

West Africa viewed from Wales: New work by Mfikela Jean Samuel in response to 'Outlines of the Globe' by Thomas Pennant (1726–1798): Storiell, Bangor, 4 February–15 April 2023

This exhibition is a fusion of past and present, Wales and Africa, the iniquity of slavery and the hope represented by challenge to its legacy. The impetus is twofold: an appreciation of the growing scholarly and public interest in the historical figure of Thomas Pennant (1726–98), naturalist and traveller; and an awareness of the burning issues of inequality and racism inherent in Western European societies today.

In Wales, the fight against discrimination and unfairness towards the Black, Asian, and minority ethnic community is spearheaded by voluntary organizations including Race Council Cymru and the Sub-Sahara Advisory Panel; supported by Welsh Government policy and funding initiatives; and further espoused by a wide range of institutions across the country. The wave of anti-racism protests, initiated by the murder in May 2020 of African-American George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, saw repercussions in Wales as support for the Black Lives Matter movement, established in 2013, grew worldwide. Protests against the pride of place given to slave owner Thomas Picton (1758–1815), both in a drawing at the National Museum in Cardiff and in an imposing monument at Carmarthen, displayed the engagement of Welsh people with the issues surrounding historical abuse and their contemporary impacts.

Flintshire landowner Thomas Pennant was famed in his day for a vast array of published works on natural history, including *British Zoology*, with its focus on the animals, fish, and birds of the British Isles, and his accounts of journeys in Scotland and Wales – home travels with a popular appeal which led to multiple editions from 1771 onwards. Following his second marriage to Ann (c.1739–1802), sister of his friend and neighbour Roger Mostyn (1734–96), in January 1777, Pennant gradually reduced his exploits as a traveller and, by the mid 1780s, having reached his sixties, the 'grand climacteric' as he termed it, was perceiving the effects of old age on himself and his closest acquaintances. Resting his oars as a traveller in response to this, he simultaneously expanded the compass of his traveller interests to include the entire world. He now began to make use of travel accounts by others, some published, others conveyed by letter or word of mouth. More able than himself to venture into the ever more distant territories which attracted him, individuals ranging from the controversial figure of Warren Hastings (1732–1818), onetime Governor of Bengal, to Pennant's own son David (1763–1841), whose continental travels during 1785–92 included visits to France and Spain, functioned as satellite informants for Pennant's writings. The result of these efforts was 'Outlines of the Globe', a twenty-two-volume account of geography, history, natural history, and peoples, spanning most of the continents of the world, and replete with visual images. The images, which lend the manuscripts a unique value, comprised engravings collected in London print shops or by his son in continental Europe; drawings, some of unknown origin; and original watercolours provided by Pennant's own artist, Moses Griffith (1747–1819), and others. Initially a private project, 'Outlines of the Globe' was begun around 1788, and employed Pennant for the remainder of his life, with two volumes – judiciously chosen accounts of India, for which 'All the world is growing mad' – published in the final year of his life.

At the sale of the library of Thomas Pennant's Downing home in 1938, the multivolume 'Outlines' was purchased by the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, where it has remained ever since. Interest in the 'Outlines' has been unaccountably low. However, recent work related to two AHRC-funded projects, *Curious Travellers: Thomas Pennant and the Welsh and Scottish Tour (1760–1820)* (2014–19) and its successor *Curious Travellers 2: Digital Editions of Thomas Pennant's Tours of Wales and Scotland* (2022–5), led by Professor Mary-Ann Constantine of the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies and Professor Nigel Leask of the University of Glasgow, has seen an upsurge in response. Furthermore, a Caird Fellowship at the National Maritime Museum awarded to Dr Rhys Kaminski-Jones, and funding from the Wales Innovation Network (WIN) and Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol to Dr Ffion Mair Jones, both of CAWCS, has enabled the study of aspects of the 'Outlines'. Corresponding with the awareness of the historical involvement of the Global North's hegemony with slavery and colonization, new avenues now present themselves, questioning Pennant's attitudes towards the people and natural resources which his writings explored.

Arguably one of the most relevant volumes of the 'Outlines' for our times is volume 11, entitled 'Nigritia' and describing territory 'from the river Senegal to Cape Negro; ... Prince's Isle, Isle of St. Thomas, Isle of Ascension, and that of St. Helena'. The National Maritime Museum's online catalogue highlights its contents in a description which clearly holds true from an exploration of its visual images and is further supported by a reading of Pennant's text ('This volume contains information about the transatlantic trade in enslaved people'). The material shows considerable antipathy to the practice of enslavement on the coast of West Africa, Pennant quick to condemn the historical involvement of the British of Elizabethan times alongside the rulers of the Dutch Republic and of France for their participation in it. Of Elizabeth I he said:

I cannot but think she connived at the slave trade, for she punished neither Drake or Hawkins for the wrongs inflicted by them on the poor Negros. She certainly loved her own subjects but cared little for the sufferings of those of other Kingdoms. Her wars were semi-pyritical her Heroes little better than Buccaneers.

Drawing on abolitionist discourse, he quoted a poem by Samuel Jackson Pratt (1749–1814), expressing 'Shame' at British involvement; and used the arguments of the prominent abolitionist Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846) in favour of 'legitimate trade', whereby commerce could be established directly with African people on their own land, negating the need for their transplantation in chains to North America and the Caribbean whilst simultaneously deflating the calls of plantation owners for compensation for their losses. Images inserted into the manuscript included several by Swedish-born abolitionist Carl Bernard Wadström (1746–99), strongly involved in projects for legitimate trade, and sent in 1787 on an expedition to Guinea to search for a suitable location. The discovery of the horrors of enslavement led to publications, both textual and visual, when Wadström returned to Europe, relocating in London from 1788. In 1790 Pennant sought connection with him through his own abolitionist friend Joseph Plymley (1759–1838), and several arresting images, with accompanying explanatory text, feature in the account of Western Africa, among them 'A View taken near BAIN, on the Coast of Guinea in Affrica. Dedicated to

the FEELING HEARTS in all Civilized Nations'; and 'A View of Joal, on the Coast of Guinea in Affrica. Dedicated to the SOUND POLITICIANS of all the Trading Nations in Europe'.

The exhibition of paintings by Cameroon-born artist Liynyuy Mfikela Jean Samuel is a response to the visual elements of Pennant's West Africa account. The artist consulted the entire range of images, focusing in the first instance on those relating to enslavement, which is seen through the eyes of abolitionist sympathizers. Wadström's images, with their appeal to their audience's pity for the humanity of the Africans submitted to brutal enslavement, were a focal point. Yet, as Mfikela Jean Samuel explains in his Artist's Statement, this is not an exhibition about the cruelties of past European transgressions in his native land. Other images in Pennant's manuscript spoke to more positive appreciations of African life: the richness of its natural history in the form of birds, baboons, and other animals; and the life of its people in well-ordered villages, employed with agility in exploiting its resources by mounting tall palm trees in quest of their fruit. United with Mfikela Jean Samuel's infectious enthusiasm for his life in Cameroon and his passionate efforts to connect with people from all backgrounds in his adoptive country of Wales, these images coalesce to create an inclusive and positive vision of West Africa for today's Wales.