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# **A “Very Extensive System of Peculation and Jobbing”: The Liberated African Department of Sierra Leone, humanitarian governance and the fraud inquiry of 1848**

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## **Abstract**

After the Abolition Act of 1807, over 100,000 Africans were liberated at Sierra Leone, and “disposed of” by the Liberated African Department. For over half a century, this department was integrated deeply into the fabric of colonial life. In 1848, a “most extensive and searching investigation” was launched into allegations of corruption and embezzlement. This article seeks to evaluate how the 1848 enquiry can inform our understanding of humanitarian governance in the British Empire, and broader, related intersecting themes of empire, slave emancipation, labour organisation and the possibilities of freedom for formerly enslaved Africans.

Early on the morning of 4 June 1848, just as breakfast was being served, the Acting-Governor of Sierra Leone, Benjamin Pine, sent two representatives, Mr. Aiken and Mr. Pike, down to the Liberated African Yard to seize and bring back to Government House six of the wooden mess tubs, each containing breakfast for ten adults—in total, the breakfast for sixty of the approximately one thousand individuals recently liberated from slave ships and housed in the Yard at Freetown at that time, pending “disposal” and resettlement. Upon measuring each tub’s contents, the commissioners reported, just as they had suspected following a tip-off from a local merchant, that the quantity of food being provided to the liberated Africans was about half of what it should have been.<sup>1</sup> Comparing the food in the tubs with the amounts signed off for that day by the department’s chief clerk, William Dixon, they concluded that neither the regulation type nor amount of food was being provided. Aiken and Pike could not say whether it was a case of theft by the officers of the department, or whether the

contractors never delivered the food in the first place. “On either assumption,” they considered it “undoubted that more than one party connected with the Liberated African Yard [was] deeply implicated.”<sup>2</sup> The Acting Governor ordered a “most extensive and searching investigation,” specifically of William Dixon.<sup>3</sup> This inquiry produced some eight hundred pages of evidence. It uncovered, as the acting governor described it, a “very extensive system of speculation and jobbing,” with profound health consequences for the Africans held in the Yard.<sup>4</sup>

This article seeks to evaluate what light the evidence of the 1848 enquiry can shed on the workings of the Liberated African Department of Sierra Leone over the decades-long course of its operations, and how this department—positioned at the intersection of the anti-slave trade intervention and of routine colonial governance—can inform our understanding of broader, intersecting themes of empire, slave emancipation, labour organisation and the possibilities of freedom for formerly enslaved Africans in the British Empire. In doing so, this article looks to build upon the work of Fae Dussart and Alan Lester, and, within the same constructive critique of humanitarianism’s relationship with empire, to propose that the example of the Liberated African Department of Sierra Leone represents both an earlier example of humanitarian governance than those previously identified, and also a distinct elaboration of the concept: one that blended “emergency” and “developmental” humanitarianism, a pragmatic programme of value creation organised around unfree contract labour, and a substantial ideological dimension: a distinctly imperialist discourse of African “improvement.”<sup>5</sup> This article will argue that the Liberated African Department was a space where the tensions between “humanity” (or what would in the present day be called humanitarianism), profit and competing ideologies of appropriate forms of freedom for the empire’s Black subjects were worked through over the course of six decades, and that this represented an important crucible for subsequent elaborations of the concept in other locations and contexts.

The first section traces the department’s trajectory over the lifespan of the suppression campaign, swelling from an office of one person in 1808 to an employer of hundreds, before being whittled back down to a very modest size in the mid-century and closed finally in 1891.<sup>6</sup> The second section outlines the fraud of which Dixon was accused, exploring the opportunities created by the logistical and

commercial arrangements of the Yard. The 1848 case was not, as this section shows, by any means the first or only case of corruption or embezzlement of which an employee of the department stood accused, or the only such incident to affect that administration's reputation. The third and final section will consider some of the wider information it is possible to glean from the enquiry regarding the intricate complex of the department's operations at its main site, the Yard in Freetown, both before and after the reductions of 1843. In particular, it will consider how the regular routines and "ideal" job descriptions of the Yard's clerks and overseers illuminates the forms of discipline and governmentality associated with the abolition intervention's overtly "humanitarian" aim of transforming liberated Africans into compliant colonial subjects, and how some individual liberated Africans held in the Yard may have viewed their confinement.

Overall, this article sets out to do two perhaps apparently contradictory things: to focus on an isolated case of abuse, and use it to reflect upon the routine practices of a department that for decades functioned as the effective colonial administration for much of the colony. The objective is to tease out this apparent tension and to show how, both before and after the liberated Africans were released from the Yard and into the "disposal" pathway that had been determined for them, the department can be understood both as a powerfully coercive space of confinement, discipline and surveillance *and* as one subject to complacency, wilful oversight and neglectful instrumentalism; likewise, how it can be understood as a structure of post-intervention governance organised around distinctly humanitarian registers, and yet could still be, in essence, one final "middle passage" designed to funnel the "liberated" Africans not towards full freedom, but along what Clare Anderson has termed the "continuum of labour exploitation."<sup>7</sup>

### **Evolution of the Department, 1808–91<sup>8</sup>**

When the British legislative abolition of the slave trade in 1807 created the category of "liberated African"—a status conferred on at least 180,969 individuals released from approximately 1,985 slave ships over the course of half a century—of these, over 100,000 were adjudicated at Freetown, Sierra Leone, and "disposed of" by the administrative structure created for this purpose.<sup>9</sup>

