

# Ecroyde Claxton – Kendal's slave ship surgeon and the abolition movement

Bryan Rhodes, FRCS (Orth)

## Sonnet to Thomas Clarkson by William Wordsworth

On the final passing of the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, March, 1807

Clarkson! it was an obstinate Hill to climb;  
How toilsome, nay how dire it was, by Thee  
Is known,—by none, perhaps, so feelingly;  
But Thou, who, starting in thy fervent prime,  
Didst first lead forth this pilgrimage sublime,  
Hast heard the constant Voice its charge repeat,  
Which, out of thy young heart's oracular seat,  
First roused thee.—O true yoke-fellow of Time  
With unabating effort, see, the palm  
Is won, and by all Nations shall be worn!  
The bloody Writing is for ever torn,  
And Thou henceforth shalt have a good Man's calm,  
A great Man's happiness; thy zeal shall find  
Repose at length, firm Friend of human kind!

## INTRODUCTION

Triggered by incidents such as the *Kong* disaster of 1781, when the ship's captain threw overboard 133 African slaves from his overcrowded ship in order to claim on the insurance policy, the abolition movement became a national movement in the 1780s with petitions raised in many parts of the UK.<sup>(1)</sup>

Although William Wilberforce has achieved lasting fame as the architect of the abolition movement in the UK, in fact Thomas Clarkson was its driving force. Clarkson was one of the 12 men who established the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787. He then embarked on an exhausting campaign to provide the evidence needed to achieve abolition. This involved him travelling up and down the country to find people willing to give evidence to Parliament about conditions on the slave ships; Clarkson estimated that he travelled over 35,000 miles in person. It is not known how Clarkson found the slave ship surgeons who gave evidence to the parliamentary select committee entrusted with investigating the slave trade, but he visited Lancaster in 1787, and spent a number of days in Liverpool early in 1788, trying to find willing people. Whilst in Liverpool, he received anonymous letters threatening his life.<sup>(2)</sup> The result of Clarkson and his Society's early efforts in Parliament was the Dolben Act of July 1788. This attempt to improve conditions in the 'middle passage' of the slave trade limited the number of 'slaves' carried according to the weight of the ship, established that each ship carrying 'slaves' must have on board a qualified surgeon, and required that the surgeon must keep a record of deaths on the ship. It also established a series of bonuses for captains and surgeons if mortality rates were kept low – perhaps an early example of performance-related pay for surgeons.

By the 1780s, the great majority of slave ships leaving British ports sailed from Liverpool. In fact only seven voyages (three ships) started their journeys in Lancaster between 1788 and

1807, when the trade was finally made illegal for British citizens. Therefore, surgeons who wanted to earn a living from the slave trade in the last part of the 18th century would find it easier to gain employment in Liverpool. Even before the Dolben Act, slave ship surgeons were well paid at £3 to £4 per month, not far behind the captain himself. Ecroyde Claxton was one of just five slave ship surgeons to give evidence to the House of Commons in 1790 and 1791. Ecroyde Claxton's evidence to Parliament, alongside that of all the other witnesses produced by Thomas Clarkson, led to the first successful vote to 'gradually' abolish the slave trade.

## ECROYDE CLAXTON



*Kendal Town Council's image of Ecroyde Claxton reproduced by permission of Trevor Hughes at Kendal Civic Society*

Born in 1769, Claxton was the son of John Claxton, surgeon to the Kendal Dispensary in Lowther Street, and the grandson of John Ecroyde, also a prominent surgeon in Kendal. Ecroyde Claxton was also related through his mother to Rev Caleb Rotheram, one of the organisers of a petition against the slave trade from the people of Kendal sent to Parliament in 1792.<sup>(3)</sup>

After spending a number of years as an apprentice, almost certainly with his father in Kendal, Claxton will have been examined for practice on an African ship by the Company of Surgeons at their headquarters in Newgate, London. The examination for surgeons working on ships was less demanding than those for surgeons entering civilian practice. Still only 19 years old, Ecroyde Claxton arrived in Liverpool in 1788

seeking employment on a slave ship. His first journey was as the 'surgeon's mate' on the ship *Garland*, which left Liverpool in May 1788 and arrived in Bonny, Nigeria, in August.

