

## TTP After Abolition

### How proud can Britain be of the Royal Navy's efforts to end the Atlantic Slave Trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century?

#### Contextual Essay

Understandably the teaching of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in British schools tends to culminate in the final achievement of legislation in 1807, wrapped up as it is in the 'heroic' and 'humanitarian' efforts of 'saintly' men like Wilberforce, and increasingly Clarkson and Equiano. Teachers are far less likely to pursue the post-abolition story, partly from lack of curriculum time and partly through lack of knowledge of the issues and events.

In putting the spotlight on this post-1807 period, it is hoped that attention can be drawn to the fact that the slave trade continued to exist, indeed flourish, well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century – a fact well documented and illustrated in both statistical and graph form by the website 'Slavevoyages'<sup>1</sup> - and that Britain pursued a number of strategies to curb it. Furthermore, the efforts of Britain need to be honestly and objectively evaluated to judge whether this campaign was one which the nation could be proud of.

In exploring the concept of 'Britishness', we are fond of expounding the virtues of 'humanitarianism', 'fairness' and 'the rule of law'. On the face of it, the campaign fought to end the slave trade after 1807 fulfils these virtues: we pressured other, often reluctant nations, to adopt abolition; Parliament passed legislation to increase the detection and punishment of illegal slave trading; we patrolled the waters off West Africa intercepting illegal slavers. There is, no doubt, much to admire in this and teachers might be fully entitled to relate it in a way that invites no other further scrutiny or criticism.

There is, however, a stark challenge to this received version in the form of the negative interpretation offered by Marika Sherwood in her 2007 book, *After Abolition*. The essential interpretation of the book is that Britain's commitment to the cause was disproportionate to its immense wealth and power, and that she continued, in a hypocritical fashion, to benefit economically from close connections to the slave trade and slavery in the Americas. Although polemical in her approach, Sherwood offers an interpretation that can be used to inform our enquiry and stimulate debate about Britain's role in past affairs:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces;jsessionid=86F52769AE6D8097A1CA32E645C77F6C>

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*'These days there is much discussion about the definition of 'Britishness'. This ought to – this must – include an acknowledgement of the misinformation we have all been fed about British philanthropy and the glories of the 1807 Abolition Act. We have to reassess ourselves in the light of realities, not propaganda.'*

The core content of this enquiry focuses on the enforcement role played by the West African Squadron, set up by the British Government in 1819. A documentary (Source 1) starting point will be the case of the former slaver 'Henriqueta' which was captured in 1827 and seconded to the Squadron as HMS Black Joke. With more time available, it would be interesting to approach the WAS through the TNA document listing the Africans 'liberated' by the capture of the Henriqueta'. Ironically, the Henriqueta was a 'Baltimore Clipper', designed to possess the necessary speed to out-run naval patrols; when pressed into the Squadron it turned out to be one of the most successful brigs, along with another former slaver HMS Fair Rosamond, capturing 11 of the 13 slavers taken between November 1830 and March 1832. Source 2 lists the six vessels boarded by the Black Joke between 4<sup>th</sup> October 1830 and November 1830 providing a detailed record which holds plenty of scope for students to explore. It does, however, give the study an untypical view of the effectiveness of ships in the Squadron. Some effort should be made to draw attention to the slower and older ships normally used; Lord Palmerston, in 1862, complained: 'If there was a particularly old, slow-going tub in the navy, she was sure to be sent to the coast of Africa to try and catch the fast-sailing American clippers.'

Another aspect to draw attention to was the rapid rate of decay suffered by Squadron vessels in the tropical waters off West Africa. The Black Joke was declared to have rotten timbers and destroyed in May 1832; all that is left today is an envelope of timber turned to dust in The National Archive. Also, the conditions under which the Squadron crew members served were extremely hazardous, running the risks of pestilence and violent resistance from well-armed slaving vessels; the mortality rate was 55 per 1000, compared to 10 per 100 in home waters<sup>1</sup>.

The second documentary focus of the teaching unit involves Royal Navy Marine operations on West African soil in 1875. By this time the Transatlantic Slave Trade has significantly dwindled. History has tended to declare the battle against the Atlantic Slave Trade over by the 1860s and the focus of suppression shifted to East Africa. Yet on the West Coast of Africa an element seemed to have lingered on. The southern reaches of the Squadron's patrols had been less effectively dealt with, particularly the River Congo. Ostensibly this seems to be the justification for Royal Marine raids on African villages in 1875 as documented

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<sup>1</sup> Huw Lewis-Jones: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/royal\\_navy\\_article\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/royal_navy_article_01.shtml)

2. J. Walvin, A short History of Slavery, pp193: '...for over the next half century, until the 1860s, when the Atlantic slave trade was effectively brought to an end, three million Africans were shipped to the Americas, largely to Cuba and Brazil.'

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by Source 3-5. Punitive raids preceded the drawing up of an agreement with local African King, Anizanza, to end his involvement in the slave trade. The ethics of using force as a prelude to diplomacy/legal agreements is in itself worthy of debate; clearly the British military believed in policy of diplomacy from a position of strength. Hopefully parallels can be drawn with other 'policing' actions in history and the contemporary world which claim the moral right to use violence. Huw Lewis-Jones also alludes to the shadow of a more predatory imperialism at play:

'One can be certain that the high ideals of abolition and the promotion of legitimate trade were equally matched by economic and territorial ambitions, impulses which brought forward partition and colonial rule in Africa in the late 19th century.'<sup>1</sup>

A summary of the arguments that can be deployed:

What Britain can be proud of:

- Launching and sustaining a long battle against the Atlantic Slave Trade
- Freeing 1000s of Africans destined for slavery
- Pursuing their own citizens involved in the illegal slave trade and using legislative penalties
- Royal Navy crewmen putting their lives at high risk
- Pressurising other slave trading nations to end the trade and co-operate with Britain to police the Atlantic
- Providing the lead in patrolling, followed – less enthusiastically – by France and the USA
- Carrying highly risky military operations on the main land of Africa to punish African slave traders
- Reducing the flow of slaves to a relative trickle by the last 4 decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

What Britain could feel ashamed of:

- The hypocrisy of having enjoyed the benefits of being the main slave trading nation in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to depriving nations of that privilege after 1807
- Continuing to benefit financially from the sale of manufactured goods to foreign nations which would end up being used to purchase slaves in West Africa
- Continuing to provide investment capital to finance slave trading of ships under foreign flags
- The half-hearted nature of the commitment to the West Africa Squadron – i.e. a reliance on too few ships, that were inadequate for the task

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid

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- The naval effort and its expenditure being disproportionate to Britain's power and wealth
- The uncertainty of the fate of 'liberated' Africans and captured slaving vessels
- The arrogance, belligerence and innate racism of military raids such as those on King Anizanza in 1875.
- In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain embarked on massive empire building in Africa, an action which runs contrary to the spirit of abolition pursued in the previous part of the Century. This tends to call into question the sincerity of Britain's 'humanitarian' stance.