

# Robert Wedderburn

Born 1762.

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*This account of the life of Robert Wedderburn was archived, with acknowledgement and thanks, from Wikipedia in 2021.*

# 1. Early Life

Robert Wedderburn (1762 – 1835) was a Jamaican-born Unitarian, ultra-radical leader, and anti-slavery advocate in early 19th-century London. He was born in Jamaica. His mother, Rosanna, had been born in Africa, and was enslaved. Wedderburn's father, James Wedderburn, was born in Scotland. Wedderburn's grandfather's, Sir John Wedderburn, 5th Baronet of Blackness, execution for treason resulted in his father and uncle, John Wedderburn of Ballendean, fleeing Scotland. James Wedderburn settled in Kingston, making a living first, as a doctor, and then as a sugar plantation owner. While in Jamaica he had children by several different enslaved women.

After she had already given birth to two children by him,[1] James Wedderburn sold Rosanna, then five months pregnant with his third child, back to her previous owner. (James Wedderburn later returned to live in Britain. His legitimate son and heir, Andrew Colville, defending his father after these details were made public in the British press, denied the paternity and further claimed Rosanna was both promiscuous and unable to control her temper.) James Wedderburn stipulated, however, that Rosanna's child (Robert) when born should be legally free, and he officially registered both Robert and an elder brother, James, as free. Although born free, Wedderburn was raised in a harsh environment, as his mother was often flogged due to her "violent and rebellious temper". She was eventually re-sold away from her son, who was then raised by his maternal grandmother, a woman known as "Talkee Amy".

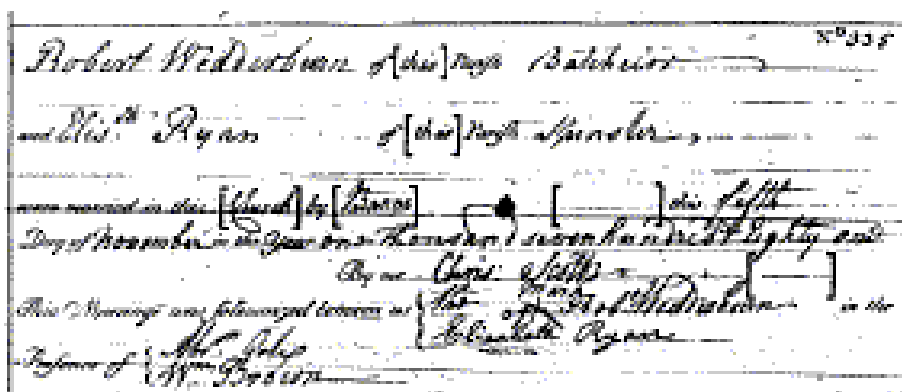
To escape the insecurity and abuse of the plantation, Wedderburn signed on with the Royal Navy at the age of 16. On the ships, food and living conditions were horrific, and it was during this time that Wedderburn became increasingly aghast at the violent punishments used by the British both on their ships and in their colonies.

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## 2. Arrival in Britain

Wedderburn arrived in Britain aged 17 and lived in the district of St. Giles, London, among a community of runaway slaves, Jamaican ex-servicemen, and other immigrant minorities including Jews, Lascars and Irish. Known as the "London blackbirds", this ethnically diverse subculture is reported to have been free of the racial discrimination so prevalent elsewhere in this era. However, as people living on the margins, the "blackbirds" often relied on criminal activity in order to survive.

Through means that remain unclear (it is possible that he had been an apprentice in Jamaica or had learned while in the Navy), Wedderburn became a journeyman tailor. As he referred to himself as a "flint" tailor, this suggests he was registered in the book of trades and shared values typical of other artisans - including pride in his craft and a belief in economic independence. Unfortunately, the instability of his career made him increasingly susceptible to the effects of a trade recession, inflation and food shortages, and he was soon reduced to part-time mending work on the outskirts of town.



*Robert Wedderbury marriage certificate.*

By now married and desperate for money during one of his wife's pregnancies, Wedderburn visited his father's family at Inveresk on the outskirts of Edinburgh. As this proved unsuccessful (apparently his father disavowed him and he was sent away with some small beer and a bent or broken sixpence), Wedderburn dabbled in petty theft and keeping a bawdy house. At some point he published in Bell's Life in London an account of his origins and his father's failure to provide for him. His alleged half-brother Andrew Colville published a reply citing his father's denial of paternity and later threatened to sue the paper if it published any further slanders.

