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The Abolition of the British Slave Trade Seen from Sierra Leone: Padraic Scanlan's *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution*

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Article abstract

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The Abolition of the British Slave Trade Seen from Sierra Leone: Padraic Scanlan's *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution*

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Abstract

This essay discusses the important contributions of Padraic Scanlan's book Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution, to the history of the abolition of the slave trade in the British empire. Scanlan's innovative work emphasizes material concerns rather than altruism in explaining how policing the slave trade in West Africa and attempting to control the formerly enslaved, not least in redeploying them as soldiers, worked to the advantage of colonial administrators and British elites. The essay examines Scanlan's work in relation to the economic history of abolition, the history of humanitarianism, the entanglement of abolition and imperialism in West Africa, and the military history of empire, which Scanlan vitally puts back into conversation with the history of abolition. It also asks how to include religion as a motivating force, and suggests that the book may undervalue the role of religious belief, not least among Africans. As Scanlan's evidence shows, the line between freedom and unfreedom was by no means sharp. Debates about the post-abolition economy were accordingly informed by anxieties about the meaning of "freedom", as ideological beliefs informed economic conceptions. Freedom's Debtors demonstrates how events in Sierra Leone anticipated the fusion of humanitarianism and colonialism that was crucial to justifying empire in West Africa and underscores the vital importance of understanding abolition in terms of how it worked on the ground rather than solely how it was thought about in Britain.

Résumé

Ce texte examine les contributions importantes du livre de Padraic Scanlan, Freedom's Debtors : British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution, à l'histoire de l'abolition de la traite des esclaves dans l'empire britannique. L'ouvrage novateur de Scanlan met l'accent sur les préoccupations matérielles plutôt que sur l'altruisme en expliquant comment le maintien de l'ordre dans le cadre de la traite des esclaves en Afrique de l'Ouest et la tentative de contrôler les anciens esclaves, notamment en les redéployant comme soldats, ont été à l'avantage des administrateurs coloniaux et des élites britanniques.

Ce texte examine le travail de Scanlan en rapport avec l'histoire économique de l'abolition, l'histoire de l'humanitarisme, l'enchevêtrement de l'abolition et de l'impérialisme en Afrique de l'Ouest, et l'histoire militaire de l'empire, que Scanlan ramène avantageusement dans la conversation sur l'histoire de l'abolition. Ce commentaire se demande également comment inclure la religion comme source de motivation et suggère que le livre sous-estime peut-être le rôle de la croyance religieuse, notamment chez les Africains. Comme le démontre Scanlan, la frontière entre liberté et non-liberté n'est pas forcément apparente. Les débats sur l'économie post-abolition ont donc été alimentés par des inquiétudes sur la signification de la « liberté », alors que les croyances idéologiques ont influencé les conceptions économiques. Freedom's Debtors démontre comment les événements en Sierra Leone ont anticipé la fusion de l'humanitarisme et du colonialisme qui était cruciale pour justifier l'empire en Afrique de l'Ouest et souligne l'importance fondamentale de comprendre l'abolition en termes de son fonctionnement sur le terrain plutôt que seulement de la façon dont elle était considérée en Grande-Bretagne.

Padraic X. Scanlan's award-winning work, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution*, draws the reader in with its vivid narrative and adroit use of telling detail. As early as the opening paragraph, Scanlan introduces Sir Charles MacCarthy, governor-in-chief of Britain's West African possessions and former governor of Sierra Leone, being ambushed and decapitated in 1824 during the first Anglo-Asante War. MacCarthy's skull, a testimony to imperial arrogance, would resurface some years later as a trophy of war, at least according to the British soldiers who believed they had recaptured it. This brutal start sets the tone for an unromantic rethinking of anti-slavery seen from its business end in West Africa, where British use of Sierra Leone as a base for capturing and selling slave ships for profit would morph into a colonial mission by the 1820s.

Freedom's Debtors asks what Britain's abolition of its slave trade looked like when viewed from Sierra Leone, at the workplace of anti-slavery. This is an account about the material world, in line with new cultural histories of economics, rather than one focused on the abstract power of altruism. Scanlan is interested instead in what happened in practice and on the ground. Above all, *Freedom's Debtors* puts the quest for profit, improvisation, violence, and sheer grubbiness back into the history of abolition, creating, as the author puts it, "a history of putting laws against the slave trade into force: a history of severed heads and everyday commerce, of people in pain and in motion, of improvisation and miscommunication" (2).

