

# THE PORTRAYAL OF THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN PEASANTRY IN THE MEMOIR ACCOUNTS OF BRITISH TRAVELERS (1764-1795)

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**Abstract:** The article analyzes the descriptions of Polish-Lithuanian peasants found in travel literature penned by British visitors to Poland during the reign of Stanisław August Poniatowski. It aims to present the literary image of peasantry and comment on the Britons' attitude towards the problems they faced. The authors whose works are analyzed are William Coxe (historian and tutor), John Lind (associate of a Polish king), Nathaniel Wraxall (traveler and ex-merchant), James Harris (a future diplomat), Joseph Marshall (a mysterious figure, probably a merchant) and John Williams. Villagers are generally described as miserable human beings struggling with poverty, cruelly exploited by their lords in a condition resembling slavery. The authors' attitude is sympathetic to the difficulties of peasant lives. Britons appreciated attempts to extricate them from their plight in the belief that emancipation was ethically desirable and would render their work more productive.

**Key words:** memoirs, diaries, British travel writing, peasants, peasantry, Poland, the Commonwealth of Both Nations

## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The aim of the following article is to present the British portrayal of peasant life in Poland and Lithuania in the reign of their last monarch, Stanisław August Poniatowski (ruling in 1764-1795), during which Poland-Lithuania disappeared from the political map of Europe as a result of three successive partitions (1772, 1793 and 1795). The sources selected for analysis are written accounts, generically referred to as memoir accounts, authored by travelers from Great Britain who actually visited the country and thus had a chance to eyewitness the reality of village life in the region. Since 1569, the Polish-Lithuanian territories had been united in a federative superstructure known as the Commonwealth of Both Nations, which internally consisted of two monarchical states, the Kingdom of

Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, having one elective king and supreme legislative organ (the Diet) but still retaining numerous other separate offices.

The research is intended to show the British perception of the socio-economic position of peasants in Poland-Lithuania as well as the Britons' own private opinions concerning the problems described (for example, the institution of serfdom or prospects of emancipation), thus revealing their mindset. The remarks Britons made have also been contextualized in an attempt to explain where their beliefs might have come from. For this reason, the narrative below is intertwined with references to the findings of modern historiography.

## THE BRITISH PORTRAYAL OF THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN PEASANTRY

Diary entries describing the lives of Polish-Lithuanian peasants arguably belong to the saddest fragments of these publications: misery, poverty and enslavement are recurring themes. The Commonwealth of Both Nations did not have a good press for its treatment of simple villagers; the plight of peasants in the country was an important argument the partitioning courts utilized to lessen the odium they risked incurring because of their attempts to dismember the Commonwealth of Both Nations. Indeed, western political literature teemed with criticism of their social position (Kot, 2017: 186-188). It was, however, neither the partitioning powers nor 18<sup>th</sup>-century British travelers who were the first ones to draw Europe's attention to the problem. The conviction about peasants' enslavement had reigned supreme in British literature and travel accounts at least since the Renaissance (Zins, 2002: 7, 213, 220). The belief was not characteristic of the British alone, but it was common among observers from numerous countries over the ages (Jasnowski, n.d.: 88-93, 183-191; Libiszowska, 1960: 293). An Irish traveler of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, well acquainted with Poland, used the term 'slavery' with full conviction (Connor, 1698: 168, 186), and so did Britons in the following one.

Such a point of view was not groundless. Peasants in the nobility's private domains were almost entirely subject to their lords (they had not been protected by kings since 1518 [Ihnatowicz, Mączak, and Zientara, 1979: 265]), and the only advantage they gained from the 18<sup>th</sup> century legislation up until the enactment of the Constitution of 3 May was a prohibition of sentencing them to death by their masters' courts, while their murder was made a capital crime (Michalski, 1984: 369). Polish thinkers themselves, those more enlightened at least, criticized the severity of peasants' subjection because of its immorality as well as its adverse effect on the whole community and the state. Even they often acknowledged that the bondage of serfs was comparable to slavery (Skrzetuski, 1784: 135; Frycz Modrzewski, 2003: 398-399; Maroń, 2012: 126-127; for more examples, cf. Janicki, 2021: 10-12). Usually, however, they did not agitate in favor of the total abolition of serfdom but proposed limited reforms or even less, simply appealing to the conscience of noble owners and trying to convince them to treat their peasants

better (Leszczyński, 2020: 262-272). It is therefore not surprising that, on the verge of the Commonwealth's downfall, even those Britons who had a good reason to approach partitioning courts' announcements with due caution had to accept the validity of this claim. All of the travelers who addressed the problem pointed out the hardships that peasants in Poland daily struggled with, and all those who tried to define their social status called them slaves.

