



Ignatius Sancho.

London Published Dec^r 20th 1802 by W^m Sancho, Charter Street Westminster.

SANCHO'S LETTERS.
with
Memoirs of his Life
By
Joseph Selkirk Esq. M.P.



London
PRINTED for W. SANCHO.
N^o. 20. Charles Street, Westminster.
Dec. 20th 1802.

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“LETTERS”
OF THE LATE
IGNATIUS SANCHO,
AN AFRICAN.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED,
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE,
By JOSEPH JEKYLL, Esq. M.P.

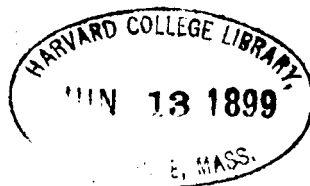
THE FIFTH EDITION.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR WILLIAM SANCHO,
CHARLES-STREET, WESTMINSTER.

1803.

[*Wills and Taylor, Printers, Chancery-lane.*]

17417.29



Col. J. W. Higginson .

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THE LIFE
OF
IGNATIUS SANCHO.

"Quamvis ille niger, quamvis tu candidus esses."
VIRGIL.

THE extraordinary Negro, whose Life I am about to write, was born A. D. 1729, on board a ship in the Slave-trade, a few days after it had quitted the coast of Guinea for the Spanish West-Indies; and at Carthagená he received from the hand of the Bishop, Baptism, and the name of Ignatius.

A disease of the new climate put an early period to his mother's existence; and his father defeated the miseries of slavery by an act of suicide.

At little more than two years old, his master brought him to England, and gave him to three maiden sisters, resident at

Greenwich ; whose prejudices had unhappily taught them, that African ignorance was the only security for his obedience, and that to enlarge the mind of their slave would go near to emancipate his person. The petulance of their disposition surnamed him Sancho, from a fancied resemblance to the 'Squire of Don Quixote.

But a patron was at hand, whom Ignatius Sancho had merit enough to conciliate at a very early age.

The late Duke of Montagu lived on Blackheath : he accidentally saw the little Negro, and admired in him a native frankness of manner as yet unbroken by servitude, and unrefined by education—He brought him frequently home to the Duchess, indulged his turn for reading with presents of books, and strongly recommended to his mistresses the duty of cultivating a genius of such apparent fertility.

His mistresses, however, were inflexible, and even threatened on angry occasions to return Ignatius Sancho to his African sla-

very. The love of freedom had increased with years, and began to beat high in his bosom.—Indignation, and the dread of constant reproach arising from the detection of an amour, infinitely criminal in the eyes of three maiden ladies, finally determined him to abandon the family.

His noble patron was recently dead.—Ignatius flew to the Duchess for protection, who dismissed him with reproof.—He retired from her presence in a state of despondency and stupefaction.

Enamoured still of that liberty, the scope of whose enjoyment was now limited to his last five shillings, and resolute to maintain it with life, he procured an old pistol for purposes which his father's example had suggested as familiar, and had sanctified as hereditary.

In this frame of mind the futility of remonstrance was obvious. The Duchess secretly admired his character; and at length consented to admit him into her household, where he remained as butler till

her death, when he found himself, by her Grace's bequest and his own œconomy, possessed of seventy pounds in money, and an annuity of thirty.

Freedom, riches, and leisure, naturally led a disposition of African texture into indulgences; and that which dissipated the mind of Ignatius completely drained the purse. In his attachment to women, he displayed a profuseness which not unusually characterizes the excess of the passion.—Cards had formerly seduced him; but an unsuccessful contest at cribbage with a Jew, who won his clothes, had determined him to abjure the propensity, which appears to be innate among his countrymen.—A French writer relates, that in the kingdoms of Ardrah, Whydah, and Benin, a Negro will stake at play his fortune, his children, and his liberty. Ignatius loved the theatre to such a point of enthusiasm, that his last shilling went to Drury-Lane, on Mr. Garrick's representation of Richard.—He had been even induced to consider the stage as a resource

in the hour of adversity, and his complexion suggested an offer to the manager of attempting Othello and Oroonoko ; but a defective and incorrigible articulation rendered it abortive.

He turned his mind once more to service, and was retained a few months by the Chaplain at Montagu-house. That roof had been ever auspicious to him ; and the present Duke soon placed him about his person, where habitual regularity of life led him to think of a matrimonial connexion, and he formed one accordingly with a very deserving young woman of West-Indian origin.