A view from Freetown, a disruptive regional presence, suggests that slave trade abolition was, to use Scanlan's terms, "acquisitive" — concerned with turning a profit and completely compatible with capitalism; "gradualist," and thus quintessentially cautious and conservative; and, thirdly, thoroughly militarized (20). This last point is a particularly important observation, given the eagerness with which policy makers sought soldiers from diverse regions of the world for the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British army. *Freedom's Debtors* analyzes the relationship between abolitionism and imperialism in the era before aggressive late nineteenth-century imperial conquest in Africa that often used the excuse of opposition to slavery. This reflects recent scholarship. Christopher Brown, for example, has argued that West Africa was seen as a site for commercial exploitation and territorial settlement by both advocates and opponents of the slave trade far earlier than is often recognized, even as scholars such as Matthew Wyman-McCarthy argue that slave-trade abolitionists hoped to remedy the perceived ills of empire by building a more moral version.³⁶ Scanlan's work broadly illustrates overlap in assumptions and practices between the abolitionist settlement of Sierra Leone and later imperial ventures.³⁷ More particularly, the observation that many so-called "Liberated Africans" were redeployed as soldiers re-centres the intrinsic violence of an empire that, even at its peaceful moments, was dependent on the threat of violence and on military strength, creating an endless appetite for soldiers.³⁸

The book has five principal chapters, shaped, as Scanlan comments, around archives produced by the careers of individual colonial officials, even if the ambitions of the book certainly transcend an analysis of colonial administration (25). The first chapter, "Antislavery on a Slave Coast," follows the first two Governors, John Clarkson and Zachary Macaulay, both appointed by the Sierra Leone Company under the leadership of the prominent Evangelical politicians and businessmen of the so-called "Clapham Sect." Under Clarkson the colony almost starved; Macaulay better adapted himself to the nuances of the local slave trade. Nonetheless, the colony was near collapse by 1800. It was rescued in part by becoming a Crown Colony in 1808, primed to intercept slave ships on the West African coast. In chapter two, Scanlan follows the first Crown Governor, Thomas Perronet Thompson, who fell afoul of the Sierra Leone directors, among other reasons for claiming that so-called "captured Negroes" were being coerced. Before his recall, Thompson nonetheless anticipated later ways to make use

of the formerly enslaved who had been rescued from captured slave vessels, proposing their deployment as settlers and as soldiers, both archetypal colonial roles for British allies. Thompson's criticisms and his proposed remedies arguably expressed in microcosm wider imperial debates about whether a supposedly more consensual version of empire, promoted by largely paternalist colonial "humanitarians", could in fact be moral and mutually beneficial to colonized and colonizer alike. The example also of course illustrates problems with this model. This was arguably a microcosm of debates about whether a supposedly more consensual version of empire could, in fact, serve ends that British humanitarians might have seen as moral.

In the following chapter, Scanlan considers in more detail the working of the Vice-Admiralty Court. This court was at the heart of British activity in West Africa. The court adjudicated whether ships captured by navy patrols had indeed been slaving. If a ship's captain was convicted of slaving, the Vice-Admiralty Court oversaw the sale of the ship and division of the prize money, following naval conventions for the distribution of profits from captured enemy ships. The Vice-Admiralty Court also oversaw the fate of formerly enslaved people who had been taken from slaving vessels. Scanlan does a particularly good job of showing the tight links between the capture of slave ships and the recruitment of soldiers: the Royal African Corps was formed as a military regiment headquartered in West Africa, and it depended on the formerly enslaved for recruits. Scanlan again underscores that freed slaves were only ambiguously "free." In the following chapter, Scanlan examines conflicts between two Governors, Edward Columbine and Charles Maxwell, over access to prize money and to the labour of the formerly enslaved, particularly for military recruitment. Here, Scanlan shows the competing demands for soldiers of the Royal African Corps and the West India Regiment, the latter supported by Maxwell, who aggressively tried to seize slave forts in order to generate more recruits. The conflict illustrates the local benefits of the fight against the slave trade, and the incentives this created for competition between profiteering white elites for access to the spoils. In the final chapter, Scanlan takes the story past the end of the Napoleonic wars and the eventual replacement of the Vice-Admiralty Court by Mixed Commission Courts. His final study is of Charles MacCarthy and his attempts to mitigate the economic shock of the end of the war (and increasing regulation of British access to slave ships) through the creation of a formal civilizing mission to those he now termed "Liber-

