

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY FOR THE LESSONS ENTITLED:

What would a Traveller to the West Coast of West Africa during the 17th and 18th Centuries have Witnessed?

I have been interested in the imperial aspect of British History since the early 1990's. In 1996 I completed an MA dissertation in History in Education at the London Institute of Education on the importance of imperial history within the National Curriculum. I argued that, simply in order to be objective, history teachers needed to spend far more time considering such matters as the Slave Trade and Anglo-Indian relationships than seemed to be the case at that time. Since then, the quality of text books has improved and teachers seem much more willing to teach the aforementioned topics. The tendency to gloss over painful aspects of Britain's past seems to have diminished and most history departments appear to devote reasonable amounts of time to the study of aspects of the British Empire and to the Slave Trade.

However, as history teachers, we must try to avoid complacency and be prepared to assess our practices. We should frequently ask ourselves two questions:

- Does our teaching of history reflect its true nature as a discipline and current research and debate relating to the topics we currently teach?
- Does our teaching enable students effectively to learn?

The first point refers to the necessity for us to be epistemologically and historiographically rigorous – the need to involve our students in real history. The second point concerns the need to enable students to make intellectual progress – to be sufficiently interested and involved in the subject to be able to acquire and perfect particular skills and knowledge and to be sufficiently able and motivated to pursue their interests independently. We can distil both points into one question – are we enabling our students to become young historians?

The attached series of lessons has been created as a result of asking the above questions in relation to the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. A survey of some of the most commonly used resources and of departmental schemes of work reveals that the answer to the first question is in most cases “no” and to the second is frequently “not as well as we could”.

Regarding the first question, it seems to this author, having first investigated the matter in the mid 1990's and then having observed developments over the subsequent decade and a half that teachers are much more willing to deal with the Slave Trade than had been the case. There is no doubt at all that we have made progress since the late Victorian days when S.R. Gardiner wrote in his school history text book about the middle passage:

“The poor wretches suffered horrible torments, being packed almost as closely as the sufferers in the Black Hole of Calcutta, in nearly as stifling an atmosphere so that large numbers died on the way”¹

Gardiner’s unctuous and distorted self-justification combined with his erroneous comparative morality make it highly risible. During the 20thC, school historiography made some progress, but the tone was still a bit patronising. Textbooks seemed to imply that the British only ever began the slave trade in order, later on, to demonstrate their tremendous sense of fair play by abolishing it.² There was hardly any discussion of the African dimension or of the role of the enslaved people in effecting their own liberation. At the end of the century, there was a textbook revolution brought about by the inauguration of the National Curriculum in 1989. Books became more colourful and replete with source extracts and challenging questions.³

To a lesser extent, public or popular history seemed to undergo a similar change. For example, at that time, the BBC screened a series of six programmes about colonial people who challenged the empire. Olaudah Equiano was one of them. Subsequent to that, Equiano seemed to become an unofficial hero for all history teachers, as his face appeared in textbooks and on posters and no lesson about the slave trade was thought to be complete if it did not contain an extract from his autobiography.⁴ At about the same time, Merseyside Maritime Museum opened a new gallery devoted to Transatlantic Slavery, which many people, including this author, found to be a profoundly disturbing educational experience.⁵ As a Merseysider who had regularly visited the great Liverpool Museum since childhood and who had found the African exhibits of the old Mayer Collection to be particularly fascinating, I now found them being displayed in a totally different fashion – as evidence and illustrations of the depth and complexity of pre-colonial African culture. Their juxtaposition with exploration of the depredations of the European slave traders was particularly poignant. The gallery has since been expanded and upgraded. It is visited by numerous school parties every year.⁶

The above discussion implies that everything is as it should be – Equiano gives us the African perspective; he features in all our textbooks and we have at least one museum which deals with the Slave Trade. The history teacher must surely be justified in thinking that, at last, we have got it right. Sadly however, I don’t think we have. I say this because I don’t believe it is the role of the history teacher to be either a hagiographer or a purveyor of myths. When it comes to treatment of the Slave Trade, I fear that this is what most of us become – we seem to think that certain texts (e.g. Olaudah’s autobiography) and particular images (e.g. the cross

¹ Quoted by Kathryn Castle on page 66 of *Britannia’s Children – Reading Colonialism Through Children’s Books and Magazines*, Manchester, 1996; Gardiner’s book was published in 1892.

