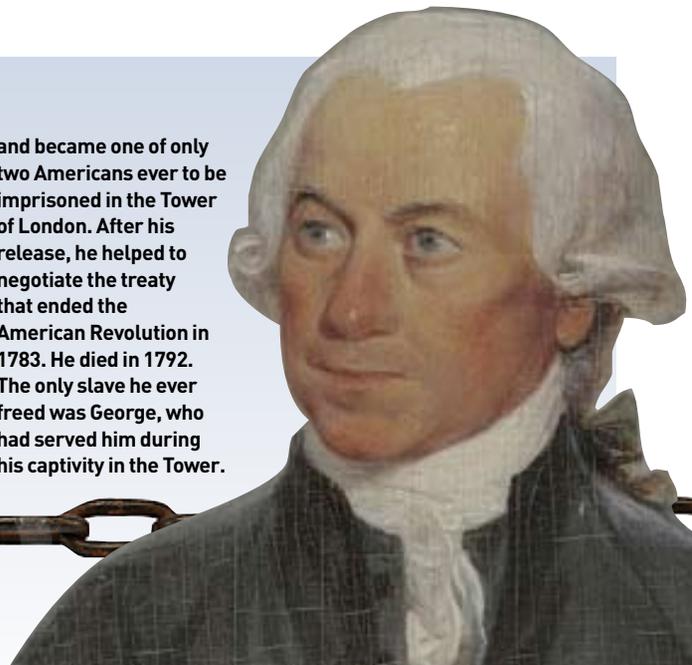
Henry Laurens

HENRY LAURENS was born in 1724 to parents of Huguenot ancestry in the colony of South Carolina. While still a young man, he built up a fortune through the slave trade. Throughout his life he privately expressed misgivings about the "peculiar institution", but insisted that his own slaves were "as happy as

slavery will admit of". Laurens was disillusioned by Britain's use of force against the colonies after 1774, and he took a leading role in the American Revolution. While he was a delegate to the Continental Congress (1777-1779), during which time he served as president for a year, his son John, an

American army officer, proposed a plan to free South Carolinian slaves in exchange for military service. Henry took an ambiguous stance on the idea, and only belatedly supported it. The plan was not adopted. En-route to a diplomatic mission in Holland in 1780, Laurens was captured by the British

and became one of only two Americans ever to be imprisoned in the Tower of London. After his release, he helped to negotiate the treaty that ended the American Revolution in 1783. He died in 1792. The only slave he ever freed was George, who had served him during his captivity in the Tower.





*The Third Duke of Richmond
Out Shooting with His Servant
by Johann Zoffany (c1765)*

There was plenty for Robert to spend his money on – London offered many amusements for the servant classes.

Perhaps the most pernicious influence came from Robert's new companions, the English domestics employed by Henry's landlord. London servants were notorious for their insubordination. And visiting American colonists noticed that the English lower orders were surprisingly uninhibited about accepting blacks among their ranks. Robert quickly achieved solidarity with his new co-workers. The effect on Henry was immediate. Normally an early riser, he was obliged to comply with the London fashion of sleeping late because the servants – "even my black servant" – would not get up to light him a fire. "If I quitted the bed it must be to starve in a cold room."

But what could he do? Flogging was the ultimate sanction on the plantation, but in London it was not entirely respectable. More than one slave owner had lamented that the "rigour and severity... which is absolutely necessary to make [blacks] useful" could not be implemented in London. The result? They "cease to consider themselves as slaves in this free country".

Henry was not the sort of man to tolerate this state of affairs for long. In May 1772, while the Somerset trial was taking place around the corner in

Westminster Hall, a confrontation took place which left Henry back on top. Robert "behaved a little amiss one day" Henry recalled. "I told him I would not be plagued by him. If he did not choose to stay with me, to go about his business. He said he would serve no body else, and has behaved excellently well here ever since." In a jibe at the Somerset case, Henry added gleefully, "My man Robert Scipio Laurens says, that Negroes that want to be free here,

The English lower orders were uninhibited about accepting blacks among their ranks

are fools". Henry had resorted to brinkmanship, and won. But why? What had prevented Robert from calling his master's bluff?

