

Portrait Writing

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*Portrait of an African, attributed
to Allen Ramsay*

I feel anger when I look at this picture – for what it doesn't say, tell us, for what it doesn't explain. I see a man's spirit dressed up as belonging but I feel his alienation keenly. Is Exeter a fitting home for a picture like this? I think so.

For here is a man, cast forward, a breadcrumb of history – just one of many clues connecting this city to the men, women and children stolen, sold, used and abused and cast out as inferior beings till forever, till now, till the white man gets it.

We cannot see this man's past beyond that jacket he wears. We cannot see the lash on his back or the loved ones who cared for him, about him, who missed him. We ask who was he? But who asked back then? Who asked of his mother and father? His children? Who were they? Who were those twelve million sold for cowrie shells and manillas, pots and pans and guns and the many tons of broadcloth, manufactured and exported from here, this city, where you stand, Exeter.

Was this man part of that slave exchange, the business, the industry? He is a breadcrumb still. He wears wool shorn from sheep off the moors, their fleeces carded and combed for the weavers, who gave up their wares to the millers, who flattened the cloth and hung it to dry on tenterhooks, up and down the hillsides, all across the Westcountry.

This red coat is a joke, it's not his, does not belong to him. It plays a trick on your eye, Dressed up huh? But not in wealth and dignity. His coat, that cloth, flattened and soaked in red dye, a crimson symbol, it's camouflage, that's all. Yes, a big lie. Concealing the real terror and horror of Britain's human merchandise. Eighteenth century Exeter, fifth richest city in the land, - yes, he comes to tell us – *this* city had a hand in it.

The merchants dyed Exeter broadcloth red using carmine from the cochineal, which is a beetle, an insect to be found in Mexico and South America. Mr Francis Baring, son of Exeter, and raised in a cloth factory right here on the River Exe, bought Cochineal beetles by the ton, and in 1787 spent half a million

pounds on them (£71 million in today's money). Mr Baring had many fingers in many pies, driving multiple trades that were wholly dependent on the free labour of imprisoned slaves on British plantations. They've named streets and crescents, universities, great halls and glamorous balls for Baring and for many other Exeter families who grew the foundations of their wealth using slaves. But this man you look at now, he has no name.

This cloth from Exeter once dyed, left these shores for Africa. The forgotten trade they call it now. Well, I remember. In Africa, the slave hunters used red flags to entice away their prey. Humans. Family. Enticed away from villages, from all they had ever known, to be cuffed up and slung into castles of doom, to await ships that would carry them off to certain death by high seas or disease or plantation slavery. In Africa, the slave hunters stole through the forests of my ancestors, and dressed the trees with handkerchiefs, bright red to catch the eye, as your eye is now caught on this obscure flag from the past, an unknown black man.

Red. Red to catch the eye of the children, playing, fathers hunting, their mothers picking berries in the calm of the day. Red dye catching your eye now, from the calm of *your* day, the pain of those slain staring back at you through the eyes of this nameless man. DON'T TURN AWAY.

He talks to you. He says, "I am a black man enslaved to red dye – here I am, here I am, eye to eye. Who am I?"

Who does this picture belong to? The white man who captured him, imprisoned him, encased him in this frame, buttoned up, silent, the man who choked him with a pure white shirt, cloaked him, all to conceal the white man's shame? Or does the picture belong, to the owner of those eyes staring back at you?

Who is this man, who travels the world, looking out of his frame, a man with fame and no name. The African, from that slab of land, like a giant tongue holding millions of tongues, a great tongue of promise cut off from, split from, your uncivilised civilisation.

Even without a name, we will remember them. We must. We must remember them.