

From St Helena to Bencoolen: The English East India Company's Practices of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Late Eighteenth Century

Intra-imperial and inter-imperial linkages not only shaped the daily and long-term formation of the early modern British empire but also constituted an actively and contentiously debated matter among imperial subjects and proponents of empire. Intra-imperial rivalry co-existed alongside recognitions of the mutual benefits of intra-imperial coordination and economies of exchange. The English East India Company's engagement with slavery and the slave trade, particularly the phenomenon of the "Company's Slaves" – slaves who were owned by the Company rather than any particular individual – offers a revealing example of such a combination of intra-imperial circulation, rivalry and collaboration. The Company's purchase of slave labor as well as use of slave labor implicated the entirety of the Company's territories, from St. Helena in the South Atlantic to Bencoolen on the West Coast of Sumatra, whether or not a particular territory was in itself the final destination for enslaved men, women, and children. As early as the late seventeenth century, the English East India Company had attempted to establish sugar-works in the East Indies, bringing slaves as well as planters "skillful in Sugar plantacōns" from St. Helena to Bencoolen, located not far from Dutch Batavia. The Company's practices of imperial governance and economy, and consequent shipping routes and channels of circulation in the East Indies, produced such a state of inter-connectedness. Decisions regarding the apportioning of slave populations between St. Helena and Bencoolen were made by high-ranking Company officials in Calcutta in the Bengal Presidency. Similarly, buying slaves as well as capturing escaped slaves involved the relaying of goods, orders and intelligence from one territory to the next.

Nevertheless, territories sought to distinguish themselves from the other and emphasize their own commercial viability on the basis of the deployment (or lack thereof) of slave labor. For instance, in the midst of the slave rebellion in St. Domingue in the 1790s and the resulting rush to supplant the French colony as the leading producer of sugar, political economic debate among the Company's affiliates resulted in a discursive comparison of the profitability of sugar produced by free labor in Bengal and that of sugar produced by slave labor in Bencoolen. The import of the revolt in St. Domingue to political economic debate in the East Indies points to the oft-ignored convergences and connections between Britain's territories in the East Indies and the Atlantic world. Further, Company administrations in territories subordinate to the Bengal Presidency vociferously sought to resist impulses towards abolition from above by citing the necessity of slave labor for the local economy. The history of the Company's engagement with slave labor thus points to the global circulation of not only enslaved persons but also that of political economic and moral discourses about slavery.

Paying attention to hubs of slaving also allows us to reconceptualize the history of the East India Company and imperial geographies. The English East India Company's settlement at Bencoolen has long appeared as a footnote in histories of the Company's expansion in South Asia, or a failed attempt to replicate the success of Dutch Batavia. What these South Asia-focused or more narrowly Bengal-centric narratives and judgements of failure occlude, however, is that eighteenth century British actors did not uniformly and wholeheartedly subscribe to either of these claims. The English, and later British settlement of Bencoolen was first established in 1685 and remained in British hands, barring French wartime occupation, until 1824. Bencoolen was even elevated to the status of a Presidency in the

second half of the eighteenth century. The question we must ask, therefore, is why indeed was the settlement maintained for so long? That so many historians have argued that Bencoolen was hopelessly peripheral sits uncomfortably with Bencoolen's long history as a significant node in British maritime and commercial networks and equally, as a hub of Company governance and administration. This project suggests that Bencoolen's status as an outpost and eventually Presidency was no accident. Rather, it was precisely because Bencoolen lay at the heart of multiple imperial projects that it remained a valued and long-held possession. Bencoolen stood at the centre of efforts to capture the pepper market and wrest it from Dutch control, displace the West Indies as the premier source of sugar, and also develop a more benign model of slave labor deployment. Furthermore, it would be a mistake to assume that all eighteenth century imperial agents imagined the British empire as a metropolitan core in a hierarchical relationship with multiple colonial peripheries. Rather, numerous proponents of a less hierarchical imperial structure advocated for and sought to enact an empire constituted of equally important and autonomous territories. In such visions of intra-imperial collaboration, Bencoolen occupied a critical position both as a way-station for Company ships trading with Canton and as a defensive bulwark essential for securing the Company's South Asian Presidencies. Thus, tracing histories of slavery also allows us to provincialize the Bengal Presidency and place in it a broader imperial constellation.

Finally, this project also offers a fragmented history of the experience of enslaved persons. Various trial records in which enslaved persons appeared as witnesses across Company territories indicate the legal status of slaves in the apparent absence of clear detailing of laws or any explicit legal code. While treatment of slaves and conception of slaves was broadly congruent across the Company's territories, the identity of other ethnic

and laboring groups, whether European or otherwise, present in a particular place shaped the particularities of the status of slaves, and the labor performed by them. Therefore, despite broad similarities in the structure of Company administration, governance, and law across the Company's various territories, divergences in the ethnic and demographic make-up of different spaces meant that slaves in Bombay and slaves in Bencoolen occupied fairly different positions.

Largely drawn from materials housed at the British Library, London, this study of such practices and debates brings to the fore the ways in which a range of historical actors, from imperial agents to enslaved persons, understood the ramifications of global intra-imperial and inter-imperial connections and deployed such knowledge to further the machinery of the imperial state or equally, subvert it. The support of the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking was invaluable for the completion of this project.

List of Ships taken up for the year 1798 with the names of the Managing Owners, Commanders, Places of Consignment, &c.

Ship	Tonnage	Managing Owners	Commanders	Chief Officers	Second Officers	Third Officers	Fourth Officers	Surgeons	Consignments
2 Anson	798	Mr. Rogers Esq.	Robt. Kempell	J. M. Smith	Wm. Green	Wm. Smith	Wm. Smith	Wm. Smith	India and Africa
1 Royal Charlotte	1233	Mr. Roberts Esq.	Mr. Roberts	Mr. Roberts	Mr. Roberts	Mr. Roberts	Mr. Roberts	Mr. Roberts	India, Bengal & Africa
2 Trew	300	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
1 Anson	1208	Mr. Williams Esq.	Mr. Williams	Mr. Williams	Mr. Williams	Mr. Williams	Mr. Williams	Mr. Williams	India, Bengal & Africa
1 Francis	789	Mr. Moffatt Esq.	Mr. Moffatt	Mr. Moffatt	Mr. Moffatt	Mr. Moffatt	Mr. Moffatt	Mr. Moffatt	India, Bengal & Africa
1 Parrnell	796	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
1 Lord of Mercavenny	822	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
1 Orlery	775	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
1 Lord Thurlow	805	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
1 Polutara	906	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
2 Corva	1180	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
2 Woodcut	802	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
1 St. George	957	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
1 Marquis of Cambridge	617	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
2 Luce	801	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
2 Earl Fitzwilliam	802	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
2 Prince of Wales	802	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
2 Prince Amherst	808	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
1 Rodney	772	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
3 William Pitt	798	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
3 Albion	744	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
5 Royal Admiral	921	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
4 Marquis Hastings	786	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
2 Drake	799	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
2 Prince Royal	805	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
2 Worcester	798	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
3 Swift	785	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
5 Earl of West	787	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
2 Henry Dundas	802	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
5 Pelham	789	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa
2 Lord Malsborough	561	Mr. Pater Esq.	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	Mr. Pater	India, Bengal & Africa

Image from an East India Company Ship Logbook