

# 1801: William Gilbert in Charleston

This lone sighting of Gilbert in the pages of a Charleston newspaper shows that his enthusiastic support for France (on account of the French Revolution) had not waned in the five years since he published *The Hurricane*. Britain and France were at war, and the Federalist Party wanted to make an alliance with Britain, rather than France. (Letter traced by Patricia Cline Cohen).

## Letter to the *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* of Charleston, Oct. 19, 1801, p. 2.

For the CITY GAZETTE.

Messrs. McIver & Williams,

As I have perceived your newspaper is one in which a gentleman may appear without being ashamed of his company, I yield without hesitation to the desire I feel of explaining myself to the world in print, whenever I can do it through a not disgraceful vehicle.

I find one distinction between the friends of the French revolution and their enemies to be universal throughout the globe, and unceasing from the first to the last stage of it. Whether the writing against French liberty, human happiness and divine power, come from a French emigrant; an English anti-jacobin, an American federalist, or appear in an imperial manifesto, it preserves invariably one character—namely blackguardism. Who among them all more elegant than Edmund Burke? Yet I have heard him, *when in opposition* to Mr. Pitt, call that minister *in the house of commons*, ‘saucy, abusive, stupid and insolent;’ and the well known author of the phrase ‘swinish multitude,’ does not seem to have emerged from this *boue de Londres*. In short, if I glance on a paper having on it the epithets villain, rascal, &c. rapidly succeeding one another, I never wait for the context to know on which side it is written. This moderation too, preserved on our side, is the more laudable, as it is not owing to *our* consciousness of any inaptitude between the epithets just cited, and the persons or party themselves who use them. for instance, though we know that Lord Nelson broke a capitulation which allowed the Neapolitan patriots to retire after the French, put them in irons, then executed them on board his fleet, and rowed round with Lady Hamilton to view the executions, he has still been called Lord Nelson, and nobody has given him a more vulgar title, nor a worse. Though his patron Lord St. Vincent gave occasion to the Martinique royalists to say, when a thing was stolen, that it was only taken *a la Jervis*, that peer is still called a great British naval officer, not a thief nor a pirate. Though a person in no inferior station in England, and not remarkable for poverty, has three time brought back his corn from Uxbridge market, because he could not get *his* price for it, he is still called a great farmer. These several honorable appellations, I assert, have never been denied them.

To refer slightly again to Mr. P. When Mr. Burke addressed him as I have stated, it was in 1787. I was at that time so much Mr. P.’s friend, principally for his pursuing the commercial treaty with France, that I wrote a pamphlet in his favour. However, as it is dangerous to dispute Mr. B.’s judgment of character, as Mr. P. afterwards made the habitual user of such language his bosom friend, (and on *two* different days did Mr. B. hold this language to him) and he has since *usque ad necem* reversed his then course in politics, I no longer hold it necessary in me to exclude him from the class of those on whom, if we had no respect for ourselves, and no wish to heal rather than irritate the long festering wounds of society, we might, without fear of serious refutation, bestow injurious epithets.

So long ago as 1787, also, I openly argued with Mr. Grenville, in the newspaper called *The World*, on ‘the policy of depressing, *suppressing* if possible, the commerce and navigation of the United States’. The identical paper is now in Charleston. I then assumed the above proposition as an object of the British government, which they took no pains to conceal, nor when publicly charged on them, to disavow. The

expressions of Mr. Grenville, in his place in the house of commons, which I most pointedly attacked, were, that Britain had treated America too mildly, and must make her feel the rod a little severer. This I called in the newspapers poor impotent folly! But if the federalists of America be the people of America, I must humbly beg their pardon for having interfered in their quarrel. But that word I must recal, and more modestly say, in what I conceived to be their cause, that of commerce and that of humanity, for they have kissed the rod. To this identical Mr. Grenville, tenacious of his purpose and impressing their seamen, to place in the van of the war by him undertaken against at once the patron, the friend, and the child of their independence, they have kneeled. To him they have sacrificed, exclusive of some fallen in battle, the blood of a brother, left by Mr. Jay, where he was fixed when pressed, and hanged for mutiny at the Nore. Yet for all this I do not deal out the epithets of traitorous nor dastardly. I only say, that if federalists be the Americans, America is no longer independent. I by no means say, that, after having gnawed their way out, they were not as free as ever to return for the remains of cheese in the mouse-trap. I call not a commercial negotiator for the United States ignorant, because he knows not that cotton grows in South-Carolina; nor do I impeach the partiality or patriotism of such a person's appointment—Still, I must say, in favour of French aggressions at that moment, that if a man will lay flat in a ditch, or across a road, and instead of keeping his face UP TO THE STARS, will wholly *bury* it in the mud, he must expect to be trodden on by friends as well as foes; and I particularly admire the courage, spirit, and honor of that man who will jump up and fight his friend for the insult, in preference to the bullying foe, who frightened or bribed him into the situation so abject. It is really no wonder if such a man can never free his mouth from dirt.

But, although I have refrained from all abusive epithets, I will not permit this letter to fall short of its mark, nor go off lightly, infirmly nor undecided, and therefore I will give the federalists before I conclude, a designation which I write up for *eternity*—it is *ungrateful!*

If you say a man is ungrateful, you say all that is bad of him. I mean to say so; I mean to say ungrateful to France; ungrateful to heaven; ungrateful to the blood of her own native defenders; ungrateful to all her own capacities, whether of soil and situation, or of mental expansion.

If I should be obliged to write a second letter, it shall sink 'em.

Observe, I have not here done more than just *touch* religion. They had better not suffer me to do it; for *then* and *there* is no suspension, nor any mercy, from WILLIAM GILBERT