Abolitionism and the Back-to-Africa Movement in Britain:
The Sierra Leone Experiment

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The article focuses on the settlement of freed black slaves from England and Nova Scotia in Sierra Leone. As the eighteenth century drew to a close, plans were made for the "repatriation" of impoverished migrants of African descent to their "ancestral" land. Such plans were contextually defined by the abolitionist movement in Britain. Abolitionism gained exceptional momentum in the country that played a leading part in the transatlantic slave trade at that time. The movement aimed to end both the slave trade and slavery. The article investigates the activities of the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor and especially the role of the prominent British philanthropist and abolitionist Granville Sharp (1735–1813), who made significant efforts to bring the "repatriation" plans to fruition. I argue that the Sierra Leone project was an ambivalent experiment, which should be interpreted in the light of both humanitarian compassion and imperial interests: if, at first, it was premised upon idealism and religious fervour, the desire to set foot in west Africa and to set up a colony there subsequently prevailed. For some Britons, sending impoverished free blacks to distant shores was also an opportunity to expel them from their own "white" society. In this sense, the "repatriation" of Africans was most likely to occur in the form of deportation, a form that suggests the restrictive regime of penal colonies, such as Australia.

Keywords: Sierra Leone, slave trade, abolitionism, humanitarianism, Back-to-Africa movement, Granville Sharp, Province of Freedom, colonization, migration.

Migration has been part of human history since its dawn. It can be argued that people are nomads by nature, and migrant displacement is at the core of the development and evolution of humanity. People may leave their homes and settle in other places for various reasons – wars, disease, poverty and famine are among the most frequently cited causes of migration. Though voluntary and involuntary migration represent two distinctive types of displacement, it is not all that easy to approach them as totally distinct entities. For instance, people driven by hunger and poverty have no other choice but to migrate as they struggle to survive. Unfortunately, conspicuous examples of involuntary migration, such as human trafficking and forced labour, are still among the gravest social evils of our world. Although slavery has been repeatedly condemned by public opinion and declared illegal, it exists even today, albeit in covert forms, through which suffering, pain and humiliation are inflicted on millions of people, particularly on women and children.

The transatlantic slave trade plagued Africa for centuries, but around the turn of the nineteenth century, when revolutionary changes took place in Europe and America, the future began to look brighter. As a result of the abolitionist movement, in 1807, the outrageous traffic was declared illegal in Britain, and soon many other countries followed suit. Abolitionism likewise yielded insight into how to implement the plans of the Back-to-Africa movement: the projects provided for the "repatriation" of some Africans, living in Europe or America, to their – or rather, their ancestors' – native continent on condition that they would start a new and better life there.

The most famous examples of such projects point to Sierra Leone and Liberia. Both countries share a common historical past: they were founded on the coast of west Africa as settlements for freed slaves. Such "repatriation" projects were enabled by the activities of prominent figures and organizations in Britain and the

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USA: in the first case, the merit went mainly to the remarkable British philanthropist and abolitionist Granville Sharp (1735–1813) and the Sierra Leone Company, while in the second, it was the American Colonization Society, founded in 1816. In 1787, the first black settlers from Britain arrived in Sierra Leone, which marked the beginning of the new colony, known as the Province of Freedom. A few years later, the city of Freetown was founded, which was to become the country's capital. In a similar course of events, free black people from America settled in an area on the west coast of Africa in 1822. They called that patch of land Liberia and named its capital Monrovia after James Monroe, US President at the time. Only a quarter of a century later, in 1847, Liberia became the first independent republic in Africa. Although the experimental settlements failed to fulfil their original utopian expectations, they were successful in the sense that Sierra Leone and Liberia have survived to this day. Unfortunately, nowadays they happen to be among the poorest countries in the world with numerous social, economic and political problems.

The present article focuses on the foundation of Sierra Leone, seen from the perspective of abolitionism. It does not aim to exhaust the subject, but to shed light on the questions of how the Sierra Leone project was designed and realized and what prompted the *"repatriation"* or *deportation* of the settlers from Britain and North America to the remote coasts of west Africa. The early history of Sierra Leone has been discussed by historians such as Christopher Fyfe, James W. S. G. Walker and Ellen G. Wilson. Isaac Land, Andrew M. Schocket, Steven J. Braidwood and Cassandra Pybus, among others, have likewise contributed to the elucidation of some of the problematic aspects of the Sierra Leone project and the diverse motives and interests behind it. As regards the problems of the slave trade and abolitionism, the works of James Walvin, Hugh Thomas, Thomas Benjamin, Trevor Burnard, Paul Lovejoy and Christopher Leslie Brown, among others, are particularly relevant to the present research. As far as the general history of west Africa in the early modern period is concerned, texts by historians such as Basil Davidson, James B. Webster and Albert Adu Boahen also provide some valuable insights.

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Africa is the continent where slavery took its most violent forms. The transatlantic slave trade, conducted by Europeans between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, represents one of the most conspicuous instances of the abuse of the most basic human rights. Actually, the roots of slavery can be traced back to certain African traditions: slave-keeping had been practised in various forms by many communities on the continent centuries before the notorious transatlantic traffic began. It is also true that quite a few Africans were actively involved in the slave trade alongside rulers and merchants who played leading parts in commercial negotiations. Motivated by their self-interest and greed, the former built up the prosperity of their towns and city-states in a manner that reproduced the efforts of their European partners to bring new wealth to the ports and cities of their countries (Davidson 267). However, we have to bear in mind that the concept of a common African identity did not exist at that time. Local slave hunters targeted foreigners and outsiders as their victims and, despite some cases of intra-tribal captivity, most slaves came from enemy tribes. Thus, a lot of Africans involved in trade with humans did not feel remorse over selling their captives to Europeans. The latter did not dare enter the interior of the continent and preferred to remain in safety at their forts on the coast. No matter how they had lost their freedom, those slaves, who remained in Africa, did not suffer the monstrous dehumanization that befell the victims of the transatlantic slave trade. This fact works against attempts by slave traders and planters to justify their business ventures by claiming that America actually offered better life to the slaves.

