

Littérature de l'Asie et des Caraïbes

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5. The Fourth Revolution

1797–1800

GENERAL PICTON DIED, aged fifty-six, at the battle of Waterloo. He had been badly wounded at the battle of Quatre Bras two days before, but he had bandaged himself and kept the wound secret. When Wellington, under whom Picton was directly serving, gave the order to withdraw, Picton lost his temper; he said that Waterloo was a damned bad place to fight a battle.

‘A rough foul-mouthed devil as ever lived’ was what Wellington said of Picton. But Picton by this time had licence: a Knight of the Bath, a Member of Parliament, one of the heroes of the Peninsular War, unanimously judged by the House of Commons to be ‘amongst the foremost in that race of glory’, his reputation, won at Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajoz and Vittoria, higher than that of Sir John Moore, of the poem, who in 1797 had also been a thirty-shillings-a-day military governor in the West Indies.

Ten years after Picton’s death it was decided to put up a statue in Carmarthen. The King himself subscribed; and Picton’s brother, a Pembrokeshire rector — he had just come back from a visit to the Picton estates in Trinidad, where he had been fined £164 for maltreating two of the estate Negroes — sent his abashed thanks through the Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel. A memoir of Picton was written by Captain Marryat, the novelist, himself the son of a Trinidad slave-owner. In 1835, twenty years after Picton’s death, there came a two-volume *Life*, which went into a second edition. There were people then who placed Picton above Wellington; but this was part of the continuing reaction to the long disgrace that preceded Picton’s four years of glory.

The military glory Picton aimed at and achieved could not last. It lay in personal valour: the smoke clearing, the hero seen leading his men up the breach at Badajoz; the hero putting himself at the head of the retreating Portuguese battalion at Busacos and, still in his coloured nightcap, crying ‘Forward!’ and ‘Hurrah!’ The style — ‘That

damned fighting fellow Crawford will some day get us into a scrape' — was the military style of the age. 'A force more formidable to its friends than enemies': Abercromby said that in Ireland, Picton said it in Port of Spain, but the sentiment is remembered as Wellington's. The reputation of Picton and others was to be absorbed in Wellington's more complex, nation-building myth. Picton's glory abolished his disgrace; when the glory went, the man and his disgrace were forgotten.

It seems to be another Thomas Picton who appears in the *Newgate Calendar*, the popular chronicle of English criminal trials, offered with 'occasional remarks ... original anecdotes ... moral reflections ... confessions and last exclamations of sufferers'. There, among the cases of Richard Ferguson (Gallop Dick), convicted at the Lent Assizes in 1800 for highway robbery, and George Waldron (The Gentleman-Pickpocket), several times convicted and finally transported to Botany Bay, is the case of Thomas Picton Esq (Late Governor of Trinidad), 'convicted February 24, 1806, of applying a most cruel torture, in order to extort confession from Luisa Calderon'.

That was only one trial. The investigation had begun three years before, when Picton was still in Trinidad; the trial could be said to have ended only with Picton's death. The proceedings fill 1,000 fine columns in Howell's *State Trials*. The Picton papers in the Public Record Office in London have been worn thin by handling. The affair was the subject of one-sided books, pamphlets, articles. Pictures were sold in London of Luisa Calderon and the instruments of her torture.

Picton saw Luisa twice. He saw her early one evening in Port of Spain when she was brought to the hall of Government House, accused of theft; he saw her four years later in London at his first trial. But it wasn't just for Luisa Calderon that Picton was being tried. He was really being tried for being governor of Trinidad at the end of the eighteenth century. There had originally been thirty-seven charges; the torture of Luisa Calderon was the only one that had stuck. The trial was soon to look like persecution. Slavery existed; it made many people rich. Yet it was clear that Picton was being tried for being governor of a slave colony. In the United States, England and France there were people willing to exploit the Spanish American revolution; the revolutionaries themselves betrayed the revolution and each other. Yet it was clear that Picton was also being tried for having

failed the revolution.

He was the victim of people's conscience, of ideas of humanity and reason that were ahead of the reality. And such a victim: an unemployed soldier of thirty-eight who had come out to the West Indies on speculation, interested neither in slaves nor revolution, looking only for action and glory, as the man who would rally a retreating battalion and give the order to charge.

HE HAD GOT the job as military governor because he knew Spanish — picked up in Gibraltar when he was an ensign — and in the beginning his duties were clear: to maintain order in a conquered and disorderly colony, full of French republican factions, and to defend that colony against attack. Just across the Gulf, on the Venezuelan mainland, there were many French republican refugees, people of colour from Trinidad and other islands. They were less nervous about making war than their Spanish hosts. The British navy had gone and the Spanish and French privateers had come back to the Gulf and the waters around the island. Picton had no naval force; and his garrison was unreliable.

