

Winter 2008

New Approaches to the Founding of the Sierra Leone Colony, 1786–1808

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Repository Citation

Land, Isaac and Schocket, Andrew M., "New Approaches to the Founding of the Sierra Leone Colony, 1786–1808" (2008). *History Faculty Publications*. 5.
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New Approaches to the Founding of the Sierra Leone Colony, 1786–1808

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This special issue of the *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* consists of a forum of innovative ways to consider and reappraise the founding of Britain's Sierra Leone colony. It originated with a conversation among the two of us and Pamela Scully – all having research interests touching on Sierra Leone in that period – noting that the recent historical inquiry into the origins of this colony had begun to reach an important critical mass. Having long been dominated by a few seminal works, it has begun to attract interest from a number of scholars, both young and established, from around the globe.¹ Accordingly, we set out to collect new, exemplary pieces that, taken together, present a variety of innovative theoretical, methodological, and topical approaches to Sierra Leone. We expect that these articles will be of great interest to those invested in the history of that particular time and place. But we also believe that the wider readership of this journal will find that the following articles raise provocative questions, both in method and in interpretation, that hold significant implications for the study of colonialism in its broadest historical context. After all, the establishment of the first British settlement colony in Africa illuminates numerous themes recurring often in our studies of empires before and after: early plans reflecting a mix of colonizing experience and untested metropolitan assumptions; colonization as a physical, cultural, economic, racialized and gendered project; complex relations not only between colonizers and colonized but also the formation of new political, diplomatic, and economic patterns beyond the colony's borders; and the ambiguous status and culture of settlers as colonizers and clients, to name a few.

The early years of the Sierra Leone colony represent an ideal site to investigate those motifs and many others. Nestled on the west African coast just south of the Guinea area and named for the leonine mountains visible from the shoreline, in the eighteenth century it was home to more than a dozen ethnic groupings, most notably the Temne, Mende, and Sherbro near the coast and the Limba inland. By then they were quite familiar with Europeans, having traded slaves and palm oil to them and been the subject of Christian missionary efforts for nearly two hundred years. Meanwhile, in the mid-1780s, black loyalist refugees from the American Revolution had gravitated to two general areas, London and Nova Scotia. In London, a group of white philanthropists decided to kill two birds with one stone by resettling the black poor to the coast of Africa, thereby not only helping the blacks return to their ancestral homeland but also striking a blow against the slave trade. Their first attempt in 1787 was an economic and demographic failure. However, four years later, some of the same men tried again, this time establishing a corporation – the Sierra Leone Company -- and finding that an astonishing 1,200 Nova Scotian black loyalists were eager to emigrate at company expense. These settlers landed in what the

colony labeled “Freetown” in 1792, and in the following years struggled both with Company officials and with an unfamiliar land and climate, as most of them had been born in America. Local groups, meanwhile, now negotiated between the slave traders still present and the new colonial presence. Although the colony survived, reaching a population of about 2,000 by 1807, it continued to flounder financially, and in 1808 was re-established as a British protectorate under the direct supervision of the British crown. Soon after, the British began resettling Africans there that the Royal Navy “recaptured” from the slave ships of other nations.

“Plan of Sierra Leone,” drawn by James Phillips and published by the Sierra Leone Company in London in 1794. Map reproduced with the permission of the Afriterra Foundation. www.afriterra.org

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“Plan of Sierra Leone,” drawn by James Phillips and published by the Sierra Leone Company in London in 1794. Map reproduced with the permission of the Afriterra Foundation. www.afriterra.org

The articles in this issue fall roughly between the drafting of the first British plans for colonizing the area and the arrival of the colony’s first crown-appointed governor, thus following the trajectory from initial beginnings to Sierra Leone’s official recognition as part of the British imperial project. There has been a tendency for historians to fast-forward from the early initiative of the mid-1780s to the post-1808 period. One of our major aims in this issue is to inquire closely into those two missing decades and take notice of some of the improvised, contingent, and conflict-ridden aspects of the colony’s founding, aspects which are sometimes drowned out by a teleological emphasis on Sierra Leone’s anti-slavery mission. By doing so, we highlight a particular moment – or, to its participants, series of moments – when the very nature of this particular colonial project was a matter of contestation among all the people involved, a particularly intense set of encounters and negotiations that readers will doubtless recognize from their own encounters not only with the history of Sierra Leone but also with that of many other fledgling colonies.

Where should we locate the founding of Britain’s Sierra Leone colony in the larger history of the British Empire? It is not easy to find references to Sierra Leone in either the eighteenth or nineteenth century volumes of the Oxford History of the British Empire (1998), although the editor of the eighteenth century volume, P.J. Marshall, has recently offered the suggestion that Sierra Leone was important because it proved that British freedom could be extended to persons indisputably not of British descent, an assessment that would have pleased Granville Sharp, the British anti-slavery activist most responsible for the colony’s founding in the late eighteenth century.² Sierra Leone received more attention in the “Companion Series” volume to the OHBE, *Black Experience and the Empire* (2004), although the circumstances of its founding are subsumed into an analysis of the anti-slavery movement, and the long-

term trajectory of the Krio (Creole) population is addressed in two subsequent chapters.³ The original project behind Freetown appears everywhere out of the corner of one's eye, with the reader never getting a look squarely at it.