Even the authors who cannot be accused of being pre-biased but sought to develop their own independent view acknowledged the terrifying condition of peasantry. Harris, present in Poland prior to the Bar confederation, when Russia was dictating Polish legislation, partly seeing through the Empress' intrigues and sympathizing with the Polish king, speaks in no uncertain terms about the material living conditions of the village population. Travelling through the westernmost province of Greater Poland, he notes:

Villages, such as they are, frequent; but the greatest poverty reigns. No houses, but huts: all the family in one miserable room. The head of it has a sort of mock bed; the rest lie on the floor; and the children that have the advantage to be small enough, creep into the oven. The only comfort they seem to enjoy is, a thorough plenty of fuel, they being able to procure wood, merely for the pains of fetching it. (Harris, 1844: 11)

He says nothing, however, about the relations between a peasant and his lord.

Wraxall's first described encounter with the peasantry takes place in the vicinity of Cracow. The circumstances are quite exceptional, as it was a wedding that he had the good fortune to witness. The event must have seemed extraordinary to him, because he chose to describe it in much detail, both in terms of the behavior of the people involved and their clothing:

I was a witness, two days ago, in a cottage not far from this city, to the revelry and festivity observed on the marriage of two Polish peasants. The bridegroom was a tall, handsome young man; and the intended bride, though not beautiful, might be termed very agreeable in her person. She wore a jacket laced with gold, which fitted exactly to her shape; and while it modestly concealed her neck, betrayed the formation of her figure. Her hair, parted on the crown of her head, was ornamented with a cap, composed of gold thread, and a garland of flowers. Behind, her hair, in great quantity, fell down on her back, braided with rose-coloured ribands. When I came into the room, it was filled with peasants of both sexes, half intoxicated. The young bride supported herself against the wall, while her lover, quite unrestrained by the presence of so many spectators, paid his court to her by every testimony of drunken and savage pleasure. He leaned against her, howling, whistling, singing, and hallooing by turns in her ear. From time to time, he presented glasses of beer which she never refused. But, when he attempted to take liberties with her person, she affected

to oppose his caresses, and to repulse his freedom. At a little distance, was seated the bride's mother, in a pleasing state of partial inebriation, regarding attentively the two lovers. Round them were several young men, who attended on the bridegroom; and six Polish girls in waiting on the bride. These females were dressed exactly like her, having circlets of flowers about their heads, and several rows of coral round their necks. In the adjoining room, a number of peasants, male and female, were engaged in dancing. The men wear enormous boots, fortified with iron heels, which they strike continually against each other. It formed altogether a most entertaining exhibition of barbarous mirth. (Wraxall, 1806a: 401-402)

Wraxall was not the only Briton who witnessed a peasant marriage. Years later (but in the Napoleonic period), James (1817: 364-365) did, too. Both describe the ceremony as a joyous celebration, fully absorbing the participants. James (1817: 364) notes that his presence was not even noticed in all the jubilation captivating the attention of those present at the ceremony. The two weddings, a few decades apart, are the only circumstances under which peasants are described as reveling in authentic happiness in an otherwise dull life. This sad fact notwithstanding, Wraxall's narrative is nonetheless judgmentally condescending. What emanates from the excerpt is a clear feeling of cultural superiority. Even setting aside the last quoted sentence with its unambiguously expressed opinion (the wedding as a scene of '*barbarous* [emphasis mine] mirth'), it is evidently manifest, which is perhaps not strange. The excerpt confirms the accusations filed against the Poles very often: drunkenness and sexual frivolity. The peasants in the room are 'half intoxicated', the groom is outright drunk and gives in to his desires under the influence of alcohol, and the bride never refuses to consume yet another glass of beer passed by her husband. Even the mother of the bride is in a 'pleasing state of partial inebriation'. The groom, undaunted by the presence of wedding guests, his mother-in-law, and their watchful gaze, makes explicit sexual advances. The bride does not comply, but, as the author writes, the feeble resistance offered is only feigned: she only '*affected* [emphasis mine] to oppose his caresses.' Her own mother remains indifferent to these actions and enjoys herself nearby. The language used is therefore not surprising: the groom is driven by 'savage pleasure'; he does not simply sing, but among his vocalizations one can hear primitive 'howling', 'whistling', 'hallooing'. James' narrative is free from such disparaging undertones.

