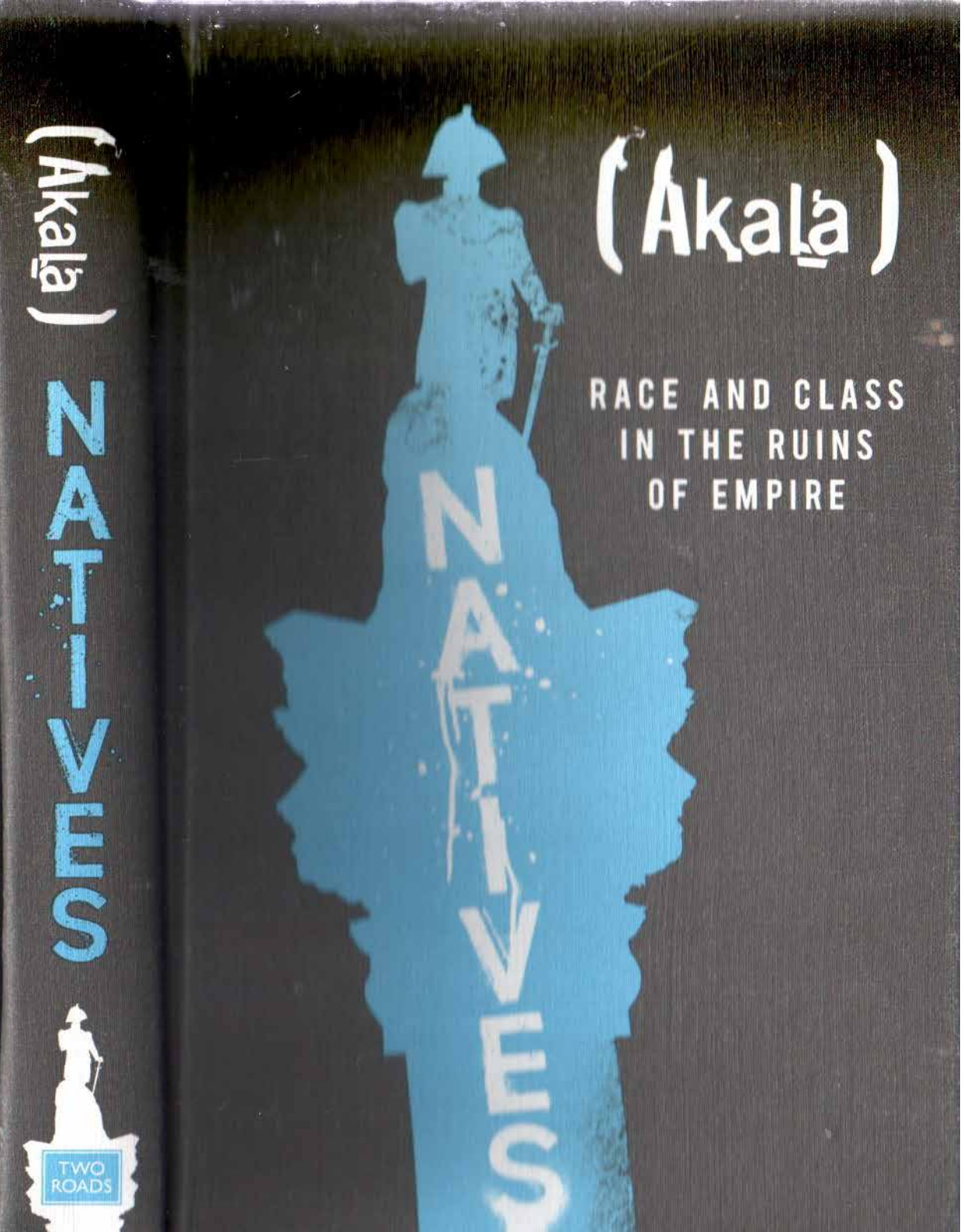

5 – EMPIRE AND SLAVERY IN THE BRITISH MEMORY

'I think he would be very proud of the continuing legacy of Britain in those places around the world, and particularly I think he would be amazed at India, the world's largest democracy – a stark contrast, of course, with other less fortunate countries that haven't had the benefit of British rule. If I can say this on the record – why not? It's true, it's true.'

Boris Johnson of Winston Churchill, on whom he has just finished writing a book

'I am strongly in favour of using poison gas against uncivilized tribes. It would spread a lively terror.'

'I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion.'

Winston Churchill

'Come over here, Kingslee,' my teacher's Canadian voice called excitedly, as she beckoned me towards her. She was never usually nice to me, so I was a bit suspicious about her calling me over with such enthusiasm. When I got close enough, she put her hand on the shoulder of my seven-year-old self with just the right weight of touch to communicate the monumental solemnity of the occasion.