He then became the ship's surgeon on the *Young Hero*, transporting 250 'slaves' from Bonny to Trinidad in the Caribbean, leaving Africa on 1 August 1788, ie within a few weeks of the passing of the Dolben Act. At just 80 tonnes, the ship was clearly overcrowded and ripe for infectious disease. The causes of infectious diseases were not understood at this time and young Claxton would have faced a situation very different to those he would have come across at the Kendal Dispensary. The death rate for the Africans on this journey was over 50%!

Claxton gave evidence about this disastrous voyage to Parliament in 1791. In his evidence he stated: 'The *Young Hero* carried a cargo of 250 slaves, of whom 132 died, mainly of the "flux" [amoebic dysentery]. He described that they were stowed 'in such density that they were only able to lie on their sides.' Isolation was impossible and after a sail was laid out on deck as a temporary berth, it became contaminated with blood and mucus. Such was the punishment meted out to slaves who soiled the sail that some resorted to vigorous straining into a tub in order to empty their bowels elsewhere. This itself led to anal prolapse, untreatable on board. Scurvy and leg oedema, from the leg irons, were universally found. Ecroyde described a particularly macabre practice of decapitation of dead slaves in front of survivors in an attempt to reduce suicide risk by dispelling the belief that after death the body and soul would be repatriated, and described an incident where one slave committed suicide by jumping overboard: he 'made signs which it is impossible for me to describe in words, expressive of the happiness he had in escaping from us. He went down again and we saw him no more.'

Later, in 1791, Ecroyde Claxton married in Burton-in-Kendal and subsequently had three children, all born between 1792 and 1796. Claxton almost certainly had an independent practice as a surgeon – apothecary in Burton during this period. Despite this, he returned to the slave trade in July 1794, and we can only speculate as to his motives as there is no surviving personal record of his experience. He was certified for the slave trade in April 1794 by the Liverpool Medical Board and he served as ship's surgeon on the *Mary*, a 171-ton ship. The ship left Liverpool in July 1794, purchased 299 'slaves' in Angola and transported them to Grenada. This time 279 'slaves' survived.

His final complete journey took place less than a year later. He served as ship's surgeon on the *Speedwell*, of 150 tonnes, which left Liverpool in August 1795 and carried 251 'slaves' from Cape Mount, on the west African coast, to the Bahamas. This time, just four African 'slaves' died on the voyage. Ecroyde Claxton arrived back in Liverpool in April 1796.

It isn't clear what happened to him after this. It is recorded that he died on the Gaboon river in Gabon, Africa, but no details are given.<sup>(4)</sup> The slave ship voyages' database lists just one ship that was involved with an episode of 'African resistance' between

1796 and 1807 in Gabon.<sup>(5)</sup> This was the *Roehampton* that left Liverpool in 1804 and was attacked from the shore, resulting in seven of the 22 crew members being killed. Perhaps Ecroyde Claxton was one of them.

I have also discovered that Ecroyde had two brothers who also became slave ship surgeons.<sup>(6)</sup> Charles Claxton was the ship's surgeon on the *Rattler*, which departed from London in April 1795 transporting 'slaves' from Cape Coast Castle, Anomabu, to Kingston, Jamaica, and returning to London in April 1796. I have not found any further information about Charles Claxton.

Caleb Claxton was the ship's surgeon on two voyages. The first was the *Catherine*, which left Liverpool in August 1795 and transported 'slaves' from Bonny to Jamaica, returning to Liverpool in June 1796. The second was on the *Christopher*, which left Liverpool in July 1798, returning in September 1799. Like many ship's surgeons, Caleb Claxton later became a ship's captain, but was subsequently lost at sea off Mauritius.<sup>(4)</sup> The 1790s and early 1800s was a particularly dangerous period for the crews of slave ships. As well as the risk of accident, disease and ship wreck, African resistance increased and attacks by French ships also became more common.<sup>(7)</sup> With the latter, the ship's surgeon would be required to deal with major injuries in difficult circumstances. Although it appears that the Dolben Act may have decreased the mortality rates for Africans on British slave ships, the risks for slave ship crews increased. It appears that John and Mary Claxton may have lost all three of their surgical sons through this iniquitous trade.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Kendal Town Council for the picture of Ecroyde Claxton. (Note: the picture is dated 1761, so may be John Ecroyde rather than Ecroyde Claxton.)

Steve Behrendt (Dept of History, Wellington University, New Zealand) for information from his database of 1,000 slave ship surgeons.

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