It was not as easy as it looked to escape from slavery in Georgian London. English law did not allow for the forcible detention of a slave, but slave owners got around this by simply ignoring it. There were men in London who made a profit from recapturing runaway slaves. If it was illegal, most Londoners looked the other way. Even after the Somerset Decision in 1772, slaves were sometimes apprehended and placed in irons with no interference

from the authorities. Running away also carried with it another risk, for it could leave one starving in the streets. It was estimated that 20 people a week died of starvation in the capital.

Robert knew perfectly well that Henry would never really allow him to "go about his business". Not long after their confrontation, he witnessed the abduction of a fellow slave named Cato, the property of one of Henry's merchant friends in Shropshire. Cato had probably been showing signs of a rebellious spirit in the wake of the Somerset decision; he suddenly found himself transported back to South Carolina. The entire business was overseen personally by Master Henry.

Master-slave dynamic

But what of Henry and his own black servant? The face-off in May seemed to have cleared the air, and for a while the old familiar master-slave dynamic was restored. When Henry went on a tour of the continent in autumn 1772, he took Robert along. The peace, however, was not to last long, for Robert was chafing badly under his master's authority.

Inevitably things soured, and when Henry went abroad again the following year he left Robert behind, banishing him to Aston Hall, the country estate of a friend in Shifnal, Shropshire. "It will vex me exceedingly if he should be troublesome," wrote Henry sternly. Henry's friends urged him to dispatch the youth back to South Carolina. But Henry refused, something he may have regretted in retrospect, for his power struggle with Robert was about to reach an unexpected denouement.

"Foolish rascally Robert," raged Henry when he heard the news. For Robert had been arrested in the act of burgling Aston Hall. He had only taken a gammon and some other small things, but in Georgian England one could be hanged for stealing a pair of stockings. Henry's outrage was compounded by the news that there was a lady in the case. Robert had met a girl in Shifnal, and there was even a whisper of matrimony. Henry affected to marvel at the taste of Englishwomen for African men, but that wasn't really the issue, as well he knew. Marriage to a free person was one possible route out of slavery. Robert was still up to his old tricks.

Robert had indeed never stopped trying to gain his freedom. It may even

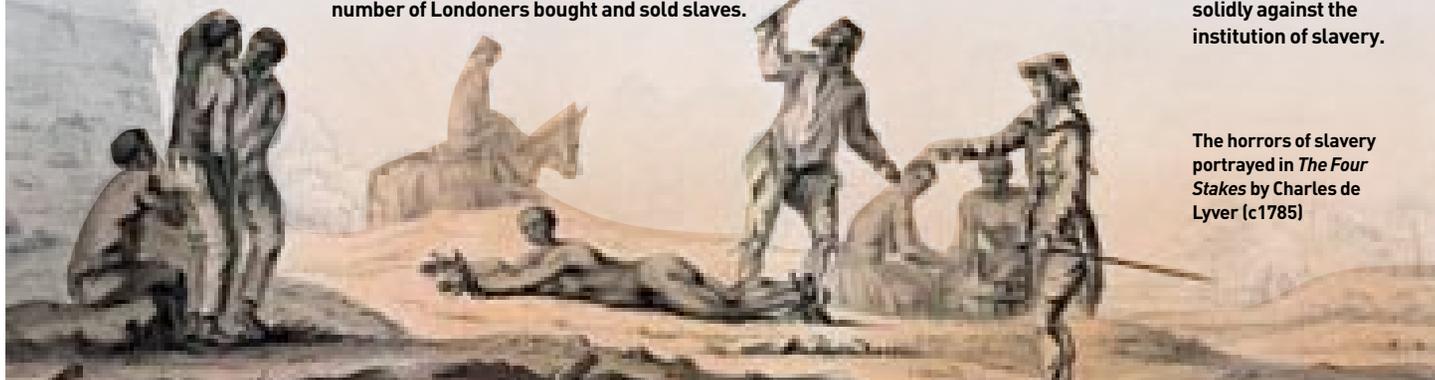
Londoners and slavery: a mixed reaction

"If there be an object truly ridiculous in Nature, it is an American patriot signing resolutions of independency with one hand, and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves."
 Thomas Day, *Fragment of an Original Letter on the Slavery of the Negroes*, London, 1776

The hypocrisy of slave-owning American patriots was not lost on London critics of the American resistance. British newspaper writers and pamphleteers, among them the anti-slavery activist Granville Sharp, denounced the Americans as tyrants in their own right. The Somerset Decision in 1772 also aroused public sympathy for the plight of slaves who were forced back to the plantations by their masters. But at the same time, the practice of slave-owning was on the rise in London itself, and a growing number of Londoners bought and sold slaves.

