

Grounded Histories of British Antislavery in Sierra Leone

Sandra den Otter

Volume 30, numéro 2, 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074388ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074388ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

den Otter, S. (2019). Grounded Histories of British Antislavery in Sierra Leone. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 30(2), 235–239. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074388ar>

Résumé de l'article

Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution (2017) de Padriac Scanlan est l'occasion d'examiner les premières décennies de l'antiesclavagisme du point de vue de la côte occidentale de l'Afrique et de contester les récits triomphalistes de l'abolition. L'histoire de la Sierra Leone démontre que la rhétorique de la liberté et l'élan donné par l'abolition de l'esclavage étaient étroitement liés à la détermination inébranlable de générer des profits et des opportunités commerciales. Les élites métropolitaines et coloniales ont continué à tirer profit de l'esclavage bien après son abolition. Une histoire des idées, tant humanitaires que juridiques, est une méthodologie précieuse pour explorer l'histoire de l'antiesclavagisme. Les tentatives incohérentes, fluides et décousues de mise en pratique de l'antiesclavagisme à un niveau très local mettent en évidence les hauts et les bas, les continuités et les discontinuités, ainsi que les interventions aléatoires dans l'élaboration d'une idéologie vernaculaire de l'antiesclavagisme et de la mission civilisatrice.

Grounded Histories of British Antislavery in Sierra Leone

SANDRA DEN OTTER

Abstract

Padriac Scanlan's Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution (2017) provides an opportunity to examine the early decades of antislavery from the vantage point of the western coast of Africa and to challenge triumphalist narratives of abolition. The history of Sierra Leone demonstrates that intertwined with the rhetoric of liberty and uplift in the abolition of slavery was a unflinching determination to generate profit and commercial opportunity. Metropolitan and colonial elites continued to profit from slavery long after its abolition. A grounded history of ideas, both of humanitarian and legal ideas, is a valuable methodology to explore the history of antislavery. The inchoate, fluid and disordered attempts to put antislavery into practice at a very local level point to the fits and starts, continuities and discontinuities, and haphazard interventions in the making of a vernacular ideology of the antislavery and the civilizing mission.

Résumé

Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution (2017) de Padriac Scanlan est l'occasion d'examiner les premières décennies de l'antiesclavagisme du point de vue de la côte occidentale de l'Afrique et de contester les récits triomphalistes de l'abolition. L'histoire de la Sierra Leone démontre que la rhétorique de la liberté et l'élan donné par l'abolition de l'esclavage étaient étroitement liés à la détermination inébranlable de générer des profits et des opportunités commerciales. Les élites métropolitaines et coloniales ont continué à tirer profit de l'esclavage bien après son abolition. Une histoire des idées, tant humanitaires que juridiques, est une méthodologie précieuse pour explorer l'histoire de l'antiesclavagisme. Les tentatives incohérentes, fluides et déconçues de mise en pratique de l'antiesclavagisme à un niveau très local mettent en évidence les hauts et les bas, les continuités et les discontinuités, ainsi que les interventions aléatoires dans l'élaboration d'une idéologie vernaculaire de l'antiesclavagisme et de la mission civilisatrice.

In this compelling and important monograph, historian Padraic Scanlan offers a vivid analysis of the end of the slave trade from the perspective of the Crown Colony of Sierra Leone. Founded in 1787

to re-settle former slaves, Sierra Leone was designed to demonstrate the virtue and productivity of free labour. The settlement initially was small, primarily populated by black loyalists from Nova Scotia, Jamaica, and Britain, but after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, a much larger and diverse migration of African peoples, including formerly enslaved, coerced migrants and captives, settled in “the Province of Freedom” across the nineteenth century.²³ The small colony, Scanlan argues, marked both a rupture and the beginning of a new form of empire. As Scanlan writes: “The end of the slave trade in Sierra Leone became an invitation to imagine a new kind of empire in Africa, based on commerce in African commodities rather than enslaved people, and firmly rooted in the righteous rhetoric of anti-slavery.”²⁴ Scanlan’s history of Sierra Leone in the early decades of the nineteenth century demonstrates that intertwined with the rhetoric of liberty and uplift was an unflinching determination to generate profit and commercial opportunity to demonstrate the viability of free labour. Scanlan concludes, “the acquisitive values of capitalism underwrote both slavery and anti-slavery.”²⁵