Although Africans were involved in the slave trade, the latter should undoubtedly be approached as a primarily European imperial undertaking. The early stages of European colonization of non-European lands was partially conditioned by a desire to broaden Europeans' geographical knowledge. The largest shipments of human flesh were handled by the Portuguese, as they started first and ended last. They transported almost six million Africans mostly to Brazil. Britain came second, exporting more than three million Africans to the British West Indies and North America. The British gained their leading position in the trade as early as the eighteenth century when ports such as Liverpool, Bristol, London and Glasgow thrived on the trade with slaves. Other major traders in human beings were France, Spain, the Netherlands and the newly established United States, which remained on the slave market only for the last quarter of the eighteenth and the first decade of the nineteenth centuries (Burnard 91). The slave trade was highly profitable to all involved because

it supplied cheap labour to the European plantations in America, which derived huge profits from growing a single crop – usually cotton, tobacco, coffee, sugar cane, cocoa or rice. Luckier among the African slaves were those, who became domestic workers in towns, since life there was much easier and healthier.

Historically, the slave trade across the Atlantic represents an exceptionally violent form of forced human migration whose aftermath brought about enormous demographical, social, economic, political and cultural consequences. It affected a huge geographical area, including the coasts of four continents: Europe, Africa, North and South America. These continents were interconnected into a complex trading network, known as the *Triangular Trade*. The three-legged trade route started with shipments of goods from Europe, which typically included beads, metals, cloth, rum, salt and guns. Shipments would go to Africa, where enslaved people would be bought in return for those items. Then the slave ship would transport the captives to their new "home" across the Atlantic Ocean. The second leg of the trade, the so-called *Middle Passage*, was the hardest part of the journey. Once in America, the ship would unload its human cargo and take on molasses, rum, sugar or tobacco after which it would sail away to Europe, thus accomplishing its Triangular Trade route.

Most researchers agree that the number of Africans, forcibly deported from the Dark Continent in the course of the trade cycle, amounts to more than twelve million. Not all of them survived the abominable conditions in the holds of the slave ships during the infamous Middle Passage. As a result of malnutrition and disease many of them lost their lives and only the fittest reached their destination across the Atlantic. According to calculations, the number of the survivors amounted to around ten million (Benjamin 326). Many of the worst aspects of our contemporary life, such as racism and other forms of discrimination, as well as the display of unequal relations between rich, developed countries and those referred to as "the Third World" can be traced back to the slave trade across the Atlantic, which was carried out with unusual perseverance and brutality. The slave trade was particularly devastating for west and central Africa as these regions were systematically deprived of millions of physically strong young people. These instances of forced migration, along with the shrinking population of the afflicted regions, reveal a legacy of violence and loss of direction which necessitated a number of readjustments in the social, religious and communal spheres of life. The slave trade did leave deep scars in African history, and attitudes arising from the paradigm of slavery have persisted throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods to contemporary times (Lovejoy 48–49).

It is hard to imagine the actual dimensions of the trauma experienced by black slaves. Life turned into a never-ending suffering for the Africans who were forced to leave their homes, and the crossing of the Atlantic, which lasted for two or three months, was just the beginning of their misfortunes. After the slaves had been captured, they were forced to march hundreds of miles before being taken in small boats to the trading ships waiting offshore. Life on board the tightly-packed, foul-smelling slave ships was appalling (Burnard 87). One of the most vivid narratives about such a difficult journey is related by Olaudah Equiano (ca 1745–1797), whose heart-rending account of being kidnapped and sold into slavery became a best-selling book in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century. The story draws constant parallels between the human dignity of the Africans and the cruel treatment that they received as slaves, and this fictional response to human oppression lent momentum to the campaigns of the abolitionists:

> The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo was confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us… The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceiveable. (Equiano 58)

Slave ships transported their human cargo under horrible conditions, but their crews also shared in the harsh life of the slaves. Seamen were poorly paid and usually succumbed to illness at some point of the Triangular Trade route. Moreover, they had to face the pending threat of rebellions as the slaves would not accept their fate passively. Death plagued the ships and soon they turned into floating prisons, with weapons to curb the frequent unrest. The mortality rate among seamen and passengers was higher compared with that of the human cargo: about 15–20 per cent of British seamen would not survive the journeys while some 12 per cent of the slaves would perish along the way (Burnard 88).

The *Zong* massacre of 1781 is a notoriously cited instance of such violent displacement. When supplies began to run short on board the eponymous ship, 133 slaves were thrown overboard to their deaths to make sure that the ship owner would be entitled to claim a previously settled insurance. The case came to court in London two years later when instead of trying the mass murder as a criminal act, the trial was held as a case of disputed insurance claim. Underlying the legal proceedings was the assumption that human life equalled that of livestock.[1] This stance provoked large-scale public protests that lent their vigour to and helped to launch the abolitionist movement. *The Brookes*, another overloaded ship, represents one more popular iconic image of human suffering and humiliation cited by abolitionists in their campaign against the institution of slavery (Walvin 86–89, 150; Thomas 488–489; Benjamin 629).

