

## Comment on Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution*

Nicholas Rogers

Volume 30, Number 2, 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074387ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074387ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Rogers, N. (2019). Comment on Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution*. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 30(2), 226–233. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074387ar>

Article abstract

*Padraic Scanlan's Freedom's Debtors makes an important intervention in the debate on the abolition of slavery by looking at what actually happened in Sierra Leone as it moved from company project to crown colony. Scanlan shows that anti-slavery advocates were not in practice equity advocates: slaves had to earn their freedom. In so doing he forces us to reconsider the manifold forms of bonded labour that characterised the Atlantic world and the imperatives of a globalizing market that demanded the continuing production of tropical staples by captive workforces, before and after slavery. Scanlan arguably blends abolition and emancipation in the opening phase of the British campaign to end the slave trade, but he shows, despite the humanitarian motives of some activists, that the full emancipation for slaves was conditional on their integration into global political economies.*

## Comment on Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution*

NICHOLAS ROGERS

### *Abstract*

*Padraic Scanlan's Freedom's Debtors makes an important intervention in the debate on the abolition of slavery by looking at what actually happened in Sierra Leone as it moved from company project to crown colony. Scanlan shows that anti-slavery advocates were not in practice equity advocates: slaves had to earn their freedom. In so doing he forces us to reconsider the manifold forms of bonded labour that characterised the Atlantic world and the imperatives of a globalizing market that demanded the continuing production of tropical staples by captive workforces, before and after slavery. Scanlan arguably blends abolition and emancipation in the opening phase of the British campaign to end the slave trade, but he shows, despite the humanitarian motives of some activists, that the full emancipation for slaves was conditional on their integration into global political economies.*

### *Résumé*

*L'ouvrage de Padraic Scanlan, Freedom's Debtors, apporte une contribution importante au débat sur l'abolition de l'esclavage en examinant ce qui s'est réellement passé en Sierra Leone alors que ce pays est passé du statut de projet d'entreprise à celui de colonie de la Couronne. Scanlan démontre que les défenseurs de l'antiesclavagisme n'étaient pas en pratique des défenseurs de l'équité : les esclaves devaient gagner leur liberté. Ce faisant, il nous oblige à réexaminer les formes multiples de servitude pour dettes qui caractérisaient le monde atlantique et les impératifs d'un marché globalisant qui exigeait la poursuite de la production de denrées tropicales de base par une main-d'œuvre captive, avant et après l'esclavage. On peut dire que Scanlan associe abolition et émancipation dans la phase initiale de la campagne britannique pour mettre fin à la traite des esclaves, mais il démontre, malgré les motivations humanitaires de certains militants, que la pleine émancipation des esclaves était subordonnée à leur intégration dans les économies politiques mondiales.*

*Freedom's Debtors* traces the fortunes of Sierra Leone, a novel settlement for liberated Africans, both as a company trading post and then as a Crown Colony. It is not a colonial history, but, as Scanlan notes

early on, "a history of the ideology of antislavery in practice."<sup>1</sup> It is a magnificent first book, distinguished for its texture, argument, and analytical rigour.

The scenario at the beginning and end offers segues from antislavery to imperialism. It illuminates the bombast and pretensions of Governor Charles MacCarthy in his war with the Asante and his desire to bring British "civilization" to Africa. Although this is not explicit in the text, it gestures ironically to other imperial "heroes" who reputedly had their heads "archived" by Indigenous people, most famously Captain Cook.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere the narrative speaks of British disorientation in Sierra Leone, of frustrated dreams and tropical illness, of frustrations with intractable workers, and of paranoid prejudices against certain groups. Here one might cite Perronet Thompson's victimization and prosecution of Anne Edmonds for infanticide and concealment, which reflected his stereotyping of Nova Scotian settlers as lazy, dissolute, even republican; ingrates who would not reconcile themselves to their subordinate status in the new settlement, despite promises from John Clarkson of a fair measure of self-government in their new home.<sup>3</sup>

