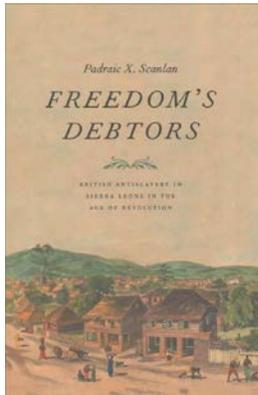


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Scanlan, Paidric X. *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution*. New Haven: Yale, 2017. 299 p. ISBN# 9780300217445. Hardcover. \$40/£30.61.



When Great Britain abolished its slave trade in 1807, it also, in a time of war, took on the task of interdicting the slave trade of other nations. Sierra Leone became a center of Britain's anti-slave trade efforts. Sierra Leone was founded in 1787 as an anti-slavery experiment by British anti-slavery activists. The first effort to establish a foothold in West Africa collapsed under pressure of attacks by its native neighbors and from starvation. Reconstituted in 1792 as a free colony, Freetown in Sierra Leone, was founded to hold "Black Loyalists" who had been resettled in Nova Scotia after the end of the American War of Independence.

An estimated 3,000 free Negroes were transported to Nova Scotia, as well as some 1,300 slave brought by white Loyalists. Poor harvests, a famine in 1789 (the province became known as "Nova Scarcity"), racial prejudice and oppositions from white laborers whose wages were undercut by the poorly-paid Blacks, led to disillusionment among the free Blacks. White Loyalists, with their slaves, could and did return to the United States, an option not available to free Blacks. (Grant, 255-256)

Petitions by the Nova Scotian Blacks to the British government, and inaction by Nova Scotian officials, led to an offer by the Sierra Leone Company in 1791 to relocate willing free Blacks to Sierra Leone. A fleet of 1,190 persons sailed to Sierra Leone in Jan. 1792. A second emigration to Freetown, from Jamaica, of Trelawny Maroons exiled to Nova Scotia following a rebellion on the Caribbean island, took place in 1800. Neither group had prospered in cold and rugged North America. (Grant, 258-9) British officials found that the Black Loyalists were "tainted" with republican sentiments. William Wilberforce complained that the "Nova Scotians" were "as thorough Jacobins as if they had been trained and educated in Paris. (p. 64) The dream that the freemen and former slaves would become "a race of active cultivators attached to the soil...a free and hardy peasantry" never became a reality. (p. 75)

On the other hand, when Freetown was attacked by French sailors in 1794, one of the "Nova Scotians" wrote that the attack was a divine punishment on the "Barbarous Task Masters" of the Company. Having escaped their slave masters, the Blacks were not willing to work on plantations for their wage masters. The Company saw the Maroons as

an asset for controlling the free Blacks from Nova Scotia. When a group of “Nova Scotians” rose up in rebellion against the Company, the Company used the Maroons to hunt down and capture the Rebels. The Company then requested a Royal Navy presence to guard Freetown against a possible Maroon uprising. Later, British officials saw the freed “Prize Negroes” as possible protection against the Maroons.

Freetown was no more successful than the earlier Sierra Leone experiment in creating a colony of self-sufficient freemen working profitable plantations. The Company had hoped to make a profit by trading in African commodities – commodities cultivated or produced by slave labor in the interior and transported by slaves. Prices for produce produced by the settlers was undercut by that grown by slaves in the inland and the Company blamed the agricultural problems caused by the poor soil on the settlers’ laziness. The directors of the Company saw militarization of the colony as a further opportunity to tap into government funding. In 1800 the colony received a detachment of the Royal African Corps, a convict regiment based at Gorée, and in 1804 the new governor was a Royal Navy captain.

Becoming a Crown Colony coincided with the outlawing of the slave trade, giving the Company increased opportunities for economic gain, as well as government influence. Zachary Macauley, a leading member of the “Clapham Sect,” the evangelical antislavery society behind the Sierra Leone Company, wrote, I have *no doubt* the Government will be disposed to adopt almost any plan...provided we will but save them the trouble of thinking.” (p. 63)

Sierra Leone became a port for “captured negroes” rescued from slave ships (other ports included the Cape Colony, Barbados, Trinidad, Mauritius and Zanzibar). The so-called “Prize Negroes” were a source of “fungible labor”, growing crops, constructing buildings and roads, and fighting Britain enemies. Anti-slavery became a profitable source of capital for the activists in Britain. In 1808 the London directors of the Sierra Leone Company managed to divest itself of responsibility and Sierra Leone became the first British West African Crown Colony.