The intoxication witnessed by Wraxall is hardly unexpected. The nobility encouraged their peasants to drink as much as possible; it sometimes happened that a peasant would not receive his lord's permission to marry unless he bought from his tavern a prescribed quantity of liquor—the wealthier he was, apparently, the more he was obliged to buy (Burszta, 1950: 88). Janicki (2021: 248; trans. mine) quotes a fragment of Wraxall's description to show 'how such a celebration might have looked'. Sometimes lords also hosted similar festivities for their own

entertainment; like Wraxall, they must have believed that celebrating peasants constituted 'a most entertaining exhibition of barbarous mirth'. However, Wraxall describes himself only as a witness to the wedding, not an active participant. He would have probably been shocked to find out that wealthy Polish aristocrats, including Stanisław August himself, sometimes stooped to partaking in such festivities (Burszta, 1950: 109-110).

Other impressions immortalized by Wraxall, traveling in the Kingdom of Poland (from Greater Poland to Lesser Poland) through rural areas between Warsaw and Cracow, are not much different from what other travelers saw. Wraxall was struck with disappointing scenery similar to that witnessed by Harris. He had difficulty finding houses of nobility; what he came across in abundance were 'hovels of peasants [which] are made of the same materials' (wood), and there were 'the Poles, among whom depopulation, oppression, and misery, [which] appear under every possible shape, manifest in their looks and their whole appearance, the utmost poverty' (Wraxall, 1806b: 2). It is also possible that some of the hovels he saw might have belonged to impoverished noblemen, but it is something that Wraxall seems to be unaware of. The noble estate was financially well diversified, and it was not even required to own land to be a nobleman and to enjoy most of the class privileges as long as one was able to prove that his ancestors were noblemen; the membership in the estate was simply based on the inheritance of the status. Consequently, the lives some nobles led were indistinguishable from those of peasants (Maciszewski, 1986: 33; Davies, 2005: 156).

Coxe's (1787: 208) description of rural areas and rustic life in Austrian Poland is the same except for the distribution of population. It is also emphasized that wooden hovels were 'wretched beyond description, [...] full of filth and misery', with 'the appearance of extreme poverty'. However, the land was not dotted with villages as Greater Poland seemed to be in Wraxall's diary; there are few of them (*ibid.*: 208-209). Later on, their portrayal becomes even worse: 'the peasants were perfect slaves; their habitations and appearance corresponded with their miserable situation; I could scarcely have figured to myself such objects of poverty and misery' (*ibid.*: 308). All that could be seen inside their houses were bare walls. It is therefore not surprising that he also assessed husbandry as not effective (*ibid.*). Roaming Lithuania, Coxe is again surprised at how destitute the peasantry was, but at the same time resigned to and capable of living with no material comforts whatsoever, procuring and manufacturing everything from wood (*ibid.*: 346-347). It is striking how similar the accounts are, all of them highlighting the sole presence of all-wooden hovels and the misery and poverty of their inhabitants without any notable exceptions to the rule, as if there was literally nothing else to be found in the landscape of the Polish countryside.

A different kind of peasant dwelling is presented by Marshall (1773: 238-239) in the description of Lithuania. Those are cone-shaped buildings made chiefly of turf instead of wood, with an opening at the top to let the smoke out. People are said to live with cattle in the same room. It is also to be learned from Marshall that there existed a myth about peasants using ploughs made only of wood for fear of

iron damaging the crops. The author refutes it by claiming he did see ploughs with iron elements as well as all-wooden ones deeper in the country.

