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The British Part in Suppressing the African Slave Trade

When in 1442 Prince Henry 'the Navigator' was examining the West African coast he directed one of his officers, who had captured some Moors, to carry them back to their own country. The Moors in return, presented the Prince with some gold dust and ten negroes. This was the beginning of the European part in the African slave trade.

Forts were established on the African coast and many negroes were brought into Spain from these Portuguese settlements ; the colonial slave trade firstly appears in the form of the introduction into the newly discovered Western world of the descendents of these negroes.

It was not ~~unlike~~ to be expected that trader England would long remain outside so enterprising and lucrative a business; the doubtful honour of

being the first British slave trader belongs to Sir John Hawkins. At first just a sideline, this slave trade on his third voyage became his chief care, for he took four hundred slaves to Spanish America, selling them for about twenty-five pounds each. Queen Elizabeth, while encouraging trading in the New World, looked askance at the human cargo. Indeed, it was not until the Restoration, when an African Company arose with a charter containing a reference to slaves, in 1663, that the trade was seriously considered in England.

In the very early days there were no English colonies, so the trade was confined to Spanish ones, but after the foundation of our colonies, it did not take very long for slaves to be imported. In 1620 a Dutch ship arrived at Jamestown to sell part of her cargo to the tobacco planters. The demand for servile labour, growing slowly at first, as the plantations increased, so the demand for negroes rose too.

Despite the heavy guilt of Britain's share

in the early slavery just mentioned, which was to last for nearly three hundred years, and the share of the country generally in the lucrative business of slave trading, the whole credit of stirring the world to abolition and emancipation undoubtedly stands gloriously to her credit.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century a small coterie of enthusiasts threw their whole heart into the extinction, not indeed of slave holding, but of the execrable slave trade from West Africa, and all its horrible concomitants. Wilberforce, who took every opportunity in the House of Commons of exposing the evils of the trade, and Clarkson, who at the same time, conducted the agitation throughout the whole country, are but two of many.

British enterprise had long been engaged in slavery, but it is safe to say that few of those who ventured their money in what was a profitable trade, had any idea of what it meant.

The national conscience, never so far stirred, was roused, despite a sometimes justifiable opposition to the methods and language used by the abolitionists, and soon decided in anger and shame that Britain should no longer have a prominent share in so inhuman an institution.

The first anti-slavery blow was struck a little earlier than the times mentioned above, in 1772, when Granville Sharp obtained from Lord Mansfield, in the name of the whole bench, the epoch-making decision that whenever a slave set his foot on the soil of the British Isles, he was free. At this time there were about twenty thousand slaves in England, largely servants of retired planters ; the Mansfield decision made them free to leave their masters as they wished.

In 1791 legislative sanction was given to the establishment of the Sierra Leone Company, for colonisation of this district on the West Coast of Africa and the discouragement of the slave trade there. This step forward was due

largely to the efforts of the 'Association for the Abolition of Negro Slavery' founded by Granville Sharp in 1787. The idea was to settle negroes who had come to London, and were at that time working and starving in many different capacities. Four hundred of the poorer of them were sent out immediately to the colony.

Earnestly and eagerly did Sharp develop their cause, taken up at this time by Wilberforce who, from 1787 led the growing group of abolitionists. After many failures, his Bill of Abolition was made law in 1807. This enacted that no vessel should leave from any port within the British dominions after the first of May 1807 with the intention of carrying slaves, and that no slave should be landed in the colonies after the first of March 1808. This Act was habitually violated, as the traders knew that, if one voyage in three were successful, they would make huge profits. This state of things, it was plain, must remain so long as there were

only fines were inflicted on offenders. Accordingly, in 1811, a bill was passed which declared the traffic to be a felony punishable with transportation. This proved successful and the trade virtually ceased.

The abolitionists were now eager to proceed, and did eventually proceed, to the entirely separate though allied question, of emancipation. In these early days, 'abolition' meant the ending of the actual trade from West Africa, while 'emancipation' meant the freeing of all slaves.

England, however, was far in advance of many of the other European countries in whose colonies slavery still flourished, or by whose nationals the slave trade was still carried on.

The final defeat of Napoleon in 1814 seemed a great occasion on which to summon the world to reconsider its attitude and to make humanity its own. Hardly had the first Treaty of Paris been signed in 1814 when Holland followed Britain with a declaration in favour of abolition. France agreed to support Britain in advocating abolition, but gave herself

five years during which she intended to make as much money out of the slaves as she could.

At Vienna the abolitionists looked for some definite pronouncement in their favour, but had to content themselves with the pious declaration of February 1815, to the effect that while their desire was for total and universal opposition, each must reserve the right to fix its own time.

