

Primary Source: Reading Stedman's Narrative "Against the Grain"



Introduction

John Gabriel Stedman was a British soldier who spent five years in Suriname (1772–1777) fighting against Maroons (escaped enslaved people). He also collected plants and animals as a naturalist. In his published account, he describes interactions with many enslaved people, but in the excerpts below he names Graman Quacy and Joanna. In his narrative, Stedman described his interactions with Quacy, who was born in West Africa around 1690 and became known for his medical and botanical knowledge. Joanna was a fifteen-year-old enslaved woman who treated Stedman's illness and attack by local fleas.

Discussion questions

- Who found this butterfly specimen? Who gets credit for the scientific work? What skills might the person who found the butterfly have that Stedman doesn't mention?
- What skills and knowledge do Quacy and Joanna possess? How does Stedman describe them? Do his facts match his language?

Primary Source

Introduction

Reading Stedman's
Narrative "Against
the Grain"

Reading Stedman's Narrative "Against the Grain"

Source: John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative, of a Five Years' Expedition, Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America; from the Year 1772 to 1777: Elucidating the History of that Country, and the Description of its Productions, viz. Quadrupedes, Birds, Fishes, Reptiles, Trees, Shrubs, Fruits, & Roots; with an Account of the Indians of Guiana, & Negroes of Guinea*, 2 vols. (J. Johnson, 1796; Project Gutenberg, 2022), vol. 1, 87–8, 343–44, 352–53; vol. 2, 22, 347–48, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/65715/pg65715-images.html>; <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/69441/pg69441-images.html>. The source excerpts have been edited and annotated for modern readers. The original text may be found at the locations listed in this citation.

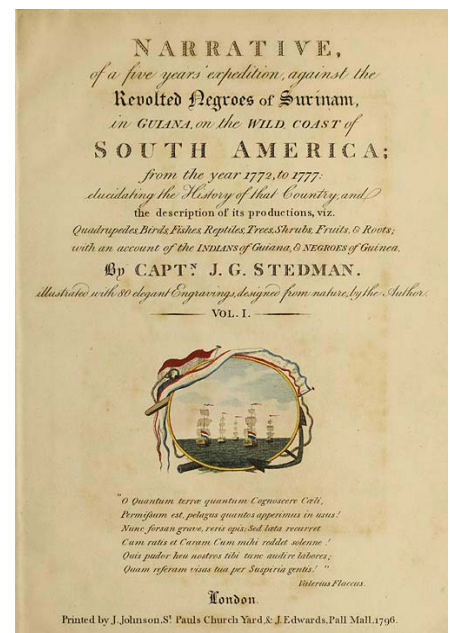
Note: Historical sources often contain language that modern readers may find outdated or offensive. Despite this problematic language, it is important to preserve it when analyzing history because it helps us recognize how perspectives and power dynamics have shifted over time.

Stedman's description of an unnamed person and the collection of a butterfly

While we continued here, a negro brought me a beautiful butterfly, which I copied with all the correctness I was master of [.] This fly was a dark blue tinged with green and variegated (having different colors) with spots like a peacock's feather, and on each wing, it had a spot of pale yellow; the under part of the wings was a charming crimson and purple; the body a pale red.---The caterpillar is green and yellow; it is crowned with eight horns on the head, and has two on the tail.

Stedman's description of Graman Quacy

Having got the name of a *lockoman* (spiritual healer), or sorcerer, among the lower slaves, . . . to whom he sells his *obias* (spiritual charms) or amulets (protective objects), in order to make them invulnerable (unable to be hurt), and, of course, to engage [in battle] without fear: . . . and at the same time filled his pockets with no inconsiderable profit to himself; while his person by the blacks is adored and respected like a God. The trash of which his amulets are made costs him, in reality, nothing, being neither more nor less than a collection of small pebbles, sea-shells, cut hair, fish-bones, feathers, &c. the whole sewed up together in small packets, which are tied with a string of cotton round the neck, or some other part of the bodies of his credulous (easily fooled) votaries (followers).



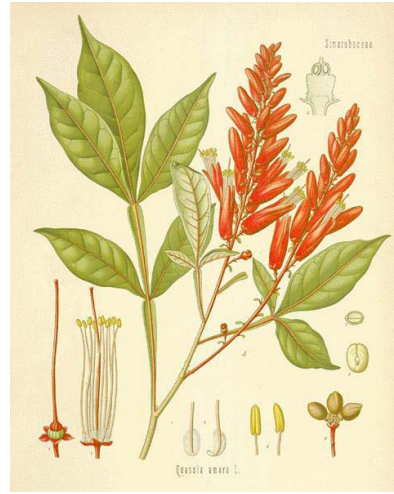
Title page of John Gabriel Stedman's 1803 *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition*.



