

Those that are well off do have the natives as Slaves:

Humanitarian ‘Compromises’ with Slavery in Sierra Leone and Liberia

by

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Arriving in Liberia, founded by the American Colonization Society (ACS) as a new home for emancipated slaves and free African Americans, Peyton Skipwith wrote to his former master in 1834 that “there is Some that hav come to this place that hav got rich and a number that are Sufering those that are well off do hav the nativs as Slavs.”¹ Meanwhile, in Sierra Leone, founded for London’s ‘Black Poor’, slaves liberated from the slave trade, and African Americans who fought for the British in the American Revolution, John Ellis was barred from obtaining a government job because he was “Convicted of Slave Dealing at the sessions in...1831.”² To many, this would appear to be a contradiction of the principles on which these antislavery colonies were founded, or at the very least, proof that the organisations that founded and ran the colonies were compromised by their desire to ameliorate, rather than destroy slavery. However, frequently during the first half of the nineteenth century, at least until Liberia’s independence in 1847, these organisations found themselves in strange alliances reflecting the complicated relationship that antislavery colonizationists had with the realities of colonial life in Africa. Shifting alliances between slaveholders, people of African descent and self-identified humanitarians throughout the Atlantic World in the first half of the nineteenth century have proved problematic for a straightforward, Whig narrative of the abolition of slavery. Odd alliances between these groups reveal that they were often willing to work together on the basis that this would promote longer-term personal and public goals. This paper proposes that early antislavery movements such as colonization found themselves allied with slaveholders not out of a compromise in their belief in antislavery or a cynical calculation of political-economic realities, but as a reflection of slow imperial communications, complex relationships between formerly enslaved people and the institution of slavery, and finally, their fundamental belief

¹ Peyton Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, 10 February 1834, in Randall M. Miller, *Dear Master: Letters of a Slave Family* (Athens, Georgia, 1990), p.58.

² National Archives (UK), CO 267/119, 5 March 1833.

in the inevitability of the end of slavery and a desire to bring it about quickly and without violence.

Traditional Historiography

The ACS was founded in 1816 by a diverse group of influential politicians and self-identified ‘humanitarians’ including the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Henry Clay; Robert Stockton, related to a signer of the Declaration of Independence; the Reverend Robert Finley, a prominent antislavery campaigner; and Bushrod Washington, the first president’s nephew and a former Supreme Court Justice. By 1822, the ACS had gained enough support amongst antislavery activists and humanitarian-inclined slaveholders to establish a new colony in West Africa. After a few false starts, Monrovia – named for President James Monroe, a supporter of the colonization cause – was founded as the capital of the new colony of Liberia. Liberians came from several groups: manumitted slaves who may have had a good relationship with generally benevolent masters who freed them; free African Americans who sought commercial and educational equality with whites; those who experienced increasing pressure to relocate after the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831 and subsequent periods of increased oppression; and recaptives settled in the colony by the US Navy’s slavery squadron.³ Even within the founding group, there was debate about their intentions: Clay warned that colonization should only be for those who were already free, not slaves, while Finley hoped to use it for gradual emancipation.⁴

As a result of these alliances within the Society, immediatist abolitionists – those seeking unqualified emancipation and equality for African Americans – saw colonization as going “against the grain of core African American cultural values of freedom resistance, and self-determination.”⁵ Since the immediatists eventually gained the moral heart of the abolitionist movement in America, and their methods and tactics helped to precipitate crisis in the Civil War, leading to the emancipation of the slaves, it is understandable that their

³ Richard West, *Back to Africa : A History of Sierra Leone and Liberia* (London, 1970); Tom W. Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore, 1980); Amos J. Beyan, *The American Colonization Society and the Creation of the Liberian State : A Historical Perspective, 1822-1900* (Lanham, MD, 1991).

⁴ P.J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865* (New York, 1961), p. 29.