Pointing to the painting on the wall, she said, 'Kingslee,' and then drew in a dramatic breath to add power to the punchline,

'this man stopped slavery.' She managed to pull her eyes away from the picture and turned them in my direction, her gaze instructing me to be thankful.

She expected me to share in her joy, but I was just thoroughly confused. 'What, all by himself, miss?' I asked. 'Don't you mean he helped?'

Her face distorted and she took the exact same flustered breath that liberals everywhere would take in 2008, right before they were about to lecture any black person who had the gall to declare themselves a non-supporter of Barack Obama. (I was there in 2008, I was one such sinner, I know that face of 'you can't possibly know what is good for you and how could you be so ungrateful' very well.) 'No Kingslee, he stopped slavery,' she retorted, clearly annoyed at my refusal to blindly accept what I was being told.

We were on a school visit to the National Portrait Gallery and the painting on the wall was of one Mr William – patron saint of black emancipation – Wilberforce. I did not have the strength or wherewithal to argue back with my teacher, I was only seven after all, but I knew her statement was absurd, hence the memory staying put. By what force of magic could an educated adult be compelled to believe that one man, all by himself, could put an end to a few centuries of tri-continental multi-million-pound business enterprise – and genocide – by the sheer force of his moral convictions? What's more, why would this teacher try to convince me, of all the students in our class, of such an absurdity? I was not the only child of Caribbean origin in our class, so it could not have been a 'let's just pick out the black kid' scenario, but I was the only one who went to pan-African Saturday school, and thus had demonstrated a particular penchant for challenging what I was being taught. Courtesy of that community schooling, by the time this teacher was telling me that Wilberforce had set Africans free I already had

some knowledge of the rebel slaves known as 'Maroons' across the Caribbean, and of the Haitian Revolution, so I had some idea that the enslaved had not just sat around waiting for Wilberforce, or anyone else for that matter, to come and save them.

While it's certainly true that Britain had a popular abolitionist movement to a far greater degree than the other major slave-holding powers in Europe at the time, and this is in its own way interesting and remarkable, generations of Brits have been brought up to believe what amount to little more than fairy tales with regard to the abolition of slavery. If you learn only three things during your education in Britain about transatlantic slavery they will be:

1 Wilberforce set Africans free
2 Britain was the first country to abolish slavery (and it did so primarily for moral reasons)
3 Africans sold their own people.

The first two of these statements are total nonsense, the third is a serious oversimplification. What does it say about this society that, after two centuries of being one of the most successful human traffickers in history, the only historical figure to emerge from this entire episode as a household name is a parliamentary abolitionist? Even though the names of many of these human traffickers surround us on the streets and buildings bearing their names, stare back at us through the opulence of their country estates still standing as monuments to king sugar, and live on in the institutions and infrastructure built partly from their profits – insurance, modern banking, railways – none of their names have entered the national memory to anything like the degree that Wilberforce has.

In fact, I sincerely doubt that most Brits could name a single

soul involved with transatlantic slavery other than Wilberforce himself. The ability for collective, selective amnesia in the service of easing a nation's cognitive dissonance is nowhere better exemplified than in the manner that much of Britain has chosen to remember transatlantic slavery in particular, and the British Empire more generally.

My Wilberforce moment was not unique or isolated, but springs from this larger tradition of extremely selective recall that Brits tend to call propagandistic when it occurs in other nations. For example in 2007, on the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, the government and media organised a season of celebration and commemoration. Tony Blair expressed his deep sorrow and regret about Britain's involvement with slavery but stopped short of an apology, and a glut of articles appeared across the press asking if Britain should apologise, most of which inevitably regurgitated the 'we were the first to abolish, why can't you just get over it' line. The only major film to emerge from these festivities was, of course, one about Wilberforce, predictably titled *Amazing Grace* – after the redemptive hymn written by the English slave trader John Newton.[1] The film depicts a simple, Hollywood-style narrative of one brave and visionary soul who challenges the dominant and powerful interests of his day and in the end wins them over with his plucky righteousness. There were some other voices during this abolition season, including my sister, who presented a documentary about the Jamaican Maroons on BBC Two, but those voices were extremely faint in comparison to the Wilberforce chorus that echoed across the nation.