The grim, sometimes serio-comic quality of these stories registers the gap between metropolitan expectation and colonial practice; predictable given the high, unrealistic hopes that abolitionists like Thomas Clarkson had of Sierra Leone as a bridgehead for new forms of British commerce and capitalism. This gap, this aporia or lack of alignment between official intention and practicality, is worth reiterating given the recent efforts of Steven Pincus and his stable of historians to exaggerate the roles played by ideology and by changes to metropolitan policy in the shaping of imperialism, neglecting what we might call those Braudelian factors which influenced colonial practice: terrain or terroir, communications, environment, and the practicalities of local trade.<sup>4</sup> In *Freedom's Debtors* Scanlan emphasizes the fact that slave-free Sierra Leone could not survive without slave-grown rice, that local conventions of barter did not accord with British notions of commodity exchange, that the land was unsuitable for the kinds of staples that the British hoped to grow there. Basically, it was not easy to extricate the new settlement from its embedded location in African exchanges (including slavery); and indeed, even the landed title of Sierra Leone was the product of misunderstandings of what the British "purchased" from Indigenous people.<sup>5</sup>

In this respect it is interesting to compare *Freedom's Debtors* with Simon Schama's *Rough Crossings*, which tracks the fortunes of black

loyalists through the American Revolution to Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone.<sup>6</sup> Schama's story is one of frustrated dreams by blacks who hoped for a fuller measure of freedom; who after a settler revolt in 1800 had to come to terms with a tougher company regime under Zachary Macaulay, backed (rather ironically) by ex-Jamaican Maroons. It says more about John Clarkson's governorship and efforts to broker some racial equality in Sierra Leone, but it is principally a history of personalities and frustrated democratic dreams. It does not delve deeply into the very contradictions of the African experiment as a purportedly free-trade, counter-slave-trade venture. Scanlan is able to do this more successfully by extending the time frame beyond abolition. He pays less attention to the early efforts by Nova Scotians to advance settler democracy.<sup>7</sup> That said, the two books, with different styles and objectives, usefully complement one another, especially in expanding the transatlantic dimensions of the Sierra Leone project.

Scanlan's focus on the "ideology of antislavery in practice" constitutes his major intervention in the debate on abolition. There has long been a dispute as to whether the abolition of the slave trade was an altruistic measure on the part of the British, or a pragmatic, expedient move in a changing industrial climate in which slave plantation labour was a hindrance rather than a bonus. Scanlan's work on Sierra Leone shows that British anti-slavery advocates were not equity advocates. Liberated slaves were not quite free; they had to earn their freedom. "Liberated Africans were freedom's debtors" writes Scanlan, "no longer enslaved, but bound to the British empire by the rhetoric and practise of anti-slavery."<sup>8</sup> Abolitionists were concerned about the civilized nature of liberated slaves and their propensity to work and adapt in global political economies. Scanlan reveals that after the ending of the British slave trade in 1807, Africans liberated from condemned ships remained wards of the state and technically prizes, a status that meant they were assigned duties in this early colony that benefitted Britain's imperial, global economy. We don't always know what happened to these "prize blacks"; we know a lot more about the profits they brought to naval officers and vice-admiralty officials during the final years of the Napoleonic wars. But it is clear that many liberated Africans were more or less conscripted into the Royal African Corps or enlisted in the West Indian regiments protecting British plantations from the French and insurgent slaves. Later, some Africans enrolled as indentured labourers in the plantations themselves. David Northrup calculates that over 40,000 African migrants worked in this capacity

in British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica before 1914. British abolitionists and their supporters may have heralded the ending of the slave trade as a great moral victory, and some like Seymour Drescher have even regarded it as “econocide,” that is to say, that abolition entailed a substantial economic sacrifice because the slave trade and the tropical economies it serviced were still very profitable.<sup>9</sup> But in practice freedom for blacks was conditional upon their integration into British imperial ventures and the global capitalist economy of the early nineteenth century, an economy reliant upon plantation products for consumption and industrial production. This is why so much emphasis was made in Sierra Leone, and later the Caribbean, upon “apprenticeship,” the training and “civilizing” of blacks.