Towards the close of the year 1773, repeated attacks of the gout, and a constitutional corpulence, rendered him incapable of further attendance in the Duke's family.

At this crisis, the munificence which had protected him through various vicissitudes did not fail to exert itself ; with the result of his own frugality, it enabled him and his wife to settle themselves in a shop

of grocery, where mutual and rigid industry decently maintained a numerous family of children, and where a life of domestic virtue engaged private patronage and merited public imitation.

In December 1780, a series of complicated disorders destroyed him.

Of a Negro, a Butler, and a Grocer, there are but slender anecdotes to animate the page of the biographer ; but it has been held necessary to give some sketch of the very singular man, whose letters, with all their imperfections on their head, are now offered to the public.

The display those writings exhibit of epistolary talent, of rapid and just conception, of wild patriotism, and of universal philanthropy, may well apologize for the protection of the Great, and the friendship of the Literary.

The late Duchesses of Queensberry and Northumberland pressed forward to serve the author of them. The former intrusted

to his reformation a very unworthy favourite of his own complexion.—Garrick and Sterne were well acquainted with Ignatius Sancho.

A commerce with the Muses was supported amid the trivial and momentary interruptions of a shop ; the Poets were studied, and even imitated with some success ;—two pieces were constructed for the stage ;—the Theory of Music was discussed, published, and dedicated to the Princess Royal ;—and Painting was so much within the circle of Ignatius Sancho's judgment and criticism, that Mortimer came often to consult him.

Such was the man whose species philosophers and anatomists have endeavoured to degrade as a deterioration of the human ; and such was the man whom Fuller, with a benevolence and quaintness of phrase peculiarly his own, accounted

“ God's Image, though cut in Ebony.”

To the harsh definition of the naturalist,

oppressions political and legislative have been added ; and such are hourly aggravated towards this unhappy race of men by vulgar prejudice and popular insult. To combat these on commercial principles, has been the labour of Labat, Ferman, and Lennezet—such an effort here would be an impertinent digression.

Of those who have speculatively visited and described the slave-coast, there are not wanting some who extol the mental abilities of the natives. D'Elbee, Moore, and Bosman, speak highly of their mechanical powers and indefatigable industry. Desmarchais does not scruple to affirm, that their ingenuity rivals the Chinese.

He who could penetrate the interior of Africa, might not improbably discover negro arts and polity, which could bear little analogy to the ignorance and grossness of slaves in the sugar-islands, expatriated in infancy, and brutalized under the whip and the task-master.

And he who surveys the extent of intellect to which Ignatius Sancho had attained by self-education, will perhaps conclude, that the perfection of the reasoning faculties does not depend on a peculiar conformation of the skull or the colour of a common integument *, in defiance of that wild opinion, "which," says a learned writer of these times, "restrains the operations of the mind to particular regions, and supposes that a luckless mortal may be born in a degree of latitude too high or too low for wisdom or for wit."

* In farther illustration of this passage the Editor has thought it not irrelevant to the general tenor of this publication to subjoin the following observations from the celebrated work of professor Blumenbach intitled—
"Observations on the bodily Conformation and mental Capacity of the Negroes. From *Magazin fur das neueste aus der Physik*," Vol. IV.

"During a tour which I made through Swifferland, I saw in the picture-gallery at Pommersfeld four negro heads by Vandyk, two of which in particular had the lines of the face so regular that the features seemed very little different from the European. At that time, as I had never had an opportunity of acquiring a proper knowledge respecting the form of the negro head and cranium, by studying nature, and as I remembered that

Mr. Camper, in a dissertation read in the Academy of Painting at Amsterdam, had mentioned that the greater part of the most eminent painters, and especially Rubens, Vandyk and Jordaens, when they painted Moors, copied from Europeans whose faces had been blackened for that purpose, I ascribed the European look of the above negro heads to this common fault. Some months after, however, I had an opportunity of convincing myself that there are real negroes whose features correspond very nearly with those of the Europeans, and that the above heads in the gallery of Pommersfeld might be a true representation of nature.