Black activists and scholars were offended by the Wilberforce-centric narrative, so much so that community activist and founder of legali.org Toyin Agbetu was compelled to make an entire independent documentary calling into question what was dubbed the 'Wilberfest'.[2] Agbetu and others were

responding not just to the 2007 celebration but to the longer tradition of miseducation, and to programmes such as the 2005 BBC doc *The Slavery Business*, where the presenter tells the viewer that 'in 1807, Britain did something remarkable; it ended the slave trade and turned its back on its enormous profits. This was largely down to one man'. This childishly idyllic – and completely inaccurate – sentence is largely representative of mainstream narratives around abolition. A couple more examples will suffice to make the point. In the conclusion to his 900-page tome *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, the historian Hugh Thomas fails to even mention slave resistance as a factor in abolition at all, lists a number of European abolitionists and of course positions Britain as the abolitionist in chief, apparently motivated by pangs of conscience and nothing more. Thomas also asserts that the slave trade went on as long as it did because Africans – apart from the Muslim ones, apparently – were 'good natured and usually docile'.[3]

In recent years, three separate schools in different parts of the country have made headlines because of their teaching and remembrance of slavery; two of the schools gave their students worksheets that were essentially business plans for buying and selling African people as slaves, and a teacher at another school thought it would be a good idea to get children to come in dressed as slaves for black history month![4]

Even Bob Geldof, our very own latter-day Wilberforce, this generation's chief white saviour in command, is not above this kind of reductionist rhetoric when it comes to Africans. In his series *Geldof in Africa* we see him strolling along the shores of a West African beach, telling the viewer that Europeans came to Africa in search of gold, 'but, to their eternal shame, what the Africans had to sell was their own people.' Geldof may well not have written the script, but he said the words.

So what are the facts then? Did Wilberforce do it all by

himself? Was Britain the first nation to abolish slavery and were Africans queuing up on the shores of the Atlantic to sell their own children to the highest bidder? No, no and nope.

Britain quite simply was not the first nation to abolish trans-atlantic slavery; Denmark did so in 1792 and France briefly abolished slavery during the height of the French revolution in 1794. What was 'abolitionist' Britain's response to these abolitions? Was it to quickly follow suit? No. The British government's response was to send its armies to the Caribbean to invade French-held islands and to try and reinstall slavery everywhere the French had abolished it. This conflict with France included imprisoning some 2000 black French fighters in Porchester Castle, among them some of the most prominent black abolitionists of the era, and this at a time when the entire black British population was somewhere between 10–15,000.[5]

The British invasion of the French Caribbean included an invasion of Haiti, which is particularly significant given Haiti's place in the history of the period; during the 1780s Haiti was by far the most profitable slave colony in the Americas, exporting as much sugar as Brazil, Cuba and Jamaica combined,[6] producing half the world's coffee and generating more revenue than the entire thirteen colonies of what had just become America. Haiti, or Saint-Domingue as it was then known, was the pearl of the Antilles, the cash cow that allowed the French Empire to still compete with the British. To capture such a prize would have been a massive boost for both the British Empire and for the continuation of industrial-scale, racialised slavery.

As it panned out, formerly enslaved Africans fighting under the French flag were able to defeat the British armies and retake the portions of the island Britain had won – reinstalling slavery as they went, remember. This mass campaign for re-enslavement in the Caribbean was undertaken by none other than Prime Minister William Pitt, the very same man who would

encourage Wilberforce to front the abolitionist campaign in parliament just a few years later. In fact, Pitt himself raised the question of abolition of the slave 'trade' in parliament before even Wilberforce.[7]

The Caribbean campaigns of the 1790s proved to be one of the greatest military disasters in British imperial history with defeats, setbacks and unwanted treaties undertaken right across the Caribbean. British troop losses are estimated to have been at least 50,000, by some estimates quite substantially more. It is absolutely inconceivable that Britain would have suddenly had a moral epiphany in 1807 if they had won Haiti from the French, making them undisputed masters of the Caribbean by holding the two most important Caribbean colonies of the time, Haiti and Jamaica. Remember, at this point America had only just won its independence, a fact about which Britain was less than happy – see the war of 1812 – and was not yet a global power like Britain and France.

Just a few short years later, France would renege on its temporary abolitionist principles and attempt to re-enslave the people of Haiti, the same people who had fought and defeated the Spanish and the British and kept the island for France. Toussaint L'Ouverture had proved his willingness to accommodate the French planters even to the point of letting them keep their plantations and forcing former slaves to continue to work for them – albeit with meagre pay – but Napoleon just could not bring himself to work on anything resembling equal terms with a negro; legend has it that on his deathbed, Napoleon said 'I should have recognised Toussaint'.