Initially, it was the legal responsibility of only one person to manage the documentation, care and “disposal” of liberated African arrivals.<sup>10</sup> The 1807 Abolition Act, made operational by the first Order in Council of 16 March 1808, designated “the Collector or chief officer of the customs” responsible “to receive, protect and provide for” those slaves seized by the Royal Navy and adjudicated under “prize” terms at British ports.<sup>11</sup> By the end of 1810, the number of liberated Africans brought to Sierra Leone had exceeded 1,600. Governor Columbine recommended that the Collector of Customs be relieved of this burdensome duty, and a “Superintendent of Captured Negroes” appointed.<sup>12</sup> The first person to hold that office was Kenneth Macaulay, an eighteen-year-old second cousin of Zachary Macaulay, who had been in the colony since 1808, and who—as an early personification of the tangle of interests the liberated African system facilitated—also acted as prize agent for Macaulay and Babington, and, on occasion, as acting judge of the Sierra Leone Vice-Admiralty Court.<sup>13</sup> From 1811, a separate parliamentary vote supported “the subsistence of the Captured Negroes.”<sup>14</sup> The “Captured Negro Department,” as it evolved over the following decade, was renamed in 1822 the “Liberated African Department.”<sup>15</sup>

As the war with France drew to a close in 1814–15 and the legal basis of the Navy’s suppression campaign became problematic, the nature of the intervention had to shift, and with it, the administration of both the prize money system and of liberated Africans.<sup>16</sup> During this time, the department entered into a partnership with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) whereby the CMS took over the “improvement” of liberated African villages and schools, and the Liberated African Department focused its energies on the Yard, where new arrivals were deposited from the slave ships and held for a period of weeks or months pending their adjudication, enlistment, apprenticeship or resettlement by other means. A somewhat utopian and impracticable arrangement, the partnership collapsed in the mid-1820s, and the administrative and managerial vacuum left by the missionaries in the villages had to be filled once again by the secular staff of the Liberated African Department. For the next twenty years, the department effectively administered much of the colony’s local government. By 1841, it listed over 200 people on its payroll, of whom twenty-four were officers and senior management<sup>17</sup> Many of the lower-ranking employees were themselves former liberated Africans who had been through the system and had been

for some time resident in the colony. In 1838, one Acting Superintendent called it “this most complicated Department, which I beg leave to observe is the most varied and difficult in the colony.”<sup>18</sup>

The criticism was a harbinger of things to come. In 1843, influenced by a highly critical commission report, and in the dual expectation that the slave trade was on a terminal decline and that Africans liberated in Sierra Leone could be persuaded to emigrate to the West Indies, Lord Stanley ordered that the department be reduced “to the lowest point consistent with the maintenance of order and promotion of education among those liberated Africans already settled in the colony.”<sup>19</sup> He professed to be at a loss to understand why “the crowds of petty functionaries of various denominations, who are attached to each village” should continue to be employed.<sup>20</sup> Richard Doherty, a former governor of the colony, argued however that the department was “in effect the government of the country districts”; that those individuals, known as magistrates in other contexts, in Sierra Leone

bear the name of managers, and in addition to their magisterial duties, perform the kinder, more paternal offices of watching, advising and directing persons but lately reclaimed from the savage state; settling their differences, preventing their offences, and encouraging their good efforts.

“To abolish their office would merely be to withdraw this superintendence... without any diminution of expense.”<sup>21</sup>

Stanley was not swayed. Departmental officer numbers were cut to just three: the general superintendent (a role filled by the governor), one cash and store keeper and one writer. Primary responsibility for the welfare and disposal of the liberated Africans was transferred back once again to the collector of customs. Auxiliary staff numbers were cut to just thirty-six in total for the whole colony.<sup>22</sup> The supply of stores was to be reduced if possible to “the amount necessary for about 500 persons.”<sup>23</sup> The following year, the Liberated African Hospital at Kissy was transferred to the colonial government and re-designated a Colonial Hospital.<sup>24</sup>

Stanley's reductions reflected a false optimism about the decline of the transatlantic trade. In fact, the 1840s and 1850s saw a fresh burst of slaving activity, sustained by Brazilian and Cuban market demands. It was not until March 1863 that the final slave-carrying ship adjudicated at Freetown was condemned by the Vice-Admiralty Court.<sup>25</sup> The Navy continued to interdict smaller slave-carrying vessels on the West African coast until 1864.<sup>26</sup> Officer numbers of the Liberated African Department crept up again during these years, but were again reduced in 1874, when all but the clerk in charge and one messenger were discharged.<sup>27</sup> By the early 1890s, the now tiny establishment remained responsible only for the support of a few pensioners and hospital in-patients, and the maintenance of liberated African children at Charlotte school.<sup>28</sup> In 1891, the department was finally wound up, the school at Charlotte closed down and responsibility for the support of the hospitalised transferred to the colony's poor fund. A small number of pensioners continued to be supported from the colonial budget until their deaths, the final payment of which was made in 1922.<sup>29</sup>

To put this administration into context, this was the largest of the liberated African administrations that developed across the Atlantic. The other sites included St. Helena, the West Indies, Gambia and Cape Colony, where vice-admiralty courts adjudicated cases, and after 1817, Cuba, Loanda, Surinam and Brazil, where mixed-commission courts sat. Local circumstances and attitudes led to significantly varied outcomes for the liberated African populations in each.

### **The Fraud Inquiry of 1848<sup>30</sup>**

The investigation into William Dixon commenced when, in early June 1848, the Commissary at Sierra Leone communicated his suspicions to Acting-Governor Benjamin Pine that "peculation had for some time past been practiced" within the Liberated African Department.<sup>31</sup> On the same day, the department's contractor for rice, a British trader named Charles Heddle, informed Pine that over the past couple of months, "an entire change had taken place in the diet of the liberated Africans in the Yard by the substitution of fufu for rice."<sup>32</sup> Heddle complained that this change was "very unfair toward himself," and suggested that it had been occasioned by "improper motives." Upon receipt of these allegations, Pine recollected recent comments of naval officers who, when delivering a captured slave ship to Freetown,

had reported that the liberated Africans still resident in the Yard from the previous disembarkation “appeared to them to have become lean and emaciated.”<sup>33</sup> Pine resolved upon an immediate investigation and appointed three commissioners: Lawson, the colony’s staff surgeon and principal medical officer; Fergusson, the Colonial Secretary and former colonial surgeon, and Oldfield, marshal of the Vice-Admiralty Court.<sup>34</sup> The commissioners were asked to examine four questions: Had Dixon undertaken without sanction to reform the diet of the liberated Africans? If so, what were his motives? Had Dixon allowed goods of insufficient quality or quantity to be accepted from contractors? And had Dixon stolen, or allowed others to steal from the department?