In contrast, the nineteenth century volume of the UNESCO General History of Africa (1989) celebrates Freetown as one of the most interesting developments of the entire era, characterizing it repeatedly as a "British success" and noting how it inspired several imitations (the American settlement in Liberia; the French settlement of Libreville, Gabon; a Kenyan settlement called Freretown). The chapter by the Ghana-based scholar A.A. Boahen, entitled "New Trends and Processes in Africa," positions Sierra Leone not so much as the advance guard of European colonialism, but as a liberated space where the new Ethiopianist philosophies could emerge and as a harbinger of a time when Africans ("following similar movements of independency shown by Nova Scotians in Sierra Leone at the beginning of the century") would control their own Christian churches. Boahen highlights the innovative role of Krio culture and thought, which flourished because it was "not simply an importation from elsewhere but rather a synthesis of African, Nova Scotian, and British elements."⁴

The initial establishment of the Sierra Leone colony and the settlement of Freetown have registered so softly in the broader historiography of the British Empire for a number of reasons. The small number of African scholars with the institutional opportunities to pursue western-style historical scholarship has shown much greater investment in Krio language and culture as a pan-African phenomenon than in considering imperialist beginnings. Historians of late eighteenth-century Britain have concentrated upon struggles between the British and French abroad and between radicals and conservatives at home. And for historians of colonialism, the founding of Sierra Leone does not fit squarely in the major frameworks of British imperialism: first empire or second empire, informal or formal empire, settler and non-settler colonies, colonizers and colonized. But through its status as an outlier, the Sierra Leone experiment – and experiment it surely was – can shed light on these historiographic distinctions, demonstrating more clearly some of the continuities between the first and second empires as well as the interstices among various conceptions of empire.

Some of the early philanthropic supporters of resettling London's black population seem to have understood it as similar to earlier eighteenth-century initiatives undertaken by Thomas Coram and James Oglethorpe. The colony of Georgia (founded in 1732), and the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia (founded in 1749), had been the product of both humanitarian compassion and imperial calculation, relieving London of convicts and the urban poor while simultaneously (at minimal cost) strengthening a vulnerable site overseas. This may help to explain the cavalier attitude of the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor (a group of London philanthropists founded to aid indigent Afro-English in 1786), which disbanded after the first ships had sailed to Sierra Leone in 1787, rather than keeping a close watch on the fate of the settlers.⁵ The Swedenborg-inspired explorers and alchemists who also supported an

African utopia for mystical reasons of their own were not practical enough to offer much assistance, leaving Granville Sharp supporting the settlers out of his own pocket.⁶ Despite its appalling early years, the Sierra Leone project did not end in failure. In 1791, British abolitionists (that is, in the British context, those who wanted to abolish the slave trade) backed by sympathetic and deep-pocketed investors persuaded Parliament to create a “Sierra Leone Company” to promote commercial and missionary endeavors. Its first chairman was the banker (and former Committee member) Henry Thornton, whose outlook was considerably less utopian than Sharp’s. One of the first acts of the new Company was to mint coins, and Fort Thornton became a landmark of Freetown architecture. The historian Christopher Fyfe supplied a succinct epitaph: “Thus a colony governed by absentees in England replaced the self-governing Province of Freedom.”⁷

Certainly its choice of location, its rationales for colonization, and the Sierra Leone Company’s methods and ideologies represented both the old and the new. Since the late sixteenth century, the English had looked both east and west, and the structure of the new colony reflected time-worn models. Like most English settlement colonies, it would be administered by a corporation funded by investors, with the imprimatur of Parliament and the Crown that would appoint officials holding full civil and military authority within the colony’s confines. Its founders explicitly stated a desire not only to further the empire’s commercial interests (which dovetailed with their own), but also to foster the “wide and general diffusion of European light, knowledge, and improvement... into the Continent of Africa.”⁸ That diffusion included the spread of Protestantism, a goal part and parcel of English imperialism from its beginnings and, indeed, central to British identity.⁹ The Company even proposed to distribute land to settlers under a land tenure system known as “quitrents,” a legal arrangement with feudal origins that had been used extensively in British North America.¹⁰ In all these ways, the Sierra Leone experiment resembled what historians refer to as the first British Empire.

However, just as it was poised chronologically between Britain’s loss of the American Revolutionary War and its later territorial expansion in Africa and Asia, the new colony showed hints of the second empire’s launch. From the early 1600s on, English efforts at settlement had concentrated primarily upon the Caribbean and North America, with its activities in Africa focused on trading posts providing slaves to fuel the western hemisphere plantation complex. In that sense, the establishment of a settler colony with a territorial footprint in Africa marked a new departure. While the layout of Freetown in some ways resembled Philadelphia’s grid, thereby replicating Renaissance ideas, those who portrayed Africa as primarily a treasury of animal and vegetable specimens reflected Enlightenment philosophies that justified empire in the name of scientific progress; the hero now was neither Hernán Cortés nor Francis Drake, but the kinder and gentler James Cook. The Sierra Leone Company’s backers claimed that, like Cook, they came “not to conquer, but to save.”¹¹ The intent to establish a trade in goods to supplant the one in human beings marked an innovative extension of earlier conceptions of an empire, as historian David Armitage put it, “Protestant, commercial, maritime, and free” to include not only the freedom of ethnic English but also to others (though not yet all others) in their dominion.¹² And the use

of non-ethnic English to further the empire's territorial and strategic reach marked the practical application of suggestions that had surfaced mere decades before.¹³