Britain helpfully removed the naval blockade it had previously had in place in the English Channel during the years of war with France to allow French troops, headed up by Napoleon's brother-in-law, to travel to Haiti and try to put the 'gilded negroes' back in their rightful place. The latest British

prime minister, Henry Addington, said 'we must destroy Jacobinism, especially that of the blacks.'[8] The British Governor of Jamaica sent weapons and assistance to the French mission in Haiti; like Addington, he understood that the preservation of slavery and white supremacy, even that of their French rivals, was preferable to empowering abolitionist-minded rebel negroes.

Once the French realised, as predicted at the time by British abolitionist James Stephen (and by the Haitians themselves), that the Haitians could not be re-enslaved, the French plan was to exterminate them all and start over again with newly enslaved people brought from Africa. The war that ensued became an explicitly genocidal one, in which the French troops were instructed to exterminate all of the blacks on the island.[9] This extermination attempt included the massacre of families and surrendered soldiers, the elderly and the sick, but the French also excelled themselves in the range of human barbarities they introduced with this war. These included turning ships into gas chambers, mass drowning – Toussaint L'Ouverture's brother and his family died this way – and importing thousands of dogs from Cuba that had been trained to eat people. None of this savagery cowed the Haitians, rather it appears to have only emboldened them; French soldiers and observers have left many terrified records from the period.

The formerly enslaved African and Creole (Haitian-born) 'slaves' and their allies – the Maroons, the free people of colour and the Polish defectors – defeated the French just as they had defeated Spain and Britain before them, and Haiti declared itself independent in 1804. This was the first and only successful slave revolution in human history, and only the second colony in the Americas to be free of European rule. Haiti abolished slavery immediately upon independence – thirty years before Britain would do so in its Caribbean possessions – and

became the first state in the world to outlaw racism in its constitution, despite everything done in the name and practice of white supremacy on the island over the preceding centuries. As alluded to earlier, the Haitians in fact went one step further than merely outlawing racism and declared that the 'whites' – in reality Polish and some Germans – that had fought with the revolution were now officially black; honorary blacks, if you will.

Britain and the other major Atlantic powers (France and the USA) refused to recognise the independent black republic despite its abolition of slavery (in fact because of this very abolition), and despite their willingness to recognise the newly created nations that would rebel against Spanish rule in the coming decades. To add bitterness to this irony, it was the newly independent black state of Haiti that aided Simón Bolivar in his attempts to liberate South America from the Spaniards, providing him with money, arms and military expertise with the condition that he free the enslaved in any territories that he liberated. Yet the states Bolivar created were recognised more quickly than was Haiti itself.

Clearly, whatever the British government's 'abolitionist' convictions, they did not extend to recognising the nationhood of the only state in human history founded by rebel slaves who'd won their freedom.[10] Furthermore, 'abolitionist' Britain stood by as France and then the US repeatedly punished Haiti for winning its freedom and its abolition of slavery. Under threat of re-invasion, the French extorted a debt from Haiti in 1825 of 91 million gold francs for the loss of their 'property' – i.e. the Haitians themselves. It took up until 1947 to pay this 'debt', and in fact Haiti had to borrow the money to pay the debt from French banks.

After independence, Haiti was afflicted by a series of fratricidal wars between the victorious revolutionaries that often

had a racial overtone to them – blacks vs. mulattoes – and the legacy of that colour-based, slave-era privilege still afflicts every former slave colony to this day. The USA then invaded Haiti in 1915, removing the stipulation in the Haitian constitution that prevented foreign whites from owning land there, killing 15,000 Haitians and backing a brutal dictatorship for the best part of the twentieth century, and then, when Haiti finally went to the polls, the USA collaborated with the Haitian elite to have their democratically elected leader overthrown, twice.[11] To my knowledge, no senior British government official uttered even so much as a word in protest about any of this, though we can all be sure they would have found their moral indignation about 'human rights' if Russia or Iran had been the culprits.

But the duplicity of the British government as it relates to abolition did not end with attempts to crush the Haitian Revolution. Upon abolition in Britain's own colonies, it was the slave owners who were given compensation to the tune of £20 million, roughly £17 billion in today's money,[12] the largest public bailout until the aftermath of the 2008 banking crisis. The formerly enslaved were given nothing; in fact, they were expected to remain slaves for five more years under a system euphemistically entitled 'apprenticeship' and of course East Indian 'coolies' continued to be scattered across the Caribbean to labour as 'indentured servants' well after the abolition of slavery.[13]