Following an investigation, the commissioners concluded that Dixon had in fact altered the food schedule: he had replaced rice with fufu and admitted as much freely, defending this decision on the grounds that the liberated Africans had requested the more familiar food of their countries of origin. “In complying with the wishes of the people,” he argued in an appeal to the Colonial Secretary, “I was acting in conformity with my instructions... and I conceive with the intention of the government.”<sup>35</sup> While we know very little else about Dixon’s background, the enquiry did document that he was a settled liberated African who had once been processed through the Yard. Nonetheless, even taking this into consideration, the commissioners professed to doubt the truth of Dixon’s claim and the professed selflessness of his motives, not least because the change in diet coincided exactly with the appointment of a new governor, who would not immediately spot the alteration. Moreover, in addition to the missing foodstuffs, the commissioners discovered that many liberated Africans had not received their allowance of two suits of clothing, recorded as issued, and that nineteen brass kettles were unaccounted for.

Dixon defended himself vigorously. He insisted on his honesty and humane motives, and pleaded that any errors were the result of the recent reduction of the department and the increased scope of his role. On the subject of the missing brass kettles, he claimed that they had fallen in the well. The commissioners reported that a search of the well revealed only one very old, broken kettle, sunken in the muddy sand.<sup>36</sup> After compiling and considering the evidence, they concluded that a “very extensive” fraud was being perpetrated, achieved through underfeeding the liberated

Africans and embezzling the cash difference. Alongside Dixon, several subordinate employees and food contractors were named as suspected co-conspirators.<sup>37</sup> However, since the case relied on circumstantial evidence, their verdict was that Dixon should be dismissed, not prosecuted.<sup>38</sup>

The colony of Sierra Leone had a widespread contemporary reputation for being costly and corrupt, and Dixon's case in the late 1840s was by no means the first allegation of misappropriation of its resources.<sup>39</sup> The colony's collector of customs, A.W. Perceval, was discovered in 1826 to have embezzled over three years a total of £2,639 from customs receipts.<sup>40</sup> Fifteen years later, Royal Commissioner Richard Madden reported that the entire liberated African establishment was based upon "old abuses, time-honoured abuses which have gradually accumulated, and have the sanction of long impunity."<sup>41</sup> These abuses, he reported "were carried on to an extent that would appear hardly credible elsewhere."<sup>42</sup> He cited the example of a recent investigation carried out by Governor Doherty into the liberated African hospital at Kissy after an allowance of 610 gallons of Madeira wine was drawn for the additional comfort of "poor negroes... suffering [from] exhaustion and debility" consequent to their illnesses.<sup>43</sup> Upon making enquiries, the hospital accountant admitted that ninety of the patients for whom this allowance had been drawn did not exist. Doherty speculated that some patients may have been real, but had been kidnapped and resold into slavery, or that the children had been apprenticed out by the hospital accountant at a fee of 10 shillings per child and "greedily received by the people."<sup>44</sup> In a related investigation, it was found upon the death of Mr. Harper, a manager on the Banana Islands, that between his official returns and the number of children found to be actually attending school, there existed "a difference of 55."<sup>45</sup> This practice of reporting inflated numbers was "a practice which also prevailed in other districts."<sup>46</sup> Of most shock to Madden was the discovery that the returns Harper sent to Freetown detailing the deaths of schoolchildren had included in one three-month period a total of 256 deaths, "and yet no inquiry was instituted, nor any notice taken of such a circumstance."<sup>47</sup> Madden concluded that "the children were undoubtedly apprenticed by the manager on his own account."<sup>48</sup> The papers of the Liberated African Department reveal many more such examples.<sup>49</sup>

Such instances create an impression of a deeply embedded culture of corruption and exploitation amongst the employees of the department, with the collusion of the local population. This impression is further reinforced by European observers' frequent expressions of concern for the safety and wellbeing of the child apprentices, who, it was often alleged, were the downtrodden victims of a profoundly abusive and exploitative settled population, hungry only for cheap labour and an easy life.<sup>50</sup> There is of course a source bias in operation here, in the sense that in any administration, cases of corruption and abuse would be documented and reported in this way, where routine efficiency and honesty, and everyday examples of low-level employees performing their duties honestly probably would not. It is particularly important to note that much of the negative attention on Sierra Leone and its most vocal criticism within metropolitan Britain originated with individuals linked to pro-slavery, or at least anti-intervention, interests, who were determined to demonstrate the failure of the colony and the associated slave-trade suppression campaign, as cautionary lessons against future visionary anti-slavery activities.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, even with the biases and agenda of key actors in mind, it is clear that the department's administrative structures and supply networks facilitated various forms of corruption and embezzlement. The ease with which liberated Africans could be defrauded of their rations by local-level superintendents and managers was recognised relatively early within Sierra Leone, and this influenced some important changes of policy made in the mid-1820s: for example in 1827, when Governor Neil Campbell substituted cash for supplies and rations specifically because he perceived amongst the superintendents in the villages "strong temptations to fraud."<sup>52</sup>

