

REVIEW ESSAY

New Perspectives on Slavery after 1807: Liberated Africans, British Naval Officers, and Rebel Slaves

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Richard Anderson and Henry B. Lovejoy, eds. *Liberated Africans and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1807-1896*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, www.boydellandbrewer.com, 2020. 480 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. US \$125.00, cloth; ISBN 978-1-58046-969-2. (E-book available).

Mary Wills. *Envoys of Abolition: British Naval Officers and the Campaign Against the Slave Trade in West Africa*. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, <http://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/>, 2019. 356 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. US \$120.00, cloth; ISBN 978-1-78962-078-8. (E-book available).

Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie. *Rebellious Passage: The Creole Revolt and America's Coastal Slave Trade*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, <https://www.cambridge.org/>, 2019. 372 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. US \$29.99, paper; ISBN 978-1-10870-000-9. (E-book available).

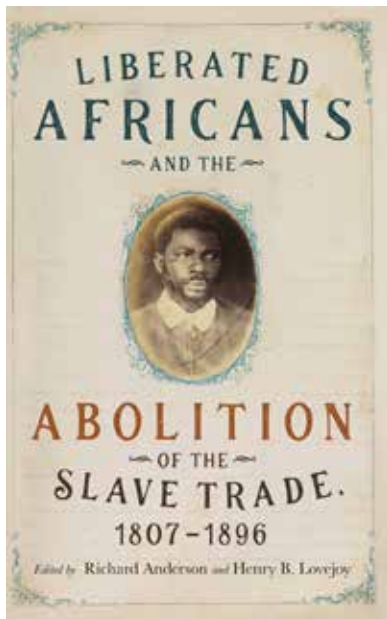
Great Britain enacted the Slave Trade Act of 1807 to prohibit the slave trade throughout the British Empire. Similarly, across the Atlantic, the United States Congress passed the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves, to halt the importing of slaves into the US beginning 1 January 1808. Despite the importance of these acts, one quarter of the nearly fourteen million people who were taken from Africa as part of either the Indian Ocean slave trade or the Atlantic slave trade embarked after 1807. The three volumes featured in this review essay examine different aspects of slavery after 1807, including the experiences of liberated Africans and the often-circumscribed freedom that resulted after their liberation from slavery, roles and attitudes of British naval officers in the campaign to suppress the slave

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trade, and one of the largest slave revolts in American history.

Many scholars have discussed Britain's aggressive measures against the slave trade and slavery after 1807. Royal Navy squadrons patrolled the waves and British officials prodded other countries to sign treaties suppressing the slave trade. As the introduction to *Liberated Africans* highlights, however, while the century progressed, British, Portuguese, Spanish, Brazilian, French, and US authorities "began capturing ships suspected of illegal slave trading, raiding coastal barracoons, and detaining newly-landed enslaved people in the Americas, Africa, the Caribbean, the Atlantic and Indian Ocean islands, Arabia, and India" (1). Richard Anderson, currently Lecturer at the University of Essex, and Henry B. Lovejoy, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Colorado, Boulder, explain that a complex network of British naval courts, international mixed commissions, and local authorities "liberated" nearly 200,000 men, women, and children between 1808 and 1896. In addition to discussing British suppression efforts, the contributors to *Liberated Africans* illuminate the lives and struggles of the liberated Africans. They correctly evince skepticism about whether these Africans were truly "liberated," because "the terms of 'apprenticeship' simply disguised alternative forms of bonded slave labor" (3).

Liberated Africans is divided into six parts, the first of which dissects the early development of the suppression campaign. Sean M. Kelley's fascinating treatment of the first cohort of "captured Negroes" in the British colonial world follows 35 men, 10 women, and 25 children taken off *Nancy* (a US vessel) and sent to Tortola. Scholars usually focus on Sierra Leone, but Kelley reminds readers that liberated African resistance in Tortola "paralleled the situation in Sierra Leone and prefigured events elsewhere" (42). Suzanne Schwarz analyzes how the first cohorts of Africans responded to relocation to Sierra Leone. Their experiences varied considerably and, as on Tortola, they "shaped the terms of their new status through various forms of resistance and by making use of the legal structures of the colony" (61). Daniel B. Domingues da Silva and Katelyn E. Ziegler discuss the Visualizing Abolition website. Most letter writers were British, but "each worked in a different part of the world, subject to different governments, cultures, and ways of life, as well as conceptions of slavery and freedom" (76).