ated Africans." MacCarthy spearheaded a villagization policy that saw so-called Liberated Africans grouped together in villages where they were educated and missionized through a partnership with the Church Missionary Society. Scanlan argues that this might be seen as MacCarthy's own "empire in miniature" in West Africa, and a precursor of the much larger Victorian empire to come.

Throughout this study, the drive to control often resistant Black subjects informed the management of abolition, according to Scanlan. The relatively conservative elite wing of the movement to abolish the slave trade, spearheaded by the Anglican evangelicals who founded Sierra Leone, sought to establish an ordered and indeed hierarchical society rather than one disordered by slavery. At the same time, Scanlan, with his brilliant eye for idiosyncrasy and the telling detail, is very far from telling a story about historical inevitability. This is a highly empirical book, for all its engagement with theory, and it follows its archives closely. This means following people (in recognition that the book focuses most closely on the British actors most visible in the archives), and people prove to be unpredictable. Successive governors engaged, however paradoxically, in disordered and unruly actions in Sierra Leone in the name of order, whether attempted regional conquest or the effort to force the formerly enslaved into the army. Every period examined by Scanlan, from the early crisis of the colony in the 1790s to the creation of Liberated African Villages from 1816 to 1823, saw an effort at control punctuated by unexpected incapacities.

Within this broad framework of analysis, the book raises a number of important themes with broad implications. I would like, however, to address four in particular, namely Scanlan's approach to the economic history of abolition, the book's contribution to debates about humanitarianism and religion, the entanglement of abolition and imperialism in West Africa, and the helpful re-centring of military history in the history of abolition. In each area, Scanlan makes a significant intervention, even if not always an uncontroversial one.

A recent wave of important work has argued for the entire compatibility of slavery with "modern" capitalist economies, particularly in light of the importance of slavery to new world economies well into the nineteenth century, in contrast to the idea that a "modern" economy demanded free labour.³⁹ In an interestingly parallel argument, Scanlan emphasizes instead that abolition, at least as practised in West Africa in the early nineteenth century, was also compatible with older labour practices, despite the convictions of abolitionists. There was

no bright line between freedom and unfreedom. Scanlan is of course concerned with the aftermath of the abolition of the slave trade, rather than slavery itself, but others have made similar arguments about the abolitionists' assumptions about post-emancipation labour practices.⁴⁰

Perhaps more innovatively, Scanlan argues both that abolitionism was a reflection of some specific financial practices and that abolitionists had beliefs about the free labour economy that were deeply informed by cultural assumptions. For example, it mattered that members of the elite Clapham Sect had a particular kind of financial experience: as Scanlan puts it, "[m]any of the directors of the Sierra Leone Company, and Henry Thornton in particular, were innovators in the management of financial markets, and experts in the manipulation of currency, credit, and debt" (29). This analysis could in fact be extended to the Quaker-Anglican abolitionist circles of families such as the Buxtons and Gurneys, who were so crucial to the later drive to abolish slavery itself in the 1820s and early 1830s and who were linked by family and professional ties to the earlier abolitionists. They were international bankers and merchants, as well as interlocked family circles, united by trust in a double sense.⁴¹ In other words, they could imagine a different form of profit making. The colonial officials and evangelical patrons who governed Sierra Leone had a powerful faith in the power of cash to transform societies, imagining rapid transition in West Africa from a supposedly barter-based to a supposedly currency-based economy that would create moral transformation among its participants, facilitated by the currency minted by the Sierra Leone Company for the colony. In reality, Scanlan argues, the economy was too deeply entwined with slavery and regional dynamics that also depended on the slave trade for the rapid transformation foreseen by abolitionists to occur. Historians of West Africa have further demonstrated the importance of economic activities that were often invisible to British colonial administrators; among key dynamics were the role of Liberated Africans in forging and maintaining trading networks, including the trading activities of a significant Yoruba diaspora, the importance of Muslim merchant networks, and the crucial role of female traders.⁴² Far from being blank slates, Liberated Africans forged new economic relationships that often did not follow the Christian colonial script.

