

Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia

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The past year has seen an embarrassment of riches for those interested in the history of slavery and abolition. The complexity of connections between the British Empire and anti-slavery have come to the fore-front, while in the US the cinema releases of *Lincoln* and *Django Unchained* have launched a new popular interest in the legacies of North American slavery and abolition.⁽¹⁾ A new volume on the origins of international law in the abolition of the slave trade highlighted the transnational nature not only of the humanitarian movements, but also of government activity and pro-slavery lobbying.⁽²⁾ The history of the abolition movement has benefited from the ‘new imperial history’ approach, which takes empire and colony in a ‘single analytical field’, first proposed in 1951 by George Balandier, but elucidated and popularised in recent years by Catherine Hall, Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, among others. These ‘new imperial histories’ have intersected with some of the preoccupations of identity politics, producing interest in how ideas about race, class and gender were constructed in empires.

The publication of *Abolition and Empire*, which takes a comparative approach to the colonisation schemes of the 19th-century British and American abolition movements, is therefore timely, and this detailed archival study fits well into this landscape. The broad topic of the study, anti-slavery colonisation, is not a new one but, as Bronwen Everill argues, the entanglements and competition between Liberia and Sierra Leone have gone almost unmentioned – despite their geographical and political proximity. Her main argument for re-examining their 19th-century history together is the importance of the interaction between the two settlements as well as their impact on metropolitan politics. Neither settlement fits comfortably into the traditional imperial conceptual framework: Sierra Leone ‘has frequently been treated as an anomaly’, while Liberia ‘is generally rejected outright’ (p. 7). These fascinating questions: why these colonies have

been left out of imperialist narratives and how (or indeed, if) they fit into the story of empire are, necessarily, glossed over in one page. Further study of these theoretical questions would add greatly to our understanding of the role of the 'humanitarian interventions' like these colonies in African history.

The main research questions of the study reflect the interest of the past two decades in reworking imperial history to demonstrate the impact of the colony on metropole (p. 8).⁽³⁾ Everill's questions add complexity and nuance to the idea of a monolithic anti-slavery movement, asking how Sierra Leone and Liberia served to fracture consensus and intensify competition amongst anti-slavery networks. These questions are served well by the comparative approach, which emphasises the interaction between the colonies. The second approach explicitly laid out in the introduction is Frederick Cooper's suggestion to use processes of 'identification', rather than the more flat and worn-out concept of identity, to explain how the settlers shaped their respective colonies.⁽⁴⁾ More detail on this section would have been appreciated – since Cooper and Brubaker's article first came out, academics have tiptoed around the minefield of identity, but more precision is needed about what 'processes of identification' means and how it substantially differs from simply analysing identity.

In terms of source material, students and researchers of West African colonisation will find much useful guidance. The book is based on the author's PhD thesis, with some minor changes to the content and structure. The bibliography reflects her empirical approach, and while the secondary literature list may seem less weighty than comparable volumes, the four-country archival range and extensive use of published primary material more than compensate. Her archival work took advantage of the wide range of resources available in American archives on Liberia, to balance the sad lack of archival material in Liberia itself following the civil war. Both local newspapers and letter collections are also used to give an idea of settlers' views. The wide range of archives consulted reflects the diversity of actors and contexts touched on throughout the work, which ranges freely from Freetown to Washington, from Monrovia to London and even as far as Texas. The difficulty in this kind of wide-ranging approach lies in the danger of obscuring or eliding elements of resistance, co-operation and interaction between different groups within the settlements, and Everill takes time to make it clear that she focuses solely on those who 'do engage with the imperial government'. This is particularly pertinent in the case of Liberia, where relations between settlers and local communities were especially fraught in ways that had long-lasting repercussions. However, this declaration left the question hanging of what happened with those who, like West Indian Pan-Africanist Edward Blyden, rejected the Western models of the colonisers and sought a more 'authentic' African lifestyle or experience.

The work is divided into two sections: 'Foundations' and 'Interactions'. The first three chapters detail the make-up of 'Transatlantic anti-slavery networks', the emergence of 'An African middle class' in the early colonial history of Sierra Leone and the first, less directed, emergence of settlements of 'Americans in Africa' in Liberia. The second section is structured more ambitiously. Its four chapters each deal with both colonies on the themes of 'The abolitionist propaganda war', 'Slave trade interventionism', 'Commercial rivalry and Liberian independence' and 'Arguments for colonial expansion'. These two sections together cover the period from 1822 to 1861 in detail. A brief epilogue looks forward to '1861 and beyond', and lays out some future research questions and potential areas of study.