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In the past, slavery came to be seen as a "natural" and even "God-ordained" form of social organization: as it had been in existence since times immemorial, it could easily be claimed that it was an institution sanctified by Holy Scripture. Criticism against slave labour started as early as the mid-eighteenth century. By that time the question of whether the slave trade should continue had not been raised or discussed. Instead, public opinion was mostly concerned with its participants and terms (Brown 282). Nevertheless, this was the time when voices against slavery began to be heard, although they were soon muffled by the lucrative prospects of the trade. Such voices were incidental at first and did not manage to break the vicious practice of transporting wretched human beings across the Atlantic on a journey at the end of which they would melt into a nameless mass. Actually, some advocates of slavery would eloquently point out that the captives, most of whom were taken as war prisoners, could only benefit from their relocation as having reached the Americas, they would get introduced to Christianity (Brown 282). This claim was considered convincing at the time when the slave trade flourished and it was frequently employed to justify the moral premises of slavery. The instituted forms of enslavement were so pervasive and ubiquitous that their existence seemed unquestionable.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a dramatic reversal of the situation took place. The Atlantic world experienced deep social, economic and political changes, some of which were inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment. Europe and the Americas entered what some scholars term "the Age of Revolution," which put an end to the untroubled existence of ruling elites, including the American planter class with its enormous landed estates, populated by slaves. The status quo was destabilized by liberal and republican ideas and the notion of liberty became synonymous with that of revolution. During that transitional period of turmoil and transformation, a lot of traditional values were exposed to critical scrutiny. One of the ideological breakthroughs was advanced by the view that all people, regardless of their birth, should be entitled to certain natural rights, deemed inviolable. This newly formulated position put an end to the formerly established patterns of social organization which were based on privilege. Consequently, people, taken as a collective agent, assumed unprecedented authority, theoretically imagined as a democratic substitute for the monarch's divine right. In the meantime, Jean-Jacques Rousseau introduced the concept of social contract which became a powerful tool in the hands of the newly formed class of citizens. Above all, it enabled them to depose any despotic government if its rule violated the established "social contract." In other words, people had the legitimate right to revolt against their sovereign in order to establish the form of government which would best suit their needs (Benjamin 517).

Against this background, slavery stood out as an instance of glaring injustice. Paradoxically, it did not cease even where the supremacy of liberty was considered the founding principle of social organization. The revolutionary age happened on both sides of the Atlantic, including several slave societies. Many slaveholders were revolutionaries themselves, for instance, the renowned Founding Fathers of the United States George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. However, they never thought that their struggle for liberty might concern their slaves (Benjamin 518). Therefore, a double standard was applied and the vociferously proclaimed principles of liberty and equality apparently lost their significance for enslaved humans.

Nevertheless, the Age of Revolution did not completely ignore the delicate "slave question." The period paved the way for abolitionism, the first movement against the slave trade, which would eventually result in its complete eradication. Its adherents were not concerned only with the moral aspects of that practice. Some of

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[1] The *Zong* case inspired the English Romantic artist J. M. W. Turner's famous painting *The Slave Ship* (1840).

them wondered if free white workers would manage to compete with cheap African labour successfully, while others worried that the planter class in the "new" World, who followed the example of the European aristocracy, might not become too powerful. One of the strongest arguments against slavery regarded the rapid growth of the "savage" and "rebellious" slave population as a threat to the stability of the white-dominated societies of the Western Hemisphere (Brown 283). The fact that slaves did not accept their fate and never missed a chance to resist and fight for their freedom speaks for itself. A succession of plots, uprisings and Maroon wars shook many slave societies throughout the Americas in the eighteenth century. Planters felt seriously threatened by the powerful and practically independent Maroon communities in Jamaica and Suriname whom they failed to subdue, and had to finally recognize their autonomy in return for their promise not only to stop helping runaways from the plantations, but also to capture escaped slaves and return them to their owners (Dubois 268).

The slave resistance reached its climax in the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), the only successful slave rebellion which resulted in the foundation of the first "black republic" in the "new" World. That bloody riot, which demonstrated how merciless slaves could be to their masters, represents a landmark event in the history of abolitionism. It was regarded both as a cruel warning to white planters and as a source of encouragement for enslaved Africans. The fear of riotous slaves lent new vigour to the abolitionist movement because slave owners realized the precarious grounds of their own position. Besides, riots influenced Back-to-Africa projects which envisaged the deportation of unwanted social elements.

Religion is another major factor in the history of abolitionism. The Quakers, a Protestant denomination, which emerged in the middle of the seventeenth century as a community of peace-loving and tolerant believers, were the first religious group to criticize slavery systematically. Later on they supported the abolitionist campaign in Britain with remarkable perseverance.

French-born American educator Anthony Benezet (1713–1784), who spent most of his life in Phila-delphia, Pennsylvania, was one of the outstanding supporters of abolitionism among the Quakers. Benezet taught poor black children and did his best to refute racist stereotyped models of Black African inferiority. An active humanitarian, he established the first public school for girls in North America and the Black African School of Philadelphia, which remained open well into the next century. Benezet also founded one of the world's first anti-slavery societies, called the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage. He condemned human traffic as an instance of flagrant injustice that disgraced the principles of Christianity and did his best to convince the governments of the states involved in it to cease the slave trade once and for all (Brown 284). Benezet's life and work inspired other vigorous activists in Britain and North America. John Wesley (1703–1791), the founder of Methodism, Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), one of the Founding Fathers of the United States and a renowned polymath, and Granville Sharp, the first English abolitionists to become involved with the Sierra Leone project, undoubtedly benefitted from Benezet's example.