⁵ Nikki Taylor, "Reconsidering the 'Forced' Exodus of 1829: Free Black Emigration from Cincinnati, Ohio to Wilberforce, Canada," *The Journal of African American History*. 87 (2002), p. 288.

narrative of the ACS should come to dominate the historiography. P.J. Staudenraus argues that the abolitionist sentiment of the ACS membership was undermined by a belief in the inevitability of racial prejudice.⁶ Not all of the historiography is as negative. Susan Ryan does point out that contemporary colonizationists believed they were improving the life opportunities of free African Americans, giving them a chance for economic self-sufficiency, while at the same time bringing civilization and Christianity to Africa.⁷ Evangelical Christianity also played an important role, both in the creation of the society by Reverend Finley, and also in its stated goals of achieving a 'spiritual empire' driven by missionaries and Christian settlers.⁸ However, even those who do recognize the ACS as having genuine antislavery motives generally characterize this by arguing that "the Society served as an important transition for abolitionists-to-be," emphasizing the progressive development of antislavery thought over the century.⁹

Colonizationists in Britain are less uniformly dismissed; however, they still face criticism for their hypocrisy and use of antislavery rhetoric as a tool of empire-building. The British colony for freed slaves established at Sierra Leone in 1787 was the brainchild of Granville Sharp, a British humanitarian, inspired by the Somerset case and the growth of a population of 'Black Poor' in London at the end of the 18th century. Although the first settlement faced obstacles including disease and violent disputes with indigenous populations, the experiment was not abandoned. The colony expanded with the settlement of the Black Loyalists from Nova Scotia, brought to the colony by John Clarkson, and the Maroons, a group of free black Jamaicans. Once the British slave trade was outlawed in 1808, the same year that the Crown Government took control of the colony, the settler population grew quickly as slave ships were impounded by the navy and the slaves on board – referred to as 'recaptives' or 'Liberated Africans' – were integrated into Sierra Leone society. As the colony grew in both population and importance to the British Empire in West Africa as the home of the Court of Mixed Commission for the prosecution of slave traders,

⁶ Staudenraus, p. 121.

⁷ Susan M. Ryan, "Errand into Africa: Colonization and Nation Building in Sarah J. Hale's Liberia," *The New England Quarterly* 68:4 (1995), p. 565.

⁸ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 192.

⁹ James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors* (New York, 1996), p. 31.

there were continuing debates over the role that the colony should play in the abolition movement and the empire.¹⁰

Howard Temperley writes that “one of the principle effects of such calls [to use Freetown to end the slave trade] was, in fact, to give an air of moral legitimacy to the European’s scramble for colonies.”¹¹ Within the British antislavery movement, from the abolition of the slave trade through the abolition of apprenticeships in 1838, the tensions between economic and humanitarian impulses were mitigated by the utilitarian idea, articulated by David Eltis, that free labour was more efficient and more productive than coerced labour.¹² The abolition societies often found themselves divided over whether trade or missionary work was the best method for achieving African civilization. A.G. Hopkins also argues that this struggle to civilize and Christianize Africa was commercial as expansionists attempted to make the rest of the world resemble middle class Britain and “protect the British way of life by reproducing it abroad.”¹³ Robin Law’s assertion is that an enforcement of British antislavery values onto the commerce of West African societies was necessarily imperialist and was the “local application of a much wider project...which sought to reconstruct the world in the image and interests of British liberal capitalism.”¹⁴ Christopher Fyfe has written extensively on the use or misuse of the antislavery cause in the spread of imperialism in Africa, using the examples of Thomas Fowell Buxton’s Niger Expedition in 1841 and Livingstone’s humanitarian campaigns in East Africa later in the century. He points out that for all their bluster, once the British government actually took over a territory, they tended to look the other way with regards to domestic slavery. In Sierra Leone, this was certainly the case, although I challenge Fyfe’s cynical assessment of the situation, and argue that, while antislavery campaigns in West Africa did contribute to

¹⁰ Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (Oxford, 1962); Joe A. D. Alie, *A New History of Sierra Leone* (London, 1990); John Peterson, *Province of Freedom: A History of Sierra Leone, 1787-1870* (London, 1969).

