

## Let My People Go Free

*Before I embark on a historical record of the family, it is important to emphasize that my knowledge is partial and based on the facts at my disposal. It may very well be that in future I shall have to revise any observations which I make, in the interests of accuracy and integrity.*

My name is Bill Grimke-Drayton, and I am British. However, I am a direct descendant of two slave-owning families from Charleston in South Carolina. My great-great grandfather, Theodore Drayton Grimke, left the States shortly before the Civil War of 1861-1865, taking up a position in his father-in-law's business in Lancashire, England.

He had met his English wife-to-be on the so-called Grand Tour of Europe. What were his thoughts as he left his home? I believe he was greatly influenced by the radical views of his aunts, the famous abolitionists, Sarah Moore Grimke and Angelina Grimke (wife of Theodore Dwight Weld). All resided in the north, and would certainly not have been welcome back in Charleston, I believe that Theodore Drayton Grimke through his associations would have known that the north with its industrial might would eventually win the war.

From family research I undertook in the early 1990s I believe that the Draytons originated from Atherstone in Warwickshire in the Midlands of England. They were trades people - tanners, butchers, innkeepers, etc. Records go back as far as 1550. Some of the Draytons moved to London, where they became members of the Livery Companies of the City during the 17<sup>th</sup> century - a time of great upheaval in England with the Civil War as a pivotal moment in history, dividing both family and nation, as another conflict would do on the other side of the Atlantic just 200 years later. The Draytons could be said to have been, like many other families, pragmatists - siding at first with the Parliament, but with the accession of Charles II to the throne of England, changing their allegiance with the prevailing wind, particularly now that there were great opportunities opening up for enterprise and adventure across the seas. I found a will at the Public Record Office of a John Drayton, dated 1643, as being "on a voyage to the Barbathoes". Grants were given to the pioneers under a scheme, whereby they indentured themselves to landlords for 7 years and then they themselves would become landowners and acquire indentured servants for the same period of 7 years. Life was harsh for these people, and they may very well have meted out the same treatment to those who followed. In the Virginia Land Grants there are entries of a John Drayton in the 1650s, and a Thomas Drayton in the mid

1660s. What has to be emphasized is that all these were white and originated from the homeland.

At some point during the 1670s in the early part of King Charles II's reign, a ship called the "Willing Wind" set sail from Gravesend with amongst its passengers a certain Thomas Drayton, and his son, also Thomas Drayton. The ship stopped at Kinsale in Ireland, and then proceeded to Barbados. Another ship called the "Mary" sailed in April 1679 from Barbados, bringing more settlers to land on Carolinian soil after the successful initial expedition in 1671 under the leadership of Sir John Yeamans, a Barbados landowner and brother to the mayor of Bristol in England. According to information passed on to me by a relative as a result of a recent TV programme on my visit to Charleston, the Thomas Drayton who left England settled in Barbados, and his son, also Thomas, born in 1650, went to Charlestown as it was then.

Among the passengers with this Thomas Drayton to arrive on Carolina soil was his future father-in-law, Stephen Fox, whose daughter, Ann, would become Thomas' second wife, and so Thomas through this marriage would inherit Magnolia plantation on the Ashley River. Thomas Drayton's descendant, also Thomas Drayton, bequeathed the property to the eldest son of his daughter, Sarah Daniels Drayton. She had married Thomas Smith Grimke, whose first son by her had been killed in a hunting accident. So the property passed to her second son, Rev. John Drayton Grimke, who added the name of Drayton. He was responsible for developing the property into Magnolia Gardens - the name by which it is known today. For financial reasons, particularly as a result of the defeat of the South in the Civil War, he first opened the gardens to the general public in 1870. Rev John was forward-thinking for his time. During the antebellum period he set up a slave school before the Civil War, and solemnized the weddings of his slaves. Both of these actions were illegal, but because of his position in society and his quiet pursuit of his actions, he was left alone.