An outstanding scholar, philanthropist and lawyer, Sharp devoted much of his life to fight social injustice. The problem of slavery occupied most of his activist work in the 1760s. Back then it did not trigger such intense popular debates as the ones it would provoke towards the end of the century, and Sharp was still the sole defender of black people in England. He committed himself to providing legal defence to Africans threatened by forceful deportation from England to the colonies (Walvin 150). Benezet and Sharp kept in touch through regular correspondence and held frequent discussions over the most adequate strategy to support black emancipation. In the course of their correspondence, they sent a number of petitions to both the Parliament and the king. Later on, petitioning would become a vital element of the abolitionist campaign and a means of expressing public opinion before the British Parliament (Walvin 148–149).

Sharp's name is also related to the emblematic "Somerset Case" of 1772, which helped redefine the legal status of the Africans living in England. James Somerset, a slave from Virginia, escaped from his owner while in England, but was later recaptured, forcibly deported to Jamaica, and finally released by a temporary court order. Determined to plead for Somerset's permanent freedom, Sharp took his case to the Court of King's Bench. There Chief Justice Lord William Mansfield decided in favour of Somerset. The memorable decision that the judge took in spite of his personal convictions was interpreted in a sense that slavery could not exist in England (Thomas 473–474). On another occasion, connected with the aforemenshioned *Zong* case, Sharp revealed the disgraceful details of the tragic event trying to attract the attention of influential figures, such as MPs, cabinet ministers and clergymen, unfortunately, to no avail.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a violent public debate in Britain pitted the two opposing camps of the supporters and opponents of slavery. At that time, no other country could practically bring the campaign against the Atlantic slave trade to such public success. British abolitionism was largely assisted by the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, founded in 1787. Nine of its twelve founding members were Quakers, and the other three, Sharp, Philip Sansom and Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846), the author of an influential essay on slavery, belonged to the Church of England. Initially, the Committee aimed to abolish the slave trade only because a more comprehensive approach to slavery would have appeared too ambitious and unrealistic at that point.

The anti-slavery campaign in Britain was carried out by Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce (1759–1833), a young MP for Yorkshire, who came to personify the movement itself. Wilberforce became famous for his passionate parliamentary speeches against the slave trade while Clarkson, in turn, would encourage people to join the campaign by citing compelling evidence from his research and travels. He toured the country with thumbscrews and shackles to make the horrors of the human traffic tangible to the British people. He lectured and agitated whenever he went, usually at public meetings. James Walvin notes that he "helped to transform the public's vague and general sense that there was something wrong with the Atlantic slave trade into a powerful and focused national voice of widespread and strident opposition" (157–158).

Clarkson and Wilberforce did their best to define the slave trade as a morally unacceptable practice, and their active participation in the anti-slavery campaign contributed to its popularity. The latter grew as prolific abolitionist literature, including pamphlets, brochures and lections, began circulating throughout the country. Being the first major human rights movement in Britain, the campaign attracted men and women from all social strata. The movement entered its most prolific phase between 1791 and 1792 when more than five hundred petitions signed by more than 400 000 people were sent to the House of Commons (Brown 285). During the West Indian sugar boycott, organized in 1792, at least 300 000 people gave up sugar to protest against the slave labour used in its production (Sadler 40). The abolitionist campaign yielded some iconic images, two of which turned into its emblematic signifiers: Josiah Wedgwood's medallion with a kneeling slave in chains asking "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" and the aforementioned itinerary and middle section of the slave ship *The Brookes*. A number of well-educated Africans in London, who called themselves "Sons of Africa," likewise contributed to the success of abolitionist propaganda. Ottobah Cugoano and Equiano stood out in their attempts to stir up British society with stories about their lives and the challenges they faced as children of slave-traders in Africa.

The slave trade was finally abolished in the British colonies and the transatlantic traffic with human beings became illegal. However, slavery itself continued to exist in the British Empire officially until 1833 (the year of Wilberforce's death), when, after passing the Abolition of Slavery Bill, and the system of apprenticeship,[2] it was declared illegal and remained so until 1838. Ironically, the British Parliament compensated slave owners lavishly, while former slaves got nothing.

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At present the integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities is a hot topic, which receives a lot of attention from the media. Social marginalization is a ubiquitous problem. The newly arrived are usually treated with hostility by the locals and often ethnic, religious or racial differences remain firmly entrenched for generations. Unfortunately, the history of European- African relations has borne the brunt of racism for centuries on end and racism is still one of the most enduring legacies of slavery. The slave trade was based on the concept that it is natural for black people to be enslaved on account of their skin colour which was interpreted as a sign of inferiority. In this interplay of racial stereotypes colour served to justify African denigration (Sadler 53). The slave trade and slavery were abolished in the nineteenth century, but race-related stereotypes and various forms of negative discrimination endured. For this reason movements such as the Civil Rights Movement in the USA and the Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa, which are part of humanity's very recent history, had to continue the fight against racism and race-related infringement of human rights. Unfortunately, the success of such movements did not result in the total eradication of racism: we witness recurring examples of racial violence and discrimination even today.

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[2] Under the system of apprenticeship former slaves were obliged to serve their ex-owners for up to six years without being paid.