The first chapter on 'Transatlantic anti-slavery networks' sets the scene for the rest of the book by highlighting the conflicts between the British and American projects in West Africa. She emphasises the economic threat a second colony posed to Freetown, though the level of antipathy towards the American settlers seems extraordinary, for example, she quotes the *Sierra Leone Gazette* as early as 1822 as condemning the 'fatuity' of both the settlers and their American sponsors (p. 29). Further conflicts emerged from religious, organisational and personal differences between the two competing networks. The strange geographic proximity of the two colonies, Everill argues, is due both to this rivalry and pre-existing networks of knowledge and trade.

The next two chapters sketch a picture of settler life in the early period of each colony. Chapter two, 'An African middle class' largely confirms, in great archival detail, the image of the Freetown Afro-Victorian

described by Christopher Fyfe and others. She defines this emerging 'Sierra Leonean identity' as 'pulling together elements of British identity with an amalgamation of West and Central African traditions' (p. 33–4). At the same time, the Freetown colonists are characterised as developing 'a hardening of moral expectations linked to a fear of "going native"' (p. 41). This fear, surely exacerbated by the shared skin colour of the settlers and the indigenous population, led Freetonians to an obsession with the outward performance of 'Britishness', which Everill demonstrates through the use of material culture evidence. The British imperial values of 'civilisation, Christianity and commerce' were then institutionalised and passed on to new settlers through a well-organised and near-seamless educational system and used to apply pressure to the British government.

The third chapter, 'Americans in Africa', applies the same kind of institutional and material culture analysis to settler society in Liberia. Unfortunately, due to the relative paucity of sources in comparison, the coverage is necessarily less detailed. The chapter also emphasises the contingent and ad-hoc nature of many of the Liberian assertions of cultural difference in Africa – most strikingly in the dearth of colony-wide organisation of education or missionary work. From the first section, then, the reader gets an impression of two settlements differing not only in metropolitan goals, but also in the incipient settler culture and society. Later, in the concluding paragraph, Everill refers to these as 'cultures of modernity that were exported and invented in colonial settings' (p. 180).

Part two of the volume launches into the more detailed comparative work. 'The abolitionist propaganda war' concentrates on the metropolitan anti-slavery movements, emphasising the relative strength and cohesion in Britain, compared with the fracturing of opinion in the United States. American anti-slavery activists were forced to confront the risks of abolition in their own territory, while the British, more removed from the practice of slavery, were able to grant more effective support to the settlement. The failure of the American Colonisation Society (ACS) to truly comprehend the regional differences within the United States provides an insight into the unevenness, not just of imperial spaces, but within the metropole itself. This is mirrored, though less sharply by the differences with the UK, between English, Scottish and Irish concerns.

Chapter five, 'Slave trade interventionism', launches from the successes of 1838, the abolition of apprenticeships in the West Indies for the British anti-slavery movement and the ratification of a new constitution and unification of most state colonies in Liberia. The early 1840s also marked a period of renewed interest in slavery and the slave trade in Africa and the peak of Anglo-American co-operation. The curious case of the *Amistad* forms a central part of this chapter. Everill rightly observes how impotent the ACS appears to be when the Mende captives from the *Amistad* are re-settled in Sierra Leone, instead of Liberia. This resettlement accompanied the founding of the Mende Mission, later taken over by the American Missionary Association. The chapter concludes with a seeming contradiction, that anti-slavery activity on the ground was revived 'as a result of the negative public perceptions of their efficacy' (p. 127). This renewed vigour and energy would ultimately lead to increased tensions between the colonies.

In 'Commercial rivalry and Liberian independence', Everill shows how the diverted focus away from African intervention on the part of metropolitan actors, led to new, vibrant roles for settler leaders. From the outset, anti-slavery colonies were intended to demonstrate the benefits of 'legitimate trade' *with* Africans over the evil trade *in* Africans. The proximity and overlapping aims of Liberia and Sierra Leone naturally led to conflicts between traders. However, while Sierra Leoneans remained firmly enmeshed in the networks of the British Empire, attending British universities, working up through the ranks of British trading houses and serving ably in the Colonial Service; Liberians faced a period of rejection from the United States, prompted by a perceived lack of strategic value and exacerbated by growing racial tensions. This slow dis-coupling was officially cemented by the Liberian declaration of independence in 1847. Again, the key theme of the work is clear, the development of distinct settler cultures in Sierra Leone and Liberia had a profound impact on the development of the colonies, their relationships with their respective metropolises and practices of anti-slavery.

