



## Was it Good Fortune to be Enslaved by the British Empire?

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*"And so it was that I came to be born in Detroit and that thirty-five years later..I was in Africa, birth place of my ancestor, standing at the edge of a river not as an African but as an American journalist- a mere spectator-watching the bloated bodies of black Africans cascading over a waterfall. And that's when I thought about how, if things had been different, I might have been one of them---or might have met some similarly anonymous fate in one of the countless ongoing civil wars or tribal clashes on this brutal continent. And so I thank God my ancestor survived that voyage." -- Keith Richburg, *Out of America* (1997)*

1619 was a year of terrible cruelty in the world. In Europe, the French king imprisoned his mother in a rural chateau and had her tortured in conditions described as no better than in the Bastille. The horrific Thirty Years' War began in Central Europe: before it ended, it would take eight million lives and reduce the population of parts of Germany and France by over half. The bubonic plague was sweeping India and millions were dying from famine in Ming China, both places ruled by decadent god-kings that saw mass deaths as a natural part of the cosmic order. In the Americas, the governor of Bermuda was replaced after having a man hanged for stealing a piece of cheese.

My own Scottish forebears were being rounded up by the Scottish king for duties in New Scotland (Nova Scotia). The king preferred to settle this new colony with ne'er-do-wells, criminals, and "Brownists"—Protestant followers of Robert Browne, the same radicals who would people the *Mayflower* in 1620. Most died in the 1620s from freezing, starvation, or scurvy. The expedition leader described the latter condition in a 1629 letter as "a nasty and lazy disease with swelling of feet, legs, and thighs, with shoots the colour of the rainbow, with sores falling off the hair, a canine appetite, even til death much discontent." Further down

the North American coast, “20. and odd Negroes” were put ashore at Jamestown, slaves stolen from a Portuguese ship which had loaded them at Angola in southwest Africa.

For all such groups – Bohemian rebels, Bastille prisoners, Chinese and Indian serfs, Caribbean settlers, Scottish malcontents, and African slaves – life was nasty, brutish, and short around the year 1619. The Reformation was only a century old and had yet to achieve its moral revolution in the world. The Industrial Revolution, through which capitalism generated unprecedented human welfare, was over a century away. None of us would choose to have belonged to any of these groups: canapés and an honest Grenache at Versailles for me, please. But if one were forced to make a choice, a plausible argument could be made for the good fortune of the “20. and odd Negroes”, not just compared to the other unfortunates but also compared to the millions of slaves of African and Arab owners that they left behind.

The Jamestown 20-odd were likely part of the plunder from a war a year earlier between the dominant Ndongo kingdom in Angola and a Portuguese-led alliance of African rivals, dissidents, and mercenaries. While slaves were always part of war plunder in Africa, most slaves in Africa were a result of market transactions not war. The Jesuit chronicler Pero Rodrigues wrote in 1594 that the number of "slaves taken in war are nothing compared to those bought at *feiras* [markets], at these *feiras* the kings and lords and all Ethiopia [i.e. east Africa] sell slaves." Those who ended up in Jamestown were headed for the Caribbean and would otherwise have ended up in east Africa or the Middle East.

The Spanish and Portuguese believed they were doing African slaves a favor by rescuing them from cruel local tyrannies, and that they would fare better as slaves under Christian masters, their souls saved. Hence the hasty baptism of slaves about to be shipped from Angola, including probably those who ended up in Jamestown in 1619. The glimmer of a push for equality and emancipation from the ethical resources of Western civilization was already present on those beaches.

None of this made their enslavement “right.” But then little of what happened to the wretched of the earth in that era was right by contemporary standards. There is a historical bait and switch when contemporary critics charge European colonialists with all sorts of modern crimes: stealing land, owning slaves, shooting lions. These charges appeal to norms and expectations that emerged later from Western civilization itself, and *only* from Western civilization. Stealing land, owning slaves, and slaying wildlife were, after all, the national sports of pre-European contact African, Arab, and native American cultures.

In the event, the life chances of those enslaved under the British empire improved markedly compared to what they would have been in Africa even as freemen, and certainly compared to other slave colonies in the Americas. Within a flourishing capitalist system, the value put on slaves meant that slave owners had every interest in keeping them healthy. That is why black slaves in the United States were healthier than British marines or French or Italian peasants. It is also why U.S. slave population expanded more rapidly than elsewhere through natural increase.

The Jamestown 20-odd were dropped into a particularly idealistic part of the West, where Protestant notions of emancipation and the equality of all men would develop faster than elsewhere. As time passed, the moral revolution against slavery that began in Britain would sweep the United States. From 1619 until the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the moral revolution was building. Slave traders were increasingly held accountable for the humane treatment of their slaves and their legal rights. Where else would there have been such a protracted legal process as at Newport, Rhode Island in 1791 for a captain accused of throwing a slave woman overboard because her smallpox threatened to kill everyone on his ship? The case went on for five

years before a lengthy opinion acquitted him on the grounds of emergency measures. All this for a single slave woman. Nowhere else in the world was human life treated as so precious.