Viewed against the background of abolitionism, the Sierra Leone project stands out as a particularly significant undertaking. It was intended as a plan to "repatriate" some free British and North American Africans back to the "land of their fathers" where they were expected to establish the Province of Freedom colony. This happened in 1787, and thus coincided with the foundation of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in London, as a parallel initiative of another organization, the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, founded by Sharp the previous year. The aim of the Committee was charitable and noble: to provide sustenance for poor and starving people of African and Asian descent, who presented a sorrowful sight in the British capital. By the 1780s, "the streets of London were swarming with a number of Blacks in the most distressed situation, who had no prospect of subsisting in this country but by depredations on the public or by common charity, the humanity of some respectable Gentlemen was excited towards these unhappy objects" (Hague 223; Sierra Leone Company 3). As the homeless blacks suffered severely in the cold January temperatures, urgent measures had to be taken in order to save their lives. Actually, although some of the Committee's influential members, most notably Sharp himself, declared themselves against slavery, the project did not appear as part of their anti-slavery agenda (Land).

This was partly due to the ambiguous interpretation of the category of "Black Poor": it embraced an exceptionally diverse group of people who had been brought to London either as slaves or as indentured servants on slave ships. It is important to note that after Lord Mansfield's famous 1772 decision, which practically contested the legal foundations of slavery in England, all African slaves there (and they were about 15000 at that time) were considered legally free. Many of the Black Poor were African American Loyalists who, having fought on the British side during the American Revolution, were granted their freedom. After the British defeat, some Africans joined the retreating British Army on its way back to Britain (Davidson 274). Others settled in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick on the eastern coast of Canada. They were promised land, food and the opportunity to start a new life, but once there, the newcomers were not allowed to avail themselves of the promised aid. In fact, not all of the Black Poor were of African descent. Many of them were Lascar[3] seamen, who had disembarked from East India Company ships. At that time, it was a common practice among black sailors to serve on both navy and merchant ships. About one hundred out of the initial two hundred and fifty Africans, who benefitted from the Committee's project, worked for the Royal Navy (Land; Braidwood 27, 63, 70).

The growing number of free blacks, who settled in Britain, disturbed many of the British proponents of national purity. They believed Africans were immature and childish, and hence, not ready for their freedom. The majority of the local population insisted on strict measures to keep black Africans under control in order to prevent them from giving vent to their wild and riotous passions. The free blacks, then, were largely regarded with mistrust. While some felt sorry for their poor condition, others were frightened and wanted to get rid of them. Such controversial reactions gave rise to the idea that the entire ethnic group had to be relocated to their original lands. The Committee embraced it and set about putting it into practice.

The project fleshed out an attempt at turning the clock back. Britain was the leading power in the slave trade which flourished at that time. Sharp and his adherents in the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor believed that their Back-to-Africa project was part of the divine plan to allow Britain to atone for its role in the outrageous slave traffic, as well as a means to make use of British imperial power in an act of generosity. The British considered the opportunity to help impoverished blacks return to their ancestral land, which was supposedly left depopulated and barren in the wake of European encroachment, as a reconciliation with the past and repentance for the old sins committed in the course of the Middle Passage (Land). The original motives for the "repatriation" of free blacks to Africa were therefore humanitarian and there was also a utopian element in the project. African people were expected to adjust to the "land of their ancestors" more efficiently than to Britain, their "stepmother." Africa was their imagined real "mother" and the indigenous people would be happy to get reunited with their lost "brothers" and to build up together their common home in which they would live in peace and harmony. Such ideas harmonized with the spirit of the age, in which evangelization was part and parcel of colonization.

The significant role that religion played in colonization took a clearer shape at the beginning of the seventeenth century when North America's early English settlements such as the Plymouth Colony (founded

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[3] A term borrowed from colonial times to refer to sailors, army servants, or artillery troopers from India or other parts of south east Asia.

by the pilgrims on board *The Mayflower*) advanced the spirit of Puritanism. Obviously recollecting earlier Puritan experience, the relocation of blacks to Africa was likewise compared to events that took place in the depths of Hebrew history: the quest for a "Promised Land" in remote Africa was imagined to reproduce the exodus of the ancient Hebrews out of Egypt into Palestine. In fact, intellectuals at that time were preoccupied with collecting Old Testament evidence to justify the new providential role of the British Empire as an instrument in God's plan to restore impoverished blacks to their "home." Sharp was one of the most enthusiastic evangelical philanthropists whose various activities included Biblical research and the foundation of several religious societies (Land).

The Sierra Leone project was not without precedents in the quest for freedom. Two other similar projects of the optimistic mid-1780s deserve our attention: Thomas Jefferson's plan to end slavery in Virginia and Marquis de Lafayette's experiment in French Guiana. In his famous *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Jefferson recommended that after 1800 the descendants of slaves should go through an apprenticeship period to get prepared for their emancipation. Jefferson was likewise convinced that black slaves, being rebellious and dangerous, should leave Virginia. The future US President proposed to relocate Virginian free blacks to some remote part of North America. As a representative of the ruling planter class, he declared himself firmly against granting former slaves the same rights as those of their former masters, let alone the right to remain and live in the same place. His plan, however, did not come to fruition. In fact, although some sources suggest that slaves did emigrate from Virginia in the early years of the nineteenth century, this most likely happened occasionally as part of the enhanced waves of migration to the new slave states. Marquis de Lafayette, a truly borderline figure, developed a similar project in 1785. He purchased a plantation in French Guiana, near Cayenne, and freed all slaves working there. Unlike Jefferson, Lafayette was convinced that former slaves had to be protected and taken care of instead of being left to the mercy of fate (Land; Miller 22).

