

– a mysterious animal – and how that symbol first serves as a catalyst for local issues and then evolves into a symbol of local culture. The Chessie Phenomenon was sometimes exploited for profit and sometimes to promote a worthy cause. Cheezum does not solve the mystery of what Chessie actually was. Instead, he shows us how Chessie was like a Rorschach Inkblot, showing readers how people and communities interpreted an ambiguous phenomenon in ways that served their needs.

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**Theodore Corbett. *The Promise of Freedom for Slaves Escaping in British Ships: The Emancipation Revolution, 1740-1807*. Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword Books Limited, <https://www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/> 2024. xiii, 242 pp., illustrations, maps, endnotes, index. UK £25.00, US \$34.95, hardcover; ISBN 9781 39904 820 0.**

Theodore Corbett claims the emancipation of slaves by the British during the American Revolution was the critical impetus for the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807. He connects the emancipation to the British navy, which provided work for some and carried freedom seekers to new homes in Britain and its colonies. During the War of Independence some 30,000 Blacks left slavery under rebel masters for freedom in exchange for service fighting with the British. The book consists of 28 short chapters and covers the pre-revolutionary period through to the aftermath of the Abolition Act in 1807.

In the pre-war section, Corbett covers the slave trade and the American southern plantation system. The author makes clear the slave owners' fear of insurrections and the brutal suppression of those who rose up.

In chapter four Corbett introduces the role of religion, primarily the evangelical movement, as a significant catalyst for the abolition movement. The evangelical movement resurfaces throughout the text, sparking the thinking and behavior of various central characters in Corbett's narrative. In relation to the navy, while some naval officers were evangelical in their use of religion aboard ship, not all were, as Corbett recounts (p. 211). The evangelicals challenged the slave owners with Christianity's belief that all people were created equal. The evangelicals brought Christianity to the slaves and encouraged some to become ministers, spreading the word among other enslaved people. Both of these trends were resisted by the slave owners.

Five chapters centre around the Royal Navy's place in the freeing of slaves. Corbett notes that free Blacks could find employment aboard merchant and naval ships as seamen, which provided income and potentially a more inclusive

space than life ashore. Corbett states that as much as five percent of British navy sailors were Black during the Revolutionary War (p. 35). Later, he states six to eight percent were Black (p. 53). Evidence for either percentage for ships on the North American Station is missing. The origins of these seamen is not spelled out, thus the number that were freed slaves from the American colonies is unknown. The number that went to the navy was likely lower than those who went to the British army. The author also describes the employment of free Blacks in English shipyards and related industries. The full extent of the inclusivity of the wooden world requires further study.

Corbett takes a more positive perspective on impressment, suggesting men pressed “ultimately stayed in the navy” (p. 55). In light of the fact that leaving was considered desertion and received some of the harshest punishments, it makes sense that most stayed until released by the navy at war’s end. He states that freed Blacks serving in the British navy so liked the experience that they became loyalists (p. 208). This statement needs support, even allowing for the fact that volunteering to fight with the British could imply an existing loyalty to the crown.

The author discusses the proclamations of Lord Dunmore (1775) and Generals Guy Carleton, Howe, and Clinton calling for slaves (and indentured non-Blacks) to fight for Britain against the rebels in return for their freedom. Corbett does not mention that it was just the rebels’ slaves Dunmore wanted to free, not the Loyalists’ slaves. The idea, as Corbett suggests, that “Dunmore was the first to bring white and black Loyalists together...” is a stretch (p. 76).

The settlement of the Black Loyalists in Britain and Nova Scotia is the focus of Corbett’s post-war chapters. In both places the new arrivals met with prejudice and segregation. Low wages meant poverty and the need for local relief. The free Blacks became a cheap source of labour for the white community, causing additional tension with the lower labouring order over jobs.

An answer to these problems was the Sierra Leone scheme, through which British abolitionists resettled free Blacks in Africa. The colony was at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River in the heart of the slave trade. Corbett covers this bleak history, addressing numerous leadership issues and local challenges. He focuses on Thomas Thompson, a naval captain employed to escort the settlers to the new colony. Thompson seems to have been the only good leader the colony had, although he left after just two years. Lieutenant Henry Savage RN arrived in 1789 to find the colony in difficulty with local slave traders. Savage stayed long enough to arrange a resolution of the issues and then left after which the deal collapsed.

Corbett recounts the efforts to pass abolition legislation in Parliament culminating in the Abolition Act of 1807, which outlawed slave trade to Britain

or British colonies. It was not until 1833 that Parliament freed those in slavery within the confines of the Empire.

In his conclusion, Corbett references the calls by the rebels for liberty (at least for white males), and writes, “in the War of Independence the British formulated a kind of emancipation proclamation that totally subverted what seemed to them the most hypocritical cause...” (p. 208). He places “the War for Independence as the crucial event in the eventual abolition of the slave trade” (p. 208). These are bold conclusions that I do not think he has fully supported.

The question is whether the freeing of enslaved people during the American Revolution was truly emancipation in its fullest sense? Yes, people were released from slavery when they crossed from rebel-held areas into British-controlled spaces, including British ships-of-war. The biggest problem for Corbett’s position is the contradiction that the British encouraged the slaves of rebels to gain freedom by fighting for the British, when the British would not allow their slaves freedom for fighting the American rebels. The suggestion that it was premised on abolition of slavery or even outright emancipation is spurious.

An example of the complicated story of the British navy’s involvement in emancipation is that of John Perkins. Perkins, a mullato who may have been born into slavery, entered the British navy and ultimately received the patronage of Sir Peter Parker and George Rodney, rising to the rank of lieutenant commander. At the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, he used his prize money to buy land in Jamaica, “ironically employing slave labor” (p. 62).

Several maps appear within the text to help locate where events took place. The book has two sections of grouped images of people, places and events. All serve to help locate and illustrate the narrative. The index and endnotes are workable.

Corbett’s bold assertion of an emancipation revolution beginning with the American Revolution will draw interest and further critique from those who study the abolition movement. As for British naval history, this book is a start, but more work needs to be done to flesh out the extent of the navy’s role in providing space for Blacks to flee slavery. A strength of the book is Corbett’s use of short biographic examples of free Blacks and abolitionists in each of the chapters to illustrate the chapter’s point. Finding more of these stories will serve to expand our understanding of the lived experiences of the people who escaped slavery during the American Revolution and their subsequent lives.

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