"The Green Butterfly of South America," from John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative*.

Quacy's discovery of bitter-root

But besides these and many other artful contrivances [that is, (clever schemes)], he had the good fortune, in 1730, to find out the valuable root known by the name of *Quac-cia* bitter, of which he was actually the first discoverer, and from which it took its name: and, notwithstanding [(despite)] this medicine is now less in repute (less respected) in England than formerly, it is highly esteemed [(valued)] in many other parts of the world for its efficacy [(effectiveness)] in strengthening the stomach and restoring the appetite. It has, besides this valuable property, that of being a powerful febrifuge ([a medication that reduces fever].)



Artist's illustration of *Quassia amara*, from *Koehler's Medicinal-Plants*, 1897.

Quacy shares his knowledge with Europeans

In 1761, it was made known to Linnaeus . . .; and the Swedish naturalist has since written a treatise (detailed study) upon it. By this drug alone Quacy might have amassed (gathered) riches, were he not entirely abandoned to indolence [(laziness)] and dissipation [(wasteful living)]; the consequence of which is, a complication of loathsome [(disgusting)] dis-temper [(dis-eases)], of which the leprosy is one: and that disorder is, as I have already stated, absolutely incurable.



Quacy, as depicted by an artist in 1815..

Stedman's Description of Joanna¹

I shall now . . . present to the reader . . . a description of the beautiful mulatto maid Joanna. This charming young woman I first saw . . . where I daily breakfasted, and . . . Joanna, but fifteen years of age, was a very remarkable favorite.

Rather taller than the middle size, she was possessed of the most elegant shape that nature can exhibit moving her well-formed limbs with more than common gracefulness. Her face was full of native modesty and the most distinguished sweetness; her eyes, as black as ebony, were large and full of expression, be-

1. Note: This source includes Stedman's account of his relationship with Joanna, a fifteen-year-old enslaved girl. Notice the contradictions between Stedman's romantic language and the reality of this exploitative relationship. "Suriname marriage" was a widespread colonial institution in which European men purchased enslaved women as "domestic and sexual partners" for the duration of their colonial assignments—another layer of exploitation and abuse that enslaved women and girls regularly faced. This makes our work of "reading against the grain" to understand these women on their own terms even more important. We can still recover Joanna's real medical expertise, even though it was documented through this deeply exploitative lens.

speaking (showing) the goodness of her heart, with cheeks through which glowed, in spite of the darkness of her complexion, a beautiful tinge of vermillion (bright red color), when gazed upon. Her nose was perfectly well formed, rather small; her lips a little prominent, which, when she spoke, discovered two regular rows of teeth as white as mountain snow; her hair was a dark brown [almost] black, forming a beautiful globe of small ringlets, ornamented with flowers and gold spangles.

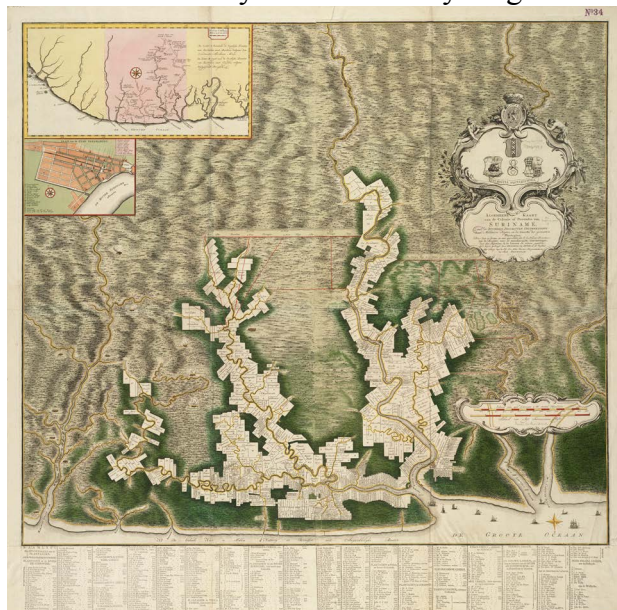
Joanna treats Stedman's fever

[T]he moment I fell, four strong negroes had taken me up, and by [Joanna's] direction placed me where I now was; that the surgeon having put blisters (painful skin treatments used by doctors) on several parts of my body, had finally declared that I was dead, and had suddenly left the plantation, when a grave and coffin were ordered for my burial . . . , which she had prevented by dropping upon her knees to implore a delay; she had dispatched (sent) a black to her aunt for wine-vinegar, and a bottle of old Rhenish (a type of wine), with the first of which she had constantly bathed my temples, wrists, and feet, by keeping without intermission five wet handkerchiefs tied about them, while with a tea-spoon she had found means to make me swallow a few drops of the wine mulled (heated and spiced); that I had lain motionless during all that time; while she had day and night, by the help of an old negro, attended me, still hoping for my recovery: for which she now thanked her God.