Sierra Leone was not the indisputable choice of the Committee as a place of settlement for free blacks in London. The Committee discussed several possible locations with the British government before deciding on that particular part of Africa. Such locations included the sparsely populated coast of northern Scotland, some small but strategically placed tropical islands in the Indian Ocean, the Bahamas, New Brunswick, and even Australia (Land; Land and Schocket). Most probably, the final decision in favour of west Africa came as a result of several discussions held between Sharp and the representatives of the black community in London. Equiano, one of the most influential Africans at the time, was convinced that Sierra Leone could best meet the needs of the "repatriated" Black Poor. With regard to the already mentioned religious aspects of the Back-to-Africa project, it is worth noting that in his *Interesting Narrative* Equiano often draws parallels between Hebrew rituals and those of his own Igbo people, proposing that there had to be some connection between them and that he might have been descended from a lost tribe of Israel that had wandered to west Africa (Land; Equiano 41, 43–44). In November 1786, Equiano got involved in the project and a government official placed him in charge of supplying provisions to the new colony of Freetown. Unfortunately, his participation in that enterprise did not have a positive outcome because he was dismissed after protesting against financial mismanagement and came back to England (Equiano 226–229). Another person to advocate the choice of Sierra Leone was Dr Henry Smeathman (1742–1786), a botanist, who spent three years on the islands off the estuary of Sierra Leone. He proposed that it was an ideal place for a colony of freed slaves as the rivers there were long known for "their extraordinary temperature and salubrity of the climate" (quoted in Braidwood 28). His excessive enthusiasm, however, should be approached with scepticism: a year earlier he expressed just the opposite view, claiming that the place was unsuitable as a penal colony for white convicts who would die shortly after their arrival (Thomas 496). Traces of colour-based racism can easily be detected in his subjective attitudes to black Africans and white Europeans. Obviously, Smeathman held the common but wrong belief that all people of African origin had to be immune to tropical diseases, while Europeans were advised to avoid Sierra Leone for its rumoured reputation as a "white man's grave" (Land).

Although at first sight the Sierra Leone project might have appeared as a "humanitarian operation," aiming to rescue London's impoverished free blacks, it was indisputably intended as a colonial undertaking, organized in the context of the so called "Second British Empire." The loss of such a large territory as the Thirteen Colonies in North America in 1783 forced the British government to look for alternative destinations of colonization. The British soon turned towards Asia, Africa and the Pacific. Earlier the North American

colonies had served primarily as places to which convicted criminals could be sent, but after 1788, as Australia became the largest British penal colony, they began to be refashioned for a variety of other purposes. From such a standpoint, as Isaac Land and Andrew M. Schocket have pointed out, the establishment of a settler colony in Africa as a base for trade with valuable goods other than slaves marked a new point of departure in European colonialism (Land and Schocket). As already mentioned, the free blacks in London were persistently seen as unwanted population. By transporting them to the coast of Africa, the white residents of the British capital would literally "kill two birds with one stone": they would both get rid of impoverished blacks and would establish a new colony in Africa. Under the circumstances, philanthropists such as Sharp embraced the Sierra Leone project as the fulfilment of God's plan for the "repatriation" of Africans to their "homeland," while quite a number of other people, who wished to see them far away from London, remembered the deportation of white criminals to the distant shores of Australia.

The chosen place was not a blank spot on the map. Located on the west coast of Africa, just south of Guinea, it had been inhabited for thousands of years. The country was named after the formidable lion-like mountains, which the Portuguese explorer Pedro de Sintra put down on his map of the region in 1462. In the eighteenth century, it teemed with dozens of ethnic groups, most notably the Temne, Mende and Sherbro, who inhabited the coastal areas, and the Limba, who lived in the interior. By then, after two centuries of intensive contacts with traders and missionaries, the natives had become quite familiar with Europeans (Land and Schocket). The Atlantic slave trade had a significant impact on Sierra Leone in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when at first Portuguese and later English, French and Dutch traders visited the place. In 1672, the British Royal African Company (RAC) established a branch on Bance Island in the Sierra Leone River, which became a major centre of transatlantic slave trade. The place was likewise used as a starting point for slave ships that departed across the Atlantic to the rice plantations of the British colonies in America.

The Committee's "noble" ideas were about to materialize soon. Both the British government and private companies provided financial support. The government granted £12 per African to cover the cost of transport (Thomas 496). Sharp contributed more than £1,700 of his own money. Many influential figures, including William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and Henry Thornton, also invested in the project. The project was also supported by other philanthropists, abolitionists and self-emancipated former slaves. It should certainly not be seen as the outcome of a single act of colonization. Facing a lot of hardships, the new colony had to be rebuilt a number of times by several waves of settlers before it could achieve stability and become a Crown Colony in the early nineteenth century (Land).

On 8 April 1787, a total of 401 people (290 free black men, 41 black women and 70 white women, including 60 prostitutes from London) left for Sierra Leone. Two ships were commissioned. One of them, the sloop-of-war *Nautilus*, with Captain Thomas Boulden Thompson of the Royal Navy in command, served as a convoy escort (Thomas 496–497). In May 1787, after a month-long journey, the ships disembarked in Sierra Leone and began to build Granville Town, so named after the prominent British abolitionist (Davidson 276). The initial settlement spread across an approximately ten-mile-long stretch of coastal land bought from the local overlord, a Temne chief known to the English as "King Tom," for about £60 in goods, including arms and ammunition, cotton cloths, metalware, tobacco and rum. As Sharp described it, it was "a fine tract of mountainous country covered with trees of all kinds" between the famous slave-trade rivers of Sherbro and Sierra Leone (Thomas 497). "King Tom," whose tribe lived at the seaside, and a senior chief, "King" Naimbana, who lived about six miles up the Sierra Leone river, were the ones who benefitted from the purchase (Davidson 275; Thomas 497).