The book is especially effective and particularly suggestive in three broad areas. First, Scanlan’s study adds its voice to challenges of the triumphal humanitarian celebration of anti-slavery and the British defence of liberty. Like Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, and others who have investigated compensation to British slave-owners in their *Legacies of Slave-Ownership* project have demonstrated for a slightly later period, metropolitan and colonial elites continued to profit from slavery long after its abolition.²⁶ The language of protection, which was used to assert control over local polities and to curb evasion of anti-slave trade dictates, led to a simultaneous extension of state authority and expansion into new territories and regions for which Britain had no claim. The invocation of protection was used to legitimate claims that Britain enjoyed the right to define and act on despotism globally.

Scanlan brings a new dimension to our understanding of this intersection of moral argument and economic reform by treating with perceptive detail the commercial quotidian activities of the colony, identifying the ways in which colonial officers, Freetown merchants, and anti-slavery crusaders profited on the end of the slave trade and how trade in key commodities like rice, kola, and cattle depended on the inland and coastal circuits used by slaver syndicates. Historian Catherine Hall has described Sierra Leone as “a new imperial exper-

iment, a laboratory for the benevolent empire of God” and one of the Empire’s imagined spaces for the production of new societies.”²⁷ Scanlan demonstrates how much the “benevolent empire of God” depended on the mechanics of making money from the profitable end of the slave trade. Especially striking is the book’s third chapter, on the Court of Vice-Admiralty of Sierra Leone. The Court was empowered to emancipate entire slave ships, inventorying the captives on board and seizing the goods and cargo. Scanlan robustly challenges the interpretation that the Court of Vice-Admiralty was an early court of human rights, identifying it instead as a kind of clearing house to recruit former slaves into labour in the military, government, or apprenticeships. Scanlan traces with absorbing forensic detail how colonial officers, notably Governor Zachary Macaulay, amassed substantial personal funds (by way of the family company, Macaulay & Babington), through the Court’s monopoly in restoring captured ships, controlling government contracts and recruiting former slaves into the Royal African Corps. One of Macaulay’s successors in the role of governor, Charles Maxwell, enlisted former slaves into a much-expanded Corps that he then used to suppress dissent, to deploy to the West Indies, and to support an “aggressive, expansionist British empire in Africa.”²⁸

A nuanced final chapter follows Scanlan’s contention that by the end of the Napoleonic War, “‘civilization’ replaced prize money at the heart of the colonial economy.”²⁹ Sierra Leone was a pilot for a new kind of commercial society made on the profits of ending the slave-trade; it was also a pilot for the civilizing mission, animated by missionary appeals from both Britain and America. Anti-slavery plans for West Africa in 1792 had been commercial; in 1822 they were imperial. Scanlan analyzes two key sources: the Register of Liberated, and the statements of disposals to trace Africans working in land clearing, draining swamp, and settling villages that extended control of the colonial government. Scanlan attempts to show how settlers and coerced migrants of African origin and descent resisted or reconfigured this ethos of civilization in his examination of contested land claims and heterogenous religious practices. Both these lines of investigation suggest in shadowy outline the voices of African settlers in Sierra Leone, “just beyond the edge of the archive.”³⁰