In 1848, the guideline scale of diet provided for every 100 adult liberated Africans twenty-one pounds of beef (including bone), two bushels of rice (dry weight), half a gallon of palm oil, eighteen and one quarter bushels of cocoa leaf, two gallons of salt and two pounds of pepper. This daily food ration was allocated in two meal portions. Children were given the same food, but more frequently throughout the day.<sup>53</sup> On any given day, the number of men, women and children to be fed in this way might be only a handful; sometimes it was upwards of one thousand individuals.<sup>54</sup> The foodstuffs were obtained on credit through regular suppliers, which occasioned very lucrative and jealously guarded contracts.<sup>55</sup> Under Dixon, the

contract for rice had been substituted by approximately two hundred fufu balls and the contracted amount of the beef ration tripled. The negative financial implications for Mr. Heddle, who supplied the rice, were significant, as indeed they were in reverse for Mr. Grant, the liberated African merchant who supplied the fufu and beef. Assuming there was in fact a conspiracy to commit fraud, it seems likely that those responsible might have succeeded for longer had they maintained the existing provisioning order as it stood, and simply siphoned off the foodstuffs to resell them privately. After all, it was not the naval officers' reports of the increasingly "emaciated" look of the Africans in the Yard that prompted Acting-Governor Pine to investigate; it was the suggestion of corruption and the complaint of the rice supplier. The mistake was, it would appear, was that the conspirators both short-rationed the Yard inmates *and* switched suppliers; switched from Charles Heddle, a leading Freetown merchant, member of the Governor's Council and an agent of the trading house Forster and Smith, which was part-owned by Matthew Forster MP, to Mr. Grant, a liberated African merchant. Heddle, with the weight of Forster behind him, had the connections and the influence to ensure his interests were protected.<sup>56</sup>

William Dixon protested his dismissal. He addressed lengthy letters to the commissioners, the governor and the colonial secretary, claiming a conspiracy had been formed against him, with Heddle at the centre: "Not a stone was left unturned," he claimed, "nor a stratagem untried to find a cause to criminate me [sic]."<sup>57</sup> Dixon claimed that Heddle had approached him privately after losing his rice contract with threats of revenge. Subsequently, Pine was, Dixon claimed, "earwig'd by Mr. Heddle and others my secret accusers and columniators [sic]" and became "so determined to carry into execution the threat of his friend Mr. Heddle" that he appointed Oldfield as a judge in the case, "a Gentleman who entertain enemical [sic] feelings towards me."<sup>58</sup>

It is certainly possible that Dixon was, as he claimed, the victim of a particularly clever scheme of revenge by Heddle, with assistance—knowing or unknowing—from Oldfield and perhaps the acting governor. The case against him rested on the plausibility of the reported weight of the breakfast mess tubs and of the reported physical state of the liberated Africans. We know from the reports of the naval officers that the health of the recent arrivals had deteriorated in the Yard; it is

possible that this was not because of short-rationing, but that after Dixon switched suppliers, the inmates of the Yard had in fact received their full food quota, yet were still in a “lean and emaciated state” due to some other factor, such as a shipboard infection or mosquito-borne illnesses. In that case, it is conceivable that on the morning of 4 June 1848, someone might have intentionally misreported the weight of the breakfast mess tubs. This hypothesis is however challenged by the evidence of four liberated African men, who were interviewed about their experience of life in the Yard.

### **Life in the Yard**

Although these transcripts must be considered as heavily mediated sources, nonetheless the four “Aku” men’s testimonials offer a rare glimpse of some aspects of life in the Yard. Akitollah, the first man interviewed on 15 June 1848, reported that he had been about two months in the Yard, during which time the food had alternated between a fufu- and rice-based diet, accordingly as the people would “tire” of eating one and requested a change.<sup>59</sup> He stated that the people who had arrived most recently had “made a disturbance wishing to have foofoo.” Akitollah confirmed that the amount of food then being given to each group of ten men had increased significantly since the investigation began into Dixon’s conduct. He mentioned that upon first arrival, he and his shipmates “could not eat all they got. Their stomachs were weak.”<sup>60</sup> The second man was named Adio.<sup>61</sup> He had also been about two months in the Yard. He confirmed that they had been fed fufu previously, and mentioned that they also sometimes got beans too. Like Akitollah, he mentioned that since the “two white men” came and took away the sample mess tubs, the Yard inmates had had enough to eat, but not before. When they first arrived “the whole of the people in the yard complained that they had not enough to eat.” Adio reportedly said that “they talked but did not fight... they did not speak to anyone in particular, but grumbled amongst themselves.”<sup>62</sup> He said that when asked, the people all requested fufu.<sup>63</sup> The third man was also called Adio, styled “Adio 2” in the case evidence. He stated that he and “Adio 1” always ate together as part of the same group of ten, although contrary to Adio 1’s account, Adio 2 stated that he had “always ha[d] his belly full” and that “all his company of ten men were satisfied.”<sup>64</sup> He later qualified this statement to say that they had never received quite as much food as regulations specified. He did remember the group being asked if they wanted fufu,

and being given fufu and rice but not beans. The “palaver sauce” (generally beef, palm oil, cocoa leaves and salt) he said was “not good.” And they were not given salt, but they “never complained to any body that they had no salt.”<sup>65</sup> The fourth and final witness was Onee, also an Aku and also a shipmate of the previous three.<sup>66</sup> He recalled being fed fufu and beans upon first arriving in the Yard. Since then, the people had complained of not having enough to eat. Generally, they complained only amongst themselves, although it appears on one occasion they directed a complaint to the Yard overseer, who at that time “found fault with the cook.” For the past eleven days the kit had been filled and the people at last had “plenty” to sustain them.<sup>67</sup>

These four testimonies have obvious limitations. It is clear that the interviews were designed to achieve a very specific purpose, and important contextual information is lacking: For example, who interviewed them? Why were these four men chosen for interview rather than others? Were they considered “spokesmen” for the liberated Africans, or chosen randomly? All testimonies were taken through interpreters and appear to consist of answers to specific, set questions. Furthermore, there are gaps in the picture they paint of life in the Yard: none of the men mentioned the overcrowded state of their accommodation at that time.<sup>68</sup> Women and children were in a separate part of the Yard and were not consulted.