Part Two concentrates on Sierra Leone. Érika Melek Delgado explores "the colonial classification of children that was used for all liberated Africans who arrived in Sierra Leone in the nineteenth century" and demonstrates

the need for more scholarly attention to the childhood of liberated Africans (82). Allen M. Howard contends that the 1831 Freetown Census demonstrates that, “far from being helpless recipients of largesse, liberated African men, women, and children were building the city and sustaining its population and social order through their labor” (116). Paul E. Lovejoy analyzes Ali Eisami Gazirmabe of Borno, also known as William Harding, specifically “how and when he was enslaved and his explanation of the impact of the jihad on his family, his society, and his country” (128).

Part Three, focused on the Caribbean, begins with Inés Roldán de Montaud’s important discussion of liberated Africans in Cuba. Cuban authorities did not see liberated Africans as free at all. Rather, *emancipados* became “a new social class of people who were distinct and legally ‘free’ but forced involuntarily into contracts of apprenticeship” (154). Randy J. Sparks also examines Cuba, specifically the cooperation between British Consul David Turnbull and Gavino, an *emancipado* reduced to slavery. Turnbull used Gavino’s story, which highlighted abuses against *emancipados*, to compel the British government to intervene on their behalf. Laura Rosanne Adderley scrutinizes “the gendered limits of post-slavery freedom” in Antigua and Tortola (175). Records kept by British authorities, she explains, provide significant data about liberated Africans, but yield incomplete answers about what freedom meant for Black women. Part Four relocates the frame to the Portuguese world. Maeve Ryan investigates “the evolution of liberated African rights as a foreign-policy interest of Great Britain” and the nature of British pursuit of these rights in Brazil and Cuba. José C. Curto begins “the process of reconstructing the contours of the history of liberated African slaves in colonial Angola” (240). Nielson Rosa Bezerra surveys the illegal slave trade and liberated Africans in Rio de Janeiro, specifically, how the case of the Africans who arrived on the *Paquete de Benguela* illuminate “the specificity arising from the ‘freedom’ and ‘guardianship’ granted by Brazil’s mixed commission antislavery court” (266).

Four essays in Part Five consider liberated Africans in a global perspective. Matthew S. Hopper demonstrates that the British anti-slave-trade campaign in the Indian Ocean World went through two distinct phases. Chris Saunders explores liberated Africans at the Cape and examines continuities between the era of the slave trade and the later era that involved “prize negroes” (301). Andrew Pearson discusses the lives and labour of hundreds of recaptured slaves who settled permanently on St. Helena. Sharla M. Fett examines recaptive experiences in Liberia and argues that “the Liberian aftermath proved critical because it offered relatively greater opportunity for receptive resistance than did fetid slave ships or crowded US detention camps” (324).

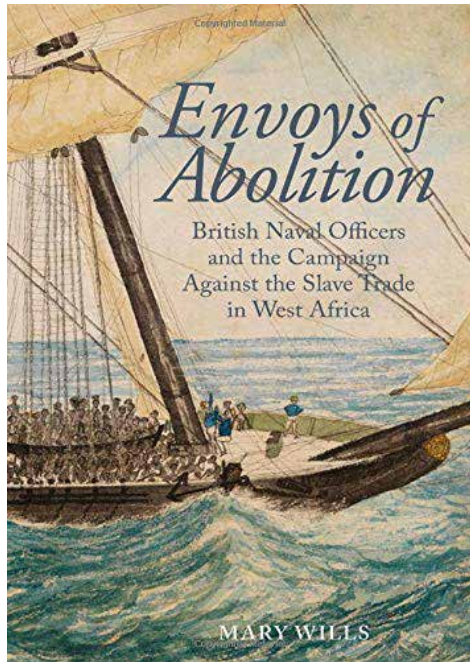
Finally, Part Six contains three essays about liberated Africans who faced secondary migrations elsewhere in the Atlantic World. “Forced migration of liberated Africans to the Gambia,” Kyle Prochnow contends, demonstrates “the human cost of Britain’s antislavery movement and highlights painful secondary—and even tertiary—migrations” (349). Tim Soriano describes the transition from slavery to apprenticeship and the use of liberated Africans in the mahogany