### 3. Religious conversion and activity

In 1786, Wedderburn stopped to listen to a Wesleyan preacher he heard in Seven Dials. Influenced by a mixture of Arminian, millenarian, Calvinist, and Unitarian ideas, he converted to be a Methodist, and soon published a small theological tract called *Truth Self Supported: or, a Refutation of Certain Doctrinal Errors Generally Adopted in the Christian Church*. Although this work contained no explicit mention of slavery, it does suggest Wedderburn's future path in subversive and radical political action.

Politically influenced by Thomas Spence, Wedderburn was an impassioned speaker and became de facto leader of the Spencean Society in 1817 after the nominal leaders were arrested on suspicion of high treason. Wedderburn published fiery periodicals advocating republican revolution, using violence if necessary, to bring about redistribution of property in Britain and the West Indies. In 1824, he published an anti-slavery book entitled *The Horrors of Slavery*, printed by William Dugdale and possibly coauthored by George Cannon.

To promote his religious message, he opened his own Unitarian chapel in Hopkins Street in Soho, London. After he began to question Christian tenets he was later associated with Deism. He also campaigned for freedom of speech.

Wedderburn served several prison terms. According to Peter Linebaugh (2000) it is recorded that Wedderburn "did time in Cold Bath Fields, Dorchester, and Giltspur Street Compter prisons for theft, blasphemy, and keeping a bawdy house." While imprisoned, Wedderburn wrote a letter to Francis Place.

In 1831, at the age of 68, he was arrested and sent to Giltspur Street Prison and sentenced to two years in jail, having been convicted of keeping a brothel. On his release he appears to have gone to New York City, where a newspaper records his involvement in a fraud case and refers to him as "a tailor and breeches maker, field preacher, anti-bank deposite politician, romance writer, circulating librarian, and ambulating dealer in drugs, deism, and demoralization in general".[3] He returned to London shortly after. His last mention in the historical record was in March 1834 when a Home Office informer listed him as present among the congregation at the Theobald's Road Institute.

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## 4. Death & Descendants

The exact year of his death is unknown, although it appears to have been before official registers of death began to be kept in 1837. He may be the "Robert Wedderborn" who died aged 72 in Bethnal Green and was buried in a non-conformist ceremony on 4 January 1835.

The British Labour politician Bill Wedderburn, Baron Wedderburn of Charlton, was a direct descendant of Robert Wedderburn.

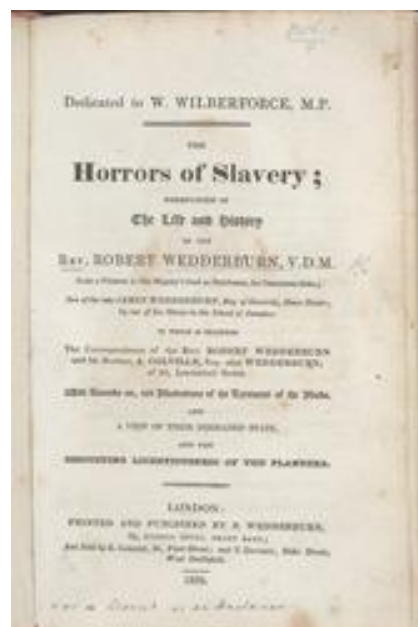
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## 5. Postscript

Ancestor of the scalemaking Wedderburn line, Robert was one of several illegitimate children fathered by James Wedderburn of Inveresk, Jamaican plantation owner. Robert was a grandson of Sir John Wedderburn of Blackness, whose family fled to Jamaica after defeat at Culloden in 1746. Sir John himself was captured, tried for treason, then hung, drawn and quartered by the English.