In other ways, the Sierra Leone project was neither especially British nor--in any explicit sense--a work of imperial aggrandizement. Smeathman shopped the idea around Paris first, the new settlement found some of its most enthusiastic supporters among Swedes, and of course the settlers themselves were more attuned to the Black Atlantic milieu--which they had experienced across many degrees of longitude and various registers of slavery, revolution, and freedom--than to any agenda emanating from George III or his ministers. It is worth remembering the general antipathy of the founding generation to the word "colony" (one of the Black Poor's elected deputies called it an "agreement," Sharp preferred "Province of Freedom," while John Coakley Lettsom called it a "black embassy").¹⁴ As historian Cassandra Pybus has recently shown, for many of its supporters and participants, Sierra Leone was a social, economic, political, and religious experiment that resonated with the revolutionary age of which it formed an important part; it was an expression of the quest for freedom that resounded across the Atlantic world.¹⁵ Yet many of its British projectors understood it--and remembered it--as an act of pity, a humanitarian rescue mission which quickly took on the paternalist character of a colonial endeavor.

Sierra Leone's founding decades were characterized by planning and improvisation, philanthropy and condescension, egalitarianism and efforts to impose authority, scientific curiosity, religious fervor, revolutionary utopianism, and the search for profit. This tangle of motivations has sometimes tempted historians to cut the Gordian knot by insisting that only one of these agendas truly mattered. Folarin Shyllon's account, in the 1970s, suggested that Sierra Leone was essentially a deportation scheme. Those familiar with Simon Schama's recent book--if they read nothing else on the subject--may rest content in the assumption that Sierra Leone was nothing but a selfless Christian humanitarian initiative.¹⁶ The precise sequence that led to the departure of the first settlers has been rendered in such various ways that it is worthwhile to review and reappraise the events of 1786 here.

The founders of Sierra Leone had an acute sense of history, and began writing narratives of the foundation almost immediately; Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* marks, in a sense, the beginning of the historiography, though it was followed by the profoundly unflattering verdict on the first settlers included in the Sierra Leone Company's first published report, dated 1791. Without identifying Sierra Leone as an outpost of the British Empire, the earliest retrospectives did place Britain, and British agency, at the heart of the story. When Granville Sharp died in 1813, an obituarist explained Sierra Leone by making a revealing connection back to the Somerset case, the 1772 British judicial decision that effectively spelled the end of slavery in Britain:

In the year 1786, Mr. Granville Sharp was occupied in humanely trying to remedy an inconvenience, which had grown out of his own benevolent exertions in behalf of the African Slaves. When the case of Somerset was decided, there were many slaves, who had been brought over by their masters, in the metropolis... The Negroes, therefore, who had been brought to England, being locked up, as it were, in London, and having now no masters to support them, (many of them unaccustomed to any useful handicraft or calling), and having besides no parish which they could call their own, fell by degrees into great distress, so that they were alarmingly conspicuous throughout the streets as common beggars.¹⁷

Sharp, the obituarist continued, felt that these people were his “African orphans,” but his personal resources could not support them forever. He “determined upon sending them to some spot in Africa, the general land of their ancestors” where they might provide for themselves.¹⁸

In this bleak and condescending portrait of post-emancipation society, we are given the misleading impression that Sharp devised and implemented the resettlement scheme by himself (an impression that Sharp himself did much to encourage). The 1783 British defeat in the War of American Independence and concurrent exodus of American Loyalists does not appear as an explanation for why these “African orphans” appeared in London; instead, the reader is led to believe that these beggars were former slaves resident in the capital for some time, perhaps accustomed to carrying trays in opulent houses, who ironically experienced the post-Somerset world as restrictive. They were “locked up” in the metropolis and shut out from their previous life of comfort. And while, as in many societies with slaves, some British slaveowners surely did emancipate slaves hobbled by age and work, thus relieving themselves of the costs of support and leaving freedmen to shift for themselves, those few infirm individuals were the least likely recruits for the rigors of resettlement. Sharp’s own recollections of Sierra Leone’s origins were less condescending, but were shaped by his expectation that the hand of Providence was at work throughout. Blacks were suffering through a bitter winter on the streets of London, Henry Smeathman broached the Sierra Leone destination at just the right moment, and Sharp himself helped to free an African who hailed from that very region and could offer corroborative testimony.¹⁹

In fact, Sierra Leone was both one of the most-planned, and least-planned, of colonial projects. Sharp and Smeathman, who each wrote pamphlets detailing their utopian expectations for the new settlement, have left the impression that West Africa was the inevitable and obvious choice; neither man, however, had a seat on the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, and an examination of the Committee’s minutes shows that many destinations were considered, implying various significantly different destinies for the settlers. After Smeathman’s death in July 1786, the Committee considered two locations, each with its own brand of bitter irony: New Brunswick and the Bahamas. New Brunswick was the very place whence black loyalist Thomas Peters came to London to protest the callous treatment of local colonial officials, and would have placed London’s free blacks just across the Bay of

