

The Story of Free Town/ Sierra Leone

The Rise and Downfall of the “Black Loyalists” in Britain

The region now called Sierra Leone, flourished between the 13th and 15th centuries. Early inhabitants included the Temne, Sherbro and Limba who were organised in independent chiefdoms. The contact with Europeans began in 1462 with the arrival of Portuguese navigators who called the area Serra Lyoa (Lion Mountain), which later was modified to Sierra Leone. At the Tagrin Bay where Freetown now stands, slaving ships regularly put in to trade with local rulers for their transatlantic cargo. The American War of Independence in the 1770ies provided an opportunity for thousands of slaves to gain freedom by fighting for Britain. They were honoured for this with the name the “Black Loyalists”. But when the war ended with the defeat of Great Britain in 1783, the ex-slaves had to move away from the “Thirteen Colonies”; a territory that belongs to the USA, today. Over 15.000 of them made their way to London, some even with their wives. But they were not welcome, at all. They suffered unemployment and poverty which was a problem in Britain, already.¹ In 1786, Jonas Hanway (1712- 1786) with a group of English philanthropists, established the “Committee for the Relief of Black Poor” which suggested taking as many of them as possible to Africa to start a new life. Henry Smeathman (1742- 1786) came up with a plan that was supported by the government.² He pledged to transport the “troublesome Blacks back to Africa (...to) remove the burden of the Blacks from the public forever”.³ Both Hanway and Smeathman died in the same year of the foundation of the committee. So their plans would be accomplished by other members under the leadership of Joseph Irwin. By agreement with a local chief of the Temne tribe, known to the British as “King Tom”, twenty miles of hilly coast in Sierra Leone were secured for the purpose. The British government and the committee tried a number of ways to encourage and even force the Afro-Americans to go. Payments to the “Black poor” were now made only to people who agreed to go to Sierra Leone. The government also gave the settlers a written agreement that appeared to offer them some protection. The Nigerian Ibo Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa; 1745-1797) had been kidnapped at the age of twelve, taken to America and served in the war. The difference why he had not become one of the stranded “Black poor” was that he had made it to earn his own money and buy his freedom. This man was first employed by the British government to

¹ Gomer Williams, *History of the Liverpool Privateers and Letters of Marque- with the Account of the Liverpool Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Univers. Press, 2010), 477.

² Deirdre Coleman, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge: Univers. Press, 2005), 28-35.

³ Stephen J. Braidwood, “Black Poor and White Philanthropists- London’s Blacks and the Foundation of the Sierra Leone Settlement 1786-1791” in *Liverpool Historical Studies* Vol. 100, Ed. 1 (Liverpool: Univers. Press, 1994) 89-95.

arrange supplies for the journey of the settlers. However, when he complained about the corruption and mistreatment of the Blacks by Joseph Irwin, he was dismissed. From the beginning, the project was a disaster: In 1787, about 400 “Black poor” had signed the “repatriation” agreement; but then, some of them changed their mind and refused to embark on the three ships that were to carry them. This was why the vessels were held up in the Thames, where the passengers on board endured wretched conditions. Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (around 1757- 1801),⁴ a native from Gold Coast, opposed the scheme writing in his book how “many perished with cold and other disorders” while waiting to leave. Finally, after several months, the ships left England with 350 black passengers, including 41 women. In addition, 59 white women were most likely the girlfriends of the men and / or looking for a better future. During the voyage, 35 passengers died. When the ships reached Sierra Leone, the conditions were grim. Heavy rains made it difficult to build homes or grow food. The rations brought from England were exhausted. Many of the new settlers died of diseases. In addition, there were fights between slave traders and one local ruler. After one year, half of the settlers had died. After four years, only 60 of them had survived. The British government had failed to make any sort of alliance with them. The new colony was first named the “Grain Coast of West Africa” and later renamed by the British as the “Land of Freedom”. After most of the first settlers had perished, it was left to an entirely new group of Black Loyalists who emigrated from Nova Scotia/ Canada. They established a settlement which they named Freetown; today's capital of the land. In 1808, the British government took over the settlement and declared it a colony.

Opportunities and Oppressions for the Black Loyalists in Canada

Another part of the British army, numbering about 33.000 soldiers, were evacuated to Canada. One half of them were brought to Nova Scotia, the other half to New Brunswick. These were land grants from the British Crown to compensate for their losses. The group in Nova Scotia included 3.000 of the freed slaves, the so-called “Black Loyalists”. They founded a housing development at Birch Town (near Shelburne) which was the largest free Black settlement of the time in the North of the American continent. Almost all of them received the land that had been promised to them, in 1788. The average size was 40 acres, less than the assigned lot to Whites. For the Black settlers in New Brunswick, things did not work so well as in Nova Scotia.⁵ Their

⁴ Mary-Antoinette Smith, Thomas Clarkson and Ottobah Cugoano, eds., *Essays on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (Peterborough/ Ontario: Broadview Press, 2010), 221-325.

⁵ Ruth Holmes Whitehead, *Black Loyalists- Southern Settlers of Nova Scotia's First Free Black Communities* (Halifax/ CAN: Nimbus Publ., 2013), 8ff.

white fellow- soldiers did not want them as neighbours, so they had to move further to lands, which were fruitless, and of no worth. One of these betrayed people was Thomas Peters (1738-1792) who bitterly complained about the situation. In 1790, he left his family behind to travel to London. There, he contacted his former Commander-in-Chief Sir Henry Clinton who connected him with the abolitionist parliamentarian William Wilberforce. Through him, another abolitionist Granville Sharp (1735- 1813) was able to help Peters with his petition to speak to the Prime Minister. The argumentation went: (There exists) "a humiliating and unjust prejudice against black people that even those who will be recognized free (...) are the common rights and privileges of other residents refused", (also) "not in any elections nor jurors serve are voting allowed".⁶ In response to this, the Prime Minister undertook to pay the necessary expenses to transport the black settlers who desired to leave Nova Scotia, to Sierra Leone. John, brother of Thomas Clarkson and friend of William Wilberforce, was employed to organize the transportation. He was able to bring over 1.100 people from many different Protestant (Methodist) churches, on fifteen ships. Wilberforce had told Clarkson that he should call the new black settlers "Africans" which he believed was "a respectable way to speak of them". Nevertheless, this was not explicitly, how the settlers thought of themselves. In their eyes, they were free British subjects and Christians. So Freetown/ Sierra Leone became the centre for a new missionary movement with an environmental theology. Here was the first Protestant church established on African ground; not a European missionary creation, but a Black one.⁷ Their salvation message was that they had gone out of the house of bondage to the "Promised Land". Their story was the first real success of missionary movement in Africa. The church historian Andrew F. Walls (*1928) pioneered in studies of the history of the African Church in the academic field of world Christianity. He says, "African Christianity is to a surprising extent the result of African initiatives". The Evangelical Revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries not only put Europeans on the track of mission, but also directly ignited many Africans. Walls points to the "vital importance" of African evangelists and catechists in countries like Uganda and Nigeria. At a later stage, there were dynamic and influential preachers whose effectiveness was recognized by the mission churches, although their ministries did not easily fit into the organizational structures of those. Some of their preachers were William W. Harris in Ivory Coast (ca. 1850-1929), Sampson Oppong in Ghana (ca. 1884- ?) and Joseph Babalola in Nigeria (1904- 1959).

⁶ Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings- Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (Viking/ CAN, 2006), 11.

⁷ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross- Cultural Process in Christian History*, (Maryknoll/ NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 95.