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Anti-Slavery: West Africa and the Americas

Pax brought the gift of peace in places that were accustomed to war but it itself called for the use of force. Africa, a continent of many societies and peoples, posed special problems in certain locales, for it was a place of warlords, and slaves were property captured in war. Whole kingdoms arose from the human pillage. Traffic in slaves by slave-hunters “fermented tribal warfare, destroyed native African culture and agriculture, dispersed peaceful communities, caused unimaginable suffering, destroyed natural immunity to disease and rendered refugees vulnerable to infections they had not previously encountered”.\(^1\) It fell to the Navy, as servant of the state, to quell the traffic at sea and on the coasts. This was a central feature of Pax. Pax was a latter-day consideration in the long history of the African continent, and it had a short life, for once the policing duties of the Navy and the diplomatic pressures brought by the Foreign Office, and even colonial governors ashore, came to an end, control of African societies and principalities passed to other hands. While it lasted, it was a gallant and altruistic attempt to establish freedoms, promote human liberty, and release thousands from bondage ashore and afloat.

Some in Britain thought peace and progress were best brought by missionary enterprise or model farms. Others realized that these schemes would only invite intractable obligations: Africa ought best be left to Africans, ran the argument, and, provided that the British enjoyed freedom of trade, and made that freedom available to all nations, the best benefit for Africa could be achieved. The free flow of goods in and out of the swampy and infested estuaries caught the attention of the policy-makers early in the years of Pax, and they adhered to it to the very end. By that time, however, lines in the sand had been drawn, markers put down establishing spheres of influence and protectorates, and indications of the extent of future African states and their capitals had been given. Much has been made of the influence of technology on the reordering of Africa, but one observer of the late Pax years, Sir Harry Johnston, said this, with wisdom: “The ease with which the white man…implanted himself in Africa, as governor,
exploiter and teacher [was] due more to the work of Missionary Societies than
the use of Machine guns...”

There was much moral suasion attached to the campaign against the slave
trade. But there was another way of looking at it that did not escape the utilitarian
and legal minds of the day: the British effort to secure peace was designed
essentially to promote lawful commerce. Pax was thus tied to law, and trade
was its undeniable vehicle, with the Navy being its necessary advance force
and ultimate guardian. In all there were many quarrels about ends and means.
The Navy was obliged to shift with the changing requirements of the Foreign
Office, which came under pressure from various interests. Humanitarianism
cut a wide swathe, and many were the theories about how peace and progress
might be extended in the “dark continent”. Vacillations of purpose had to be
interpreted and dealt with in the boardroom of the Admiralty, and then instruc-
tions sent out to the Cape or to Sierra Leone to alert officers commanding of
the new requirement. As we will see, the shifting sands had to be crossed. Niall
Ferguson comments on the moral suasion that engulfed the British popula-
tion and obliged the Admiralty to accept the necessary duties of coercion and
liberation:

Here was a measure of the strength of the campaign against the slave trade: that it could mobilize not only legislators to ban the trade, but the Royal
Navy to enforce the ban. That the same navy could more or less simultane-
ously be engaged in opening the ports of China to the Indian opium trade
makes clear that the moral impulse for the war against the slave trade did
not come from the Admiralty.3

Eric Williams in his famous book Capitalism and Slavery made the powerful
claim that Britain abolished the slave trade because by the late eighteenth cen-
tury it had become unprofitable.4 This view has been countered by Seymour
Drescher, who says that slavery and thus slave-trading were important in the
early nineteenth century for the British economy, a time when the country
stood to make significant profits, and that a decline followed the abolition
of slavery in 1833.5 Neither of these views is sacrosanct, and historians will
continue to debate the issue of whether interest trumped humanity or vice
versa.6

During four centuries, ships carried an estimated 10 million persons in
bondage from Africa to the Americas.7 About 60 per cent were transported in
the half-century before 1820. Most were shipped to the Caribbean and to Brazil.
The Portuguese had been at Benin, a powerful kingdom, as early as 1485. The
Dutch and the English soon built factories. The Royal African Company was
founded in 1660 as an English trading monopoly; the French West Indies Com-
pany followed in 1664; and the Swedes, Dutch, Danish and Brandenburgers