Fundry from another population of resettled free blacks barely eking out an existence on small plots of poor farmland in Nova Scotia.²⁰ More disturbingly, in the Bahamas, re-enslavement would have been the probable outcome. The elected Deputies of London's Black Poor argued against the Bahamas, but the Committee was still entertaining correspondence from shipping companies about that destination in August.²¹ The names of the officials at the Treasury, the Home Office, and the Admiralty who helped with the logistics of the transports bound for Sierra Leone—notably George Rose and Sir Charles Middleton—are almost identical with the list of personnel who planned the First Fleet that set out for Botany Bay. Sharp was aware that Australia had been mentioned as a destination for American loyalists—a category that encompassed many of London's Black Poor.²² Some of Sierra Leone's first prospective settlers refused to board the ships sailing from England in April 1787 because they believed that they were bound for Australia. In fact, the First Fleet departed for Botany Bay on May 1.²³ Finally, the numerous naval veterans among the Black Poor should have been candidates for settlement in the model towns that Parliament wanted to erect on the underpopulated coastline of northeastern Scotland, as a way of supporting the fisheries and promoting a “nursery of seamen” for the next war.²⁴

Sierra Leone, then, was the final outcome of a long, complex process fraught with accidents and paths not taken. What seems to have prevailed, besides the strong personalities of Smeathman and Sharp, was a shared conviction on the part of both black and white opponents of slavery that a successful tropical settlement founded on free black labor would constitute a powerful refutation of prevailing pro-slavery arguments, and specifically that such a settlement in the midst of the slave trading regions could ultimately transform the African continent. Granville Sharp meant for Sierra Leone to be free, but he also intended it to be for Christians only. Sharp, best remembered today as a tireless anti-slavery crusader, took a leading role in founding the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), an ambitious publishing project which would distribute millions of Bibles worldwide in every language known to the British over the course of the nineteenth century. He started the BFBS in partnership with Henry Thornton and other fellow Sierra Leone Company board members. These men envisioned Africa as a spiritual blank slate, despite the centrality of religion, both indigenous and imported, to the lives of sub-Saharan Africans; in fact, Islamic revitalization movements were at that very moment transforming the religious geography of the continent, and one of the first communications from a local ruler that the settlers would receive was a piece of Arabic calligraphy copied from the Koran.

If Sierra Leone began as a partnership between humanitarians and willing volunteers, white condescension and contempt toward the black settlers emerged before the ships even left Britain. Committee members associated with the project launched a concerted though unsuccessful effort to intimidate all those who had accepted the Committee's money into boarding the ships. Quaker banker and philanthropist Samuel Hoare caused Olaudah Equiano to be unceremoniously left behind.²⁵ Shortly afterward, Hoare sat on the three-person committee that devised the icon of the abolitionist movement, a passive and kneeling male slave uttering the words, “Am I not a man and a brother?” Samuel Hoare's devoted daughter, Sarah, summed up her father's contradictions in some inadvertently

revealing passages contained in the memoir she composed in 1825. She observed that “earlier than almost anyone in this country he espoused the cause of the distressed Africans” but added, on the next page, that “he also assisted in a plan for sending the Blacks, who infested the streets, to form a settlement in Sierra Leone, but I fear his benevolent intention occasioned the destruction of many of them.”²⁶ Indeed, the settlement scheme--as implemented--proved to be a death sentence for most of the people who ceased to “infest” the London streets. Torrential rains, swarms of ants, and hostile neighbors each in turn decimated the Province of Freedom. Without the infusion of the Nova Scotians a few years later, it is difficult to see how Freetown could have survived long enough to benefit from the recaptives.

The Sierra-Leone-Company-sponsored emigration of about 1,200 African-Americans from Nova Scotia in 1792 eagerly peopling a British outpost reveals another fascinating historical paradox of the Sierra Leone experiment that makes historiographic pigeon-holing difficult. The settlement of Freetown by black loyalist refugees from the American Revolution blurred the lines between colonizers and colonized and between settler and non-settler colonies. From the point of view of the Temne and Foulah already living in Sierra Leone, these were distinctions without differences: regardless of the variations of skin color and heritage among the emigrants to Freetown (both settlers and company officers), the new imperial interlopers spoke a common European language, worshipped the same god, and dressed in similar clothes, all alien to the locals. This was colonization, and the locals did their best to conduct diplomacy and trade with the new colony on their own terms. Rulers hedged their bets; Naimbana educated “one son locally as a Muslim, sending a second abroad to France, and a third, John Frederic, to London.” Clearly, it was possible to take a forward-looking, proactive approach without assuming that West Africa’s future involved frankpledge, Christianity, or British hegemony.²⁷

For the emigrants themselves, and between the settlers on the one hand and the company officers on the other, British imperialism by African-Americans presents historians with numerous paradoxes that confound the usual categories. Although varying in degree, nearly all Sierra Leone Company officers (both its founders in Britain and its agents on the ground) belittled the settlers as childlike and ignorant, yet radical and stubborn. Some of this attitude represented class bias and a rising British conservative reaction against the radicalism that Company officials saw as spiraling from the American and French Revolutions. But much of this distaste betrayed a visceral reaction to people simply different from ethnic English. For the settlers’ part, while they decided to move to Sierra Leone out of frustration with their conditions (both natural and man-made) in Nova Scotia, they also expressed a desire to go to an Africa that they considered home, though most had never set foot there. Furthermore, in their religious fervor and political egalitarianism, they brought a revolutionary agenda that was nothing if not inherited from European ideas, though inflected with African-American tradition.