industry in British Honduras. Shantel George concludes the volume by employing oral narratives to analyze liberated African villages in Grenada and finds that “the descendants of liberated Africans and some of the residents in their settlements displayed and continued to display a diasporic consciousness” (386).

One important theme in the essays in *Liberated Africans* is the ambiguity of the status of liberated Africans. Freedom did not always mean freedom. “Liberated” Africans often found themselves trapped in other forms of unfree labour. Furthermore, the contributors make clear that liberated Africans were not passive victims or spectators, but actors in their own right. Anderson and Lovejoy should be commended for putting together a collection of such impressively researched and well-argued essays.

Mary Wills, currently Honorary Fellow of the Wilberforce Institute, analyzes the experiences of the officers of the Royal Navy’s West Africa squadron in suppressing the slave trade in *Envoys of Abolition*. Naval officers, she contends, were not merely the unthinking enforcers of the abolitionist movement. Rather, officer roles in West Africa were more nuanced. This extended discussion complements *Liberated Africans* by offering a detailed exploration of British officers and their important role in the suppression of the slave trade.

Wills begins with the challenges officers faced in pursuing slave ships. The squadron’s effectiveness was limited in its first decade because demand for slaves in Cuba, Brazil, and Puerto Rico outstripped the squadron’s capacity to interdict the trade. From this inauspicious beginning, the squadron’s capabilities grew. As time passed, the British showed increasing readiness to “turn to offensive action and the destruction of the settlements of those who refused to accede to a treaty or later broke terms” (23). Professional roles of naval officers intertwined with their daily experiences. Disease presented major health risks. The threat of violence was always present. Boredom often became the most common experience, although many officers relished the possibility of prize money. In addition to chasing and capturing slave trading vessels at sea, officers’ duties extended to land. They often shared diplomatic duties and frustrations, especially negotiating treaties with African rulers. At times, “their role was anything but diplomatic and peaceful, as they were tasked to punish perceived belligerence ‘with a very wholesome terror’ in the destruction of African settlements” (68).

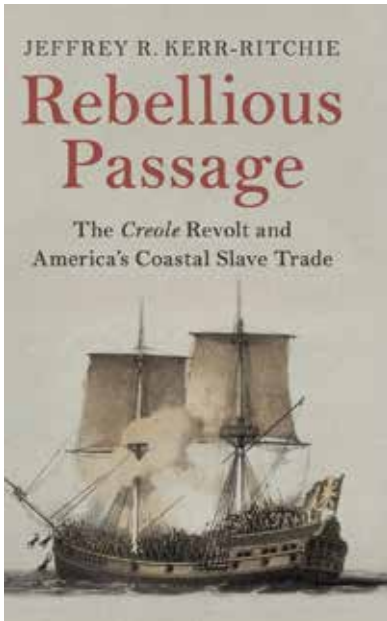


Wills refuses to engage in facile characterizations of officers as exclusively pragmatists or abolitionists. She reminds readers that the navy's campaign against the slave trade was "one part of a complex history of British abolitionism" (69). Many naval officers fervently expressed their commitment to abolitionism. Others held very different views because they believed suppression of the slave trade to be "a professional duty they were required to perform without dwelling on any humanitarian purpose" (85). In sum, "not all naval men were, or aspired to be, humanitarians motivated by the moral imperative to end slavery" (95). Many officers did their duty, regardless of their feelings about slavery, although Wills found significant levels of anti-slavery belief among officers. A desire for prize money and willingness to accept their duty coexisted with fervent ideological opposition to slavery and the slave trade.