Just like the early settlers in the British colonies in North America or the US blacks, who re-settled to Liberia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Sierra Leone pioneers were badly equipped and ill prepared for the harsh conditions that they faced. The first year of their stay was disastrous: crops failed and widespread disease killed half of the settlers. They were short of money and supplies were hard to obtain. Moreover, the settlers fell out with "King Tom's" successor "King Jimmy," who burned down their settlement in 1789. Some of those, who survived, including some former slaves, chose an easier life and became involved in human trafficking themselves, having grown oblivious to their past sufferings. They began working with slave traders at the nearby slave trade depot on Bance Island. Commenting on these developments, Sharp seemed less inclined to embrace his former idealistic stance:

I could not have conceived that men who were well aware of the wickedness of slave dealing, and had themselves been sufferers (or at least many of them) under the galling yoke of bondage to slave holders… should become so basely depraved as to yield themselves instruments to promote, and extend, the same detestable oppression over their brethren. (quoted in Hoare 329)

To sum up, the initial stage of the envisaged "repatriation" of former slaves to a land, situated two thousand miles away, of which the designers of the project had fairly little knowledge, turned out to be an economic and demographic failure (Hague 222). The failure of the settlement puts one in mind of the fate of the Roanoke Colony in North America in the late sixteenth century.

Achieving success in Sierra Leone was the cherished hope of leading abolitionists like Sharp, Thornton, Clarkson and Wilberforce. The Sierra Leone Company, which they founded, was part of their attempts to revive and stabilize the colony. William Hague, who comments on the immense practical difficulties inherent in the project, suggests that the Sierra Leone Company distracted the leading abolitionists from achieving their main goal, which was the abolition of the slave trade. However, all of them shared Sharp's enthusiasm and idealism. They believed the Back-to-Africa model would help former slaves regain confidence in their ability to sustain themselves through free and productive labour. The successful outcome of the project would likewise serve to demonstrate that the trade between Africa and Britain could develop just as successfully, even if deprived of its slavery-incurred capital. Besides, in the long run, a successful colony of free people could become a model for further development of the African affairs and a basis of Christian missionary activities across the continent (Hague 224).

Key figures in recovering the settlement were Alexander Falconbridge, former surgeon on board a slave ship, Thomas Peters, former slave, and Thomas Clarkson's younger brother John. In 1791 Alexander Falconbridge (ca 1760–1792) went to Sierra Leone as a representative of the Company. There he encouraged the 64 remaining old settlers, both black Africans and Europeans, to build a second Granville Town. Thomas Peters (1738–1792) was an African-born former slave who escaped from his American owner and won his freedom by joining the British army where he rose to the rank of a sergeant. He was one of the thousands of black Loyalists who trusted British promises and departed for Nova Scotia.[4] Suffering segregation and denigration, the black settlers in that part of North America were given the worst possible plots of land, the heaviest jobs and the lowest wages. They were often forced to work only in exchange for food supplies. Besides, failing to keep a low profile could be punished with deportation and return to slavery. Quite understandably, their hardships earned Nova Scotia the pejorative nickname of "Nova Scarcity" (Webster and Boahen 137). When the British failed to keep their promise, Peters decided to sail for England as a representative of the black Loyalists in Nova Scotia. In London he was offered to settle in Sierra Leone and he eagerly began to popularize the project among his fellow countrymen. John Clarkson (1764–1828), a no less enthusiastic naval officer who possessed the vigour of his remarkable brother, joined Peters' efforts. Clarkson entered the Royal Navy at the tender age of thirteen and served primarily in the Caribbean. He rose to the rank of lieutenant in 1783 and as a naval officer, a committed abolitionist and a shareholder in the Sierra Leone Company, Clarkson was the ideal person for the task. Joining Peters, he went back to Nova Scotia and started advertising Sierra Leone among the landless African Americans. Many of them responded to the appeal and volunteered for the distant African country (Davidson 276).

On 15 January 1792, fifteen ships carrying 1200 free black emigrants set sail towards Sierra Leone under Clarkson's command. Although he demanded that the passengers should be treated well, many of them got sick during the journey and seven lost their lives. Clarkson himself barely escaped death and arrived weak and tired. The new group of settlers landed at St. George Bay in late February. Their arrival imparted new vigour to the colony. The Nova Scotians began work on Freetown, today's capital, in place of the first Granville Town, which had become desolate since its destruction in 1789. Significantly, the directors of the Sierra Leone Company insisted on the town's emblematic name. It was in the new settlement where, following the American pioneers' example, the first thanksgiving service took place, marking the second and actually official foundation of the colony.

In spite of the initial display of enthusiasm, the settlement was about to experience the same old troubles soon: widespread sickness, inadequate supplies and insufficient crops made life really hard. The settlers had

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[4] For further reference, see W. S. G. Walker "Peters (Petters), Thomas," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* (2000).

to cope with corruption, problems of land distribution and the escalating tension between the black Loyalists, led by Peters, and John Clarkson, the first appointed governor. The settlers' expectations and ambitions to enter the utopian "Promised Land of Freedom" in Sierra Leone were far from realistic. Their leader Peters died in June 1792, less than four months after their arrival. John Clarkson himself was dismissed as governor and returned to England in April 1793. In an even worse coincidence of misfortunes, the 1794 city of Freetown was bombarded and then looted by a French naval force, commanded by Captain Newell, a New York slave trader. The protests of Zachary Macaulay, the new governor of Sierra Leone, who argued that the settlement was a humanitarian colony, were ignored by the French (Thomas 498; Davidson 276).

