

A Reflection on John Brown, Twenty Years Later

[We reached out to Steve Murdoch to inquire if he wanted to include any reflections or addendum given it has been “a few years” since publication of “John Brown: A Black Female Soldier in the Royal African Company.” After a wonderfully warm and reminiscent Zoom call from his office at the Swedish Defence University (Försvvarshögskolan) in Stockholm, Steve sent us his thoughts which we have included here, slightly edited to conform to the format of the journal. – Cynthia Ross, Editor]

John Brown – the story of a female soldier in the Royal Africa Company (RAC) in the 1690s was an article that developed from a conversation over dinner one night with Heather Streets-Salter. The source of the article was a journal kept by Thomas Phillips relating to his voyage aboard the Royal Africa Company ship Hannibal in the years 1693 – 1694. My interest in the voyage was not actually to do with the slave trade, but rather because I had been told the journal contained one of the most informative descriptions of a naval engagement between a privateer and a merchant vessel. It does! But my eye caught the later addition relating to the young woman called John Brown who had voluntarily enlisted as a soldier in the RAC. The resulting article remains one of my favourites, albeit one of the most speculative I have written. I was particularly pleased when the AfriGeneas group [an organization devoted to African-American genealogy but it appears, no longer active] wrote to me and thanked me for “remembering” John Brown. They also subsequently posted a very positive notice about the article (included below)

Over the years the article is still referenced by a number of individuals on social media and books, but has also been the source of a BBC Wales radio programme which also led to some controversy many years later. The producers contacted me after reading the article and wanted to know more about the master of the vessel, Thomas Phillips and his short-lived role in the slave trade. Someone having heard the broadcast was or

became involved in having a plaque placed on a street in his home town, which in turn proved a point of controversy when others wished to tear the memorial down.¹

Of course, the main debating point that the article throws up is the use of language. Would I change anything now? Of course! I would certainly rephrase my usage of “slaves” to “enslaved persons” to keep up with vocabulary that was not current in my younger days.

But surprisingly few have commented on that. Where there was controversy, it arose from the use of the word “Female.” A couple of years back several people contacted me on social media to query my use of the term and inferred that I had misunderstood that John Brown would have identified as a trans man. When I pressed them on this it turns out they had not even read the article and were simply aggrieved that I had used the term female. I thanked them for their advice on how I might learn from them the “truth” of John Brown’s story, but we parted agreeing to disagree on our interpretations of John Brown’s intention. NB, I have tried to find that debate online but it appears to have been deleted or the authors have blocked me.

Overall, the reception of the article remains positive. I repost it occasionally and use it in my maritime warfare courses. Others seem to also use the article on their courses. I was therefore very pleased to hear that it will be republished in *WHC*. Thank you for continuing to believe in this article.

Some links from academics over the years:

- 2021, Dr. Elaine Murphy: <https://x.com/PlymPrivateer/status/1375490824855814149>
- 2018, Prof. Helmer Helmers: https://x.com/helmers_h/status/988495917635563522
- 2018, Dr. Graeme Millen: https://x.com/Weegie_Graeme/status/1064175133533921280
- 2014, Dr. Miranda Kauffman: <https://x.com/MirandaKauffmann/status/418752275163521024>
- 2014, Roberta Wedge <https://x.com/RobertaWedge/status/418762537044561920>
- 2016 Former student Matthew Pattie, now a teacher posted this from a locked account:

*Oh - I'm using this with an extension class looking @ **gender** history #MissJohnBrown ...<http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/1.2/murdoch.html>*

Professor Steve Murdoch is Chair of the Institute of Military History at The Swedish Defence University. He specializes in British and Scandinavian aspects of Early Modern military and maritime history which he enjoys teaching in a global and comparative context. His major monographs include *Network North: Scottish Kin, Cultural and Covert Associations in Northern Europe, 1603-1746* (Brill, 2006), *The Terror of the Seas? Scottish Maritime Warfare, 1513-1713* (Brill, 2010) and with Alexia Grosjean, *Alexander Leslie and the Scottish Generals of the Thirty Years' War* (Pickering & Chatto, 2014). He has also produced a number of critical editions on aspects as diverse as maritime navigation to the East Indies and Scandinavian maritime law. He can be reached at Steve.Murdoch@fhs.se and on X (Twitter) @Prof_Murdoch.

Notes

¹ For one article that cites mine, but not in a negative way see, Rosemary L. Caldicott, “Should society memorialise a Slave Trader?” Bristol Radical History Group. 2018. <https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/should-society-memorialise-a-slave-trader/>. For my response to the debate see, Steve Murdoch (@Prof_Murdoch), “Phillips (author of the journal) himself caused controversy of late over the unveiling a plaque to him. I agree with parts, of this and I certainly would not have erected a plaque!”, Twitter (X) October 17, 2020, https://x.com/Prof_Murdoch/status/1317401199516200960.