Envoys of Abolition also offers excellent analysis of contact between naval officers and recaptive Africans. Many naval officers first witnessed the cruel realities of slavery when they captured prize vessels. Like northern soldiers during the US Civil War, who saw slavery firsthand when they entered the South, "witnessing the distressing realities of the Middle Passage – extreme disease, emaciation and suffering" became a transformative experience for many naval officers (102). That said, Wills urges scholars not to overstate the transformative nature of this experience. Treatment of liberated Africans sometimes resembled the experiences of the Middle Passage. Furthermore, "the capture and passage of a prize vessel to British territory was the first phase of an ambiguous journey to 'freedom' for captives" (118). Like the essays in *Liberated Africans*, Wills highlights the ambiguous freedom liberated Africans often faced. Individual naval officers often expressed compassion and kindness toward liberated Africans, but, "ideas of dependency and property persisted, offering an alternative reality to the idealism of abolitionist ideology and rhetoric" (132). In sum, the racial attitudes of naval officers toward West Africans "were rarely either overtly racist or liberal for their time, but often existed in a space somewhere in between" (161).

The final chapter explores the contributions of naval officers to metropolitan discussions about slavery and freedom. Naval officers participated in abolitionist circles before 1807 and, after the enactment of the Slave Trade Act, continued to contribute to abolitionist networks. Furthermore, naval officers had a "unique position of influence in anti-slavery circles from their rare first-hand experiences of witnessing the barbarities of the slave trade" (175). Through the publication of accounts describing their service in West Africa, they helped shape debates about slavery. Some officers kept themselves at arm's length from the antislavery movement, while others "seized the opportunity to contribute to change" (190).

The influence of the West Africa squadron, Wills concludes, was "more nuanced than can be gauged by a measurement of numbers of ships detained, treaties signed, or individuals released from the transatlantic slave trade" (192). Not all officers were, or even aspired to be, humanitarians and envoys of abolition, but many did. Thus, the varied and complex perspectives of naval officers should be understood as "an important piece in the complex puzzle of motivations and moral



imperatives that represents British abolitionism in the early to mid-nineteenth century” (202). This well-researched and nuanced discussion of naval officers illustrates their complex roles in West Africa as well as their powerful impact on metropolitan discourses.

In November 1841, nineteen slaves seized control of *Creole* and sailed it into Nassau, where they and the other slaves on the vessel won their freedom. Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, currently Professor of History at Howard University and the author of several excellent volumes about slavery and freedom in the Atlantic World, offers a new history of the *Creole* revolt in *Rebellious Passage*. Unlike previous treatments of the revolt, Kerr-Ritchie focuses heavily on slaves, rebels, and free Black people; analyzes the coastal trading career of the *Creole*; pays careful attention

to the role of Bahamians in the liberation of the captives; and employs a wide international framework that transcends the traditional Washington-London axis.

The volume begins with tensions between the US and Britain. Slavery, Kerr-Ritchie correctly insists, sat at the heart of the conflict between the two countries. This included arguments over escaped slaves during the American War of Independence and the War of 1812, British ire about southern laws restricting the liberties of British seamen, and disagreements about impressment and the right of search. Importantly, unlike slave ships that carried slaves from Africa to the Americas, the Middle Passage, *Creole* was engaged in the Coastal Passage, or the maritime aspect of the domestic slave trade, which “represented the massive relocation of captive people among the southeastern Atlantic seaboard and the Gulf coast for nearly two generations.” Kerr-Ritchie also analyzes four coastal slavers – *Comet*, *Encomium*, *Enterprise*, and, *Hermosa* – which were driven off course by bad weather into British waters and ports “where captives’ desires for liberation were facilitated by local authorities” (76). The case of *Creole* proved unique because a successful slave insurrection, not bad weather, carried the ship into a British port.