A Vice-Admiralty Court was set up at Freetown for Navy ships pursuing the slave traders, providing a profitable trade in captured goods and freed slaves and in prize money for the Royal Navy. The judges of the court were usually merchants whose interest was moving captured property from the Court to the market. The Court had the power to condemn captured slave ships and the property on board, including the slaves. Condemned “Prize Negroes” became the property of the Crown, which then refused exercise the its right to own slaves, making the “captured Negroes,” in effect, property without owners. Between 1808 and 1823 at least 14,500 individuals were liberated and repatriated to Sierra Leone.

Enough money could be made by seizing slave ships that government officials were competing with each other, as well as with the Royal Navy in trying to take prizes. The 1811 Slave Trade Felony Act specifically authorized colonial officials to buy condemned slave ship for the purpose of capturing even more slavers. So many slaves were freed that the demand for labor in the colony dried up. After the end of the Napoleonic Wars anti-slave trade activity continued but the profitability of the system fell off markedly, as did the demand for freed slaves both by the military and as labor. With the peace the Royal Navy had to be more circumspect about what ships were stopped. The Admiralty Court came under increased scrutiny. A deal with Spain and Portugal halted the slave trade in the North Atlantic, but Britain had to pay thousands of pounds in “restitution” for questionable actions during the war. Multinational courts of mixed compositions now heard slave trade cases.

The first Africans freed from captured slave ships after the passage of the ant-slave trade act were bound as “apprentices” to Europeans and favored freemen (at \$20 a head). An Order-in-Council of March 1808 stipulated that slaves taken from captured slavers were to be condemned as “contraband” and enlisted in the military or bound as apprentices. “Prize Negroes” were indentured to the Company. Thirty were formed into a “military corps” named, significantly, “the Corps of Labourers.” Eleven of the “Corps” quickly deserted and twenty of the other “apprentices” also absconded. Government officials and anti-slavery reformers “never conceived of a post-emancipation society where former slaves were not put to British use” either as soldiers, colonists or pioneers. (p.90)

Prior to the Slave Trade Act, from 1795 to 1807 at least 19,000 slaves were bought by the British government for military service. The Army was the largest purchaser of slaves in the West Indies. When the Slave Trade Act was passed, the Army ordered the purchase of some two to four thousand slaves before the Act could go into effect. (p.124) After the passage of the Act, some freed slaves were enrolled in the ranks of the Royal African Corps for life. The British West India Regiments also recruited from the “captured Negroes” of Freetown, competing with the Royal African Corps for the best recruits.

The government finally organized a unit for dealing with the numbers of freed slaves known as the Liberated African Department, which transferred their charges to villages created to “civilize” them. The villages were managed by missionaries, and as can be expected some were more humane than others. Village superintendents appointed some trusted former slaves to serve as overseers and punished those “Liberated Africans” who did not work in the fields. Agricultural produce from the villages was purchased by the government, often at low prices. Villagers were expected to grow rice, even though many villagers preferred to other traditional products, such as cassava,

yams, okra, coconuts, bananas, etc. Those not assigned to working on farms, were tasked with public works, as often without wages as with. When the government was distributing rations the former slaves stayed in their villages, but when rations ended many moved on.

Those who were converted to Christianity were rewarded both spiritually and materially. The converts, who were carefully vetted by the missionaries to weed out those feigning conversion before being accepted in the flocks, were considered among the “civilized,” while the “uncivilized” need to be kept in “due order.” Attempts in Sierra Leone to create a large-scale plantation economy with free labor failed. Thomas Carlyle raised the specter of lazy, free black of the Empire eating “pumpkins cheap as grass” while the plantations grew fallow for lack of labor. A 1840s book declared “that Sierra Leone has failed to realize all the expectations which were at one time indulged.” (p.216) Once the war with France ended, so did the urgency of projecting a vision of British virtue.

Scanlan sometimes jumps around in time in telling the story of Sierra Leone, but perhaps this is necessary in bringing the various threads of the story together. *Freedom's Debtors* is well-sourced and well-indexed. While histories of anti-slave trade justifiably concentrate on the politics of the anti-slave trade movement and exciting tales of the fight against slavers, what happened to the slaves after they were “freed” is often given short shrift.

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