¹¹ Howard Temperley, *White Dreams, Black Africa: The Antislavery Expedition to the River Niger 1841-1842* (New Haven, 1991), p. 176.

¹² David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford, 1987).

¹³ A.G. Hopkins, "Britain's First Development Plan for Africa," in Robin Law, *From Slave Trade To "Legitimate" Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa: Papers from a Conference of the Centre of Commonwealth Studies, University of Stirling* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 259.

¹⁴ Robin Law, *From Slave Trade To "Legitimate" Commerce*, p. 26.

imperialism, the antislavery sentiment behind colonization was frequently genuine and reflected a belief in the power of the British way of life to overcome slavery.¹⁵

Apprenticeship and Slave Trading

From Liberia's founding in 1822, settlers were expected to go it alone, relying on farming or petty trading to make a living with little official support from the ACS or the American government. Those African Americans who were sent by former slave masters to colonize Liberia often created new identities based in part on their plantation experiences, replicating the Big House, employing slaves of their own, and emulating the only form of freedom they had seen in America. The complex relationship with former masters was highlighted by their letters back to them. One wrote back to her former mistress in Kentucky about a fellow Liberian settler:

She told me...that she and her family with some others...were emancipated by you. She had come 9 miles to see me hoping I should be able to tell her something about her 'old mistress' and the family. I gladly gave her all the information I possessed relative to yourself and family. Tears of gladness ran down her cheeks when she heard in this distant land of your welfare. Her very countenance spoke lively gratitude as she talked of your kindness and benevolence to her.¹⁶

Milly Crawford wrote back to her former mistress: "My Dear Mystress you have done your whole duty. and may the [Almighty] bless and reward you a thousand fold. Lucy all love and thanks to you for your goodness care and kindness to us all."¹⁷ This kind of interaction is represented well in the sources amongst those settlers who were manumitted for emigration and shows the complex feelings new Liberian settlers must have felt on arrival. Masters and their families sponsored their travel, usually trained them in a trade, and taught them to read and write.¹⁸ Free African Americans could have similarly unexpected relationships with

¹⁵ Christopher Fyfe, "Opposition to the Slave Trade as a Preliminary to the European Partition of Africa," in *The Theory of Imperialism and the European Partition of Africa* (Edinburgh, 1967).

¹⁶ University of Kentucky Special Collections and Archives, Wickliffe-Preston Family Papers, Box 39, 20 September 1835.(G.W. McElroy to Mary Owen Todd Russell Wickliffe). Available from <http://www.bluegrass.kctcs.edu/LCC/HIS/scraps/liberia.html>.

¹⁷University of Kentucky Special Collections and Archives, Wickliffe-Preston Family Papers, Box 39, 10 March 1833 (Milly Crawford to Mary Owen Todd Russell Wickliffe). Available from <http://www.bluegrass.kctcs.edu/LCC/HIS/scraps/liberia.html>

¹⁸ Marie Tyler-McGraw explores the complex role of mistresses in the colonization movement. Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black & White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill, 2007).

white society in America. Some, like the Reverend Daniel H. Peterson did not see a natural conflict between white and black: “Many colored persons entertain the opinion that all white people are their enemies. That is not true, for I declare that, from a child unto this day, I have found all my best friends among the white people.”¹⁹ Louis Sheridan, a prominent free North Carolinian, made his way up through society, establishing himself as a merchant, planter, and slaveholder before immigrating to Liberia in the 1830s.²⁰ Once they arrived in the colony, letters home reveal that many emigrants retained affection for their former masters and sponsors and that they continued to rely on them for help in setting up their new lives abroad. Peyton Skipwith, for instance, wrote back to his master asking for supplies to set up a trade.