The moral awakening against slavery took place in Europe, not in Africa, and certainly not in the Islamic world. Throughout Africa, the British used antislavery treaties as the basis of their influence. A full 10 percent of British naval resources were assigned to anti-slaving duties in the Atlantic and Indian oceans in the 1840s. Brazil and then the U.S. joined in the abolition of slavery, and then in the latter half of the 19th century the abolition spread to Africa. When the British expanded their influence to northern Nigeria, it was experienced as a liberation from native tyranny. “The Europeans don’t like oppression but they found a lot of tyranny and oppression here, people being beaten and killed and sold into slavery,” recalled a woman of the Habe ethnic group of the British advent in 1900. She had grown up in the slave-based Sokoto Caliphate, a creation of the Fulani ethnic group which had defeated and subjugated rival tribes in a series of wars between 1804 and 1808. “We Habe wanted them to come, it was the Fulani who did not like it,” she recalled (her story was published in 1954 as *Baba of Karo*). “In the old days if the chief liked the look of your daughter he would take her and put her in his house; you could do nothing about it. Now they don’t do that.”

The greater the moral awakening in the West, the more it came in for criticism. In 1892, the British had persuaded the king of Benin to sign a pledge to eliminate human sacrifice and slave trading. He did not comply and in 1897, when British troops conquered the world’s worst tyrant, the King of Benin, they witnessed an African scene that was one of the accounts used by Conrad for his *Heart of Darkness*: “Huge pits, forty to fifty feet deep, were found filled with human bodies...everywhere sacrificial trees on which were the corpses of the latest human victims, everywhere, on each path, were newly sacrificed corpses,” a British officer recalled. “On the principal sacrificial tree, facing the main gate of the king’s compound, there were two crucified bodies, at the foot of the tree seventeen newly decapitated bodies, and forty-three more in various stages of decomposition.”

The officer’s account, *The Benin Massacre*, and another first-hand account, *Benin: The City of Blood*, were published to wide attention in Britain shortly before Conrad began work on *Heart of Darkness* in late 1898. But Conrad knew that no one would read a novel about the King of Benin. Scolding passions were reserved for the West. Instead, he made a white trader the center of horrors, successfully stirring the outrage of generations of English professors. The same literary strategy has been used by progressives ever since, especially by the American journalist Adam Hochschild in his bestselling 1998 book *King Leopold’s Ghost* about the Belgian king’s private estates in pre-colonial Congo. The king’s estate was not a Belgian colony; indeed, that was the problem. And the abuses paled in comparison to those of the nearby African slave lord Tippu Tip. If anything, Leopold’s presence, and then Belgian colonization in 1908, was far better than the likely alternatives. Yet at last count there were only three books on Tippu Tip, but somewhere between 30 and 50 on King Leopold II’s Congo Free State, none of them flattering.

Some critics discount the British and American efforts to abolish slavery on the grounds of their earlier involvement, arguing, in essence, that it should be compared to burning a fellow’s house down and then volunteering to rebuild it. That is a false analogy because it assumes an intentional and acknowledged wrong is committed in the first place. Slavery was not of that sort – the moral revolution came after, not before. A better analogy would be a slum lord who, having witnessed and indeed caused many people to lose their homes on wholly legal grounds, becomes a major advocate and funder of affordable housing programs and legal reforms to make evictions more difficult and raise standards for low-income housing. The growth of a new moral outlook brings about the change. Is this not to be praised?

Today, being black in America is one of the best outcomes for a black person globally. If not, more black Americans would own passports and would, over time, have migrated to other places, such as Guyana, Liberia, Haiti, or Sierra Leone. To be black in America is, historically speaking, to have hit the jackpot. For those who came ashore at Jamestown and in the centuries that followed, being enslaved under the British empire was about as good as it got. If your fate was to be African, then being enslaved under the British empire gave you and your descendants a better shot at a decent life than they would have had even *without* being enslaved.

There is a third unutterable: to be enslaved within the British empire was to be an agent of moral change because of the inconsistency of slavery with liberal values. Black abolitionists and slaves knew this, which is why they participated so manfully in the American Revolution and the Civil War. With the British empire on the side of anti-slavery, more good was done for the global elimination of the slave trade than would ever have happened had the British themselves not become involved in the trade. In historical perspective, the only thing worse for black lives in general than British and American slavery would have been its absence.

One wonders then why the projects surrounding 1619 – an invitation to history – have become such a boorish rejection of history. Instead of insight and empowerment, 1619 has become an exercise in Soviet-style historiography. In this version, rather than all history leading to the workers' paradise, all history leads to eternal and indelible black victimization. It is fake history, propaganda, and utter nonsense. I suspect those involved in it – like Soviet historiographers – know it.

A significant portion of black America rejects this fake history. Housing secretary Ben Carson's 20-minute talk on the dust-up over Baltimore in July is a passionate statement of black freedom and responsibility as there has been. But for too many, a catwalk of supermodels parading the latest fashion in eternal black victimization – from Malcolm X to Ta-Nehisi Coates – continues to set the style. The social and psychological crisis of black America is inextricably linked to the absence of historical memory, quite a feat for a group whose radical luminaries espouse attention to history.

Distortionary tales of white guilt and black virtue have become a recreational drug for white liberals as well, suggesting that as time goes by historical understanding becomes ever more degraded. The fate of too many of those who followed the Jamestown 20-odd was to be caught in a web of self-pity, apples tied to the branch rather than being allowed to fall freely as Frederick Douglass warned. Perhaps I would have preferred scurvy in Nova Scotia after all.

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