We must remind ourselves that we are talking about a period of British history where it took almost a century of debate, reform and much consternation to abolish domestic child labour. Are we really to believe that a British parliament that had only just come to abolish the labour of its 'own' children felt such a loving affinity for faraway negroes? Furthermore, when the enslaved in the British Caribbean struck out for their freedom, sometimes in the mistaken belief that the British

government had actually set them free, how did the local arms of the British state respond? After the 1807 act there were a series of major slave rebellions in the British Caribbean, first in Barbados in 1816, Demerara (British Guyana) in 1823 and then Jamaica's Baptist War in 1831. The Baptist War was the largest rebellion in the history of the British Caribbean, involving perhaps as many as 60,000 rebels.[14] The genuine fear that Jamaica and other territories might go the same way as Haiti cannot be overstated – indeed, had the Jamaican Maroons not helped British forces put down the rebellion it may well have developed into a full revolution. In response to that rebellion, Lord Howick, under-secretary for the colonies and the son of Prime Minister Lord Grey, wrote to the new governor of Jamaica that his information was that:

> The slaves were not being in the least intimidated or cowed by the dreadfully severe punishments which have been inflicted, but on the contrary as being quite careless of their lives, and as regarding death as infinitely preferable to slavery, while they are exasperated to the highest degree and burning for revenge for the fate of their friends and relations . . . it is quite clear that the present state of things cannot go on much longer, and that every hour that it does so is full of the most appalling danger . . . my own conviction is that emancipation alone will effectively avert the danger, and that the reformed parliament will very speedily come to that measure, but in the meantime it is but too possible that the simultaneous murder of the whites upon every estate which Mr. Knibb apprehends may take place.[15]

It is an odd way to express one's love for an oppressed class of people, to leave them in conditions so horrendous that they

have no choice but to rebel and then, rather than ameliorate those conditions – remember £20 million was found for slave masters – to engage in mass executions of the very same people one had apparently set free out of sheer and undying love.

The British government's treatment of its own rebel slaves and its refusal to recognise abolitionist Haiti contrasts sharply with its relationship with the slave owning Confederacy, Brazil and Cuba. For decades after abolition, Britain imported countless tons of slave-made cotton from the American south, which stimulated all kinds of industries, and British banks and businessmen made a mint investing in slave-owned mines and slave-built infrastructure in Brazil. Brazil and Cuba did not abolish slavery until the 1880s but still received massive inward investment from British companies and merchants, with the government's knowledge of course. But in perhaps the most treacherous episode of the whole affair, the British anti-slavery squadron tasked with enforcing abolition on the seas received 'head money' for each African they 'liberated' – so no, it was not altruism – and they sometimes even sold the Africans they liberated back into slavery.[16] Finally, slavery was not abolished in British colonies like Hong Kong, Aden and Sierra Leone until well into the twentieth century.

So, despite Britain spending almost two centuries as the dominant transatlantic slave trader, with all the torture, rape and mass murder that entailed, despite Britain refusing to back abolition when other European powers had paved the way, despite Britain spending the 1790s warring to keep slavery intact all over the Caribbean, despite Britain trying to crush the only successful slave revolution in human history and then helping their French enemies attempt to do the same, despite Britain refusing to even recognise the first Caribbean state to abolish slavery, despite all of this, some 'historians', teachers and assorted nationalists are asking us all to believe the

self-serving fairy tale that suddenly, in 1807 – just three years after Haitian independence – guided by William Wilberforce alone, Britain abolished slavery because it was 'the right thing to do'. What a pile of twaddle.

But the 'Wilberforce did it all' idea also springs from two other ideological founts, one the aforementioned classic white saviour trope and the other a seemingly human need for simple solutions to complex problems, for great men instead of the convoluted mess that is human history – in short, a need for heroes. Unfortunately, very little of human history is unsullied by the grit of reality and no humans are free from imperfections. Even if we take a far more prominent abolitionist than Wilberforce, a man who literally shed his blood for the cause of abolition – Toussaint L'Ouverture – we see these human imperfections and contradictions. Born into slavery but free by age thirty, the charismatic and militarily brilliant leader of what became the Haitian Revolution was at one time himself a slave owner. He instituted a draconian labour regime when he was governor of Haiti, had his own adopted 'nephew' executed for being too unkind to French 'planters' – slave owners – and even snitched to the British about a slave revolt brewing in Jamaica, of which the suspected instigators were hanged. L'Ouverture nonetheless did shed his blood and spent much of his adult life literally fighting for the abolition of slavery. Humans are complex. I suppose the difference between Wilberforce and L'Ouverture in this respect (other than the obvious fact that L'Ouverture's contribution was far greater) is that even the most hagiographic writings on L'Ouverture would not dare to suggest he did it 'all by himself'.