The reliance on ties to their former lives and expectations for life in the colony had incidental effects on the development of Liberian society. The society remained closed to those without means because of the federal government’s refusal to provide more support, forcing many emigrants to rely on the private benevolence of former masters or other connections in America to provide them with the capital to begin trades, farms, or commercial enterprises. The availability of the indigenous workforce for unpaid or low-wage labour made it difficult for any uneducated or unskilled settlers arriving in Liberia to earn the money they needed to advance in society through unskilled manual labour.²¹ Peyton Skipwith reported that, “poor people that come from america hav no chance to make aliving for the nativs do all the work.”²² Thomas Brown, a returned emigrant, submitted himself for examination by the anti-colonizationists in 1833 in order to report on the myths of living in Liberia. When asked “What are the feelings of the colonists in respect to slavery?” Brown replied, “I know that some in the colony are disposed to hold slaves. I heard one individual say that the colony would never become anything, that they could never amass wealth without them.”²³ Without documentation of the actual transactions that bound indigenous labourers to the settlers, it is impossible to tell whether this was in actuality chattel slavery,

¹⁹ Daniel H. Peterson, *The Looking Glass: Being a True Report and Narrative of the Life, Travels, and Labors of the Rev. Daniel H. Peterson, a Colored Clergyman; embracing a period of time from the year 1812 to 1854, and including his visit to West Africa* (New York, 1854), p. 18.

²⁰ Phil. S. Sigler “Where the Free Air Blows: The Attitudes of Free Black Americans Towards Emigration to Liberia, 1817-1865,” (Unpublished paper from the Indiana University Office of University Archives & Records Management, Bloomington, Indiana), p. 4.

²¹ *Examination of Mr. Thomas C. Brown, a free coloured citizen of S. Carolina, as to the actual state of things in Liberia in the years 1833 and 1834* (9 May 1834).

²² 10 February 1834, Peyton Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, in Miller, p. 58.

²³ *Examination of Thomas Brown*.

apprenticeship, or some other form of unfree labour. However, it is clear from settler reports that something existed that they recognized as ‘slavery,’ replicating not only the economic function, but the social institution as well. Driving home the links with plantation life back in America, the anti-colonizationists pressed Brown with further questioning:

Do the natives call the colonists white men, as a term of distinction?

They do.

Do the colonists feel as much above the natives as the whites do here above the colored people? Or do they associate together on terms of equality?

Kings, coming to that place, and chief men, are taken into their houses. The lower order are not. They are employed as servants for the purpose of toting burdens, as there are no animals there, or very few.

Is any more pains taken to educate and improve the natives than is made here by the white population generally to elevate the colored?

There is not.²⁴

As Sierra Leonean Bishop Samuel Ajai Crowther put it, many of those who had been enslaved until recently “carry a recollection of the driver’s lashes with them; and many more a disposition to inflict them on others.”²⁵

When the British government took control of the operation of the newly designated Crown Colony of Sierra Leone in 1808, Thomas Perronet Thompson was hand selected by William Wilberforce to be its first governor. Thompson was a fierce abolitionist and was disturbed when he found that the apprenticeship system of training new labourers in the colony was not as it seemed. He wrote home to his fiancée “that these apprenticeships have...introduced actual slavery.”²⁶ Slaves freed in the area or from slave traders trying to trade within the colony were sold to Sierra Leonean settlers as apprentices for twenty dollars or kept by the government to do improvement works. In response to Thompson’s repeated protests against this system, former Governor Macaulay replied that “I have always been of the opinion that the slave trade being abolished, the most likely means of promoting civilization in that country [Sierra Leone] would be by indenting the natives for a time not exceeding seven years, or till they attained the age of 21.”²⁷ Because the antislavery activists in Britain saw apprenticeship as benefiting a long-term educating and civilizing mission,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *Journals of the Rev. James Frederick Schon and Mr. Samuel Crowther, who with the sanction of Her Majesty’s Government, Accompanied the Expedition up the Niger in 1841 in behalf of the Church Missionary Society* (London, 1842), pp. 62-63.

²⁶ T.P. Thompson to Nancy Barker, July 23, 1808, in Michael J. Turner, “The Limits of Abolition: Government, Saints and the ‘African Question,’ c. 1780-1820,” *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 112, No. 446 (1997), p. 335.

²⁷ Macaulay to Ludlum, 1 May, November 4, 1807, in Turner, p. 339.