I am descended directly from his younger brother, Theodore Drayton Grimke, who did not add the name to Drayton, because he had no cause to do so. He along with his English wife, Emma (nee Evans) emigrated to England, where he took up a position in his father-in-law's coal-mining firm in Lancashire. He died in 1888, 3 years before his own brother's death. His son, also Theodore, decided to add by deed poll the name of Drayton, possibly thinking that there might be an inheritance for him in America. This did not materialize because Rev. John had bequeathed to

his daughter, Julia Hastie, his property at Magnolia Gardens, which is still in the possession of her descendants today.

As the Civil War drew to its close, all the plantation houses were ransacked and burned - except Drayton Hall, which, according to one account, had been set up as a smallpox hospital, and was therefore protected. The legacy of destruction remained for a very long time in the minds of those who had lost practically all of their possessions. It could be said that it was only after the First World War that this attitude of unresolved grievance began to change. I believe that because of this the goal of emancipation for African Americans took such a long time to be fulfilled - firstly, in terms of legislation and then in the mindset of those who felt threatened by an outside world, which regarded the former as a relic from the past. As you admire the beautiful buildings in downtown Charleston, you cannot help but be reminded that these were created on the proceeds of slave labour. Yes, we need to acknowledge that the south was brought to its knees by a Civil War, which destroyed its way of life for ever. The film "Gone With The Wind" is unashamedly nostalgic for the "orderliness and peace" which reigned in that bygone age, when everyone knew their place. How convenient that some benefited from the wealth created on the backs of others, whose lives were completely at the control of masters, who could be cruel or kind, and who represented the law!

Going back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the United States came of age, and rid itself of the chains of servitude which bound it to the British Crown, Drayton Hall was not so fortunate in the American War of Independence, because it was used as the British headquarters, from which point they were able successfully to besiege Charleston. The city was eventually occupied for a short time, before the peace agreement was signed in Paris, and the troops were sent back to England. The British had promised freedom to the slaves - quite probably for tactical reasons to weaken the position of the patriots. The former had therefore a logistical problem in the fact that Charleston had become overcrowded by escapees from plantations, desperately trying to leave with the troops. Many, including African American Draytons, ended up in Nova Scotia - according to the records at Drayton Hall. However, during the occupation of the city, at a time when the residents were being told to evacuate their homes, John Paul Grimke, as a man in his mid-70s, complained bitterly to the British Commandant of the city as to why a man of his advanced years should have to suffer the indignity of being thrown out of his house. It was nevertheless made clear to him that the

correspondence which he was maintaining with his son, John Faucheraud Grimke, who was up north fighting on the side of the Patriots, was considered highly provocative in the circumstances, and that it should be ceased forthwith, if the old gentleman wished to avoid further trouble. John Paul had considered retiring back to England. The experience of the occupation soon changed his mind I believe.

During the time leading up to the Civil War between 1861-1865, there was great upheaval among the Grimke family. Two sisters, Sarah and Angelina, the daughters of the Intendant of the City of Charleston, John Faucheraud Grimke, who would have been in charge of the policing of the city, had to move up north because of their vociferous support for women's rights and the abolition of slavery. Even as young children, they were already showing their precocious side - so unbecoming for Southern ladies, who were educated to be good housekeepers, and certainly not to be concerned with such things as politics or law. That was left to their sons and brothers. Anti-slavery pamphlets which had been written by the sisters would arrive at the port of Charleston only to be confiscated and burned by the authorities. During the War itself, when Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the emancipation of all slaves, Angelina addressed the Convention, which led up to this declaration. She was quoted as saying: "This war is not, as the South falsely pretends, a war of races, nor of sections, nor of political parties, but a war of Principles....The nation is in a death-struggle. It must either become one vast slaveocracy of petty tyrants, or wholly the land of the free....Soldiers of this revolution, to your hands is committed the sacred duty of carrying out in these latter days the ideal of your fathers, which was to secure to ALL 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' "