Zachary Macaulay (1768–1838) was another important character in the early history of Sierra Leone. A talented young man who served as governor between 1794 and 1799, he managed to reconstruct the colony thanks to his wisdom and vigour. An extraordinarily able administrator, Macaulay, started virtually from scratch, managed to transform the fragile tiny community into a neat and largely self-supporting settlement of 1 200 people, with wharves, fishing boats and farms (Hague 225; Davidson 276; Thomas 498).

The brief surge of optimism of the community of Sierra Leone came to an end after Macaulay left. In 1800, the colony faced a new challenge when Nova Scotians rebelled and only the arrival of 550 Jamaican Maroons saved it from chaos (Thomas 498; Land). In the aftermath of the rebellion, thirty-four Nova Scotians were banished and their lands were transferred to the Maroons who established Maroon Town and became the third wave of settlers in Sierra Leone. As already mentioned, the independent Maroon community in the Caribbean had long been tolerated by British governors on condition that the Maroons should help them capture their runaway slaves. The Maroons' relocation to Sierra Leone is in many respects reminiscent of that of the Nova Scotians whom they defeated. From Trelawney Town in Jamaica they resettled to Nova Scotia after surrendering to the British. Due to unfavourable weather conditions in Nova Scotia, the Maroons were willing to relocate again. The British government responded to their petition by sending them to Sierra Leone to curb black rebels there. The British strategic manoeuvre can thus be interpreted as a skilful adaptation of the traditional imperial principle of "divide and rule," bequeathed by the Romans.

The population of the colony expanded to reach about 2 000 settlers in 1808, when it was declared a Crown Colony in an official ceremony attended by British governors. After the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, Freetown became the headquarters of the Royal Navy's West African Squadron, whose mission was to intercept and seize illegal slave ships. The slaves, held captive on board, were granted their freedom and sent to the colony where they integrated into the local community. Frequently referred to as "captured negroes," "re-captives" or "liberated Africans," they contributed to the growth and development of the settlement. That practice enhanced the stability and coherence of the colonial project with more than 50 000 liberated slaves settling in Freetown over the next six decades (Davidson 276–277). People of diverse west African backgrounds formed the fourth and largest major constituent of the Sierra Leone colony. The coastal settlement grew and began to prosper. Its community celebrated the interflow of African, American and British traditions, becoming one of the greatest cultural "melting pots" of the world (Webster and Boahen 140).[5]

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The Sierra Leone project was marked by ambivalence from its very beginning. As Isaac Land and Andrew M. Schocket point out, the difficult founding decades of the colony "were characterized by planning and improvisation, philanthropy and condescension, egalitarianism and efforts to impose authority, scientific curiosity, religious fervour, revolutionary utopianism, and the search for profit." Historians are often divided in their views about whether idealism or imperialism motivated the relocation of free Africans to Sierra Leone. They often tend to prefer only one of the suggested interpretations. Thus, Folarin Shyllon regards the Sierra Leone project mainly as a project of deportation, while Simon Schama considers it to be entirely a Christian humanitarian initiative (Shyllon 115–166; Schama 89).

Undoubtedly, the members of the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor and, above all, the over-idealistic Sharp, were motivated by their genuine desire to help English and Nova Scotian blacks start a new life in the Province of Freedom. At the same time, the Back-to-Africa project contributed to the British

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[5] One of the tangible expressions of that blending was the emergence of a new, distinctive group, the *Creoles*, with their own language, called *Krio*, a hybrid form of English and Yoruba, with elements of Portuguese, Spanish, French, Arabic and some indigenous languages.

colonial plan to establish a colony in west Africa. Freetown was founded by distinguished English philanthropists for a humanitarian purpose, but those noble reasons may have also served to conceal the desire to expel some riotous Africans while the west African coast provided an attractive destination for building a "new British Empire" after the loss of the North American colonies. It is likewise difficult to determine the exact importance of Sierra Leone to the late-nineteenth-century British imperial project. According to P. J. Marshall, Sierra Leone did matter, due to the fact that it extended freedom to persons other than British subjects (52–53). This turns out to be one of the most essential consequences of the entire experiment: the new colony of Sierra Leone was inspired by the humanitarian anti-slavery opposition as part of a plan to eradicate the slave trade in west Africa (Webster and Boahen 137).

The descendants of African slaves, forcibly deported from their native lands, were offered to start from scratch in Africa where they had to struggle for their lives to reclaim a distant and hostile country as their "ancestral" home. However, the hardships that they suffered did not restore the settlers' lost kinship with either the "motherland" of their expectations or with their fellow Africans, the indigenous people of Sierra Leone. In most cases, the English or Nova Scotian free blacks arrived as foreigners to the indigenous culture and ways of life. The natives (the Mende, Temne, Fula, etc.) were similarly unwilling to accept the settlers as their "kin." Regardless of the skin colour of the newcomers, they were considered invaders and therefore not much different from the whites. What actually mattered was the fact that both the white and black settlers spoke a common European language, worshipped the same God, dressed in a similar way, and, more than that, were determined to conquer the indigenes' land (Land and Schocket). These specific features of the encounter made peaceful coexistence between settlers and natives practically impossible.

In the present author's opinion, the Sierra Leone project should be interpreted in the light of both humanitarian compassion and imperial interests: it actually began as a humanitarian rescue mission, but soon turned into a colonial endeavour. According to Cassandra Pybus, for many of its supporters and participants, "Sierra Leone was a social, economic, political, and religious experiment that resonated with the revolutionary age of which it formed an important part; it was an expression of the quest for freedom that resounded across the Atlantic world" (quoted in Isaac Land and Andrew M. Schocket). In the last analysis, the Sierra Leone project was a utopian experiment but also the first step towards the establishment of a British colony in Africa.

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