Constituting the first and largest wave of immigrants to the fledgling settlement of Freetown, the black loyalists of Nova Scotia were so disgusted with the small, barren plots of land which they had been assigned, and so unhappy with the cold climate, that they were ready to take on the hazards of life in a new West African colony. How many Nova Scotian Company officials expected to migrate is unclear, but the reaction to John Clarkson (Thomas Clarkson's brother) and Thomas Peters's recruitment efforts yielded over one thousand volunteers, who shipped out to Sierra Leone in 1792, at the expense of the British government. In 1800, the Nova Scotians were joined by Maroon rebels who had been deported from Jamaica. By 1807, the year that Britain decreed the abolition of the slave trade, there were about 2,000 people in what was soon to become a Crown Colony. Between 1807 and 1864, more than 50,000 "recaptives" would be liberated in Freetown by the Royal Navy.²⁸ Some of the original "Black Poor" — itself a diverse category that came to include men of Asian origin and, evidently, any white woman who married a "Black"—lived to see all of these transformations. John Lemon, a lascar, appeared in the Committee's minutes for June 1786 as one of the Deputies, a literate 29-year-old from Bengal who had come to London as the "Captain's Cook of a King's Ship," although he was also a hairdresser by occupation.²⁹ Lemon was still alive in 1808, and his white wife Elizabeth was a shopkeeper in Freetown until her death in 1820.³⁰

The emigrants to Sierra Leone who gained their freedom in the American Revolution, had been evacuated to Nova Scotia, and moved to establish a new society in Sierra Leone followed an agenda somewhat consonant but also in tension with British imperialism. Much of what they claimed and what they acted upon, during and after the American Revolution, entailed a substantial re-ordering of society on the periphery of the British Empire that can be described as nothing short of revolutionary by almost any definition. They wanted to abolish the forced labor so central to the Atlantic economy; they wanted to establish an egalitarian polity in a time of gross racial inequity; they wanted to provide for a broad distribution of property in an age of accumulation; and they wanted to establish a society in which greed and lust were tempered by religious faith. In this, they were not so different from the greater movement of the Atlantic World revolution outlined by scholars Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh.³¹ From their arrival in 1792 through 1800, they constantly challenged colonial governors, militating for full ownership of their land, better economic treatment from the Company, and broader participation and consultation in civil affairs, all while practicing modes of Baptism or Methodism far too demonstrative for the taste of their English overseers. The Nova Scotians eventually formed a bicameral lawmaking body in 1798, only to be rebuffed by colonial governor Zachary Macaulay and the arrival of a new colonial charter in 1799 that invested all civil authority in the hands of appointed officers. In a surprising twist, it was only the arrival of about 550 battle-tested Maroons, expelled from Jamaica after finally losing a decades-long war against plantation owners there, that allowed the Company once and for all to crush the Nova Scotian's escalating resistance. In later years, the Maroons regretted taking the governor's side in a conflict they did not at first understand. Even here, then, contradiction: British authority against one group of Atlantic Africans could only be upheld through the misleading recruitment of other Atlantic Africans.

As with all such intra-colonial strife, these conflicts took place in a greater local and global context far beyond the control or even understanding of colonial rulers or settlers. In western Atlantic Africa, local groups, especially the Mende, Temne, Limba, and Fula, had to consider how to play off the European slave traders--with whom they had a grudging centuries-long familiarity--against each other. Freetown had a different social dynamic and an interest in new kinds of trade, diplomacy, and missionary work. However, slave traders quickly went to work on them, threatening to withdraw their custom should the local groups engage in commerce with the new colonists. To what extent this campaign was successful is difficult to know, because the colonists suffered other, far more debilitating blows from a tropical climate for which they were woefully unprepared, as well as a French bombardment in 1794 that practically razed Freetown. Meanwhile, despite minimal staffing and intermittent supply from Britain, the Sierra Leone Company nonetheless hemorrhaged money, even with the aid of annual subsidies from Parliament that reached £10,000 a year after 1798. By 1807, it was too much: Company backers asked the Crown to take over the colony, which it did effective January 1, 1808, thus ending the Company's experiment and beginning full-blown British governmental imperialism in second-empire style. This coincided almost exactly with the abolition of the British slave trade, resulting in a new stream of immigrants, the "recaptives," that is, Africans caught in the slave trade whom the Royal Navy repatriated to Africa by resettling them in Sierra Leone. The experiment was unequivocally over, and a new era of Sierra Leone's development had begun in step with a new stage of British imperialism.

The essays in this issue directly address the interstices among various conceptions and trends of British colonization. In the wake of the American Revolution, British officials had to look anew for sites to transport criminals, having lost their North American dumping ground. Thus, as Emma Christopher's piece explains, the decision to transport British criminals to Botany Bay -- as opposed to West Africa -- revealed a newfound uncertainty concerning the geographic orientation of future British settlement efforts. Starr Douglas's consideration of naturalist Henry Smeathman's activities in the Sierra Leone area reveals the degree to which the imperialism of scientific knowledge, usually associated with later, more institutionalized efforts by such organizations as the Royal Geographical Society, informed the very establishment of the colony. There is also an instructive contrast between natural history as it was practiced in the celebrated Cook expeditions, which promised a form of imperialism that would not replicate the sins and abuses of the old Atlantic empire, and Henry Smeathman's cheerful complicity with slave traders. Philip Misevich shows how Freetown served and was shaped by local needs and politics as much as by the decisions of distant planners. Finally, Cassandra Pybus reveals yet another layer of the Sierra Leone experience: that of the individual settler, in this case Mary Perth, who as an African-American woman not only contended with racial tension but also had to navigate the gendered ambiguities of her situation. Perth was a British imperialist of African blood, a colonizer coming home, a servant of others with a soul of her own. Perhaps no one better symbolizes the many fascinating contradictions of the Sierra Leone experiment.