“ Going to pay a visit at Yverdun to the two brothers Treytorrens, one of whom, the chevalier, had been thirty-five years in the French service, particularly at St. Domingo; and the other, by means of the opportunities which his brother enjoyed, had a collection of natural curiosities that contained many rare articles, when I entered the court of their elegant habitation, which is situated on the road to Goumoens, I saw no person to show me into the house, except a woman of an agreeable figure, who was standing with her back towards me. When she turned round to give me an answer, I was much surprised to find that she was a female negro, whose face perfectly corresponded with her figure, and fully justified the fidelity of likenesses in Vandyk’s negro heads, which I had seen at Pommersfeld. All the features of her face, even the nose and lips, the latter of which were a little thick, though not so as to be disagreeable, had they been covered with a white skin, must have excited universal admiration. At the same time she was not only exceedingly lively, and possessed a sound understanding; but, as I

afterwards learned, was extremely well informed and expert in the obstetric art. The handsome pretty negress of Yverdun is celebrated far and near as the best midwife in the Italian part of Switzerland. I was informed by her master, the chevalier, who has in his service also a negro man as elegantly formed as a statue, that she was a creole from St. Domingo; that both her parents were natives of Congo, but not so black as the negroes of Senegal.

“ Since that period I have had an opportunity of seeing and conversing with many negroes, and have procured for my collection a great many anatomical preparations from negro bodies, which, together with what I have read in different voyages, tend more and more to convince me of the truth of the two following propositions :

“ 1. That between one negro and another there is as much (if not more) difference in the colour, and particularly in the lineaments of the face, as between many real negroes and other varieties of the human species.

“ 2. That the negroes, in regard to their mental faculties and capacity, are not inferior to the rest of the human race.

“ The three negro skulls, which I have now before me, afford, by the very striking gradation with which the lineaments pass from the one to the other, a very evident proof of the first proposition. One of them, which Mr. Michaelis was so good as to bring me from New-York, and of which I have given an accurate description in another place *, is distinguished by such a projecting upper jaw-bone, that, if the same peculiarity

* In my Osteology, p. 87.

belonged to all negroes, one might be tempted to suppose that they had another first parent than Adam. On the other hand, the lineaments of the third have so little of the exotic form, and are so different from the first, that, if I had not dissected the whole head perfectly entire, and just as it was when cut from the body, I should be in doubt whether I ought to consider it as having actually belonged to a real negro. The second holds a mean rank between both, and in its whole form has a great likeness to the head of the Abyssinian Abbas Gregorius, a good engraving of which by Heiss, in 1691, from a painting by Von Sand, I have now before me, and which not only proves in general the close affinity of the Abyssinians with the negroes, but approaches much nearer to the ugly negroes, to speak according to the European ideas of beauty, than the well-formed negresses of Yverdun, or the handsome young negro whose head I dissected as before mentioned, or than a thousand others whose features are little different from those of the Europeans. What I have here said is indeed nothing else than a confirmation of a truth long known, which has been already remarked by unprejudiced travellers, as will appear by the following quotations. Le Maire, in his Voyage to Cape Verd, Senegal, and Gambia *, says: "Blackness excepted, there are female negroes as well made as our ladies in Europe." Leguat, in his well-known Voyages †, tells us, that he found at Batavia several very pretty negresses, whose faces had the perfect European form. Adanson, in his Account of Senegal ‡, speaking of the female negroes there, has the following passage: "The women

* Voyages aux Cap Verd, Senegal et Gambie, p. 161.

† Vol. ii. p. 136.

‡ Page 22.

are almost as tall as the men, and equally well made. Their skin is remarkably fine and soft: their eyes are black and open; the mouth and lips small, and the features are well proportioned. Some of them are perfect beauties. They are exceedingly lively, and have an easy, free air, that is highly agreeable." Ulloa, in his *Noticias Americanas* *, observes, that some of the negroes have thick projecting lips, a flat nose, eyes deeply sunk in the sockets, which in general are called *getudos*, and wool instead of hair. He then adds: "Others, whose colour is equally black, have features perfectly like those of the whites, particularly in regard to the nose and the eyes, and smooth but thick hair †."

"The testimonies and examples which serve to prove the truth of the second proposition, respecting the men-

* Page 92.

† The following observations of an intelligent Danish traveller may serve still further to confirm the truth of Professor Blumenbach's proposition: "Almost all the negroes are of a good stature, and the Akra negroes have remarkably fine features. The contour of the face, indeed, among the generality of these people, is different from that of the Europeans; but at the same time faces are found among them which, excepting the black colour, would in Europe be considered as beautiful. In common, however, they have something apish. The cheek-bones and chin project very much; and the bones of the nose are smaller than among the Europeans. This last circumstance has probably given rise to the assertion, that the negro women flatten the noses of their children as soon as they are born. But noses may be seen among some of them as much elevated and as regular as those of the Europeans. Their hair is woolly, curled and black, but sometimes red. When continually combed, it may be brought to the length of half a yard; but it never can be kept smooth." See P. E. Isert *Reis na Guínea*. Dordrecht 1790. p. 175. EDIT.