Scanlan thus puts the altruistic, philanthropic upbeat interpretation in perspective. Drescher and others may be right in stressing the moral imperatives that mobilized thousands of Britons against the slave trade, and the very successful transatlantic reform movement that was launched by the abolitionists, but this is very much a white metropolitan perspective. In a recent summary of his argument in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, Drescher adopts a counter-factual argument to suggest that abolition dramatically restricted the expansion of slave economies, which might have tripled in the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Quite apart from the dubious assumptions this makes about the limitless demand for textiles and tropical goods, not to mention the changing labour requirements in the era of coal and iron, Drescher rather misses the point. The contrast is not between slave and free labour, but the continuum of coerced and partially-free labour in the early modern and modern world economy. Plantation economies required bonded labour long after emancipation. Almost two million migrants, most of them Asian, were enlisted on indentured contracts to harvest sugar, cotton, coffee, and cacao in the period before 1914. In places like Mauritius, which the British captured from the French in 1810, abolition was initially ignored; in the years 1811–21, 30,000 slaves were imported from Madagascar to grow and pick cotton. Thereafter, once the scandal of illegally imported slaves was revealed, indentured labour from India was brought in to consolidate the work.<sup>11</sup> What *Freedom's Debtors* gestures towards is the great arc of unfree labour in the making of the modern global economy, from European indentured labour, to slave labour after 1650, to Asian indentured labour after 1840 in the British and French Caribbean, with slave labour persisting in the Americas until the 1880s.

Too much interpretative weight has been placed on the polarity of free and slave labour in the international political economy of 1600–1914. Not enough attention has been paid to the diverse forms of bonded labour deployed in frontier economies, and to other areas of labour regulation: to master and servant law, which in Britain and the Empire criminalized much of labour relations until 1875; to conscription or quasi-conscription in the armed forces of which naval impressment is an important example, and one that crops up in *Freedom's Debtors* in the shape of the British impressment of American seamen during the War of 1812; to the use of vagrancy legislation to restrict the movement of labour and enhance wage dependency.<sup>12</sup> I stress the latter because one of the continuing fears of abolition and colonial advocates is that subject peoples will live a squatter existence, that they will not improve the land, or fit in with employers who want to improve it; a very Lockean concept, characteristic of British agrarian capitalism from the late seventeenth century onwards and central to land policies with Indigenous peoples, the corollary being that unworked land is *terra nullius*, land owned by no-one. In Sierra Leone it is noteworthy that black Nova Scotians who did not work their country lots had their acreage reduced to 20% of the original grant, ostensibly on the grounds of security.<sup>13</sup>

I would like to engage Padraic Scanlan on three points in his fine book. The first relates to Scanlan's conflation of abolition and anti-slavery. Having just completed a microhistory of a slave-trade murder trial in the age of abolition,<sup>14</sup> I am not entirely happy with this. I can see the logic of the fusion, which was implicit in the official inquiries into the slave trade, where discussions of slave trading and the Middle Passage inevitably led to a discussion of the decadent character of slave societies that depended upon a constant influx of disposable Africans. Pro-slavery groups found themselves defending slave societies as much as the trade. *Tactically*, British abolitionists continually made a distinction between abolition and emancipation, far more so than the American or French. William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson argued that an end to the trade would force planters to deal reasonably with their workforces, which would have to be demographically self-sustaining. They officially endorsed what was known as an ameliorist position. Both believed slaves were not ready for immediate freedom and required a transitional period to provide them with the necessary skills and discipline for a market economy. Clarkson talked at times of the need for planter paternalism to smooth the transition

to freedom, although, rather contradictorily, he also talked of freedom as a natural right, particularly during his time in France.<sup>15</sup>

Scanlan also argues that “in practice British abolitionism was acquisitive. It was not selfless or self-sacrificing except in its rhetoric.”<sup>16</sup> With the caveat “in practice” I would agree, although I would point out that there was a strain of abolitionism — a Romantic strain, one linked in many ways to the French Revolution — that was far more interested in the transcendental qualities of abolition in the making of modern man. In this group I would put the radical millenarian Granville Sharp, the chair of the London abolition society and the man who pioneered the Sierra Leone project, along with the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who in *The Watchman* saw abolition as a challenge to a consumer society of false needs, a far cry from the profit-minded imperatives of others.<sup>17</sup> I would also cite one of the most influential mobilizers of public opinion in the 1790s, Thomas Cooper, a radical cotton merchant, whose *Letters on the Slave Trade* was enormously popular and published in serial form in one of the Manchester newspapers. Cooper was certainly a man who melded abolition with antislavery, linking slavery to decadent luxury and arbitrary power and seeing it as an affront to human liberty and independence. Interestingly he also detested “the manufacturing system” in terms that anticipated Marx. Having seen it at work in industrial Lancashire, he wrote:

