

Philip Freneau, "Port Royal"

by admin - Wednesday, December 09, 2015

<http://poeticalscavenger.sfsuenglishdh.net/poems/philip-freneau-port-royal/>

PHILIP FRENEAU

"Port Royal"

HERE, by the margin of the murmuring main,
While her proud remnants I explore in vain,
And lonely stray through these dejected lands
Fann'd by the noon-tide breeze on burning sands,
Where the dull Spaniard once possess'd these shades, 5
And ports defended by his *Pallisades* -----
Tho' lost to *us*, PORT-ROYAL claims a sigh,
Nor shall the Muse the unenvied verse deny,
Of all the towns that grac'd Jamaica's isle
This was her glory, and the proudest pile, 10
Where toils on toils bade wealth's gay structures rise,
And commerce swell'd her glory to the skies:
St. Sago, seated on a distant plain,
Ne'er saw the tall ship entering from the main,
Unnotic'd streams her *Cobra's* margin lave 15
Where yond' tall plantains shade her glowing wave,
And burning sands or rock-surrounded hill
Confess its founder's fears -- or want of skill.
While o'er these wastes with wearied step I go,
Past scenes of *death* return, in all their woe, 20
O'er these sad shores in angry pomp be *pass'd*,
Mov'd in the winds and rag'd with everything blast--
Here, opening gulphs confess'd the almighty hand,
Here, the dark ocean roll'd across the land,
Here, piles on piles an instant tore away, 25
Here, crowds on crowds in mingled ruin lay,
Whom fate scarce gave to end their noon-day feast,
Or time to call the sexton, or the priest.
Where yond' tall barque, with all her ponderous load,
Commits her anchor to its dark abode, 30
Eight fathoms down, where unseen waters flow
To quench the sulphur of the caves below,
There midnight sounds torment the sailor's ear,
And drums and fifes play drowsy concerts there,
Sad songs of woe prevent the hours of sleep, 35

And fancy aids the fiddlers of the deep
Dull Superstition hears the ghostly hum,
Smit with the terrors of the world to come.
What now is left of your boasted pride!
Lost are those glories that were spread so wide, 40
A spit of sand is thine, by heaven's decree,
And waiting shores that scarce resist the sea:
In this Port-Royal on Jamaica's coast,
The Spaniard's envy, and the Briton's boast!
A shatter'd roof o'er every hut appears, 45
And mouldering brick-work prompts the traveller's fears,
A church, with half a priest, I grieve to see,
Grass round its door, and rust upon its key!--
One only inn with tiresome search I found
Where one sad negro dealt his beverage round;--- 50
His was the part to wait the impatient call,
He was the landlord, post-boy, pimp, and all;
His wary eyes on every side were cast,
Beheld the present, and revolv'd the past,
Now here, now there, in swift succession stole, 55
Glanc'd at the bar, or watch'd the unsteady bowl.
No sprightly lads, or gay bewitching maids
Walk on these wastes or wander in these shades;
To other shores past times beheld them go,
And some are slumbering in the caves below; 60
A negro tribe but ill their place supply,
With bending back, short hair, and downcast eye;
A swarthy race lead up the evening dance
Trip o'er the sands and dart the alluring glance:
A feeble rampart guards the unlucky town, 65
Where banish'd *Tories* come to seek renown,
Where worn-out slaves their bowls of beer retail,
And sun-burnt strumpets watch the approaching sail.
Here (scarce escap'd the wild tornado's rage)
Why sail'd I here to swell my future page! 70
To these dull scenes with eager haste I came
To trace the reliques of their ancient fame,
Not worth the search!---what domes are left to fall,
Guns, gales, and earthquakes shall destroy them all---
All shall be lost!---tho' hosts their aid implore, 75
The TWELVE APOSTLES shall protect no more,
Nor guardian HEROES awe the impoverish'd plain;
No priest shall mutter, and no church remain,
Nor this palmetto yield her evening shade,
Where the dark negro his dull music play'd, 80
Or casts his view beyond the adjacent strand

And points, still grieving, to his native land,
Turns and returns from yonder murmuring shore,
And pants for countries his must see no more--
Where shall I go, what Lethe shall I find 85
To drive these dark ideas from my mind!
No buckram heroes can relieve the eye,
And *George's* honors only raise a sigh---
Ye mountains vast, whose heights the heaven sustain,
Adieu, ye mountains, and fair KINGSTON'S plain, 90
Where Nature still the toils of art transcends---
In this dull spot the enchanting prospect ends:
Where burning sands are wing'd by every blast,
And these mean fabrics but entomb the past;
Where want, and death, and care, and grief reside, 95
And threatening moons advance the imperious tide:
Ye stormy winds, awhile your wrath suspend;
Who leaves the land, and bottle, and a friend,
Quits this bright isle for yon' blue seas and sky,
Or even Port-Royal quits---without a sigh! 100

NOTES:

6 *pallisades* "A narrow strip of land about seven miles in length, running nearly from north to south, and forming the harbors of Point Royal and Kingston" [Author's Note, 1809 edition].

13 *St. Sago* Variant of "Santiago," the original Spanish name for Jamaica.

15 *Cobra's* "A small river falling into Kingston Bay, nearly opposite Port Royal — and which has its source in the hills beyond Spanish Town" [Author's Note, 1809 edition].

15 *lave* "To wash against, to flow along, or past" (*OED*).

16 *plantains* "A low-growing plant that typically has a rosette of leaves and a slender green flower spike" (*OED*).

23 *Here, opening gulphs* "OLD Port-Royal, in the island of Jamaica, contained more than 1500 buildings, and these for the most part large and elegant. This unfortunate town was for a long time reckoned the most considerable mart of trade in the West Indies. It was destroyed on the 17th of Jun, 1692, by an earthquake, which in two minutes sunk the far greater part of the buildings; by which disaster near 3000 people lost their lives" [Author's Note].

28 *sexton* "An officer responsible for a church and its property, and for tasks relating to its maintenance or management" (*OED*).

29 *barque* "A boat" (*OED*).

44 *the Briton's boast* The British took control of Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655.

66 *Tories* In this context, American colonists who supported the British during the American Revolution (*OED*).

76 *TWELVE APOSTLES* "A Battery so called, on the side of the harbor opposite to Port-Royal" [Author's Note].

77 *HEROES* "Demi-gods" (*OED*).

79 *Palmetto* "From Spanish palmito, literally 'small palm'" (*OED*).

85 *Lethe* "A river in Hades whose water when drunk made the souls of the dead forget their life on earth; Via Latin from Greek ληθη? 'forgetfulness'" (*OED*).

87 *buckram heroes* An allusion to Shakespeare's 1 Henry IV, II.4. 210–50, meaning "non-existent;" a hero that does not exist.

88 *George's honors* Refers to the author's British contemporaries who were loyal to King George III, who was king of Britain at the time of publication.

90 *KINGSTON'S* "Founded in 1693, it became capital [of Jamaica] in 1870" (*OED*).

Source: *Poems Written Between the Years 1768 & 1794* (Monmouth, N.J., 1795), pp. 295-97. [Google Books]

Edited by Briana Williams