² See two great staple texts of the later 20thC: R.J. Cootes *Britain Since 1700*, Longman 1980 and P. Moss *History Scene 4*, Collins, 1985

³ A good example is Martin Roberts *The British Empire*, Longman, 1995

⁴ See Paul Edwards (ed.) *Equiano’s Travels*, Heinemann, 1967 and 1969

⁵ The associated catalogue is well worth reading – Anthony Tibbles (ed.) *Transatlantic Slavery – Against Human Dignity*, NMGM, 1994

⁶ Including, on average about 100 students from the author’s school in Kendal, Cumbria every January

section of the “Brookes”⁷) are as immutable and incontrovertible as sacred icons and that the motives of the great Equiano are beyond question or discussion. In doing so, we fail to carry out one aspect of the historian’s job – to question the sources. None of the current textbooks seem to expose the aforementioned sources to rigorous analysis. They seem merely to be employed as passing illustrations in a powerful narrative and do not discuss the fact that they are late 18thC propaganda – admittedly for a good cause, but propaganda nevertheless. We like narratives and we like patterns and clear shapes. We also like stories with a strong moral content. The story of the Slave Trade contains all these elements. We feel justified in sticking to the accepted narrative because it helps us to understand some modern world problems such as racism and the under-development of Africa. It is understandable, but it is not history.

One only needs to peruse a few standard works about the slave trade in order to realise that it has a much messier and more nuanced history than most of us imagine. James Walvin’s books, for example, make it quite clear that the idea of the Triangular Trade is a serious oversimplification.⁸ He also explains the procedures of the slavers whilst they were in Africa, describing the role of forts and of co-operation with local people.⁹ He also analyses the way in which the ships had to linger off the West African coast for weeks before they managed to get their full complement of slaves.¹⁰ This basic information is contrary to the impression which most of us give when we project the picture of the “Brookes” completely full of people or when we supplement it with clips from the films “Roots” or “Amistad”.

The attached lessons aim to remedy this, not by producing a batch of equally one-sided revisionist assertions, but by dipping into selected primary sources and exposing students to some pieces of information in their rawest form, even in some cases to the extent of not having been transcribed, edited or simplified. To put it crudely, the lessons aim to “cut out the middleman” and to enable the students both to discover and to interpret their own facts. In the first lesson, this involves learning about the ways in which the European slave traders had to co-operate with local people. The second lesson focuses on the routines of the slave trade and encourages students to think about the implications of such a protracted and uncertain business. In the second lesson, children are encouraged to think about the effect of the trade on human beings – they are provoked to think deeply about the implications of terse entries in slaving log books. It is hoped that, after all this, they will develop a more nuanced, less tidy, but much more representative understanding of the history of the Slave Trade.

Finally it is necessary briefly to discuss the implications of the second of our original questions. The attached lessons have a particular style – they aim to facilitate learning rather than to instruct. The teacher is encouraged to stimulate and guide discussion, exploration and

⁷ It was originally drawn by William Elford and widely used by Thomas Clarkson and the Abolitionists in the 1780’s; see Marcus Rediker *The Slave Ship – A Human Story*, Viking, 2007 chapter 10 for an excellent discussion of the history and importance of this image

⁸ James Walvin *Atlas of Slavery*, Pearson, 2006 pages 48 and 49

⁹ James Walvin *Black Ivory*, Fontana, 1993 pages 25-37

¹⁰ Rediker op. cit. pages 73-107

analysis rather than to lecture or expound.¹¹ The sources are to be presented in as near their original form as possible, partly so that children can experience the challenge and thrill of wrestling with old documents, pictures and maps and partly because their very strangeness is their biggest asset: children love breaking codes and unravelling mysteries. Ultimately, the lessons will lead to a higher level of student motivation and involvement in the subject. The children will become young historians – people who research, explain and interpret the past, rather than individuals who passively receive and admire moral myths or 21stC parables. They might not be supplied with comforting explanations for some of today’s international social and economic problems, but they will have acquired something much more universally applicable – a greater awareness of the complexity and subtlety of the human condition coupled with a greater ability to find, process and interpret new knowledge for themselves.

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¹¹ The approach results from research and development in which the author has been engaged at his school since September 2009. It has involved experimenting with independent learning techniques and extended to consulting students about what and how they like to learn in history. It has become apparent that they enjoy being more active in the classroom; they like to work in groups and enjoy being given more choice about learning methods. So far, the author has been impressed with the outcomes resulting from the employment of such student-centred approaches.