Nonetheless, even in spite of the select nature of the group and the leading nature of the interviewers’ interests, the testimonies are a rare glimpse of liberated African perspectives of their detainment in the Yard. Taken at face value, all four testimonies support the claim that those in the Yard were indeed being underfed until the commencement of the investigation, although it is interesting to note that one man appears to have changed his mind in the course of questioning. Only Akitollah made reference to the debilitated state in which the men had arrived, and that the quantity of food the group received upon first arrival mattered less since they had not yet regained the strength to consume more. Akitollah is also the only one of the four whose testimony implies that there was an open line of communication to the department. The other three, Adio 1, Adio 2 and Onee, all mentioned specific, unsatisfactory conditions, yet all stated, or were interpreted to say, that they did not complain. Instead, as Adio 1 put it, they “grumbled amongst themselves.” All four men recollected at least one food variation during the course of their confinement,

although they disagreed regarding the specific details and regularity of the changes.

During the course of the investigation, the commissioners became aware of an order dated February 1841, when Governor John Jeremie instructed that a variety of dietary options should be made available suitable to the various geographical origins represented in the Yard.<sup>69</sup> It was to be “strictly observed” that

The Liberated Africans, on arrival in the yard, are to be supplied as nearly as possible with the food to which they have been accustomed in their native country as follows:—

Akoos:	Yams, cocoas, plantains, cornmeal, foofoo
Eboes:	Yams, cocoas, plantains, beans
Cussos:	Rice, palm oil, cassada
Calabas:	Yams, cocoas, plantains, beans
Bassas:	Rice, palm oil, cassada
Pawpaws:	Yams, beans, cocoas, cornmeal
Sherbros:	Rice, palm oil, cassada. <sup>70</sup>

This order was reportedly followed in an ad-hoc way from 1841 until 1843, when it fell into abeyance.<sup>71</sup> Dixon raised it as part of his defence, although only some months after the beginning of the investigation, so the commissioners and Acting-Governor Pine discredited it.

In order to better understand the roles and responsibilities of the department’s employees, the commissioners set out detailed descriptions of the daily tasks that should have been carried out by Dixon and others, both before and after the 1843–44 reductions. Previous to the reductions, the main work in the Yard was carried out by a chief clerk, three writers and a large team of overseers, all ultimately responsible to the assistant superintendent of liberated Africans.<sup>72</sup> After the reductions, about half of the combined duties of the chief clerk, three writers, the head overseer plus that of the assistant superintendent fell to the collector of customs, the cook, a handful of overseers and a single clerk (Dixon), while the rest were cut or transferred to other departments.<sup>73</sup> The language of these descriptions is a language of order, categorisation, discipline, silence, cleanliness, protection and labour productivity, and suggests an aspirational model very much at odds with the reality in 1848. For

example, the role of the clerk, Dixon's role, is described as follows: he was to be at the Yard every morning to muster the overseers and all subordinates, boatmen and labourers. He was to note the sick and attend the colonial surgeon on his daily morning inspection. He was then to monitor the cleanliness of the accommodation and the kitchen, and attend breakfast, ensuring that no group or "mess" exceeded ten persons and that each mess settled down to eat at its allocated, numbered location. Afterwards, he would direct the female overseers to take the women to bathe or the children to "instruction." He would then prepare the provision orders for the following day. By nine o'clock, the "Morning State" of the department was to be presented to his superior officer.<sup>74</sup> Each afternoon, he would supervise dinner, then muster the boatmen and mechanics and quiz them on their day's work, completing a report in duplicate. He was responsible for the conduct of all subordinate employees, and handled the administration of all complaints made. Every Sunday, he would inspect the overseers before they attended either church or chapel, one of which was compulsory. Each time a slave ship arrived, he was responsible for receiving, registering and clothing the new arrivals, and allocating them to the overseers.

Overseers were frequently drawn from the population of settled liberated Africans.<sup>75</sup> Each was responsible for a group of twenty-five numbered inmates. During the day, they held three roll calls: at six and nine o'clock in the morning, and at four in the afternoon. Those in charge of adults employed on the public works were to march them to the colonial surveyor's office for six o'clock every morning.<sup>76</sup> Overseers were also expected to "conciliate the minds of the liberated Africans... by firmness and gentleness," attend to their provisioning, prevent "quarrelling or disputing" and assist them in learning the skills and endurance needed to complete their (compulsory) work. They were also to accompany them to the brook to wash each afternoon. At night, each overseer was to gather their "gang" or "squad" in approximately the same sleeping area. The male overseers were to take particular care that "the strong [did] not domineer over the weak," and that the boys and men were kept separate. When "the crowded state of the rooms" made this impossible, "two overseers must sleep in the apartment with the boys to protect the weak from the violence of the strong."<sup>77</sup> According to the instructions, the female overseers were tasked with teaching the girls to read, spell and sew, although the general lack of literacy amongst overseers was expressly acknowledged, and so this instruction at

least was mainly wishful thinking. “To avoid fatiguing the children too much,” the lessons were to be alternated every fifteen minutes, breaking up the lessons with physical activity: “making them walk, or act, or perform some trifling motion.” The overseers were to attend “most particularly to cleanliness and endeavour to instil ideas of neatness and propriety.” Furthermore, “the greatest silence must be observed” during the hours of instruction, although while the women were sewing, the overseers were encouraged to “excite” their minds by “some instructive story relative to the duties we owe each other.”<sup>78</sup>

### **A New Art of Governance?**

Two commissioners of inquiry investigating the colony of Sierra Leone in 1826–27 summarised thus the interwoven ideologies of humanitarian responsibility, racial hierarchy and calculated instrumentalism that constituted liberated African policy:

For some time after the [adult] negroes are brought into the colony, they are so utterly ignorant and helpless that it is absolutely necessary, with a view to their own welfare, to treat them in some measure as children. If, during this period, their services can be made available in useful public works, it seems but just that they should in this way be made to repay a part of the expense incurred for their support.<sup>79</sup>

In *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance*, Dussart and Lester argue that the amelioration of Caribbean slavery from the 1820s “marked the incorporation of humanitarian principles into the apparatus of governance—the elaboration of a new art of governance”; of a new “moral vernacular.”<sup>80</sup> They identify the period from the 1820s as a period in which “‘humanely’ governed British imperial expansion and indigenous devastation established an intriguingly ambivalent foundation for subsequent humanitarian registers of government.”<sup>81</sup> The example of the Liberated African Department of Sierra Leone suggests that a complex and ambivalent elaboration of the concept of humanitarian governance took place prior to this, and that from 1808 onwards, the financial, political and ideological challenges of administering and resettling thousands of liberated Africans in the ostensibly anti-slavery colony of Sierra Leone led to the early development of relatively sophisticated governance structures along both “emergency” and “developmental” humanitarian strands, at the Yard and in the wider colony respectively.<sup>82</sup> Central to both strands

was the idea of unfree labour: adults at the Yard were sent out each day to labour on the public works, often alongside the colony's convicts; children and some adults were assigned as fixed-term "apprentices" to the local population; able-bodied men were periodically enlisted in the army and navy, with varying levels of coercion and little if any understanding of the nature of the commitment they were undertaking.