There were perhaps even more layers of contradiction to elite evangelical ideas about the economy than Scanlan outlines. Free labour and a currency-based economy were believed to lead to internal

moral transformations in individuals as well as to changes in societies as a whole. At the same time, well into the nineteenth century, elite abolitionists also worried about the need to have the right *kind* of commerce, rather than simply an untrammelled free market, in which desire might play an excessive role. Such a worry arguably opened the door to the idea that only educated Christians should be entrusted with the levers of the economy. This argument might complicate too straightforward a definition of capitalism. Does “capitalism” depend on lack of constraint on the market, for example? As Scanlan’s work suggests, we need to think about “capitalism” as also something that abolitionists *imagined*, as working or not working in certain ways, and as tied to a putatively moral economy and to ideas about God that are far more obscure to the modern economist than they were to contemporaries. For many abolitionists, including the later Thomas Fowell Buxton, a virtuous economy was to replace the immoral slave economy, but it was hardly clear how an economy would become “virtuous.” It seemed to depend on the behaviour of individuals. But what happened if the agents of commerce were not themselves virtuous? This was a source of considerable anxiety. There was related tension around virtuous commerce as a solution to the slave trade, and a deep mistrust of many aspects of an unrestrained commercial economy, in my view. There were real differences between, say, British West African traders (as palm oil traders succeeded slave traders) and evangelicals concerning how the economy should work and whether it was “naturally” virtue-inducing and ought to function intrinsically as an agent of moral discipline.⁴³ In other words, Scanlan’s fruitful analysis could be pushed even further to help explain the authoritarian instincts of abolitionist administrators and the exclusion of Africans from power. The relationship between “civilization,” individual moral virtue, and economic modernity always turned out to be fraught in practice. Scanlan’s approach further complicates dichotomies between economic self-interest and ideology: economics were also an ideology, with their own quasi-mystical beliefs. This is a useful corrective to excessively presentist views of economic debates.

At the same time, it is also an important insight that slave traders and abolitionists actually shared experiences of long-distance trade and of familiarity with particular types of financial instruments. This further militates against the idea of a “clean” form of capitalism that was proving incompatible with slavery, and echoes the arguments of Christopher Brown that abolitionists and slave traders shared some key ideological

assumptions.⁴⁴ And despite Scanlan's interest in economic ideas, he also argues that on the ground most people followed their material self-interest and fell into line with the local economy, usually more than they let on to London. He puts this insight to work in a brutally effective manner as he eviscerates the business practices of Zachary Macaulay, Governor of Sierra Leone, key member of the Clapham Sect, leading abolitionist, key financial player in Freetown, holder of debt, and prize agent for the Sierra Leonean Vice-Admiralty Court, which redistributed the profit from captured slave ships — in sum the man whose company, Babington & Macaulay, dominated the Sierra Leonean economy as surely as any mafia boss, and who made a fortune of £100,000. Scanlan follows the money and the results are not pretty.

Scanlan's work is also a significant contribution to the history of international humanitarianism, a burgeoning field, and it cautions that field to be cautious, not least in its origin stories around abolitionism. Scanlan takes convincing aim at the depiction by some scholars of Vice-Admiralty Courts as a form of proto-international law or as an early example of international human rights. Scanlan's analysis suggests that the courts did not assert a universal right to freedom or make transcendent claims. Rather, they illustrate the role of power in the enforcement of international law regimes.⁴⁵ It is worth noting — in another parallel with contemporary resonance as international human rights regimes are both celebrated and critiqued — that the Sierra Leone courts infringed both on the sovereignty of African leaders and of the European powers whose ships Royal Navy patrols seized on suspicion of slave trading. Sierra Leone was a disruptive site of struggle from the outset, as the destruction of the first settlement by "King Jimmy" of the Koya Temne in 1789 suggests. "You know this country belongs unto us the Natives of it. You are the 'Stranger' ... we are the proprietors," complained Almamy Amara Touré, a headman of Moria, to Governor Maxwell in 1814 when the latter attacked slave factories and slave ships in areas outside his jurisdiction.⁴⁶ These are clearly complex debates without easy answers. The example does suggest that the enforcement of antislavery was never as easy, morally straightforward, or even legally self-evident as the view from London suggested. The infringement of sovereignty in the name of morality was (and is) a key issue both in struggles to enforce transnational human rights norms and in the extension of colonialism.