Thompson was recalled by the African Institution, who replaced him with a governor more amenable to the complex labour relations of the colony. Apprenticing new Liberated Africans arriving in the colony from impounded slave ships subsequently became official policy and government documents from Sierra Leone record apprenticeship as both occupation and social status. In 1829, J. Edmonds a Nova Scotian, and J. Neizer, a native of Cape Coast, were paid 13 and 12 pounds respectively as Apprentices in the Government Printing Office.²⁸ In the 1836 Census of the parishes, alongside the categories of ‘discharged soldiers’, ‘male and female liberated africans’, and ‘male and female children’, is the category ‘male and female apprentices.’²⁹ However, the legalization of this practice did not entirely erase its unsavoury undertones and significant campaigning by the Birmingham Anti-Slavery Society with regards to apprenticeships in the West Indies shows that the practice was known to be associated with slavery-like conditions. An 1836 petition from the settler community thanks Governor Campbell: “We learn that the moral character of the Liberated African female apprentices are brought under your Excellency’s observation and that practices disgraceful both to those who have had the charge of them and to themselves are repressed.”³⁰ It seems that it would be easy for the African Civilization Society to ignore the reports of slavery associated with apprenticeship because the practice of apprenticeship varied so extensively and the majority of the cases were part of the government sanctioned means of assimilating and training Liberated Africans. Those cases that resembled slavery on the ground could be swept into the more generic term that implied paid training.

Sierra Leonean colonists were also frequently said to be involved in the slave trade itself. An 1830 correspondence dealt with the fact that “Inhabitants accused by the Chief Justice of Slave Trading ... Trial of T.E. Cowan a Liberated African Schoolmaster for selling one of his Pupils into Slavery convicted 5 years imprisonment.”³¹ In America, a publication condemning the ACS pointed to British experience and the inability of Sierra Leone to put down the slave trade: “Judge Jeffcot, Chief Justice of Sierra Leone, officially declared in 1831, that the colony ‘*established for the express purpose of suppressing this vile traffic, was made a mart for carrying it on.*’ Parliamentary enquiries put the fact beyond all doubt, that instances have occurred in the colony of persons being actually spirited away, and sold as

²⁸ National Archives (UK), CO 267/99 (Return of Coloured Settlers, Inhabitants of Sierra Leone, holding appointments under the Governor of that Colony).

²⁹ National Archives (UK), CO 267/134, 1 December 1836 (Census of Allens Town).

³⁰ National Archives (UK), CO 267/133, 4 August 1836 (Petition to Campbell).

³¹ National Archives (UK), CO 714/144, 20 June 1830.

slaves, by their fellow colonists.”³² In 1833, Governor Findlay described Thomas H. Parker, a former police magistrate, as having been “dismissed in consequence of his having been accused of the crime of aiding and abetting in the slave trade.”³³ Since many of the accused slave traders were Liberated Africans, it is possible that they may have had connections to slave trading in the region prior to their own enslavement. Slave trading and suspect apprenticeships amongst the colonists demonstrated a fundamental problem in early antislavery thinking, which was the assumption that former slaves and their descendants would be natural abolitionists.

Humanitarian compromises with Slaveholders

The ACS membership included those who believed that slavery was wrong, but that, as Jefferson articulated, living together would be impossible or undesirable; those who believed that African Americans were inferior and a drain on the community; those who believed in the missionary promise of Africa; the anti-slave trade establishment; and those with commercial motives.³⁴ The ACS existed as a nationalizing force, presenting a unified goal of expansion to diverse audiences to bring them together on the ‘slavery question.’ The ACS formed an alliance with slaveholders in order “To afford slave owners, who wish or are willing to liberate their slaves, an asylum for their reception.”³⁵ However, after the Missouri crisis of the late 1820s, American nationalism gave way to increasing sectionalism and the southern slaveholders were even more wary of federal expansion, fearing that a strong federal government could enforce an antislavery policy.³⁶ Southerners began to reject colonisation as a “thinly veiled abolition plot.”³⁷ Meanwhile, northerners were increasingly disturbed by the growth of southern slaveholders’ power and commitment to slavery. The antislavery advocates’ endorsement of colonisation rested on the belief that slaveholders supported

³² Samuel Cornish and Theodore Wright, *The Colonization Scheme Considered in its Rejection by the Colored People – In its tendency to uphold caste – in its unfitness for Christianizing and Civilizing the Aborigines of Africa, and for putting a stop to the African Slave Trade: In a letter to the Hon. Theodore Frelinghuysen and the Hon. Benjamin F. Butler* (Newark, 1840), pp. 22-23.