The final substantive chapter, 'Arguments for colonial expansion', highlights the extraordinary efforts of Sierra Leoneans to expand the British imperial remit in West Africa. These expansionist and imperialist

visions were accompanied by even more organised and strenuous demands for rights and privileges within the colony. Meanwhile, in Liberia, the declaration of independence seems to have marked continuity rather than dramatic change. While Liberian and American missionaries also embarked on expansionist missions in surrounding areas, the Liberian government was stymied by its lack of formal recognition on the international level. Again, the complex rivalries and divergent interests in the colonisation movement in the US would result in a lack of effective support for the settlers. Only in their trade efforts did they receive backing from Americans and, in that, they often lost out to British competition.

In general, section two offers a strong argument regarding the diverging fortunes of Sierra Leone and Liberia, which manages to incorporate metropolitan debate as well as the anti-slavery practice and settler activities in West Africa. Everill's overall thesis, that a comparison of Liberia and Sierra Leone reveals important lessons about the relationship between imperialism and humanitarianism, is convincingly argued and this work not only builds on the current revival of interest in the settlements but also provides a launch for further investigations into humanitarian intervention, civilising missions and the role of empire in the history of the African diaspora. The power of this argument, though, may overwhelm some of the interesting and somewhat contradictory detail of the period. While, in the epilogue, she emphasises the role of 'civilisation, commerce and Christianity' as the metaphorical tools of imperialism for both Sierra Leone and Liberia, the evidence suggests that not only was Christianity a 'broad church' but the role of Islam and animist religions also figured prominently. The promotion of Islam, particularly, would form an interesting thread with which to link these histories to later Pan-African discourses. Civilisation is also an umbrella term, and further attention to the different meanings of the word is needed. Reading the work, the reader also might wish to add 'education' to the tool-box. New work on the history of transfers of knowledge about education, child-care and training for work and domestic labour could provide useful insights.

The work touches on a number of areas of concern to students and teachers of history. It adds to a growing historical literature on humanitarian intervention in Africa, sheds new light on the early expansion of Western colonial powers and, rightfully, focuses attention on settler communities that existed outside the standard mould of white, elite adventurers. For those reasons it would work perfectly as a course reading on imperial history and the history of humanitarianism as well as in West African studies. For students of African history audience, though, it would need to be carefully contextualised in the broader historiography of Sierra Leone and Liberia, to balance the emphasis on settlers at the expense of indigenous inhabitants. Some of the notions of 'hybridity', for example in religious belief, need to be handled with care in order to prevent the presentation of African ideas as an unchanging 'traditional' backdrop to the action in Freetown and Monrovia.

In proposing his co-operative scheme to the enslaved Django in *Django Unchained*, German bounty hunter Dr. King Schulze says, 'On one hand I despise slavery, on the other hand I need your help, if you're not in a position to refuse, all the better.' His words illustrate the, sometimes murky, relationship between humanitarian impulse and selfish expediency. The abolitionist cause in the mid-19th century was no different. So many people's lives were touched by slavery in the Atlantic World, that it comes as no surprise that the motivations and goals of abolitionists were complex and contingent. Breaking down the rigid differentiation between 'humanitarian' and 'imperial' should not mean resorting to apologetics of empire, but rather doing the most important work of history, explaining seeming contradictions and restoring the vibrant detail of the past. *Abolition and Empire* makes precisely this type of intervention, and illuminates 'the ideological, nationalistic, and practical forces that precluded international co-operation' (p. 180) on the universal moral imperative to end slavery and the slave trade.

Notes

1. On the British Empire, for example, R. L. Watson, *Slave Emancipation and Racial Attitudes in Nineteenth-Century South Africa* (Cambridge, 2012); Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (London, 2012); *The New York Times* editorial, 'Movies in the Age of Obama' by A. O. Scott and Manohla Dargis, 16 January 2013, places both movies into the

context of recent film releases.[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Jenny S. Martinez, *The Slave Trade and the Origins of International Human Rights Law*, (Oxford, 2012).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Reviews of some of the collected works exemplifying this trend are available on this site: Professor Barbara Bush, 'Review of *The New Imperial Histories Reader*' (review no. 989) <<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/989> [2]> [accessed 30 January 2013]; Dr Elizabeth Buettner, 'Review of *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A Reader*' (review no. 235) <<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/235> [3]> [accessed 30 January 2013].[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA, 2012), 'Identity'.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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