Freedom's Debtors also brings out particularly well the pitfalls of seeing the subject of charity, of humanitarian rescue, as a blank slate,

available to be remade by the saviour figure, and owing a debt of gratitude to the saviour. As Scanlan puts it in summarizing the extraordinary career of the dissident governor Thompson, who opposed what he saw as the immoral re-enslavement of former slaves through apprenticeship but envisioned many alternative uses for free men including work as soldiers, "Thompson licensed future colonial Governors to act as though a slave freed from the Middle Passage was effectively nothing, a blank slate — and therefore could be anything" (98).

At the same time, does Scanlan go too far in downplaying such key elements of humanitarianism as emotion, religious sentiment, and even altruism, however we might define that vexed concept? Particularly striking is the relative downplaying of Christianity as a key factor in early nineteenth-century Sierra Leone and in anti-slavery. We see Anglicanism weaponized and ready to be used to coerce former slaves. In other respects, however, the religious practices of the formerly enslaved and of administrators themselves are relatively absent. This is despite the importance of struggles over nonconformist religion espoused by the formerly enslaved, such as the role of Methodism in an important "revolt" of Nova Scotian settlers against the Sierra Leone Company.⁴⁷ Does this reflect the sources, or is it rather an argument that other historians have exaggerated the role of Christianity? What too of Islam, something that is hinted at in several ways? It is important to think of the region of Sierra Leone and its vicinity as also Muslim.⁴⁸ In sum, does Scanlan espouse too rationalist a conception of Christianity in practice?

More might be made of the uses of Christianity by the formerly enslaved, including as a means to find status or reconstitute community.⁴⁹ Samuel Crowther, first African Bishop in the Anglican church and originally a recaptive in Sierra Leone, might furnish an instructive example. So too might the broader mission of many Sierra Leonean captives to the Yoruba, explored by J.D.Y. Peel.⁵⁰ Even Crowther, however, in an autobiographical essay first published anonymously in 1837, underscored struggles over Christianity and resistance to acculturation. He recalled that many Liberated Africans in the 1820s "used to say, that book-learning was for White People, and was rather boyish employment." Indeed, he described a moment of resistance by reluctant scholars at the Liberated African settlement of Wellington:

Upon agreement, they soon assembled at the call of the bell;
but before school was opened, they all, with one accord,
simultaneously rushed out of the grass chapel, through the

doors and windows, in the utmost confusion possible. To crown the whole, they shouted, in their country language, as soon as they got out, with an expression of their victory over the schoolmaster.⁵¹

Although this passage was followed by the affirmation that these were the very people who later helped build a chapel, it was nonetheless removed from later versions of Crowther's brief autobiography.

More concretely, I wonder whether in adopting the Sierra Leonean view of abolition, the book gives too much credit to the Clapham Sect's own view of themselves as the driving agents of antislavery, reflecting their influence in Sierra Leone but not necessarily in the wider movement. This might be true both in terms of the broader antislavery movement and, at the other end of the spectrum, of the political support among largely conservative politicians for abolishing the slave trade in the midst of struggles over trade and blockades against the French during the Napoleonic wars. Certainly by focusing on West Africa, *Freedom's Debtors* downplays the wilder shores of abolitionism: the millenarians, the utopians, and those who believed in the necessity of abolishing slavery to prepare for the second coming. Focusing on slave trade abolition rather than the broader movement to end slavery, particularly slave trade abolition in the middle of the Napoleonic Wars when controlling shipping and feeding the gaping maw of the military were paramount concerns, perhaps makes the movement look more conservative, or at least more uniform, than it was in the *longue durée*. Here, I take Richard Huzzey's point that anti-slavery was a very diverse movement, as was evident after the emancipation of slaves in 1833, when the movement failed to maintain cohesion.⁵² It is also worth asking where the women are. What to do, for example, with sometimes more radical female activism even from within elite ranks, hinted at by Priscilla Buxton's description of the Duke of Wellington during the emancipation debates of 1833 as an "old vulture" whose funeral she clearly took some solace in imagining?