What is also noted by the British is the dehumanizing subjection of peasants to their masters. Strikingly, Williams (1777: 638) informs his readers that subjection seemed to have transformed its victims into a ‘race of beings of an inferior nature’. What Williams means is an intellectual inferiority, but Lee (1872: 40) also notices apparently physical changes resulting from serfdom: looking worse than cattle, ‘they are such mere moving clods of stinking earth. This certainly must be the effect of slavery; there cannot be so monstrous a physical difference betwixt man and man.’ Wraxall (1806b: 132) notes that they were tied to the land, sold, and bought together with it, and in fact ‘constitute[d] indeed a part of the [landed] estate’. Coxe (1787: 191) pays attention to the same aspect of Polish serfdom, which he believes made the number of peasants the factor that affected most the value of an estate, with them being thus objectified and monetized like ‘cattle’. Marshall (1773: 190-191) speaks of them like tools used by a lord for land cultivation, ‘who belong to him as much as the trees which grow on the soil’, and likens their social position to that of African slaves (*ibid.*: 243). Williams (1777: 642) goes even further, saying that ‘the situation of the negroes in many of our West-India plantations is superior to theirs’. In all of those accounts, the most numerous social stratum is presented as the living property of land-owning nobility. Scandalous as it might be, there is not much exaggeration in likening peasants to a farmstead’s inventory or cattle; these comparisons made by the British travelers were not different from the Polish landowning nobles’ perception of their serfs (Janicki, 2021: 17-19). Even the apparently most shocking remarks likening the fate of peasants to African slaves in America are not entirely out of place; it was not only British observers for whom the lives of both groups seemed similar. A Polish visitor to the French West Indies expressed the opinion that a black slave’s life under a ‘reasonable master’ was less pitiable than that of a Polish, Hungarian, or Russian peasant. Their lot, he continues, could be easier than among ‘a greater part of European peasants’ (Węgierski, 1982: 55-56).

Nonetheless, there were groups within the Polish peasantry whose position was definitely better. It seems they were a non-conspicuous minority. Polish historian Tadeusz Korzon (1897: 355) posits that since the noble-owned serfs were most numerous while their position was by far the worst and thus most shocking, foreigners—not too well acquainted with the internal structure of the class—tended to attribute the characteristics of their condition to all the peasants of Poland-Lithuania. The observation applies to British travelers as well. Marshall (1773: 190), for instance, claims that peasants were allowed to work on their small allotments of land three days a week to feed their families, all the remaining time farming their lords’ fields: ‘[T]his is a representation of all estates in Poland in time of peace.’ Williams (1777: 639), on the other hand, states that ‘every slave or farmer’ was burdened with a 5-day corvee, could not leave his allotment, and was obliged to serve his master in whatever he wished. Both accounts are gross generalizations. Setting aside the fact that the extent of corvee varied even among noble-owned



serfs (Korzon 1897: 357) (in fact, it sometimes varied even within the same estate [Ihnatowicz et al., 1979: 265]), not all of them belonged to noblemen, and not all of them worked corvee.

There is, however, one traveler more committed to detail than the rest. This author, whose diary is most nuanced, is Coxe. He distinguishes a few degrees of peasants' subjection in Poland: the least severe, he reports, was the one oppressing descendants of German settlers planted in Poland on German law, paying quit-rents and still then entitled to certain privileges, thanks to which their life was easier and lands were better cultivated. The middle condition, he continues, was the bondage of Polish peasants laboring on Crown lands, who enjoyed the right to file a complaint against an abusive *starost* (note 1). The worst was the lot of those belonging to individual nobles, whose power over their serfs was barely limited (Coxe, 1787: 191-195). It could be argued that Coxe fails to unambiguously assert that the first group mentioned by him was in fact free (Korzon, 1897: 352) (while he heavily implies that they also fell under the category of serfdom) and skips one distinct subgroup (peasants on Church lands), but his classification and gradation are generally correct (ibid.: 354-355, 357).

