

***War against the Slave Trade: The Operations of The Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron, 1807 - 1867.* By Anthony Sullivan. Barnsley: Frontline, 2020. 372 pp. ISBN: 978-1-526717-93-1.**

While sailing off the Nigerian coast in March 1845, a 15-year-old British teenager was stabbed and thrown overboard. The adolescent was naval officer Thomas Palmer, in temporary command of a recently apprehended Brazilian slave trading ship *Felicidade*, which along with its fellow slave ship *Echo* had been intercepted by the Royal Navy's anti-slavery patrol. Palmer and his boarding party of nine British and African sailors were murdered as the slavers regained control of *Felicidade*, before attempting to recapture their fellow slaver *Echo* with its cargo of over 400 recently liberated Africans. Anthony Sullivan's prologue to *War against the Slave Trade* takes us through this dramatic tale of murder, sea battle, a sinking ship, several weeks' starvation and death on a life raft. As Sullivan recounts, eventually the slaves were liberated, the slavers convicted of murder and the sailors on anti-slavery patrol were triumphant knowing they had achieved their government's mission in the face of significant challenges. But despite the liberation of the freed slaves, the ending was not completely satisfactory. The original court judgement was overturned on appeal, as the technicalities of British justice determined since *Felicidad* had no slaves on board at the time of capture, its seizure was illegal. Despite extensive media, parliamentary, public and naval dissent, the British government was obliged to free the murderers and return them to Brazil - at government expense.

There is a historical continuity linking us to the 19th century. Setting aside the Victorian predilection for appointing 15-year-old middle class teenagers to command working-class adult sailors, the account above relates to challenges facing contemporary internationally approved United Nations missions that attempt to apply progressive concerns of social justice at the periphery, in what is often an unjust world. Sullivan's detailed examination of the British naval operations against the Atlantic slave trade from 1807 – 1867 first engages readers with this lively prologue exploring the intersection of social justice to ameliorate racist slave trading, military activities, domestic public opinion, the law, and international treaties – and goes on to deliver more of the same in fifteen chapters.

After clarifying that slavery is a human institution involving commercial interests of many nations rather than being uniquely British, Sullivan establishes that the dominance of British shipping resulted in a disproportionate British involvement in transporting enslaved people to the Americas, thus creating a moral challenge for British abolitionists to rectify. Activists such as Newton, Wilberforce and Pitt convinced legislators to first mitigate the conditions of the trade before Britain's transatlantic slave trade was banned in 1807, with chattel slavery abolished in the British Empire in 1833. Having passed laws against an institution they despised, abolitionists were determined to use public money and the British military to prevent further slavery. The dispatch of a maritime force and successive treaties with Britain's allies and trading partners ensured the Royal Navy could interdict slave ships of other nations in a 60-year campaign.

Despite opposition from plantation owners and business classes in London, Bristol and Liverpool, a series of laws instituted penalties against slavers, established a British colony in West Africa as a refuge for liberated slaves, and created the Liberated African Department as a public service entity to administer them. However, Sullivan's encyclopediac focus is primarily on the actions of the Royal Navy forces sent to enact the government's bidding. At the cost of over 1,500 sailors who were to die principally of disease, an estimated 150,000 slaves were liberated from the 1,600 slave ships captured. Success accompanied tragedy, as when the Spanish ship *Formidable* was apprehended with 712 slaves on board in 1835. Only

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418 survived to be landed at the aptly named Freetown, Sierra Leone, an appalling reminder that rescue did not necessarily ensure survival.

This book contributes to a cohort of historical scholarship tracing the work of maritime antislavery patrols. The experiences of naval officers were covered in *Envoys of Abolition* (2019), where Mary Wills identified idealistic anti-slavery naval officers passionately rectifying oppressive slavery. Yet she also identified officers whose attitudes reflected British superiority and others who believed Africans were inferior, but accepted their job was to free slaves even if this meant acting against their own inclinations. The underside of history and ethnic diversity of ordinary sailors who were often freed slaves was revealed in Ray Costello's *Black Salt: Seafarers of African Descent on British Ships* (2012). Sullivan enriches these earlier contributions in his comprehensive operational history that provides meticulous details of recurring navy activities by those deployed on a multinational mission, supported by taxpayers and backed by international law. Primary sources from the British National Archives, from parliamentary reports as well as naval records have been used to great effect. I, like many readers lack specific knowledge of 19th century naval equipment and Sullivan enhances our understanding with an array of 1840s ship illustrations enabling readers to envisage the size of the craft that intercepted often hostile slave ships. Inclusion of regional maps, a 4-page glossary and two appendices further assist the maritime neophyte.

The imagined fantasies of a fictional *Bridgerton* create a pleasing 19th century on the small screen, but the realities experienced by people of colour must also be recognised. In an era of debates on post-colonial reparations and Black Lives Matter, it is critical that we understand the varieties of cross-cultural racial interactions in Britain's imperial past. Anthony Sullivan's history of British naval operations against the Atlantic slave trade provides a timely reminder that while empires have racist histories, progressive activists could use their influence from within to make governments rectify at least some of the harms of an imperial slaving past, and to limit further slavery. His comprehensive and thoughtful book provides readers with what in essence was a prototype of 21st-century contemporary United Nations missions. This reminds us that then, as in today's world, international humanitarian assistance missions can benefit from a political constituency dedicated to progressive political and social justice outcomes, mobilising domestic politics to achieve results of international significance.

Richard Gehrman

Works Cited

Costello, Ray. *Black Salt: Seafarers of African Descent on British Ships*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012.

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