At the same time, a large point of the book is precisely to distinguish between abolition and abolitionism, and to argue that metropolitan emotion was somewhat irrelevant to what happened on the ground as Britain tried to police the slave trade in West Africa. Nonetheless, how much of an outlier was West Africa during the Napoleonic wars? Or, conversely, is it indeed the case that West Africa reveals as early as the 1790s the coercive practices that would

eventually accompany British uses of abolition to justify its eventual colonization of the region? I suspect there is truth to both perspectives at once. Within the world of the Clapham Sect, were there some elements of idealism among even men such as Wilberforce? More generally, however, where is the emotion of anti-slavery? — the passion of the anti-sugar boycott, for example, a different form of interaction with the global economy of circulating goods?⁵³ In a broader context, I am struck by the tendency of historians to make activists into self-interested rational agents in a wide number of contexts. Is this simply a recognition of reality? How to write about the complexities of altruism in a non-reductive manner? Recent departures in the history of emotion might provide one way to square the circle, including recognizing the potentially problematic assumptions and expectations of those experiencing humanitarian emotion.⁵⁴

Having said all this, numerous local administrators of Sierra Leone, as well as their Clapham sect patrons, clearly deserve the opprobrium Scanlan heaps on them, given their participation in profiting from the enslaved and their authoritarian repression of the Black settlers (indeed governors were sometimes more merciful than the London-based directors).⁵⁵ Furthermore, many putatively more sympathetic anti-slavery activists (such as the Priscilla Buxtons or the Elizabeth Frys) were deeply embedded in elite politics and had hierarchical instincts. And they too in the end saw “moral” colonialism as a solution to the evils of the slave trade and of immoral empire, often in fact drawing on the example of Sierra Leone. Ultimately, *Freedom's Debtors* sheds light on the interface between humanitarianism and imperialism. It was, after all, Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, the parliamentary leader of the antislavery forces when slavery was abolished in 1833, who sponsored the first Niger Expedition of 1840–41, which might have entrenched colonialism further in West Africa had over half of the members of the expedition not died of disease. This expedition down the river Niger (newly mapped by the British), using the novel technology of steamships, drew on many of the assumptions developed by the founders of Sierra Leone. The expedition sought to persuade local chiefs to sign treaties with the British crown to abjure the slave trade in exchange for favourable access to supposedly virtuous British trade. The expedition was accompanied by a young Samuel Ajayi Crowther, and crucially supported by many crew members from Sierra Leone. It is also noteworthy that Buxton and his ally, Stephen Lushington, had created a joint stock company in Britain to invest in

cotton plantations, and hoped secretly to acquire a significant tract of territory on which agriculture could be developed, supposedly to be ruled on British Christian principles. In the end, it was humanitarians who most fervently argued for colonialism in West Africa in the early nineteenth century, to the end of a supposedly greater good, and often in the teeth of colonial office resistance.⁵⁶ Sierra Leone played an important part in that process. As the British expanded aggressively from the original small Freetown settlement, Sierra Leone remained a corner stone of British imperial policy in West Africa.⁵⁷

Another great strength of the book is its reintegration of the role of the military into the history of humanitarianism, as well of course into the history of Sierra Leone. This is a crucial innovation. It was not only in Sierra Leone that the British assumed that the newly “civilized” would join colonial militias — one might compare the Cape Colony, or the centrality of military alliances with Indigenous peoples in North America.⁵⁸ Claims to bring “peace” were often rather to put another form of participation in violence on offer (through imperial loyalty). The empire arguably depended on networks of Indigenous soldiers. Scanlan brilliantly shows the mutual entanglement of abolition and the military. Military history is too readily placed in a separate box from other forms of history, including histories of Christian missions and of abolition: it needs to be front and centre.