Coxe and Lind were also aware of recent legislation that was intended to protect villeins' lives by the introduction of the death penalty for nobles guilty of murdering serfs. Up to that point, they only had to pay a fixed fine in the Kingdom if they killed a serf belonging to someone else (Janicki, 2021: 264-267). For Lind (1773: 37), it was a step forward of great civilizational value; the law, he declares, 'restores to him [a serf], at least, the rights of man'. Coxe (1787: 195) attaches as much importance to the problem as Lind does, but, aware of the imperfections of the newly passed law, he is much more pessimistic, believing that serfs were still denied the rights due to them. According to the diarist, the reality remained as grim for peasants as it had been before, because the requirements necessary to convict a noble were so unlikely to be met that the law was unenforceable and thus nugatory for all intents and purposes (note 2). The traveler was right. The law did not even specify who was eligible to file a lawsuit. What is more, to sentence a nobleman to death, the law required the testimonies of two other nobles. It was obviously hardly possible for a peasant to find two such witnesses willing to testify against a member of their estate (Korzon, 1897: 360-361). The case shows a huge mental gap between the British and the Poles. While the former saw the protection of all human lives as an obvious corollary to what they seemed to understand to be inherent human dignity, Coxe (1787: 195) grieved that in Poland there was still a great body of nobility who 'scarcely consider [peasants] as entitled to the common right of humanity'. In England, however, the principle of legal equality had already been established (Marshall, 1956: 50), and both authors probably still remembered the events of 1760, when an aristocrat was lawfully hanged in Tyburn for killing a servant (Lipoński, 2003: 344).

Strangely, almost no one writes what peasants were like as people, i.e., in terms of their personalities. Williams (1777: 638), however, remarks that they were

illiterate religious bigots not attracted to learning, whose obedience to the clergy was unquestioning.

Toil, misery, serfdom, and poverty are the characteristics that the diarists point out unequivocally. What makes Wraxall's diary exceptional is his reiteration of arguments put forward by Polish nobility in defense of the prevailing state of affairs and the disclosure of his own attitude towards it. Wraxall was the only diarist who took it upon himself to present the picture from the point of view of those that the diarists held responsible for the plight of peasants and then to address their reasoning.

Every peasant, even the meanest, is provided by his lord with two oxen, two horses, and a cottage. In case of fire, the house is rebuilt; and if they die, the beasts are replaced by their owner. A certain fixed portion of their time and labour is appropriated to their Lords, and the remainder they are at liberty to convert to their own profit and purposes. The number of days destined for their masters, varies in different provinces, and on different estates. But in none is the proportion so severe or exorbitant, as not to leave them time sufficient to cultivate their own little land. In some parts of Poland, the peasants often become rich, or at least perfectly easy in their circumstances. Their poverty and wretchedness are not therefore, say these persons, the inevitable and necessary result of their condition. It arises more from their national and characteristic indolence, drunkenness, and want of industry or exertion. Such are the arguments and facts which are here advanced. (Wraxall, 1806b: 132-133)

The passage above is indicative of Wraxall's imperfect knowledge of the social relations in Poland and the true depth of the peasant predicament. Sometimes serfs were due to work for their masters more than six days a week, and the property considered theirs was never truly safe (Ihnatowicz et al., 1979: 267; Janicki, 2021: 144-152). As Coxe (1787: 194), better acquainted with the situation, explains, 'peasants belonging to individuals are at the absolute disposal of their master, and have scarcely any positive security, either for their properties or their lives'. The equipment or cattle received from the lord was not gifted but lent. The nobleman could take it away from a peasant if he wished to and thus precipitate his ruin (Janicki, 2021: 107-110). Apparently not knowing it, Wraxall accepted these explanations at face value, but nonetheless he did not consider them sufficient to justify the social system existing in Poland:

Admitting however all their [above quoted arguments'] force, they only prove how insufficient is every private or partial emancipation, in order to rouse and animate man, unless accompanied with the solid blessing of civil and political liberty. While the Polish people are altogether strangers to that distinction, they can never rise to their proper rank in society, not be justly accounted other than slaves. (Wraxall, 1806b: 133)



The author agitates here in favor of radical emancipation. What he means is that access to assets is not enough to extricate people from their civilizational backwardness. Emancipation, he says, must be extensive and has to extend to their civil and political rights, which, being treated like farm equipment and unable to rise in social hierarchy, they obviously did not have. Wraxall, perhaps because of the excuses offered by the Poles, is therefore a rigorous proponent of a radical path towards emancipation. Wraxall's opinion seems to be based on the conviction that a lord's aid such as this, if not entirely successful in producing a desirable outcome, only fuels the belief in their incapacity to be free and provides a rationale for their continuing exploitation.