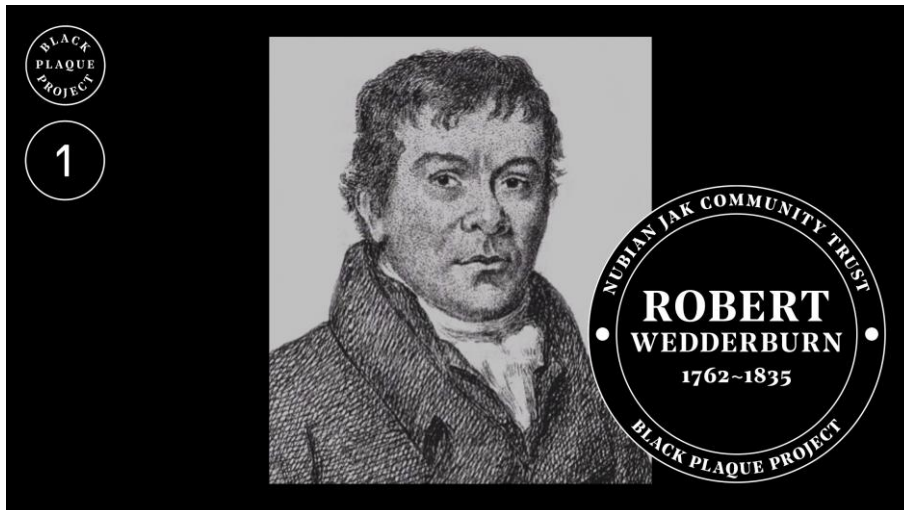
Author of the abolitionist autobiographical work "The Horrors of Slavery", ostracized by the Wedderburns who for many years claimed he had no right to the Wedderburn name, a contemporary and acquaintance of Wilberforce (to whom his autobiography is dedicated), a strategic player in fomenting popular unrest in the cause of republicanism, whilst remaining faithful to his West Indian roots and promoting the case for the abolition of slavery, he was to be imprisoned and sentenced to hard labour for his outspoken radical views.

"The Horrors of Slavery" (right), consists of a collection of tracts and autobiographical accounts which had considerable impact in Robert's era. He dedicated this work to Wilberforce, who visited him in prison. He also criticised the Anglican Church, was accused of blasphemy, sentenced to hard labour and imprisoned once more. Even from prison he managed to have the last word, succeeding in having the trial transcript published as a radical tract. The Wedderburns by this time were firmly part of the establishment once again, Robert's half-brother James was the Solicitor-General for Scotland, and Robert's activities were severely embarrassing to the family. It was little more than half a century after Culloden, a period when the Blackness Wedderburns, largely committed Jacobites, had hardly endeared themselves to the English.



The account of his life in the "Horrors of Slavery" is very convincing. He states that his father was Dr. James Wedderburn of Inveresk. Robert's mother, Rosanna, was the slave house-keeper of a Lady Bassilia Douglas, a distant cousin of the Duke of Queensbury, before being acquired by James Wedderburn. Lady Douglas was Robert's godmother at his baptism. In his pamphlet Robert maintains that he and his brother James were made 'free' from birth' and that his father James registered them as such 'as was the custom'. "Doctor" James Wedderburn of Inveresk (he practised as a surgeon on arrival in Jamaica after Culloden in 1746) was the third son of Sir John Wedderburn of Blackness, 5th Baronet. Dr. James returned to Scotland in 1773, purchasing Inveresk Lodge and property in Banffshire with the profits from his Jamaican estates. Sir John's line was to become extinct, and the Balindean baronetcy was inherited by the direct "legitimate" descendants of Dr. James, the current 7th Baronet of Balindean being Andrew John Alexander Ogilvy Wedderburn.

"This colorful, disreputable character is important to the African-American tradition. He became a leading proponent not only of abolition, but of what would be termed today a black theology of liberation, and a major figure in England's republican underground of the Georgian and Regency periods. He was at once a witness and victim of West Indian slavery. His autobiography is a vivid indictment of an execrable system; its accounts burn themselves into the reader's mind like the sting of the slaver's whip." (Publishers Weekly).



*African and Caribbean support organisation Nubian Jak Community Trust and Havas London created in 2020 The Black Plaque Project, an initiative to commemorate the contributions of black people throughout history. Timed to launch at the end of Black History Month, the project is a twist on London's blue plaques – the signs hung around the capital to pay tribute to notable British figures of the past and the buildings in which they lived and worked. However, only 1.6% of those honoured in that scheme are of African or Caribbean descent. To address this imbalance, The Black Plaque Project will install specially designed black plaques on buildings across London to celebrate the lives of some of its most notable black residents who may have been overlooked.*

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