³³ National Archives (UK), CO 267/119, 5 March 1833 (Governor Findlay).

³⁴ Bell Irvin Wiley, *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia 1833-1869* (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1980).

³⁵ Herman Hooker, *Colonization and Abolition Contrasted* (Philadelphia, n.d.), p. 1.

³⁶ Staudenraus, pp. 173-86.

³⁷ Staudenraus, pp. 173.

gradual emancipation and were simply in need of security. As sectionalism grew, it became increasingly clear to some northerners that this was not the case. In the early 1830s, just as the ACS was achieving its highest levels of donation and emigration to Liberia, immediate abolitionism, or immediatism, emerged to challenge the colonizationists' dominance of antislavery. From the 1830s, as antislavery and proslavery groups become more polarized and sectionalized in America, the multiplicity of motivations driving the ACS membership became problematic for their continued ameliorative influence. Wedged between slaveholders accusing them of abolitionist intent on the one hand, and immediatist abolitionists accusing them of betraying the antislavery cause on the other, the ACS was constantly forced to renegotiate its moderate position, seeking affirmation from their British counterparts that they were not "patrons, directly or indirectly, of slavery."³⁸ An ACS publication pointed out their unpopular position between radicals in both the North and the South, but articulated "a firm conviction, that colonization offers the best, the only true plan of bringing this controversy to a happy issue – and of making a freeman of the slave."³⁹

Anti-colonizationists, meanwhile, used the negative reports on Liberia to point out the flaws of the ACS, pointing out the Liberians' intemperance or tendency to hold slaves, and the general poverty of the colony.⁴⁰ This put the abolitionist anti-colonizationists in the unusual position of pointing out how unqualified for running their own country African Americans were, while the ACS ignored these problems to highlight the abilities – and therefore equal capacity – of Liberians to act as ACS agents and operate the schools, churches, businesses, farms, and government of the colony while promoting humanitarian antislavery values. Colonizationists back in America often sought to suppress colonists' complaints about the existence of slavery-like employment conditions because they hoped that "the great calumny, that the black man was incapable of intellectual eminence, was practically refuted...at Liberia."⁴¹ The response of the ACS to accusations of cooperation with slavery in Liberia found in testimonials and letters published by the immediatists was generally dismissive. Either they claimed that the stories were false, attempted to discredit the person, or ignored them entirely. When these issues were addressed directly, slow

³⁸ *African Colonization-Slave Trade-Commerce*, Report of Mr. Kennedy, of Maryland, from the Committee on Commerce of the House of Representatives of the United States (Washington, 1843), p. 1007.

³⁹ *An Inquiry into the Condition and Prospects of the African Race in the United States*, (Philadelphia, 1839), p. 180.

⁴⁰ *Fruits of Colonization!* (Boston, 1833); *Examination of Thomas Brown*.

⁴¹ *African Colonization-Slave Trade-Commerce*. p. 1007.

communication and the independence nature of Liberian settler politics often hindered change. For example, the Twenty-Second Annual Report of the ACS, in 1838, reported that:

Though numerous Colonial enactments have from time to time been made, the prudence of the Council has seldom imposed on the Managers the unpleasant duty of rejecting them. The most important exception of recent occurrence was that of a law enacted by the Colonial authorities in January last, but not communicated to the Board till August following, concerning the binding of native Africans as apprentices to Colonists.⁴²