I had . . . the good fortune to [slowly] recover, [with] the great care that was taken of me by that excellent young woman . . . to whom alone I owed my life . . .



Joanna, as depicted by artists in John Gabriel Stedman's Narrative, 1803.



Map of Suriname, c. 1750.

Infested with Chigoe Fleas

The chigoe is a kind of small sand-flea, that gets in between the skin and the flesh without its being felt and generally under the nails of the toes, where, while it feeds, it keeps growing till it becomes the size of a large pea, causing no further pain than a disagreeable itching; in process of time it appears in the form of a small bladder, in which are deposited thousands of eggs or nits (insect eggs), and which,

if it breaks, produce so many young chigoes, that in course of time create running ulcers (open sores), which are often of very dangerous consequence to the patient: so much so, indeed, that I have known a soldier, the soles of whose feet were obliged to be cut away with a razor before he could recover; and some men have lost their limbs by amputation ---nay even their lives, by having neglected in time to root out these abominable vermin. The moment, therefore, that one perceives (notices) a kind of itching and redness more than usual about the feet, it is time to begin extracting the chigoe that occasions (causes) it: this is done with a sharp-pointed needle, at which operation the black girls are extremely dexterous (skillful), taking every care not to occasion unnecessary pain, and to prevent the chigoe bladder from breaking in the wound. The cure is to put tobacco ashes in the orifice (opening), by which, in a little time, it is perfectly healed.

Being at this time, as I have just mentioned, infested with the chigoes, Joanna, with her needle, picked twenty-three of these insects out of my left foot, which being all hatched under the nails, caused, as may be imagined, the most terrible torment, but which I bore without flinching, with the resolution of an African negro.



Romanticized painting of the Nijl en Spijt plantation in Suriname by Louise von Panhuys, depicting a coconut tree, with a bridge and the huts of enslaved people in the background, 1812.

Image Citations

Page 1:

“Gezicht op de koffieplantage Sorgvliet aan de Commewijne rivier,” by Jacob Marius Adriaan Martini van Geffen, in Album met tekeningen van Suriname, 1859, p.2, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gezicht_op_de_koffieplantage_Sorgvliet_aan_de_Commewijne_rivier_Koffijplantage_\(titel_op_object\)_Pl._Sorgvliet_\(titel_op_object\)_Album_met_tekeningen_van_Suriname,_p.2_\(50\)_\(serietitel\),_RP-T-1994-281-2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gezicht_op_de_koffieplantage_Sorgvliet_aan_de_Commewijne_rivier_Koffijplantage_(titel_op_object)_Pl._Sorgvliet_(titel_op_object)_Album_met_tekeningen_van_Suriname,_p.2_(50)_(serietitel),_RP-T-1994-281-2.jpg)

Page 2:

Title page, John Gabriel Stedman, Narrative of a five years’ expedition., London, J. Johnson, & T. Payne, 1803, Public Domain, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/65715/pg65715-images.html>
“The Green Butterfly of South America,” John Gabriel Stedman, Narrative of a five years’ expedition., London, 1796, Public Domain, <https://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/YJC0011878/Top-The-Green-Butterfly-of-South-America-bottom-The-Rattle-Snake-Dypsas-of-Guiana>

Page 3:

Bitterholzbaum, Franz Eugen Köhler, Köhler’s Medizin-al-Pflanzen, 1897, Public Domain, <https://botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/q/quassi01.html>
Artist’s representation of Quacy, in Giulio Ferrario, Le Costume Ancien et Moderne, Milan, De l’imprimerie de l’editeur , 1815, plate between pages 406 and 407, Public Domain, <https://archive.org/details/CostumeancienetAmerFerrA/page/406/mode/2up>

Page 4:

Artist’s representation of Joanna, John Gabriel Stedman, Narrative of a five years’ expedition., London, J. Johnson, & T. Payne, 1803, Public Domain, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/65715/pg65715-images.html>
Map of Surinam, Henderick de Leth, 1750, CC BY-SA 2.0, Fentener van Vlissingen, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Suriname,_1750.jpg

Page 5:

Louise von Panhuys, Watercolour of a landscape with a coconut tree, 1812, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Louise_van_Panhuys,_oudere_kokosboom_nabij_negerhutten,_1812.jpg