Thanks to the inquiries of William Coxe, it might seem that Wraxall's suppositions were in part verified empirically, and the British public learned of their veracity. Coxe cites an experiment carried out by magnate Andrzej Zamoyski, who, he relates, freed some of his serfs and replaced corvée with rent payment. Having received relevant information from Józef Wybicki (who, in turn, had made research on the results of the reform personally and was invited to Zamoyski's estates by the owner himself [Borkowski, 2017: 123]), Coxe (1787: 196-198) says the reforms resulted in a substantial increase in the birth rate and the revenue generated by the villages, as well as peasants' respect for the law, self-reliance, and a feeling of responsibility for their labor and work environment. The recently bestowed freedom is said to have incentivized them to become more independent and determined to fend for themselves as they became responsible for themselves. Some of these statements are actually put forward in Józef Wybicki's *Listy Patriotyczne* [Patriotic Letters] (1955: 116, 174-176) (note 3). One of the remarks invoked by Coxe, allegedly made by an emancipated peasant about the newly gained incentives motivating them to work diligently, is identical with a remark also quoted by Stanisław Staszic, an admirer of Zamoyski's reforms (cf. Coxe, 1787: 197-198 and Staszic, 1816: 16) (note 4). Unfortunately, referencing Coxe two decades later, George Burnett bluntly contradicts this more than favorable outcome on the authority of the reformer's son—a short article on Burnett's account on the subject and his opinion on peasant reform was published in a journal issued by the Museum of Biezuń (the Biezuń estates were the ones that Coxe and Burnett were referring to) (Krzyżewski, 2017). It does not, however, detract from Coxe's reliability as an author. Although Coxe is not entirely correct while saying that peasants were freed (serfdom was diluted but not abolished), the reform seems to have yielded the expected results before the partition: the rent was generally paid on time, the lord did not have to worry about profits, his involvement in the administration was not burdensome, the population grew, trade blossomed, and people were content (Orłowski, 1967: 129-131)—they still lived, obviously, without any political rights, at that time not even advocated by Wybicki (1955: 91-92). Following the partition, however, the troubles began to accumulate. The villages were sacked by the Prussians, left by Zamoyski, and leased. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they generated only a fraction of the profit they were supposed to yield (Orłowski, 1967: 133). Coxe himself seems to have believed that the active participation of a lord in the process of transition

was necessary for success, and so it did not suffice to emancipate the peasants and rest on laurels.

Prince Stanislaus, nephew to the king of Poland, [...] has enfranchised four villages not far from Warsaw, in which he has not only emancipated the peasants from their slavery, but even condescends to direct their affairs. [...] [H]e explained to me, in the most satisfactory manner, that the grant of freedom was no less advantageous to the lord than to the peasant, provided the former is willing to superintend their conduct for a few years, and to put them in a way of acting for themselves; for such is the ignorance of the generality among the boors, arising from their abject slavery, and so little have they been usually left their own discretion, that few at first are equal to the proper management of a farm. (Coxe, 1787: 199-200)

The author appears to have been convinced that peasants given freedom and left to their own devices would not naturally transition into rational husbandmen because of years of slavery. The proper path to follow, then, should be to ease them into the new role under appropriate guidance.