"To be sold, a Negro Boy, about 14 years old, warranted free from any distemper, and has had those fatal to that colour; has been used two years to all kinds of household work, and to wait at table; his price is £25, and would not be sold but the person he belongs to is leaving off business. Apply at the bar of George Coffee-house in Chancery Lane, over against the Gate."
The London Advertiser, 1756

In an age when many people lived lives of grinding poverty, it was a commonplace to believe that slaves lived better than the slum dwellers of London. Not until the movement to abolish the slave trade gathered force after 1787 did English opinion swing solidly against the institution of slavery.



The horrors of slavery portrayed in *The Four Stakes* by Charles de Lyver (c.1785)

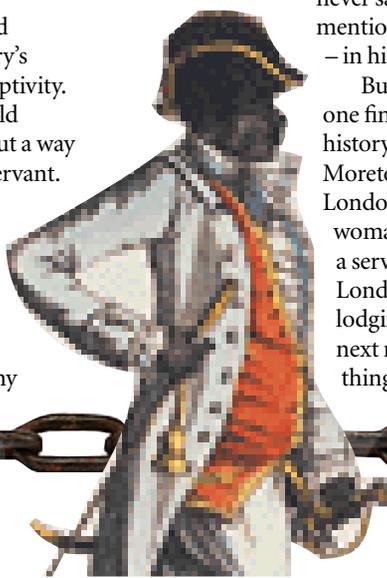
have been in his mind back in South Carolina, when he begged Henry to take him to England. But for once his enterprise had landed him where he did not want to be, in a Shropshire gaol awaiting trial for theft. Under the

London had exposed the falsehood that Henry's slaves were content

circumstances he took on yet another name, John Moreton, probably at the insistence of the Laurenses to protect their privacy.

So was this the last straw? Was Henry ready at last to give up on his "black man"? Certainly not. Henry had paid a "valuable consideration" for his bondsman, but there was more at stake here than the sanctity of private property. Moving to London had exposed the falsehood that Henry's slaves were content with their captivity. That was something Henry would never accept. He tried to work out a way of keeping a grip on his erring servant. Henry calculated that Robert would not be hanged for such a minor theft, but instead would receive the lighter sentence of transportation to America. In that case, why not transport him to his native colony

Well-dressed and fashionable black men were sometimes to be seen in the streets of Georgian London



of South Carolina? If Henry offered to pay for it, he would save the Crown money. And Robert would be his again. "No man in the world has so just a claim upon him as I have," he asserted. Back on the plantation, Henry would find "ways and means" of compelling Robert to earn his bread.

But where his own enterprise had failed him, Robert was about to have the most fantastic stroke of luck. For 'John Moreton' was not sentenced to hanging or transportation at his trial in March 1774. Instead, he was branded on the hand and imprisoned for 12 months. Detained at His Majesty's pleasure, Robert was beyond Henry's reach.

In November 1774 Henry Laurens left for America. The start of the War of Independence was only a few months away, and Henry would soon figure prominently in the patriot cause. He never saw Robert again, and never mentioned his name – any of his names – in his correspondence.

But Robert was destined to make one final appearance in the pages of history. On 10 September 1777, John Moreton ("a Black") appeared before London's Old Bailey to testify against a woman who had robbed him. He was a servant, he said, and had come into London seeking a place. He had taken lodgings in the woman's house. The next morning he found some of his things were missing. "I saw the

prisoner at the door about two hours after, and took her up," he concluded. This sounds like Robert, competent and sure of himself. The woman was found guilty and sentenced to a flogging. And Robert? He disappeared into the mists of time. But this last glimpse shows that two years after his release from gaol, he was free, and getting on with his new life. Perhaps his descendants are among the many Britons today who have forgotten African roots. **E**

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JOURNEYS

Books

► **When London was Capital of America** by Julie Flavell (Yale University Press, 2010)

► To buy **When London was Capital of America** from **BBC History Bookstore** for **£XX** (RRP **£XX**) turn to page 74

► **Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism** by Christopher Brown (University of North Carolina Press, 2006)
 ► **Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain** by Peter Fryer (Pluto Press, 1984)

On the web

► Robert Scipio's testimony before the Old Bailey can be viewed at Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org), by searching on the following reference number: t17770910-96