Equally central was the imperialist, hierarchical and implicitly racialised nature of routine governance practices: from the overseers' close management of every aspect of Yard life and the appearance and activities of its inmates, to the intensely bitter and deeply political competition between local elites for access to supply contracts. The Dixon case can be regarded as a simple enquiry into corruption and embezzlement; it can also be viewed as a conflict that positioned privileged members of the British colonial elite against liberated Africans: Heddle, Pine, the commissioners and the Colonial Office on one side; Dixon, Grant and the Yard inmates on the other. The case evidence suggests that although the influence of the settled liberated African population was on an ascendant trajectory in Freetown in the mid-nineteenth century, in 1848, power still very much rested in White hands.<sup>83</sup>

The story of liberated African policy in the Atlantic world has important wider implications, particularly for global and labour histories. The Liberated African Department of Sierra Leone was an unplanned expedient, never envisaged to be required for so many decades. It was born from the logistical problems created by the success of the naval interdiction campaign, and very quickly became an early development ground for ideologies of control and labour extraction that would be further elaborated in post-1833, post-slavery constructions of freedom. As a governance structure, it must be understood to transcend the "chronological apartheid" between pre- and post-emancipation labour systems and related ideas of freedom, and framed in terms of wider dynamics whereby the marginalised, the impoverished, the vulnerable and the otherwise inferior were made instruments of imperial expansion and wealth-creation.<sup>84</sup> In her work on liberated Africans in the antebellum United States, Sharla M. Fett discusses how American liberated-African policy extended the "long process of 'serial displacement'" well beyond the moment of former slaves' supposed rescue, effectively creating another "middle passage."<sup>85</sup> Echoing Saidiya Hartman, and in an observation that could just as easily have been made about the

Liberated African Department of Sierra Leone, Fett reflects that policies of confinement, disposal and resettlement problematise the distinction between the “‘time of slavery’ and the time of freedom as discrete units of then and now.”<sup>86</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that the expensive and complicated form of governance created and sustained towards the Liberated African Department’s overt, even self-congratulating anti-slavery humanitarian purpose could nonetheless still entail for its objects a kind of “middle passage”: an experience that, while by no means comparable with the horrors of plantation slavery, was still a continuance of their experience of expropriation and exploitation. True, the department ran an ambitious system to rehabilitate and integrate new arrivals, first providing temporary housing, clothing and food rations, including for a time in 1843 prioritising welfare provision over administrative simplicity by providing liberated Africans with familiar foods. Afterwards, people were resettled either on allotments of agricultural land or as apprentices in the homes of other colonists, or otherwise disposed of through arranged marriage or military enlistment. The department provided basic forms of child and adult education including agricultural and technical training, along with access to medical treatment and recourse to a judicial system, all at government expense, and without a clear pathway of return. Moreover, the humanitarian purpose of the system was articulated many times by colonial officials and contemporary observers, who raised their voices to protest forms of liberated African exploitation: from Governor Thomas Perronet Thompson and Judge Robert Thorpe to Governor Charles McCarthy and Superintendent Dixon Denham in the 1810s and 20s; from Governors Henry Dundas Campbell and William Fergusson to the missionary Hannah Kilham in the later years. It was to this distinctly humanitarian register of discourse that Dixon appealed when he claimed that the primary consideration of departmental policy had always been to ensure that “the interest, wellbeing and comfort of the Africans were attended to.”<sup>87</sup>

Yet while the Liberated African Department was professedly humanitarian project, it was embedded deeply within the wider politics and forms of self-interest of the colony and the empire more broadly, and underlying the entire endeavour was a basically coercive form of paternalism; a power structure created to administer

benevolence through observation and control, to mediate the liberated Africans' first contact with, and assimilation into "civilised" society, and to reconstitute the "savage" African slave as a free but subservient, useful, Christianised British subject. The overt justification was sympathy, philanthropy, benevolence, but as Ann Laura Stoler has argued, such sentiments "required inequalities of position and possibility," and were "basic to the founding and funding of imperial enterprises."<sup>88</sup> "Good faith" and sympathy for the empire's downtrodden minority groups routinely played a key role Britain's imperial projects, and in bolstering social hierarchies on which the empire depended.<sup>89</sup> Equally, the empire depended both before and after 1833 on a spectrum of unfree labour forms. When considered in this light, the Liberated African Department's simultaneously humanitarian and exploitative characteristics appear more congruous. Situated in the wider imperial context, it is evident that the liberated Africans of Sierra Leone shared with many other poor, marginalised and "inferior" peoples the extreme difficulty of regaining freedom after even the briefest period of enslavement.<sup>90</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA): CO 267/210, Lawson, Fergusson and Oldfield to Fergusson, 9 November 1848.

<sup>2</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Lawson, Fergusson and Oldfield to Fergusson, 9 November 1848.

<sup>3</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, evidence of Logan Hook, minutes of evidence, encl. 2.

<sup>4</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, précis of Dixon case, f.1.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (Aldershot: Gregg Revivals 1993), 499.