There is, however, one more account that seems to corroborate the beneficial prospects of emancipation. While travelling through the Russian-Polish borderlands during the tumultuous years of Bar confederation prior to the first partition, Marshall noticed interesting developments. Polish peasants living near the border on the lands then under Russian military control did not seek to stay in Poland but insisted on being allowed to settle in Russia and even rushed to flee whenever an opportunity arose. This, he explains, was understandable on the account of slavery ‘in the utmost extent of the word’ that they were subjected to at the hands of their Polish lords at the time of peace (Marshall, 1773: 188). He even had the good fortune to inspect a Polish peasant colony in Russia (upon Volga). Marshall’s (1773: 154-155, 158) description is as follows: the colony was partly financed by the Empress; emigrant families are said to have been provided with cattle and equipment to start a settlement, planted as tenant-freeholders, and allowed to multiply their belongings in return for rent payments after a five-year exemption period (foreign colonists were indeed granted privileges of this kind in Russia under Empress Catherine [Blume, 1961: 482-483]). The result of this undertaking entirely contradicts the accusation of Polish peasants being suffused with ‘national and characteristic indolence, drunkenness, and want of industry or exertion’ attributed to the bulk of them by Wraaxall’s serfdom-defending interlocutors. The whole colony ‘pleased me [Marshall] better, than any thing [sic] I had seen in Russia.’ The author describes the effects:

The farms were all under culture, and subdivided by the people themselves. [...] Their farms were in general in good order, and they seemed to be extremely diligent and industrious in their management. Some of them had vastly increased their cattle, keeping as many, as they

pleased on the adjoining forest: some had more than twenty sheep, ten cows, and six oxen; but they had greatly increased their farms, which the Empress allows, provided the former portion is all in culture. They all seemed to be perfectly happy, being entirely free from all oppression by being on the lands of the crown; and there is no doubt, but they will in time yield a fine revenue, without any severity being employed. (Marshall, 1773: 154-155)

Elsewhere, Marshall also notes that the Poles under the imperial jurisdiction were eager to switch to the system of enclosures, whose benefits they were aware of (*ibid.*: 193). The recipe for amelioration, Marshall concludes on the basis of his observations in the colony described above, was to grant freedom to peasants and to allow them to work safely in the knowledge of the security of their rights and possessions, which means that greater freedoms had to be granted by those lords' they were directly subordinate to (*ibid.*: 156). Marshall's beliefs are thus consistent. In his opinion, all it took to improve the well-being of peasants and generate more profits for landowners was to allow for more liberty and security of property among serfs. The change, however, had to be enforced in practice, and the peasants needed to have actual independence. The problem, therefore, lay in the attitude of the lords and their encroachments.

Yet another traveler whose account does not support the idea that indolence was a natural characteristic of a Polish peasant is Williams. While he does admit that they were apathetic, he considers this fault to be a direct consequence of their social and legal standing: 'the wretchedness of their situation makes them indolent and careless about life, as they have reflection enough to perceive that coarse food and raiment are all they can expect in this life' (Williams, 1777: 642). Williams (*ibid.*) then goes on to explain that as slaves they had no incentive to develop their talents and work efficiently, finally concluding that 'two millions of people, who would work moderately on the cultivation of the ground, and were to enjoy the fruits of their labour, would do as much as six millions of the Poles in their present situation' (*ibid.*: 649).

One additional facet worth mentioning is Coxe's interest in the impact serfdom had on peasants' self-esteem, depriving them of their human dignity and teaching them self-abasing social manners. Juxtaposing their conduct with Swiss peasants, he claims that such degradation was neither an inherent feature of peasantry nor was it in any way necessary; its development was caused by nothing else but purely external conditioning—brutal servitude they were forcefully subjected to (Coxe, 1787: 347).

What testifies to Coxe's genuine sympathy with peasantry and his revulsion against serfdom is his assessment of Casimir the Great, whom he considers to be one of the greatest monarchs ever. Although he admits that the king had numerous claims to greatness, the one he admires most was his dedication to mitigating the hardships of peasantry, which, Coxe relays, earned him the nickname of 'the king of the peasants'—'perhaps the most noble appellation that ever was bestowed upon a sovereign' (*ibid.*: 223, 226). Coxe was not the only author to invoke this monarch's concern for the wellbeing of the peasantry and express his admiration.