Creole left Richmond on Monday, 25 October 1841. “Captain Ensor’s time in the Hampton region,” Kerr-Ritchie remarks, “suggests he obtained slaves from southwest Virginia. This bordered the area of Nat Turner’s bloody slave revolt in Southampton County a decade earlier” (104). This point is speculative, but some of the slaves might have known about Turner’s uprising and it might have spurred them to action. The captives on *Creole* do not appear to have been chained, which suggests the crew did not believe rebellion was imminent. The revolt occurred on 7 November 1841, as *Creole* sailed through the Bahamas Channel. Readers

will appreciate Kerr-Ritchie's close analysis of the rebellion and its aftermath. The rebels controlled the vessel by the morning of Monday, 8 November. Importantly, "the *Creole* crew's mortality rate was small compared to other slave ship revolts" (123).

The rebels entered Nassau harbour on Tuesday, 9 November 1841. Kerr-Ritchie explores both the machinations of British civil and military officials and, strikingly, a potential plot – instigated by the US Consul – to seize control of *Creole*. Scholars often stress the role of the British authorities in freeing the slaves. The author, however, foregrounds the actions of the rebels as well as local Bahamians. Indeed, "the actions and relations of American captives and black Bahamians provide us with a much more dynamic narrative of collective self-liberation in Nassau harbor" (144). The story did not end here. With no reason to remain in Nassau, *Creole* left on Friday, 19 November, and arrived in New Orleans on 2 December 1841. Most of the slaves were set at liberty by the British, although the rebels remained in jail for several months. The Court of Admiralty finally liberated the jailed rebels in April 1842. Critically, "local imperial administrators demanded loyalty to the empire from these former rebels in exchange for the gift of emancipation that they had provided" (161). The slaves who seized their own freedom by taking over *Creole* discovered, like other liberated Africans, that freedom often had a price. Unlike many of their fellow Africans, however, who suffered under new forms of unfree labour, the freed slaves from the vessel carved out new lives for themselves in the Bahamas.

The final four chapters examine different aspects of the revolt's aftermath. The Webster-Ashburton Treaty resolved some of the tensions between America and Great Britain, although the treaty did not specifically mention the revolt. Newspapers and politicians used the revolt to make any one of a number of points about property rights or the sanctity of rights of man. The revolt also generated a protracted legal dispute involving insurance that reached the Louisiana Supreme Court in 1845. Fortunately for readers, Kerr-Ritchie patiently untangles the twisted threads in what many readers will consider the most arcane aspect of this story. The final chapter analyzes the 1853 Anglo-American Commission that "decided the outcome of disputes over lost property claims by citizens of both nations, especially those concerned with coastal slavery" (xxiii). The British government paid \$110,330 (over \$3,100,000 in today's money) to "those who lost their human property on the *Creole*" (257). This was the largest handout paid by the British government to American claimants. The *Creole* revolt, Kerr-Ritchie asserts, was "one of the most successful slave rebellions in the history of American slavery" (272) and *Rebellious Passage* does a marvelous job contextualizing and analyzing the revolt and its repercussions.

"In contrast to these details about the great personas involved in the saga of the *Creole* revolt," Kerr-Ritchie comments, "we know less about what happened to some of the ordinary male and female participants" (285). One could note the same about the material in the other volumes as well. That is to say, we know much about elite actors, but little about the vast majority of the people involved in the

suppression of the slave trade – from British officers to liberated Africans to the rebels on *Creole*. All three books mention the roles of elites and great personalities, but their primary focus is the people who left minimal traces on the historical record, or who have been long ignored. These volumes recover voices and stories and enrich our understanding of slavery and the slave trade. They emphasize the ambiguity of freedom and remind us that, in spite of two very important pieces of legislation barring the transatlantic trade in human cargo, slavery and the slave trade continued and intensified after 1807. All the authors make important contributions to historiographical conversations about slavery and freedom. All three books are highly recommended to anyone interested in slavery, freedom, and empire in the nineteenth century.

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