This collection of “new approaches” to the founding of Sierra Leone is intentionally eclectic, but one direction that will surely continue to attract more scholarship in the years to come is a gender analysis of the colonial project. Emma Christopher’s account of race, class, and gender in the genesis of both a white convict settlement (ultimately, Botany Bay) and a free black settlement (Sierra Leone) offers a tantalizing glimpse of the possibilities here, as does Cassandra Pybus’s account of Mary Perth, the first extended treatment of a female settler. In particular, it is striking how quickly discussions of racial or ethnic difference turned into impassioned pleas to preserve gender difference. Conversely, the catch-all category of “Black Poor” was used to subsume not only African-Americans in London but also South Asians like John Lemon and the 63 white women who accompanied the first settlers. As Christopher notes, racial categories remained unstable and poorly defined in this period, although it is also clear that Australia was chosen over West Africa for the convict settlement because the distinction of whiteness had a better chance of preservation there. Combined, these essays reinforce the degree to which colonialism has always been an inherently gendered proposition.

In some ways, Sierra Leone’s newly-acquired high profile in the study of Atlantic and even global history is a salutary development. However, as with any such broader contextualization in the study of colonialism, the danger remains that emphasizing linkages and comparisons will obscure Sierra Leone’s immediate local context in West African geography, economy, politics, and religion. The articles by Douglas and Misevich are indispensable here, exploring the “landlord-stranger” relationships that played such a central role in the fate of the colony as of all colonies. The influence of slave traders—who remained a vigorous military and commercial force on the coast—on every stage of the planning and implementation of the African colony reminds us that whatever the hopes and dreams of the abolitionists, the traffic in human beings was not yet the anachronism that Granville Sharp imagined. In considering Sierra Leone’s prospects and the choices made by both individual settlers and the Company, it is important not to anticipate events and fast-forward to 1807 and beyond.³² Likewise, we should acknowledge the importance and dynamism of the Nova Scotians’ Christian faith without uncritically buying into their evangelical expectations; Islam and other religions would also shape the religious landscape of Sierra Leone. Thus, these essays bring us the history of Sierra Leone from a point of view, that begins with a consideration of local conditions through noting their unique characteristics while still placing them within a broader, Atlantic World setting.³³

For all its revolutionary and utopian implications, the act of founding Freetown was an exercise of power, an exercise undertaken with very little consideration of the peoples already resident or living nearby. This uneasy dual legacy of freedom and colonialism presented political problems, not only for Sierra Leone’s British rulers but also, and most acutely, for the emerging Krio population. By the last third of the nineteenth century, the Anglophilia and educational achievements of the Krio elite were increasingly mocked by racist Britons who sought to strip them of their offices and leadership positions, while their commercial acumen aroused envy and hostility on the part of other Africans who perceived them as rich interlopers. In 1878, tension over the Krio’s ambiguous role found unusually candid

expression in the furor surrounding a “divide and rule” speech allegedly made by Governor Samuel Rowe in a visit to Port Loko, some miles into the interior. Rowe’s remarks were reported as follows:

The Sierra Leone people who come into your country and pretend to be superior to you, are not so... they have no country... their mothers and fathers were brought here by my ancestors, at the loss of much valuable lives and cost of large amounts of money in slave-ships, where they were packed up in the same manner as you do your sheep and goats in your pens; and were thrown on the beach at Sierra Leone without any clothing; and then you could not distinguish a man from a woman between them.³⁴

Rowe successfully persuaded the Krio community that his words had been twisted beyond recognition, but the mere suggestion must have stung: Were the men and women who had done so much to build Freetown into what was now called the “Liverpool of West Africa” secretly resented as a burden or an embarrassment to the British Empire? Were the colony’s founders--female and male, black and white, lascar, Maroon, and Nova Scotian--united, not in a brave utopian experiment, but amalgamated in their utter abjection, an undifferentiated herd “thrown” onto the beach in a degraded state so profound that it effaced both ethnicity and gender?