You must on this system have a large portion of the people converted into mere machines, ignorant, debauched, and brutal, that the surplus value of their labour of 12 or 14 hours a day, may go into the pockets and supply the luxuries of rich, commercial, and manufacturing capitalists.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, I would like to address Scanlan’s argument that “abolitionism was militarized.”<sup>19</sup> I was initially a little troubled by this because I could envisage colonial settlements where the initial bridgehead demanded the close co-ordination of human resources and some constraints upon freedom of movement if required by the military situation. This was true of the founding of Halifax in 1749, for example, where the British were confronted with warlike Mi’kmaq and ambiguously loyal Acadians in the Bay of Fundy. Consequently, Lord Cornwallis told settlers, many of them demobilized soldiers and sailors, that their land grants would have to be postponed until the status of the colony stabilized. Essentially, he used them as forced labour to build Halifax and Chebucto harbour, and he soon complained of a rag-



tail of “poor idle worthless vagabonds” who didn’t measure up to his orders. Sailors, in particular, had greater opportunities to fly the coop, to sail down to Boston where their prospects were a lot brighter.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the predicament that settlers faced in Nova Scotia’s typhus-ridden camp was not dissimilar to that in Sierra Leone. Land entitlements proved more conditional than promised; the terrain was unfamiliar; the climate wrecked lives (although less dramatically than in Sierra Leone); the discipline was harsh, with a military commander holding extensive arbitrary power, dictating terms.

And yet there is a sense in which there is a necessary relation between abolition and militarism, although not in the sense conceived by Padraic Scanlan. It was a critical contingent factor in the making of Sierra Leone as a crown colony, for it was necessary to secure supply lines for liberated Africans, and to insist on military service when the fledgling colony was part of the British force against Napoleon. I am also thinking of what some have called “global humanitarianism,” a goal predicated on the elimination of the slave trade and the push for human rights. In this regard, British abolitionism demanded a conspicuous naval presence, particularly in a world where slave trading continued to be tolerated and where the legal personality of blacks was precarious. In other words, in an age of legal pluralism, abolitionism and its corollary, legal protection for slaves, had to be policed.<sup>21</sup> This meant abolitionism and the military often went hand in hand and became factors critical to the emergence of Britain’s so-called “liberal” empire.

To conclude, Padraic Scanlan’s *Freedom’s Debtors*, together with his impressive articles in *Past and Present* and the *American Historical Review*, constitute an important intervention in the long and complex debate on the ending of the slave trade and slavery in the British Empire.<sup>22</sup> Like Eric Williams and other materialist historians, he challenges the notion that abolition and ultimately emancipation were altruistic gestures by the British when they are set in the broader context of trade, war, and empire. If abolitionism pulsed with the politics of affect and Christian philanthropy at home, abroad it meant something else. British anti-slavery advocates were concerned about the “civilized” nature of liberated slaves and their propensity to work and adapt in global political economies. British abolitionists may have heralded the ending of the slave trade as a great moral victory, but in practice full freedom for blacks was conditional upon their integration into the global capitalist economy of the early nineteenth century.



Scanlan's work thus forms an important bridge to the post-emancipation world, when indentured labour had to be brought in to keep many plantation economies running. It illuminates an important juncture between the old British Empire of trade and plantation slavery and a new one of imperial trusteeship and dependency in a British world-dominated economy. It also offers some critical reflections on the differences between British and American abolitionists, the latter more devoted to equity arguments about full citizenship for all in the light of America's incomplete revolution. Yet American abolitionism, as the British, had to confront national economic imperatives. Indeed, cotton, a prime mover in the economy of the early American republic, demanded a larger slave labour force than the sub-tropical products of tobacco, rice, and indigo that prevailed in the colonial economy.

\*\*\*

NICHOLAS ROGERS is Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus in the Department of History, York University, Toronto. He is the author of eight books on Britain and the Atlantic World in the 18th century, with one forthcoming. His most recent publication is *Murder on the Middle Passage. The trial of Captain Kimber* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2020).

NICHOLAS ROGERS est professeur émérite de recherche au département d'histoire de l'Université York, à Toronto. Il est l'auteur de huit livres sur la Grande-Bretagne et le monde atlantique au XVIIIe siècle, dont un à paraître. Sa publication la plus récente est *Murder on the Middle Passage. The trial of Captain Kimber* (Woodbridge : Boydell Press, 2020).