Thirdly, the book is valuable for its methodological insights, specifically for its grounded history of ideas, both humanitarian and legal. The book captures the inchoate, flexible, and disordered attempts to

put anti-slavery into practice at a very local level. Particularly valuable is the fluidity that it captures: the fits and starts, continuities and discontinuities, and haphazard interventions in the making of a vernacular ideology of the civilizing mission. Scanlan shows us the chaos and disarray, the deaths or departures of colonial officers who were architects of local plans, and the dissolution of projects until a new person was catapulted in to pick up the threads. Recent scholarship on law and empire has investigated criminal law, religion and gender, and the social practice of law across the empire; the orientation of this book towards the commercial legal regime for anti-slavery and abolition will be influential.³¹ Scanlan constantly reminds his readers of the limitations of archival records, noting, for example, the failure of the colonial records to document the lives of former captives, the scantiness of records of captives enlisted in the Royal Africa Corps, or the limitations of accounting records of the Liberated African Department.³² Scanlan investigates translocal and vernacular forms of the idea of liberty, astutely recognizing that the study of ideology in practice requires a kind of forensic analysis.

There are a few areas that prompt further questions and suggest the need for fuller engagement in future studies. This study decenters metropolitan London and fixes our gaze on Sierra Leone: the familiar figures of the anti-slavery movement in London, including leading members of the Clapham Sect, and their earnest undertakings are shifted away from London to Freetown and to the wider Atlantic World, and here too they continue to dominate the narrative. Further attention to the politics and networks of the Muslim Fula Empire, which Scanlan identifies as key to shaping the economic life of Sierra Leone, to indigenous histories of the East Guinea coast, including regional trading patterns and practices of slave ransoming, would extend and deepen the analysis.³³ A fuller discussion of the impact of local trading partnerships has the potential to enrich Scanlan's insightful exploration of other global interconnections, notably between Sierra Leone and Rhode Island merchants, Quaker activists in Boston, and slave owners in the American south and the West Indies.³⁴ *Freedom's Debtors* offers valuable perspectives on early international law; tracing the multiple jurisdictions of the suppression of the slave-trade, including Muslim politics in the region, has the potential to enrich even further our understanding of international law.

Histories of the intimate and domestic by Emma Rothschild, Anne Perry, and others have changed our understanding of colonial

officials' lives by opening up a space for gendered analyses. One of the central figures in Scanlan's narrative is Zachary Macaulay, who was in the company of Scots who travelled across the empire as colonial administrators. Zachary Macaulay is familiar to readers of Catherine Hall's *Macaulay and Sons* (2012), and reading the two books side by side fills out some of the aspects of Macaulay which otherwise are not so predominant in Scanlan's account. As Hall writes, "colonial families are a key building block of the empire."³⁵ Scanlan touches on these largely hidden life histories. He notes sea captain Edward Columbine's "hollowing by illness and grief" after the death of his wife and daughter in Freetown, shrewdly observing that his emotional storm did not stop Columbine from capturing twelve slave ships. Lastly, we've seen elsewhere across the empire how ideologies of protection led to expansion of state power, and Scanlan's analysis of the Liberated African Department illustrates this expansion at work. As Scanlan's perceptive study demonstrates, Sierra Leone served as an early pilot for a civilizing mission that was rolled out across many different regions of the British Empire with a violent and destructive longevity.

Dr. SANDRA DEN OTTER, a professor in the Department of History at Queen's University, researches and teaches the history of Britain and the world in the 18th to 20th centuries, with particular expertise in the history of ideas of social welfare and inequality, and colonial law and cultures. In addition to her investigation of legal cultures in colonial South Asia, a new research project explores humanitarianism in the 19th-century world. She is the co-editor of the *Journal of British Studies* (Cambridge University Press).

La Dre SANDRA DEN OTTER, professeure au département d'histoire de l'université Queen's, effectue des recherches et enseigne l'histoire de la Grande-Bretagne et du monde du XVIIIe au XXe siècle, avec une expertise particulière dans l'histoire des idées de bien-être social et d'inégalité, ainsi que dans le droit et les cultures coloniales. En plus de sa recherche sur les cultures juridiques dans l'Asie du Sud coloniale, son nouveau projet explore l'humanitarisme dans le monde du XIXe siècle. Elle est coéditrice du *Journal of British Studies* (Cambridge University Press).