The memory of this particularly insulting rendition of Sierra Leonean history must have still been vivid nine years later, in June 1887, when Freetown celebrated in grand style the centennial anniversary of its founding. There were illuminations, a torchlight parade, and thanksgiving services in every house of worship (including the Mosque Alsalam at Fulah Town), capped off with fireworks and a fifty-gun salute in the harbor.³⁵ The festivities happened to coincide with the Jubilee marking fifty years of Queen Victoria’s reign. On June 23, a telegram from “the people of Sierra Leone” to the Queen acknowledged both milestones, emphasizing how Africans were indebted to the British Empire’s work in “the regeneration of a continent and the disenfranchisement of a Race.” Freetown itself was “founded by distinguished English philanthropists for a purely humanitarian purpose.” An historical pageant of the colony’s founding (enhanced, as the newspaper reported, by the innovative use of electric lights positioned at both ends of the stage) was performed in front of a packed house at the Wilberforce Memorial Hall, with Governor Rowe and other dignitaries, black and white, in attendance.³⁶

The pageant, written by the pan-Africanist philosopher Edward Blyden, presented Sierra Leone’s history in a manner quite unlike the congratulatory telegram sent to Queen Victoria. The founding was not an experiment by white philanthropists such as Sharp, Wilberforce, and Thomas Clarkson, but as a union of African and African-descended peoples that was both multi-ethnic and diverse in the religious sense as well. The first speaker played an extremely elderly Temne chief, “in the picturesque costume of the interior,” who remembered seeing the first settlers arriving in 1787 and had watched the colony grow

over the century that followed. He was succeeded on stage by a speaker portraying a Nova Scotian (representing “the first settlers”), a Maroon, and a Recaptive. Mrs. Lydia Ann Johnson, of Monrovia, then appeared to personify Liberia. The next three figures in the pageant were “the Mohammedan,” “the Missionary,” and “the Creole.” The pageant concluded with allegorical figures representing Sierra Leone and Britannia (the latter played by the Rev. Thomas Truscott, “the committee having been unable to secure the services of a lady”) who stood on either side of a bust of Queen Victoria.

The Sierra Leone Weekly News chose to emphasize the Temne character’s introductory speech, featuring it at full length on the front page of their “Centenary and Jubilee” special issue. Blyden used his fictional Temne chief to voice a less euphoric appraisal of the colonial project and its legacies, noting for example that the English followed “the unfortunate practice of destroying racial indentity [sic] and family tradition by re-naming Natives after their fashion.” The chief also offered an “aboriginal” critique of the educational system, which involved “too much Englishism” and, like the pernicious habit of renaming, endangered the African character of Sierra Leoneans who fell under its tutelage. In conclusion, the chief affirmed that “my people still hold their own” and rejoiced in the formation of what he called a “new community” which--in 1887--seemed to hold the promise of a future in which the diverse elements of Sierra Leonean society would avoid war, and profit from a cross-fertilization of the best from both “civilized” and “indigenous” worlds. Blyden has been criticized for the sometimes derisive tone he adopted toward Krio culture, but through celebrating differences and distinctions among Sierra Leoneans, his historical pageant did confront Governor Rowe with a rebuttal of the “naked on the beach” version of the colony’s founding.³⁷ Perhaps most importantly, Blyden’s pageant sent the message that the founding of Sierra Leone was not over; rather, it was an ongoing process, a perpetually “new community” that each succeeding generation would need to find for itself.

Footnotes

1. Among the canonical works on early Sierra Leone are Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); James W.S.G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783–1870* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Ellen G. Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976).

2. P.J. Marshall, “Empire and British Identity: The Maritime Dimension,” in *Empire, the Sea, and Global History*, ed. David Cannadine (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 52–53.

3. The chapters in question are Christopher L. Brown, "From Slaves to Subjects: Envisioning an Empire without Slavery, 1772–1834," 111–140; T.C. McCaskie, "Cultural Encounters: Britain and Africa in the Nineteenth Century," 166–193; and Vivian Bickford-Smith, "The Betrayal of Creole Elites, 1880–1920," 194–227 in Philip D. Morgan and Sean Hawkins, eds. *Black Experience and the Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

4. *Africa in the Nineteenth Century until the 1880s*, ed. J.F. Ade Ajayi (Paris: UNESCO, 1989), 8, 52, 58. See also Akintola Wyse, *The Krio of Sierra Leone* (London: Hurst, 1989); Akintola Wyse, "The Place of Sierra Leone in African Diaspora Studies," in J.F. Ade Ajayi and J.D.Y. Peel, eds., *People and Empires in African History: Essays in Memory of Michael Crowder* (London: Longman, 1992), 107–120; Nemata Amelia Blyden, *West Indians in West Africa, 1808–1880: The African Diaspora in Reverse* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2000); Mac Dixon-Fyle and Gibril Cole, eds. *New Perspectives on the Sierra Leone Krio* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

5. Isaac Land, "Bread and Arsenic: Citizenship from the Bottom Up in Georgian London," *Journal of Social History* 39:1 (Fall 2005), 89–110.

6. Ronny Ambjörnsson, "La République de Dieu: une utopie suédoise de 1789," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française* 277 (July-September 1989), 244–273.

7. Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 27, 43.

8. *Sierra Leone Company, Substance of the Report of the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company to the General Court, held at London on Wednesday the 19th October 1791* (London: James Phillips, 1792), 50, 53 as quoted in Claude A. Clegg, III, "The Promised Land, Inc.: Company-Repatriate Relations during the Founding of Freetown, Sierra Leone," in John W. Pulsis, ed. *Moving On: Black Loyalists in the Afro-Atlantic World* (New York: Garland, 1999), 139.

9. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

10. Beverly W. Bond, Jr., *The Quit-Rent System in the American Colonies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919). For an examination of the quit-rent system in a particular colony, see Alan D. Watson, "The

Quitrent System in Royal South Carolina," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 33, No. 2. (Apr. 1976), 183–211.

11. Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire, and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 69. In other contexts, this sentiment too had a long heritage: the Massachusetts Bay Colony's original seal portrayed a Native American with the caption "Come over and help us."