Any analysis of the ending of Caribbean slavery that fails to even mention the only successful slave revolution in history and the wider phenomenon of slave resistance, as well as multiple other factors, is not to be taken at all seriously. There is also the

glaring contradiction of the creation of apartheid semi-slave states in southern Africa that stayed in existence until well into the twentieth century, and which took a combination of armed struggle, protest and worldwide boycott to formally topple. If the British government abolished the slave trade way back in 1807 because of an inherent love for justice and for African human beings, how do we explain the British government backing apartheid rule, which did not end until I was seven years old? Remember that a regime of forced labour based on white supremacy was the cornerstone of apartheid.

Let's be totally clear though, I am not disputing that Wilberforce played *a role* in the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act passing in 1807, nor am I disputing that for all its contours and complications that the abolition acts were steps forward, nor that some Britons did indeed have genuine anti-slavery principles back then, some much more demonstrably so than Wilberforce, such as Foxwell Buxton or Clarkson or the British workers that went on strike against slave-made cotton, and of course the black British abolitionists living and publishing in England at the time, such as Mary Prince Ottabah Cuagano and Olaudah Equiano. What I am saying is that power concedes nothing without demand or motive, and the abolitionist movement needs to be viewed much like the anti-war movements of today, if you will forgive the crude historical parallel. Think of it like this; there are today British citizens – perhaps millions of us – who, however fringe we may be considered in mainstream politics, are genuinely horrified at our government's foreign policy, its arms dealing and war-mongering, and there are also a few rogue MPs who constantly vote against the British war machine – but does any of that mean that the British ruling class generally take anti-war humanitarianism at all seriously?

Of course not. This is how they can support terrorists in Libya while claiming to save Libyans with humanitarian bombs,

and then let people fleeing from Libya drown in the sea while the Foreign Secretary makes jokes about clearing away the dead bodies to a laughing audience; or how they can sell arms to the Saudis for them to kill Yemeni civilians at the exact same time that they are waging war in Syria under the rubric of humanitarianism.

The times have changed and the extremities of the crimes may be different and a little less direct, but the narrative and Machiavellian mentality have remained much the same. No one refers to the 'white man's burden' any more, as it's just too crude a phrase, so instead we speak of spreading democracy and human rights and of saving people from dictators, which funnily enough is almost exactly what the original nineteenth-century version of the white man's burden claimed to be motivated by. The Scramble for Africa was justified in largely humanitarian terms; Europeans needed to go in and save Africans from their slave-dealing elites, apparently. There is no doubt of course that these slave-dealing elites existed in Africa – they had been Britain's business partners after all – but the idea that the Scramble for Africa 'saved' the African masses is so ridiculous that even the most nationalistic of historians would find it hard to spin.

And here we come to the old adage, the third slavery fact we learned in school and offered to us again by Geldof and so many others: 'Africans sold their own people'. There are a number of obvious problems with the 'Africans sold their own people' cliché, but that still does not seem to have stopped people offering it as an 'argument'. First and foremost, does the fact that Britain had 'African' accomplices rid it of any and all wrongdoing? According to many, it does. Second, there was no continental 'African' identity before industrial technology, the Scramble for Africa, the redrawing of borders and the modern pan-Africanist movement created it in the twentieth century,

and that African identity is still fraught with contradictions and conflicts. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Africa was not a paradise where all humans sat together around the campfire in their loincloths singing 'Kumbaya' in one huge – but obviously primitive – black kingdom covering the entire continent and littered with quaint looking mud huts, any more than all of Europe or Asia was one big happy family. Africa had and has ethnic, cultural, class and imperial rivalries that every scholar of the period acknowledges are the very divisions that colonisers and slave traders played on. In fact, as the award-winning historian Sylviane A. Diouf notes, in none of the slave narratives that have survived do the formerly enslaved talk about being sold by other 'Africans', or by 'their own people' and only Sancho – who lived in England – even mentions the 'blackness' of those that sold him.[17] The victims of the transatlantic traffic did not think that they were being sold out by their 'black brothers and sisters' any more than the Irish thought that their 'white brothers and sisters' from England were deliberately starving them to death during the famine.

Oral traditions collected in eastern Nigeria in the 1960s speak of local groups that considered a particular family to be cursed because they had sold a daughter into slavery several generations ago; such treachery would hardly be considered grounds for a centuries-long curse if it were the norm. Even the major slave-trading states of western Africa – Oyo, Dahomey, Ashanti – all passed laws banning or limiting the sale of their own citizens, i.e. 'their own people', while they of course continued to raid for and sell other nations' people. The early kings of the Congo wrote letters to Portuguese monarchs pleading with them to stop sending traders because they were taking away people, and to only send teachers and priests instead, and Benin, one of the most impressive West African states of the period, seems to have been the only one

that successfully protected its own citizens from the beginning of the trade.[18]