tal faculties, natural talents and ingenuity of the negroes, are equally numerous and incontrovertible. Their astonishing memories, their great activity, and their acuteness in trade, particularly with gold dust, against which the most experienced European merchant cannot be too much on his guard, are all circumstances so well known, that it is not necessary to enlarge on them *. The great aptitude of the slaves for learning every kind of nice handicraft is equally well known; and the case is the same in regard to their musical talents, as we have instances of negroes playing the violin in so masterly a manner, that they gained so much money as enabled them to purchase their liberty †.

“Of the poetical genius of the negroes instances are known among both sexes. A female negro, who was a poetess, is mentioned by Haller; and a specimen of the Latin poetry of Francis Williams, a negro, may be found in the History of Jamaica. The interesting Letters of Ignatius Sancho, a negro, are well known; and the two following instances will serve as a further proof of the capacity and talents of our black brethren, in regard to literature and science. The protestant clergyman J. J. Eliza Capitein was a negro; a man of considerable learn-

* Barbot, in his Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea, to be found in the fifth volume of Churchill's Collections, relates many interesting things on this subject. Thus he says, p. 235. “The blacks are for the most part men of sense and wit enough, of a sharp ready apprehension, and an excellent memory beyond what is easy to imagine; for, though they can neither read nor write, they are always regular in the greatest hurry of business and trade, and seldom in confusion.”

† See Urlsperger's Americanisch Ackerwerk Gottes, p. 311.

ing, and a great orator. I have in my possession an excellent print of him engraved by Tanjé, after P. Vandyk. Our worthy professor Hollman, when he was at Wittenberg, conferred the degree of Doctor of Philosophy on a negro who had shown himself to advantage, not only as a writer but as a teacher, and who afterwards came to Berlin as a counsellor of state to his Prussian majesty. I have now before me two treatises written by him *, one of which, in particular, displays extensive and well-digested reading of the best physiological works of the time. Of the uncommon knowledge which many negroes have had in the practice of medicine, very favourable testimony has been given by Boerhaave and De Haen, who were certainly competent judges; and the sound skill and delicate expertness of the Yverdun accoucheuse are, as already said, celebrated throughout the whole neighbourhood.

“ To conclude, the Academy of Sciences at Paris had among the number of its correspondents M. Lisset, a negro, in the Isle of France, who excelled in making accurate meteorological observations. On the other hand, whole provinces of Europe might, in my opinion, be named, from which it would be difficult to produce at present virtuosos, poets, philosophers, and correspondents of a learned academy.

* One of them is entitled: *Dissert. inaug. philosophica de humanæ mentis ætate, sive sensationis ac facultatis in mente humana absentia, et earum in corpore nostro organico ac vivo præsentia, quam Præs. D. MART. GOTTH. LOESCHERO publicè defendit auctor ANT. GUIL. AMO, Guinea-Afer, Phil. et A. A. L. L., Mag. et J. V. C. Wittebergæ 1784, m. Apr.* The title of the other is: *Disp. philosophica, continens ideam distinctam eorum quæ competunt vel menti vel corpori nostro vivo et organico, quam Præs. M.*

ANT. GUIL. AMO, Guinea-Afro, *d. 29 Maii 1734, defendit Jo. THEODOS, Meiner Rochlitz-Misnie. Philos. et J. V. Cultor.* In an account of Amo's life, printed on this occasion in name of the Academic Council, it is said, among other things respecting his talents: "Honorem, meritis ingenii partum, insigni probitatis, industriæ, eruditionis, quam publicis privatisque exercitationibus declaravit, laude auxit—Compluribus philosophiam domi tradidit excussis tam veterum, quam novorum, placitis, optima quæque selegit, selecta enucleatè ac dilucidè interpretatus est." And the president, in defending the first-mentioned treatise, says expressly, in the annexed congratulation to Amo, "Tuum potissimum eminet ingenium felicissimum—utpote qui istius felicitatem ac præstantiam, [eruditionis ac doctrinæ soliditatem ac elegantiam, multis speciminibus hactenus in nostra etiam academia magno cum applausu omnibus bonis, et in præsentī dissertatione egregiè comprobasti. Reddo tibi illam proprio Marte eleganter ac eruditè elaboratam, integram adhuc et planè immutatam, ut vis ingenii tui eo magis exinde elucescat.