12. David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 10.

13. This fit in with a pattern of using "others" as a buffer between British imperial territories and those of its competitors, as was done by recruiting Germans to settle in the Appalachians; see Warren R. Hofstra, "'The Extension of His Majesties Dominions': The Virginia Backcountry and the Reconfiguration of Imperial Frontiers," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 84, No. 4. (Mar. 1998), 1281–1312.

14. T 1/632, CRBP minutes of June 7, 1786; Prince Hoare, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp* (London: Henry Colburn, 1820), 324; Thomas Joseph Pettigrew, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Late John Coakley Lettsom* (London, 1817), Vol. 1, 119.

15. Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon, 2006). See also Liliane Willens, "Lafayette's Emancipation Experiment in French Guiana, 1786–1792," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 242 (Voltaire Foundation, 1986), 345–362.

16. Folarin O. Shyllon, *Black People in Britain, 1555–1833* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 115–166; Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* (New York: Ecco, 2006).

17. Hoare, *Granville Sharp*, 259–260.

18. Hoare, Granville Sharp, 260. See also Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain, 1780–1830* (London: Frank Cass, 1996); Ian Duffield, “‘I Asked How the Vessel Could Go’: the Contradictory Experiences of African and African Disapora Mariners and Port Workers in Britain, c. 1750–1850,” in Anne J. Kershen, ed., *Language, Labour, and Migration* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000), 121–154. Pamela Scully and Clifton Crais are presently completing a book on Sara Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus,” which will shed further light on her experiences in Britain.
19. Hoare, Granville Sharp, 260.
20. Gary B. Nash, “Thomas Peters: Millwright and Deliverer,” in *Struggle and Survival in Colonial America*, edited by David G. Sweet and Gary B. Nash (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 69–85
21. [UK] National Archives, T/1/634: Minutes for 15 July 1786, 26 July 1786, 31 July 1786 and letters from shippers dated August 1786.
22. The only surviving copy of Sir George Young’s third Botany Bay proposal, dated April 21, 1785, was found among Sharp’s papers. Alan Atkinson, “Whigs and Tories and Botany Bay,” in Ged Martin, ed. *The Founding of Australia: The Argument about Australia’s Origins* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1978), 194.
23. Martin, ed., *Founding*, 10, 14.
24. John Knox, *Observations on the Northern Fisheries* (London: J. Walter, 1786).
25. This influential and long-lived Quaker banker and philanthropist (1751–1825) still lacks an entry in the standard reference work, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. He often signed himself Samuel Hoare, Jr., to distinguish himself from his father, who was also a noted businessman. For more information on Hoare in the anti-slavery movement, Judith Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade, 1783–1807* (London: Frank Cass, 1997). Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 412, cites the presence of this “veteran campaigner” in the Anti-Slavery Society which was founded after his death, in 1830; the Hoare in question must be his son, the third Samuel Hoare, who was married to Louisa Gurney. Louisa wrote the influential *Hints for the Improvement of Early Education and Nursery Discipline* (1819). The Gurneys of Earham were at the center of many important humanitarian initiatives

in the early nineteenth century; for example, Louisa's sister was Elizabeth Fry, the prison reformer who appeared on the £5 note in 2002.

26. Sarah Hoare, *Memoirs of Samuel Hoare* (London: Headley, 1911), 17–18.

27. David Northrup, "West Africans and the Atlantic, 1550–1800," in *Black Experience and the Empire*, ed. Philip D. Morgan and Sean Hawkins, 51.

28. Fyfe, *Sierra Leone*; Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, Allen M. Howard, and David E. Skinner, *Community Leadership and the Transformation of Freetown (1801–1976)* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978). More recent scholarship (post-1990) includes Steven J. Braidwood, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists: London's Blacks and the Foundation of the Sierra Leone Settlement, 1786–1791* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994); Deirdre Coleman, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Pybus, *Epic Journeys*; Schama, *Rough Crossings*. For a critique of Braidwood, see Land, "Bread and Arsenic." See also Pulis, *Moving On*.

29. T/1/632: minutes, 7 June 1786.

30. For the colony's early decades, see Fyfe, *Sierra Leone*, 13–151. John and Elizabeth Lemon are discussed on page 98. One of the best sources on South Asian seamen in Britain is Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1660–1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

31. See Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon, 2000).

32. Marika Sherwood, *After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade Since 1807* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007) emphasizes the continuing vitality of the slave trade after 1807.

33. For an explanation and definition of “cis-Atlantic history,” see David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800*, David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 11–27.

34. *The Sufferings of Sierra Leone, or Governor Rowe’s Lampoon on the People. By A NATIVE* (Freetown: Granville Sutton, 1878), 17.

35. *Sierra Leone Weekly News*, June 21, 1887.

36. The details and quotations in this, and the following paragraph are all from SLWN, June 23, 1887. See also Christopher Fyfe, “1787–1887–1987: Reflections on a Sierra Leone Bicentenary,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 57, No. 4, Sierra Leone, 1787–1987 (1987), 411–421 and from the same issue, P.E.H. Hair, “Colonial Freetown and the Study of African Languages,” 560–565.

37. Leo Spitzer, *The Creoles of Sierra Leone: Responses to Colonialism, 1870–1945* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 108–147.

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Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History

Volume 9, Number 3, Winter 2008