We need not romanticise pre-colonial Africa, we are not all descendants of 'kings and queens'; most of us whose ancestors were sold into slavery are probably descended from serfs, servants, existing slaves and soldiers from warring parties. With that said, it is interesting that Olaudah Equiano made such a huge distinction between the kind of slavery that existed in African kingdoms and the kind practised in the Americas. Countless European witnesses made this same observation – that African 'slavery' was nothing like the racialised chattel slavery practised on the sugar plantations of the New World, including English slave traders like John Newton:

> The state of slavery among these wild barbarous people, as we esteem them, is much milder than in our colonies. For as, on the one hand, they have no land in high cultivation like our West Indian plantations, and therefore no call for that excessive un-intermitted labour which exhausts our slaves; so, on the other hand, no man is permitted to draw blood even from a slave.[19]

Which brings us to Hugh Thomas's assertion that Africans were 'docile'. Reflecting the unscholarly value-judgment embedded in that statement, neither Hugh Thomas, nor any others who peddle it, offer any comparative data to try and prove the claim. They do not, for example, attempt to show that enslaved people in the Greco-Roman world, the European 'Dark Ages', eighteenth-century Russia or medieval Korea were any more likely to rebel than 'Africans'. In fact, specialists in studies of global slavery note just how relatively rare slave rebellions were across all slave societies – for what should be obvious reasons to a scholar.[20]

However, perhaps the most neglected area of study in the whole history of transatlantic slavery is the issue of resistance to enslavement in Africa itself. Most people are at least vaguely aware that there was some resistance from black people in the Caribbean but it's always fascinated me that people, even many in the black diaspora, seem willing to believe that 'Africans' – undifferentiated by class, region or ethnicity – just allowed their family members to be taken away, or worse, that they were all collaborators. Thanks to decades of painstaking research we know this is fundamentally untrue. There were literally hundreds of rebellions and attacks against slave ships up and down the West African coast carried out by organised guerrilla groups much like the Maroons of the Caribbean. As many as 483 of these rebellions are recorded in British, French and Dutch records alone. The average death toll in these skirmishes seems to have been about twenty-five and the historian David Richardson estimates that a million fewer people had to go through the middle passage because of this one form of resistance alone.[21] It is also estimated that one in every ten European slave ships to dock in West Africa experienced either a shipboard revolt or an attack from land.

It is notable that there were not any major rebellions against transportation to penal colonies, let alone a revolution in the UK, during all the years that Britons were being shipped against their will to Australia and elsewhere. But I will not suggest that this is because white Brits are uniquely docile, as there are several other more likely possible explanations: the British State was too well armed; class divisions were too strong; people were too divided. In two final examples of how complex the picture and experience of the transatlantic traffic were from a West African perspective, there is even evidence of wealthy African families sailing all the way to America to get their children back during the nineteenth century and there are copious

records attesting to the practice of ransom, i.e the practice of people capturing and selling two or more people to get back a loved one that had been sold into slavery. Can such a person be called a slave trader with any degree of certainty? Can you be sure that you would not kidnap people you did not know to get back your child if faced with such a dilemma? I certainly can't.

To make the simple bald claim that Africans were docile or that they generally 'sold their own people', knowing that most West Africans of the time were not involved in slave trading at all, is like saying the English killed their own people when they invaded Ireland or fought the French, because today we see them all as white and European, and of course it's not as if the English ruling class were treating their own people wonderfully during the period in question. This colonial projection of Africa is useful to some as it avoids them having to use the usual tools to explain the behaviour of real human beings – economics, market demand, dynastic rivalries, ethnic enmity, class distinctions, pure profit-seeking, self-preservation, love and more. It allows one to offer a person's 'African-ness', a concept that did not yet exist in the period, as an explanation for their behaviour. 'Africans sold their own people' is the historical version of 'black on black violence'.

None of this is offered to excuse African elites then or now for their greed and caprice, nor black people generally for our human flaws, but rather to paint a full picture of a complex phenomenon, as we would with any other region, time period and the peoples living in it. Is an Irishman like Bob Geldof in a position to assert that Africans are eternally shamed? Is the story of Ireland so uniquely pure among the history of nations that it places Geldof in a position to cast this kind of aspersion on an entire continent? No, of course it is not. There was slavery in Celtic Ireland long before the English arrived – this justifies nothing the English did of course; Irish merchants

collaborated in selling Irish people to traders as early as the Vikings. Anglophile Irish chiefs collaborated with the English in their conquest of Ireland, and Irish merchants and landowners forcefully stole land from 'their own people' in the midst of the worst famine in modern European history.[22]