Meanwhile, in Liberia, ACS agents and colonial officials were clearly aware of the issues of enslavement of indigenous peoples. A treaty concluding a war with the Dey includes an article declaring that “No woman shall be given or sold as a wife to any of the recaptured Africans or other persons under the protection” of the colony.⁴³ However, the ACS disavowals of Liberian slavery, problems of colonial administration, and continued partnership with moderate slaveholders in the South did nothing to advance the cause of colonization: in fact, it just gave the anti-colonizationists an excuse to condemn “the spirit of Colonization – its duplicity – its flattery of sinners.”⁴⁴ American antislavery advocates and colonizationists were forced to realize through the experiment in Liberia that while allying with slaveholders might affect gradual emancipation and national harmony and unity, it was beginning to diminish their claim to the antislavery title.

In Britain, humanitarians accepted the necessity of slave traditions amongst the indigenous populations of Sierra Leone for the production of goods for ‘legitimate’ commerce to aid in ending the transatlantic slave trade. Legitimate commerce was the phrase used by British abolitionists in reference to the replacement of slave trade-based commerce with the production and trade of other types of goods, including palm oil, cotton, coffee, and other natural resources. The hope was to undermine the attraction of the slave trade by providing even more lucrative alternatives. However, throughout the discourse on ‘legitimate commerce,’ the British antislavery movement focused on the abolition of the slave *trade* with little mention of domestic institutions of slavery. An extract from the *Sierra Leone Gazette*

⁴² *Twenty-Second Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1838), p. 14.

⁴³ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Monrovia. Treaty of Peace and Amity between the Colony of Liberia and the Kings and Chiefs of the Dey Country (n.d.).

⁴⁴ College of William and Mary Abolitionist Papers, MSS 95 Ab7, 24 January 1834 (Theodore Dwight Weld to Elizur Wright Jr. Corresponding Secretary of the American Antislavery Society, New York City).

reported in 1824 that “the Natives of in the interior, finding the slave-trade abolished *to them*, have turned their attention to legitimate commerce.”⁴⁵ A letter to Prince Cain, a local leader, from Governor Macdonald articulated the sentiments of the antislavery settlement: “I trust that in a very short time your exertions will have completely destroyed the Slave Trade at Cape Mount and its vicinity; and that a good Trade will be established between you and your people and the merchants of this Colony instead.”⁴⁶ In the preface of an account of the Niger Expedition confirms that “The formation...in 1839, of The Society for the Extinction of the Slave-Trade, and for the Civilization of Africa...were calculated to...powerfully influencing public opinion in favour of measures directed to check and ultimately to extinguish the Slave-trade, by the substitution of legitimate commerce, and the encouragement of agriculture.”⁴⁷ The focus on abolishing the slave trade was part of the antislavery movement’s core strategy for undermining the institution as a whole.⁴⁸

However, the production of ‘legitimate’ agriculture by the indigenous groups trading with British merchants was often heavily reliant on forms of domestic slavery or impressed labour for the cultivation of land, harvesting of crops, and transportation of the products. The timber trade, thriving in the 1830s, was seen to be a great boon to legitimate commerce, since it had nearly replaced the slave trade along the Sierra Leone River. An account of the impact of legitimate commerce, however, reveals that those slaves who would have ordinarily been sold into the slave trade, were now employed transporting the timber to the factories. Although the author reports that “it has had the happy effect of releasing them from vassalage” he seems to be misinterpreting their new employment as being wage-based, rather than simply a shift in slave status to production from trade.⁴⁹ Once the realities of domestic slavery in Africa became increasingly reported in Britain, the antislavery campaigners gradually began to realize in the 1840s that as long as the market mechanisms remained the same, the social systems of production in West Africa would remain the same, that is, dependant on domestic slave labour. The Church Missionary Society conceded that domestic slavery would be gradually abolished through Christian conversion of slaveholders, but that

⁴⁵ Rhodes House Library, MSS British Emp. S444 Vol. 36 (Papers of Buxton), 113 (extract from Sierra Leone Gazette 17 January 1824).

⁴⁶ Sierra Leone Archives, Governor’s Local Letters 1846-48, 22 May 1847 (MacDonald to Prince George Cain).