Scanlan reminds us of the stunning figure that between 1795 and 1807, at least 19,000 slaves were purchased by the British for military service, roughly one out of every ten slaves purchased in the West Indies over this period (124). The need persisted after abolition. Some of the same people moved from supplying the army with slaves to finding ways to supply the army with the supposedly free. Another of Scanlan’s achievements is to show how Africans were coerced into serving as soldiers in the Royal African Regiment or in the West India Regiments; in a telling phrase made much of by Scanlan, many in the West Indian regiment became “volunteers for life” in the British army shortly after being recaptured by the British navy. This puts coercion, or at least degrees of unfreedom, rather than freedom *per se* back into the centre of the story, and reflects similar analyses of issues such as legal regimes in the West Indies designed to compel labour from the putatively free.

A final issue I would like to highlight is that of craft and of authorial decision-making. Throughout, Scanlan writes in a beautiful literary style. He is a master of narrative and of revealing detail:

The air in the barracks was thick. Heavy rain made the wooden structure swell, and cockroaches crawled out from between the boards to avoid being crushed. A boy walked into the yard outside. He was around fourteen years old and about five feet tall. He had noticeable scars on his right elbow, his back, his chest and his left calf. Months earlier he had been sold at Calabar, in the Bight of Biafra, with 244 other people and imprisoned abroad the Spanish-owned brigantine *Intrepida*.

Scanlan goes on to say that the Superintendent had the right to rename a former slave if the person's African name was insufficiently distinctive or hard to pronounce. In this case the Superintendent chose to exercise that right. Scanlan writes, "He could not resist a sour little joke. The boy was renamed 'Tattoo': many of his shipmates wore ink, but he bore scars."

This is stunningly good writing, encapsulating in a dense sequence issues around re-naming and the imagination of Africans as blank slates, but also trauma and the scars left by trauma: we as readers are left with a glimpse of a young boy, part of the flotsam and jetsam of the slave trade, and we are momentarily forced to imagine his experience in a few deft words. We also see the cockroaches and feel the rain. I would be interested to hear from the author more about the craft of the historian creating narrative and whether there are costs as well as benefits. Do we absolutely know there were cockroaches? Does it matter? Should a historian try to be a story-teller or resist the blandishments and pleasures of narrative?

I am struck by Scanlan's tendency to capture people at moments of being overwhelmed by the physical world (MacCarthy having his head cut off; Clarkson lying in bilge; Tattoo in a slave court): all this reflects the theme of unfreedom in freedom. Was this a conscious decision? Throughout, Scanlan makes a superb use of physical detail: this soldier given 700 lashes; this other soldier who hung himself in a sawpit outside Freetown; the rations of rum for breakfast. He also makes an excellent use of the telling archival extract. Consider, for example, the disgraced and exiled Governor Thompson who writes to his wife that he has had a fever dream about his return home: "you came and looked 'well-liking' like one of Pharoah's kine ... with that sort of respectable & goodly look which characterizes people who begin to grow elderly ..." (95). We are suddenly astonished by the people of the past.

Like much history of the colonized world, *Freedom's Debtors* also needs to wrestle with the issue of how to read colonial archives against the grain. This is a brilliant reading of papers of colonial officials, with awareness of what is missing — this is not the perspective of the Africans around the colony, for example, who so frequently affected its fate. In another telling phrase, Scanlan writes “[t]he soldiers who fought or fled under Maxwell’s command died and decomposed, leaving few traces in the paper archives of Government House, beyond head counts and occasional muster lists” (132). Was it a frustrating or revealing process to use such archives? And how to write a history of Africa and Africans in which they are constantly foregrounded as subjects of anxiety, management, pity, or vindication in the archives, and yet so rarely enabled by the archive to speak with their own voice?

Padraic Scanlan’s *Freedom's Debtors* is a brilliant, argumentative, beautifully written work, with a strong authorial voice. It raises questions that will not lead to consensus on all fronts. It is also, however, a major contribution to rethinking histories of antislavery, using the lens of a cultural history of economics, complicating the history of humanitarianism, and bringing to bear a deep appreciation for the violence, messiness, and unpredictability of the past. It is a superb example of the historian’s craft.

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