<sup>7</sup> Sharla M. Fett, "Middle Passages and Forced Migrations: Liberated Africans in nineteenth-century US camps and ships," *Slavery & Abolition* 31/1 (2010): 75–98; Emma Christopher, Cassandra Pybus and Markus Rediker, eds., *Many Middle Passages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Clare Anderson, "After

Emancipation: Empires and imperial formations,” in *Emancipation and the Remaking of the British Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Nicholas Draper (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 113–30.

<sup>8</sup> For simplicity, the term “Liberated African Department” is used throughout this article.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Domingues da Silva, David Eltis, Philip Misevich and Olatunji Ojo, “The Diaspora of Africans Liberated from Slave Ships in the Nineteenth Century”, *The Journal of African History* 55/3 (2014): 347–48; Padraic Scanlan, “The Rewards of Their Exertions: Prize money and British abolitionism in Sierra Leone, 1808–1823,” *Past and Present* 225 (2014): 113–42.

<sup>10</sup> The term “disposal,” meaning the post-adjudication distribution of liberated Africans, initially through apprenticeship or enlistment, can be interpreted to have pejorative or at least dismissive implications; however, it was the contemporary term and has the advantage of capturing the policy’s spirit of delegated responsibility. See Suzanne Schwarz, “Reconstructing the Life Histories of Liberated Africans: Sierra Leone in the early nineteenth century,” *History in Africa* 39 (2012): 187.

<sup>11</sup> African Institution, *Fourth Report of the Directors of the African Institution, read at the annual general meeting on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 1810* (London: Ellerton, 1810), 61.

<sup>12</sup> John Peterson, *Province of Freedom: A history of Sierra Leone, 1787–1870* (London: Faber, 1969), 56.

<sup>13</sup> Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, 115; Scanlan, “Rewards,” 114–35

<sup>14</sup> Public Archives of Sierra Leone (PASL), Secretary of State’s Despatches 3 April 1809–24 November 1812, Liverpool to Maxwell, 30 November 1811.

<sup>15</sup> Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, 138.

<sup>16</sup> Maeve Ryan, “‘A Most Promising Field for Future Usefulness’: The Church Missionary Society and the liberated Africans of Sierra Leone,” in *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William Mulligan and Maurice Bric (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 37–58; Stiv Jakobsson, *Am I Not a Man and a Brother? British missions and the abolition of the slave trade and slavery in West Africa and the West Indies, 1786–1838* (Lund: Gleerup, 1972), 206; Scanlan, “Rewards,” 118.

<sup>17</sup> PASL, Liberated African Department (LAD) Misc. Returns 1839–44, “Return of the Establishment of the [LAD] at Sierra Leone from 1 July to 31 December 1841”

gives twenty-four departmental officers and 186 other “persons employed in subordinate situations.” See also TNA: CO 267/92, “Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the State of Sierra Leone 1826–7,” Appendix B 22; PASL, LAD Misc. Returns 1845–61, “Return of the Establishment of the [LAD] at Sierra Leone from 1 January to 30 June 1846.”

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Daniel Augustine Vonque Stephen, “A History of the Settlement of Liberated Africans in the Colony of Sierra Leone During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century” (MA diss., University of Durham, 1963), 73.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley to Macdonald, 5 June 1843, quoted in Stephen, “A History of the Settlement,” 41–42. See also “Report from the Select Committee... Part I”, *British Parliamentary Papers (BPP)* 1842 (551), XI.1, XII.1, Appendix 15, 250.

<sup>20</sup> Stanley to Macdonald, 5 June 1843, quoted in Stephen, “A History of the Settlement,” 41.

<sup>21</sup> “Report from the Select Committee... Part I”, *BPP* 1842, Appendix 17, 365; “Instructions for the guidance of managers or assistant managers in the districts or villages,” *ibid.*, Appendix 17, 372–73.

<sup>22</sup> “Report from the Select Committee... Part I”, *BPP* 1842, Appendix 17; PASL, LAD Misc. Returns 1839–44, “Return of the Establishment of the [LAD] at Sierra Leone from 1 July to 31 December 1841.”

<sup>23</sup> Stanley to Macdonald, 5 June 1843, quoted in Stephen, “A History of the Settlement,” 41–2.

<sup>24</sup> “Report from the Select Committee on colonial accounts; together with the minutes of evidence, appendix and index,” *BPP* 1845 (520) VIII.1, Appendix 5, 586–87, 594–95.

<sup>25</sup> The last condemnation was a nameless, flagless slave ship carrying equipment but no slaves, which ran aground and was burned at the Compani River, north of the Rio Nunez in late 1864.

<sup>26</sup> “Return of Vessels Captured on suspicion of Using engaged in the Slave Trade” in Blackall to Russell, 13 July 1864, *BPP* 1865 (3503), LVI.1, 5–6.

<sup>27</sup> “Civil services and revenue departments: Appropriation accounts, 1874–75”, *BPP* 1876 (45) L.1, 278.

<sup>28</sup> The 52 surviving pensioners (30 men, 22 women) received 2d. per day: Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, 499.