⁴⁷ *Journals of the Rev. James Frederick Schon and Mr. Samuel Crowther*, pp. iii-iv.

⁴⁸ Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, 2007) pp. 325-329.

⁴⁹ James Holman, *Travels* (London, 1840), pp. 98-100.

little could be done to force the change.⁵⁰ Governor Macdonald wrote to a colleague in 1847, chastising him for allowing a subordinate to remove suspected slaves from local trading canoes. He wrote that if they did not desist “from interfering...under any pretext with the canoes, property, persons, or slaves of the natives passing up or down the river...this Government cannot be answerable for the consequences likely to result from so illegal a proceeding.”⁵¹ Humanitarians saw the success of legitimate commerce as the ultimate goal because it was believed that it would root out the slave trade and slavery at its source. Therefore, domestic slavery or impressed labour in the production of legitimate commerce was tolerated because it was hoped that legitimate trade and contact with British values and material goods would gradually erode the need for slave labour at all.

Despite the obvious tensions in these alliances, colonizationists in both Britain and America continued to support their claims to the ‘antislavery’ title, chastening the ‘immediate abolitionists’ for their recklessness and idealism, believing that radical ideologies would do more harm than good for the enslaved, while more moderate appeals and alliances with slaveholders in America, Liberia, and Sierra Leone would have lasting positive effects. The ACS saw the abolitionists as violent and destructive, writing that the immediatist movement “repudiates all responsibility, as appertaining to itself, for any disastrous results that may flow from its action.”⁵² Pacifists among the British antislavery activists equally disdained characterizing all slaveholders in the same terms. In his correspondence with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, John Allen wrote that he concurred with abolition leader Joseph Sturge that “To class all those who are Slaveholders, and who advocate slavery among such as are in the habitual commission of great crimes and to treat them as such does not altogether accord with my wishes on the subject.”⁵³

These shifting alliances in the first half of the nineteenth century showed that the antislavery campaigners were often willing to work together with slaveholders on the basis that they would promote some longer-term antislavery goal. In the case of the British antislavery movement, apprenticeship was tolerated as a means of assimilating and ‘civilising’ Liberated Africans who would eventually take up the antislavery cause as part of

⁵⁰J.F. Ade Ajayi and B.O. Oloruntimehin, “West Africa in the Anti-Slave Trade Era” in *The Cambridge History of Africa, Vol. 5* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 214.

⁵¹ Sierra Leone National Archives, Governor’s Local Letters 1846-48, 5 January 1847 (Governor Macdonald to Lemon).

⁵² Hooker, *Colonization and Abolition Contrasted*, pp. 1-2.

⁵³ Rhodes House Library, MSS British Empire S444 C4/30, Anti-Slavery Society Papers (Letter to Secretary John Harfield Tredgold, 4th month, 15th day, 1839 from John Allen).

their British identity, while indigenous domestic slavery was allowed as a means of creating legitimate commerce as an alternative to slave trading as a source of wealth for African and European traders. The American antislavery movement saw an equally strange system of alliances: the ACS was made up of both virulent antislavery campaigners such as Lewis Tappan, and slaveholders such as Henry Clay; the relationship between master and formerly enslaved Liberian settlers could develop into one of patronage, emulation, and respect; and the ACS chose to ignore or underreport rumours of this participation in slavery and the slave trade in Liberia in order to prevent the mischaracterization of free African Americans as immoral or unintelligent. Tensions within the antislavery movements in both countries, and the changing attitudes toward race over the course of the century began to affect these alliances by the late 1840s and 1850s. However, in the formative decades of the 1820s and 1830s in particular, these alliances were part of a struggle to define what antislavery activism could encompass. The foundation of Sierra Leone and Liberia as humanitarian ventures related to the suppression of the slave trade and abolition of slavery challenges the assumption that those formerly enslaved would necessarily campaign against slavery, and demonstrates the different strategies that the colonizationist antislavery organisations used to balance autonomy for the settlers, political and economic viability of the colony, and their own gradualist antislavery ideals.

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