The sisters' nephew, my great-great grandfather, Theodore Drayton Grimke, the brother of Rev. John Drayton Grimke, paid a visit to his cousin, Montague Grimke, in 1891. Montague was the son of Selina Simmons and Henry Grimke, brother of both Sarah and Angelina, and my great-great-great grandfather, Thomas Smith Grimke, who married into the Drayton family. Selina died in 1843, and Henry Grimke took Nancy Weston as his "companion", since mixed marriages were illegal according to south Carolina law. She was a woman of enormous intellectual capacity, physical strength and religious conviction. Judging by what two of their sons, Archibald (1847-1930) and Francis (1850-1937), wrote about the relationship of their parents, it was very likely a love match. Although Nancy and Henry lived in separate houses at Caneacres, Henry made no secret of their relationship. She became virtual head of the

household, and managed the plantation. Henry died in 1852, just before John, his third son was born, named by Nancy Weston after Henry's brother, Thomas Grimke, my great-great-grandfather. Montague allowed Nancy and her sons to live in a small house on Coming Street in Charleston, but little else. It appeared that despite the stipulation that they be well-treated as family, their lives were spent in great poverty with Nancy trying to make ends meet as a seamstress and washerwoman. Five years after Henry's death, Montague took her two eldest sons as house servants, and they were regularly beaten and as a consequence tried on many occasions to escape. They also experienced the cruelty of the "Sugar House", where harsh punishments were meted out. Montague had in fact reneged on his own father's will, and not recognized the boys as his half-brothers.

The three boys eventually went north, where they were discovered by their aunts, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, who financed their education through school and college. Archibald went into law and politics, and became involved in the civil rights movement until his death in 1930. In the 1890s Archibald also took up the post of American Ambassador to the Dominican Republic for a few years before a subsequent administration recalled him. Frank became a Presbyterian minister - 50 years being spent in Washington DC. There is no information to hand of John, who was born shortly after the death of his father, Henry Grimke, and John just disappeared back somewhere in the south.

The story of the Grimke family has been written by Mark Perry, a Washington DC journalist, in his book: "Lift Up Thy Voice: The Grimke Family's Journey from Slaveholders to Civil Rights Leaders". In the initial stages it deals comprehensively with life in the Grimke household at 321 East Bay Street in downtown Charleston. (During my recent visit I had the opportunity to visit the property which is now being used as a legal practice). Then we progress to the two sisters, and the conflicts within the family, regarding their perceived "betrayal" of the way of life through which their society had prospered.

The tensions were mirrored also in the nullification crisis of the 1850s, where most Southerners saw the Federal government in Washington DC as increasingly restrictive of their freedom to pass laws appropriate to their own situation. John Calhoun, the Vice-President of the United States and a South Carolinian, supported the notion that a state had a right to bypass any law which the authorities in Washington DC had promulgated and which the individual state considered unlawful.

The book which I have mentioned previously then deals with the development of the two sisters' pioneering work as abolitionists and woman's' rights advocates and their interaction with Nancy Weston and her sons. Finally, we move on to the lives of Archibald and Francis Grimke - both in the familial and personal aspects, as well as their respective occupations and campaigning as civil rights leaders.

The Grimkes originated from Rugen, an island north of Berlin in Germany, although during that period the area belonged to Sweden. Two brothers, John Paul and Frederick Grimke, left to emigrate to America, eventually landing sometime in 1733, although I have a record of John Paul being an apprentice in the City of London between 1731-1738. From 1740 John Paul worked as a silversmith in Charleston. In 1749 he moved into a house in Broad Street, where he continued his jewellery business. Many large shipments arrived from London, and John Paul often advertised the fact for potential buyers as on 25 August 1763 in the South Carolina Gazette. He became a member of the South Carolina Society in 1753, and, after many years of service, in the various offices, was elected Steward in 1771. Besides John Paul advertising his wares, it is revealed that he was a slave-owner, because in 1759 he published the fact that his slave, Sharper, had escaped, and that several people in town had been employing him. John Paul warned them not to employ Sharper again until they produced a ticket from him according to law. Thus we can see that it was the custom to "hire out" skilled black artisans.

I discovered a connection between John and Edward Rutledge and the Grimkes. These two men were delegates to the Continental Congress in 1776. John had married Elizabeth, the daughter of John Paul Grimke's brother, Frederick. Edward Rutledge caused commotion when the original draft of the Declaration of the Independence (stated and supported by Thomas Jefferson) wanted to ban slavery, and led southern states to not vote for it, until the clause had been removed, which it was.