The German mercenaries hadn't been paid; they began to desert. Their major was ill, the other officers useless. The Venezuelans paid each deserter six dollars, twenty if he brought his arms; they also paid the boatmen who took the deserters across the Gulf. Picton offered sixteen dollars for every deserter captured or killed. Fourteen German privates were recaptured and hanged immediately. Port of Spain had seen nothing like it.

The Spanish peons, the former bush-folk, had become a menace, quick with the cutlasses which they always carried. A drunken peon went to the house of a Spanish lady in St Joseph and stood 'in the middle of the hall' abusing her. Soldiers had to be called. The local Spanish administrator thought the peon should be sent off the island; it was what Chacon would have done. Picton didn't think this was 'sufficient'; the man was hanged that day. The peons were in the habit of claiming sanctuary in the church. Picton abolished the idea of sanctuary; the story was that he had a gallows put up just outside the church.

The runaway Negroes in the interior were hunted down. A Negro woman called Present, who had eloped with a black soldier before the

capitulation, was brought in one afternoon. Her owner went to claim her next morning. He was too late; his 'valuable slave' had been hanged at sunrise.

A free Negro woman complained to the Chief Magistrate that she had been raped near the magazine by four men of the Royal Engineers. The Chief Magistrate, an Irishman, sent her to Picton, 'to whom I thought it would afford amusement to hear of a rape in the West Indies'. After his early-afternoon dinner that day the Chief Magistrate walked down to the wharf. There he saw one of the accused men about to be hanged. 'Villain!' Picton was shouting. 'You are going to hell with lies in your mouth.' The three other men were sentenced by court martial to 1,500 lashes each.

It was by this system of impartial terror that Picton sought to maintain order. But more important than order and defence was the revolution on the mainland. Much had already been done. The British consul in Cadiz had been supplying general propaganda for some time; and Picton's more concrete proclamation had had some effect. The Capuchin missionaries, whose headquarters had once been in St Joseph (they were still short of some church fittings), hadn't been happy with the Spanish government ever since the Jesuits had been expelled from Paraguay; they promised now to keep their Indians 'out of the business' if the British invaded. And there was a Cadiz-born merchant, interested in the trade the British offered, who was acting as Picton's agent in Cumaná; his aim was to bring Caracas and Cumaná under direct British rule.

The resentments of missionaries and merchants didn't add up to a revolution. That was preparing elsewhere: in the prison of La Guaira, in the cell of a prisoner who had just been transported from Spain.

His name was Picornell. He was a Majorcan who had gone to live in Madrid, where he ran a school. He had written a book about the education of infants. He was also a freemason and a republican and had written a political book. Soon he began to plot against the government; he wanted a Spanish republic on French lines. He hid arms in his school. He was betrayed, arrested, tried and condemned to death with three of his supporters. The sentence was commuted to one of life imprisonment in Panama. He was brought to La Guaira in Venezuela; he was to stay in solitary confinement in the local jail until a ship could take him to Panama.

He was an unusual prisoner for Venezuela. He said he couldn't eat the jail food and didn't like sleeping on the floor and he asked for soap and water to wash his clothes. The jailer became respectful and protective. Picornell asked for a priest. More alert officials wouldn't have seen this as a sign of repentance. Picornell got his priest; in almost no time he had become Picornell's convert.

Soon, through these two contacts alone, the jailer and the priest, all La Guaira was responding to revolution. Picornell, with the cooperation of his guards, moved freely about the port. La Guaira was a good place for a conspiracy. Several hundred French republican prisoners of war had stayed there for some years and preached liberty and equality, words which every man could interpret in his own way. Picornell's supporters came to include a high official called José España, who was also a planter and slave-owner; and a retired soldier called Manuel Gual, who after thirty-three years with the Veteran Battalion of Caracas had only been permitted to reach the rank of captain.

No conspiracy was swifter. In December 1796 Picornell arrived in La Guaira; in June 1797 he was allowed to escape; the uprising was planned for July. The manifesto was simple. America had been usurped from the Indians; it was time that justice was done. There were to be no class divisions, no slavery, no Indian tribute. There was to be unity and equality, without offence to religion. All goods were to be held in common; there wouldn't even be tobacco stalls because everything would be free. Everyone was to call everyone else 'brother'. The flag of the republic was to have four colours representing the four races: white, blue for the Negro, yellow for the mixed, red for the Indian.

A well-to-do man called Montesinos was among the conspirators. He tried to interest his barber, a mulatto. The barber was an officer in the mulatto battalion; he told his colleagues; they told the chaplain. Montesinos's house was searched; twenty-four people were arrested. Gual, España and Picornell had to run. They went to Curacao. Curacao was a French island, and Spain and France were allies; but the French republican governor sheltered the conspirators and declared them French citizens. He got rid of them only after Picornell had shouted at a Spaniard in the street: 'You dog of an informer, you enemy of humanity!' and threatened to run the Spaniard through with