Casimir the Great was indeed described as such, but, ironically, among the Polish nobility that made use of this title, it was not a compliment (Wilamowski, Wnęk and Zybilkiewicz, 1998: 59), as Williams (1777: 249) is well aware.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The portrayal of peasantry is unequivocal: They were oppressed slaves struggling in humiliating destitution. It could be argued that slavery is not the best term to use to refer to the condition of Polish peasants. Unlike chattel slaves, Polish serfs were not auctioned off to the highest bidders at marketplaces, and, at least in theory, there were customs that they could cite in their defense against the encroachments of their masters. Nevertheless, it sometimes happened that they were gifted or even sold individually (separately from their farmsteads), but such transactions seem to have been rare or disguised as donations (Leszczyński, 2020: 157-160; Janicki, 2021: 272). In Russia, for contrast, they were sold openly at markets (Szpoper, 2013: 30), which may explain why they are never mentioned by the travelers as victims of human trafficking, although it is emphasized that they were in fact farmstead tools bought and sold together with the land. As noted, peasants living in noble private domains were largely not even protected by public law, so the associations between slavery and serfdom in Poland are not groundless.

The authors' strong reactions and strident language may be explained by the fact that serfdom in England had been nonexistent for two centuries, since the reign of Elisabeth I (Lyon, 2016: 227). What is more, although serfdom was by no means a phenomenon confined to eastern Europe, in France and Germany (European countries the British were more familiar with), it was less severe. In general, the further west the British cast their gaze, the more diluted serfdom was. Unlike in Poland, it was common there for serfs to be able to appeal to state authorities if a conflict arose between them and landowners (Leszczyński, 2020: 235). Thus, it cannot be surprising that the social relations in Poland-Lithuania (or Russia) seemed particularly shocking and inspired such a strident language. On the other hand, even Britain was not without sin. Scottish miners continued in serfdom up until 1799 (Watson, 1985: 516), and there were about ten to fifteen thousand black chattel slaves residing in England, who were manumitted only in 1772 thanks to Lord Mansfield's court ruling (and even this date is controversial; some scholars believe that the ruling did not abolish slavery but simply limited the power of an owner over his slave) (Cotter, 1994: n. p.).

The critical attitudes presented by the authors seem to have two different sources. First, they were motivated by humanitarian reflections: a peasant was seen as a person whose sheer human dignity was violated by the severity of his serfdom. Secondly, such an organization of labor was believed to be economically inefficient, depriving an enserfed peasant of any incentive to apply himself to his work, thus in fact impoverishing the whole country. Social relations such as those were thought of as anachronistic vestiges of feudalism.

## NOTES

- Note 1. A starost was a royal official at the local level (a representative of the government), a holder of lands comprising the territory of the *starostwo* assigned to him. *Starostwa* (plural) were Crown lands supposed to be granted for life as a reward (source of income) for distinguished service or, after 1774, leased for fifty years. Starosts administered the lands and collected the money generated by them, paying only a tax to the budget (Gloger, 1978: 272-273; Augustyniak, 2015: 91-92).
- Note 2. The problems pointed out by Coxe are also emphasized by Wybicki (1955: 185-186), who most likely inspired Coxe's criticism. The inefficiency of the law was not difficult to predict because a similar regulation, without much effect, had already been introduced in Lithuania (Korzon, 1897: 358-361).
- Note 3. Coxe quotes the exact same numbers relating to the birth rate as Wybicki in his *Listy patriotyczne* [Patriotic Letters], with one exception. In the last period mentioned, Coxe gives the number of people born 585, while Wybicki gives 535. This does not affect his line of reasoning, though, and it is also likely that it might have been an editor's mistake or a typo. In his narrative, Coxe, informed by 'a person who has visited the abbe's estate at Pawlowo', also mentions the examples of successful emancipation carried out by Joachim Chreptowicz and abbe Paweł K. Brzostowski; again, the informant, now not revealed by name, seems to be Wybicki. Stanisław Poniatowski's (nephew to the king) reforms (as the diarist says, inspired by the English example) are not overlooked either (cf. Coxe, 1787: 198-199 and Wybicki, 1955: 178-180). Wybicki himself was aware of Coxe's references to his publication. In his memoirs, Wybicki (1881: 106) says that an 'Englishman Kok [sic.]' used his remarks on the peasantry from *Listy* in his travelogue. Unfortunately, the misspelled surname is the only clue concerning the identity of the traveler. According to Opalek (1955: cxiv), the mysterious Kok was James Cook, but, in the light of the information above, it seems Wybicki meant William Coxe.
- Note 4. Each publication in Staszic's *Dziela* [Works] has a separate pagination.

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