All this took place before the Emperor Napoleon's return from Elba. During his too brief restoration, he abolished the trade, and this abolition was confirmed at the second Treaty of Paris. Unhappily, after this, <sup>N</sup>may French ships sailed Annually from the French ports to run the blockade of the British cruisers in carrying slaves from West Africa to the West Indies. This unco-operative spirit on behalf of His Christian Majesty's government was largely responsible for the inefficiency of the blockade which had been imposed when the trade was forbidden in 1807.

British policy aimed at three things, that all powers should proclaim the slave trade illegal, that their nationals should observe this, and that all nations should declare slave trading one of the forms of piracy.

In accordance with these aims, Great Britain persuaded Portugal to declare slave trading North of the Equator immediately illegal and everywhere illegal after February 1830 ; England paid three hundred thousand pounds as compensation. Unfortunately, the Portuguese did not seem willing to cease their trade entirely, so that Britain would have done better to have kept her money.

It was not until the early 1830s that progress really began to be made. With the deposition of Charles X and the accession of Louis Philippe all doors were really closed to France, French cruisers began to do their duty, an agreement was reached between Great Britain and France by which they could search each others' ships, and the captured

slavers could be broken up instead of being sold - to other slavers. Denmark, Sardinia, and Sweden all took the same course.

Because of British activity many of the slave ships were captured, <sup>but</sup> to make as large profits as possible from the ships that did get through, traders crammed them much, much too full, leading to utterly inhuman treatment for the cargoes.

In 1833 the Emancipation Act was passed ; in British possessions slavery had ceased, but in other countries it still continued, so the blockade had to be kept up on the 'slave' coast. But with the prohibition of the import of slaves into Brazil and Cuba, the Spanish colony, which was enforced in 1865, largely owing to the not so gentle persuasion of Great Britain, the export of slaves from the West coast of Africa ceased, and the British navy's long vigil was over.

On the East coast it was the labour needs of the great islands, Madagascar, Bourbon and Mauritius, as they became ripe for development

that created the same sort of demand as sent the slavers to the coast of Guinea. In this case, Zanzibar and its Arabs were entrepot and suppliers, Portugal assisting. It is thought that about nineteen thousand passed every year from the Nyassa region of Africa to Zanzibar. Besides the trade from Zanzibar to the French islands, the Sultan of Muscat, ruler of Zanzibar, had a very large and lucrative coastal trade of his own, of slaves carried up and down the coast of Africa in dhows for sale in Africa itself.

It was not to be expected that Zanzibar would be free from such a profitable business as the slave trade in negroes, that race so obviously sent into the world to be enslaved ! But British influence increased and between 1858 and 1861 eight thousand slaves were freed. This did not touch the main problem, so in 1870 the House of Commons appointed a select committee resulting, in 1873, in the appointment of a special anti-slavery commissioner. It was now recognised that Zanzibar and its

hinterland was, so far as slavery was concerned, one of the world's plague spots.

In 1876 at our instigation, the Sultan issued an Edict prohibiting the export of slaves, while in 1890 he absolutely prohibited slave holding and slavery. In Madagascar, which had been supplied from the Mozambique coast, the import and sale of slaves was prohibited in 1877. On paper this seemed excellent, but it required a little more pressure by Britain before slave trading in these parts ceased in practice as well as in theory.

There now only remains to tell of Britain's part in the suppression of the trade in the Sudan and the central parts of Africa. Formerly, in the Sudan, such half-hearted orders as might now and again emanate from a distant Cairo had no effect. Ere long, however, some of the traders became so powerful that the Khedive began to fear a rival power, so in 1874 he appointed General (then Colonel) Gordon to be Governor-General of the Equatorial Province. His task was to try and

re-establish his master's authority by stamping out the trade in humans. He met with much temporary success in his province, but his work was all useless because in the neighbouring province of Kartoum, the Egyptian Governor-General was hand in glove with the traders. After three years hard work, Gordon resigned his post in disgust.

The Khedive was disgusted too - at Gordon's resignation, and offered him control of both provinces, so he returned, eager to destroy the slave traders, to protect the people, and to make a human land of what was almost an uncivilised continent.

He worked with amazing energy, with very good results, but when the Great Powers removed the Khedive in 1879, Gordon had to resign. Once his strong hand was removed, the Sudan broke into revolt under the Mahdi, and all Gordon's good work was undone, leaving the provinces once more in confusion.

After the battle of Omdurman in 1898, came

peace unbelievable to a sore tried land. The story of the freeing and settling on land of the vast population of slaves is a story in wisdom of administration that stands for all time as a memorial to the energy and humanity of British administration.

BOOKS CONSULTED

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