On the whole, given that the system of slavery was reprehensible, the Draytons appeared to have treated their slaves well. On my visit to Charleston in April 1993, I met Richmond Bowens, who was the volunteer gate-keeper at Drayton Hall, now owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. He told me that he was a descendant of the Bowens slave-family the Draytons had brought over from Barbados, and

he had grown up at Drayton Hall as a boy, moved up to Chicago, but then came back "home" for his retirement. He even showed me the African American family burial plot on Drayton property - and the spot where he himself would be laid to rest. At the recent "shared history" event at both Drayton Hall and Magnolia Gardens, Charles Drayton, who in 1974 had sold Drayton Hall to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, spoke very movingly at the African American graveyard about his close friend, Richmond Bowens.

Since I have come back after my visit to Charleston, I am even more convinced that we should acknowledge the past in all its truth. We cannot be held responsible for what our ancestors did. We are judged by our own actions. We need to deal with the consequences of the past as they affect the present. Racism from whatever quarter is totally unacceptable. However, pointing the finger and demanding recompense for past wrongs is divisive, and does not lead to social cohesion. Should the present generation have to pay for what they did not do? Who should receive the compensation - remembering that those who believe they have a right to receive whatever is forthcoming are of today's generation? I believe that we should firstly seek to make connections and develop relationships one with each other - black and white. In this way, we will discover more of our commonalities than our differences. We all belong to the human race. We are made in the image of God, whether we believe in Him or not. Having witnessed at the *Shared History* on the 23 September 2006, the Drayton family coming together, as we interacted with each other, I am utterly convinced that we need to seek reconciliation one with another. We cannot live in isolation in our own so-called comfort zones, which are nothing but self-contained ghettos. In the bible, there is the following statement: "In Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile". For those of us who follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour there is a special bond of peace between us which is unbreakable and eternal.

Those of us who consider ourselves to be Christian, however, need to face up to the fact that in the past, people, like members of my own family, would have considered themselves as good Christian people, not realizing the contradiction between their belief that human beings are made in the image of God, and yet their treatment of fellow human beings as property. This is a scandal, which reverberates even today, Jesus challenged social norms of behaviour. He spoke to a mixed-race woman in the middle of the day, when an orthodox Jewish man would thank God he was neither of mixed race like the Samaritans, a woman

nor a dog. Jesus was accused by the religious leaders of consorting with publicans and “sinners” - in other words, not the sort of people a rabbi of his standing should associate himself with. However, how often have we as Christians been accused of being so superior because of our attitude towards those whom we should be helping instead of shunning, as though they were beyond the pale? In many cases, the accusation has been justified.

We have a chance to follow Jesus into the areas of society, where He is already working. His love extends to all, for whom He died in order to atone for their sin. He sacrificed His own life in order to bring us out of darkness into His kingdom of light. At the event on the 23 September, we were given lunch at Magnolia Gardens. After the speeches, we spontaneously sang “Amazing Grace”. The words of the song sum up the message of the gospel, and most were singing, convinced of the truth of what they were singing. As I said in my short address, we are “one big family”. I had the amazing experience of meeting relatives of Nancy Weston, whom I have mentioned previously. Let me state categorically that God is in the business of bringing people home to Himself and secondly uniting them as one, just as God is three Persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - in one.

Yes, we need to remind ourselves of the cruelties perpetrated in the past by the white population on the Africans. Many would say that we ought to move on and “sweep it all under the carpet”. I believe that is a misguided position to take up. We should learn how to treat our fellow human beings with respect and dignity, or whatever colour or background they are. We talk of ethnic minorities, as though they are to be considered separately from the rest of society. I’m afraid that multiculturalism has been a failure. So, now we are faced with the challenge of integration. How far should people be persuaded to follow the norms and practices of our own culture? Recently we have heard of the uproar caused by an opinion expressed that the wearing of the Moslem hijab for women, covering the whole person, should be discouraged. There was a time, when this would not have been an issue simply because of the small numbers of people coming into this country. This has implications for immigration and the development of society.