- <sup>29</sup> Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, 499.
- <sup>30</sup> The entire case file plus supporting documentation is contained within TNA: CO 267/210.
- <sup>31</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Pine to Grey, 10 February 1849.
- <sup>32</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Pine to Grey, 10 February 1849.
- <sup>33</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Pine to Grey, 10 February 1849.
- <sup>34</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Pine to Grey, 10 February 1849.
- <sup>35</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Dixon to Grey, 26 Dec. 1848.
- <sup>36</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Pine to Grey, 10 February 1849.
- <sup>37</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Commissioners to Fergusson, 9 November 1848.
- <sup>38</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, précis on Dixon case, f.1.
- <sup>39</sup> James Macqueen, *The Colonial Controversy* (Glasgow: Khull, Blackie and Co., 1825), 91–94; 100–101; Robert Montgomery Martin, *History of the British Colonies*, 5 vols. (London: Cochrane and McCrone, 1834), vol. 4, 597; Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, 164–65, 200; Robert Thorpe, *Postscript to the reply “point by point”*: containing an exposure of the misrepresentation of the treatment of the captured negroes at Sierra Leone (London: Rivington, 1815), 10–12; Michael J. Turner, “The Limits of Abolition: Government, saints and the ‘African question,’ c. 1780–1820,” *The English Historical Review* 112/446 (1997): 319–57.
- <sup>40</sup> Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, 164.
- <sup>41</sup> “Report from the Select Committee ... Part I”, *BPP* 1842, Appendix 15, 314.
- <sup>42</sup> “Report from the Select Committee ... Part I”, *BPP* 1842, Appendix 15, 314.
- <sup>43</sup> “Report from the Select Committee ... Part I”, *BPP* 1842, Appendix 15, 314.
- <sup>44</sup> “Report from the Select Committee ... Part I”, *BPP* 1842, Appendix 15, 317–18.
- <sup>45</sup> “Report from the Select Committee ... Part I”, *BPP* 1842, Appendix 15, 317–18.
- <sup>46</sup> “Report from the Select Committee ... Part I”, *BPP* 1842, Appendix 15, 318.
- <sup>47</sup> “Report from the Select Committee ... Part I”, *BPP* 1842, Appendix 15, 318.
- <sup>48</sup> “Report from the Select Committee ... Part I”, *BPP* 1842, Appendix 15, 318.
- <sup>49</sup> See also Stephen, “A History of the Settlement,” 54–55; “Report from the Select Committee...Part I”, *BPP* 1842, Appendix 20, 401–10; TNA: T 1/4273.
- <sup>50</sup> Maeve Ryan, “‘A Moral Millstone’?: British humanitarian governance and the policy of liberated African apprenticeship, 1808–1848,” *Slavery & Abolition* 37/2 (2016): 399–422.

<sup>51</sup> See David Lambert, “‘The ‘Glasgow King of Billingsgate’: James MacQueen and an Atlantic proslavery network”, *Slavery and Abolition* 29/3 (2008): 396, 398.

<sup>52</sup> “Sierra Leone. Return to an address of the Honourable House of Commons, dated 19th May 1829”, *BPP* 1830 (57), 12, Campbell to Bathurst, 19 January 1827; *Ibid.*, 15, Campbell to Goderich, 14 July 1827.

<sup>53</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, evidence of Thomas Pilot.

<sup>54</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, evidence of Thomas Pilot.

<sup>55</sup> TNA: CO 276/210, “Statement showing the number of rations and the articles supplied to Liberated Africans from 1<sup>st</sup> April 1845 to 31 May 1848”.

<sup>56</sup> R.R. Madden, ed. Thomas More Madden, *The Memoirs, Chiefly Autobiographical, from 1798–1886* (London: Ward & Downey, 1891), 112–17.

<sup>57</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Dixon to Grey, 26 Dec. 1848.

<sup>58</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Dixon to Grey, 26 Dec. 1848.

<sup>59</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Akitollah testimony, 15 June 1848.

<sup>60</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Akitollah testimony, 15 June 1848.

<sup>61</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Adio testimony, 15 June 1848.

<sup>62</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Adio testimony, 15 June 1848.

<sup>63</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Adio testimony, 15 June 1848.

<sup>64</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Adio 2 testimony, 15 June 1848.

<sup>65</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Adio 2 testimony, 15 June 1848.

<sup>66</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Onee testimony, 15 June 1848.

<sup>67</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Onee testimony, 15 June 1848.

<sup>68</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Commissioners to Fergusson, 9 November 1848, Appendix 2.

<sup>69</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Instructions of C.B. Jones, 28 February 1841. C.B. Jones was later dismissed from the Liberated African Department for misappropriating £164 of liberated African indenture fees: see Stephen, “A History of the Settlement,” 54–55.

<sup>70</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Instructions of C.B. Jones, 28 February 1841.

<sup>71</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Instructions of C.B. Jones, 28 February 1841.

<sup>72</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, job descriptions of the chief clerk or cashier, first writer or store keeper, second writer, third writer, clerk of the week or month and chief overseer.

<sup>73</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Statement of W.G. Terry, 14 August 1843, encl. in Macrae to McCormack, 11 Sep. 1843. See also *ibid.*, Commissioners of Enquiry to Nicol, 19

March 1849.

<sup>74</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Statement of W.G. Terry, 14 August 1843.

<sup>75</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, Statement of W.G. Terry, 14 August 1843.

<sup>76</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, encl. in Terry to McCormack, 14 August 1843.

<sup>77</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, job description of the clerk of the week or month.

<sup>78</sup> TNA: CO 267/210, encl. in Terry to McCormack, 14 August 1843. See also *ibid.*, Lawson, Fergusson, Oldfield to Nicol, 19 March 1849.

<sup>79</sup> “Sierra Leone: Report of the commissioners of inquiry into the state of the colony of Sierra Leone, first part,” *BPP*, 1826–27 (312) VII.267, 54.

<sup>80</sup> Lester and Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance*, 2–3.

<sup>81</sup> Lester and Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance*, 2–3.

<sup>82</sup> Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A history of humanitarianism* (London: Cornell University Press, 2011).

<sup>83</sup> See Peterson, *Province of Freedom*.

<sup>84</sup> Richard B. Allen, “Re-conceptualizing the ‘New System of Slavery,’” *Man in India* 92/2 (2012): 228; Anderson, “After Emancipation.”

<sup>85</sup> Fett, “Middle Passages and Forced Migrations”; Alexander Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers: Black migrants across the eighteenth-century British Atlantic world* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008); Christopher, Pybus and Rediker, eds., *Many Middle Passages*, 2.

<sup>86</sup> Fett, “Middle Passages and Forced Migrations,” 75, 89.

<sup>87</sup> TNA: CO 267/10, Dixon to Grey, 26 Dec. 1848.

<sup>88</sup> A.L. Stoler, “On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty,” *Public Culture* 18/1 (2006): 134.

<sup>89</sup> Stoler, “On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty,” 134. See also Amit Rai, *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, race and power 1750–1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>90</sup> Fett, “Middle Passages and Forced Migrations,” 90.