It could be said that this country has exploited the wealth of other nations in people and material for its own gain - even, that the momentum in this quest by the West has been accelerated by globalisation, with the so-called free market heavily weighted in favour

of the developed nations of the world. If we consider the cheap items on sale in our supermarkets, do we wonder whether workers in the developing nations who produce these goods are paid a fair wage for their labours or are they being exploited just as slaves were on the rice and cotton plantations? Some would argue that business has nothing to do with morality - it is merely the acquisition of wealth, in order then to distribute it equitably. I would contend that that is a short-sighted approach, which cannot in the long run be sustained.

Martin Luther King Jr had a dream, where he saw children both black and white walking hand in hand to the promised land. He proclaimed this manifesto fearlessly at the centre of power in Washington DC, probably knowing that he was most likely signing his own death warrant. It was a privilege for me during my South Carolina visit to meet someone whose grandparents had suffered under slavery, and yet whose parents had encouraged her to be educated, in order to find identity for herself. She became a teacher, and passed on her knowledge to her students. She became involved in the civil rights movement, even being a witness at the rally where Martin Luther King Jr gave his "I have a dream" speech.

If you are a part of society with certain rules of behaviour and a certain structure, it takes a brave man or woman to challenge the status quo, which has become the very fabric of life itself. From our 21<sup>st</sup> century viewpoint it seems completely objectionable that, for example, Sarah Grimke was criticized by her mother for teaching her slave companion to read the Bible, and was told to cease this illegal practice. For the white landowners it was important to have an uneducated workforce, who would therefore be more amenable to discipline and less likely to organize themselves into a force strong enough to overthrow the system.

Many people might say that we must not "rake up the past" even when there are outstanding issues which have yet to be resolved. Let us just "sweep everything under the carpet" and pretend that all happened such a long time ago that it is now history, and has no relevance to our lives today. Let me ask the following question to someone who is a descendant of a slave-owning family! Have you any idea of the grief and pain experienced over generations of those descendants of slave families? Your forefathers and mine were responsible for their treatment as second-class citizens - without any God-given value as individuals in their right! The only value they had was the price their owners had paid at the market for them, and the labour the former had extracted from them - from birth to death. Until we are resolved to follow the path of healing

and reconciliation, which I would contend can best be accomplished through the gospel message of Jesus Christ, this will continue as a running sore in both America and British society, as far as our responsibilities are concerned. We need to make an objective audit as to whether our institutions are truly free of any racist bias or still contaminated by the mindsets of both ex-slave-owning families and ex-slave families. Until we in both the United Kingdom and the United States face up to our responsibilities, then we have no right to judge other nations who are now similarly organised on a system of slavery. The judgment of God Almighty lies heavily on our nations, I believe, though He is indeed a God of abundant compassion, mercy and grace. He has paid the ultimate price for our ransom. In his letter to the church at Galatia, Saint Paul wrote that it was for freedom that Christ has set us free and so we should not be bound by the yoke of slavery and sin - including habits, customs, philosophical and political viewpoints, unquestioning pride in family, status, and nationhood. The basic problem is that we are self-motivated in our so-called good works. Until we put God first in our lives, we are blind to the truth of the situation. We will have "an axe to grind" - our own agenda to follow! Our opinions will be so important to us that we will not even countenance listening with respect to those of others - especially the opinions of those we consider misguided and naïve.

If I was taught one thing on my visit to Charleston, it is this. When you are prepared to listen to both God Himself and to obey His voice, and you are prepared to listen to those you meet, giving them the respect and consideration they deserve as fellow human beings, made in the image of God, even when they do not recognize this fact, then you are changed by the experience, because you grow in wisdom - God's wisdom. My aim was and is to bring people of all race together at the cross of Calvary. I know I cannot do this without God being at the centre of this work. I am merely a human being with failings and shortcomings just like anyone else. However, we are valued and loved as individuals by God, and He has demonstrated this amazing, self-sacrificial love in and through Jesus Christ, Who is both fully Man and fully God - the Word become flesh and dwelling among us. I witnessed miracle after miracle of healing during my visit to Charleston, where I felt so at home. Charleston has been known as the holy city because of the great number of churches. God has already begun a work of restoration in individual lives, and will continue to do so.

**Bill Drayton, *September 2006***