As we've seen, the Irish in America became slave owners and ardent supporters of white supremacy, despite their own sufferings at the hands of the British. One of the staunchest Irish nationalists – John Mitchell – became a vocal supporter of black slavery despite the fact that one of the most prominent black churches in America managed to send aid to the Irish famine, even though much of its congregation was still enslaved. I don't say any of this to suggest that the Irish are 'eternally shamed' nor to suggest that Irish humans are uniquely flawed, or that these actions represent the morality of all Irish people. Indeed, some Irish nationalists themselves called out this hypocritical behaviour at the time. I say this simply to say that if 'Africans' are eternally cursed for the greed and caprice of some of their number then so is all humanity, including Geldof's Irish compatriots. It's also fascinating that Geldof did not assert that British people – much less all white people – were eternally shamed for their role in enslaving their fellow human beings, but whatever. The average Irishman would certainly resent being conflated with an Englishman, yet Geldof and others can gloss over centuries of diverse and complicated history with the 'Africans sold their own people' cliché. Oh, and by the way, I am aware that this chapter is about Britain and that Ireland is obviously not part of Britain, but Geldof is such a part of the British establishment and represents so well its colonial arrogance I doubt my Irish homies will object to me including him.

Which brings us on to the wider way in which the British Empire as a whole is remembered.

Back in 2005, future prime minister Gordon Brown let the world know that 'the days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over' – leaving us all wondering when those days of apology were. In a 2014 YouGov survey, 59 per cent of Brits declared that they were proud of the empire. The historian Niall Ferguson gloated approvingly on his Twitter, 'I won'. I'd love to see a similar survey done with only British citizens whose families come from non-white former colonies, and of course the not-quite-whites of Ireland. Wouldn't the true measure of the British Empire's supposed benevolence surely be attained by asking the billions of humans that descend from the people it ruled if they remember it so favourably?

The fact remains; no one colonises another group of people out of love for them. Anyone familiar with the traditions of postcolonial scholarship will know that African, Asian, Irish and Caribbean intellectuals, and the peoples they represent, do not share Niall Ferguson's fond memories of the Empire, which is why he as a 'historian' must ignore the most prominent intellectuals of those regions. In the British Caribbean, the postcolonial tradition was pioneered by Walter Rodney, C. L. R. James and Eric Williams, who are still pretty much standard reading for any educated Caribbean adult.

In India, we could take Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy, perhaps the most prominent global critic of modern India's corruption and its mistreatment of its vulnerable populations, and even an outspoken voice of dissent against Gandhi worship. Anyone familiar with Roy's work will know that she, unlike some Indian Hindu fascists, has no nationalist axe to grind, yet her assessment of Britain's empire in India and elsewhere is much like my own. We could also choose Pankaj Mishra, whose masterful book on the Asian intellectuals who challenged European hegemony to 'remake Asia' is a brilliant refutation of Eurocentric nonsense.[23] He

also, incidentally, once gave Mr Ferguson quite an intellectual spanking in the *London Review of Books*.

If we go to Kenya, where Mr Ferguson grew up in the shadows of the gulag, we could talk to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, unquestionably the most well-known Kenyan novelist and scholar and a man imprisoned by Jomo Kenyatta's repressive – UK-backed – 'independent' government. Despite his accurate and persistent criticisms of the corruption and brutality of African elites, has he resorted to forgetting that British rule was horrendous? Nope. In fact, you'd be hard pressed to find prominent intellectuals from any of Britain's non-white former colonies, or Ireland, who are both respected in their native lands and who share Britain's romantic and fond memories of its empire. Why is this so? To understand why people across the world have such a different understanding of British colonialism we must address a number of things.

First, Britons were submitted to generations of deliberate imperialist, militarist propaganda in all areas of culture, from education to the cinema, theatre and music halls and in the production of huge imperial exhibitions at Wembley and elsewhere.[24] The myopia this propaganda still produces was aptly captured when Secretary of State for International Trade Liam Fox said in 2016, in the run-up to the EU referendum, that 'the United Kingdom is one of the few countries in the European Union that does not need to bury its twentieth-century history.' Funny, because Britain is in fact one of the few countries in the world that literally did bury a good portion of its twentieth-century history.

During the period of decolonisation, the British state embarked upon a systematic process of destroying the evidence of its crimes. Codenamed 'Operation Legacy', the state intelligence agencies and the Foreign Office conspired to literally burn, bury at sea or hide vast amounts of documents containing potentially sensitive details of things done in the colonies

under British rule.[25] Anything that might embarrass the government, that would show religious or racial intolerance or be used 'unethically' by a post-independence government was ordered destroyed or hidden. The Foreign Office were forced to admit in court about having hidden documents, then were unforthcoming about the scale of what was hidden, to the point that you'd be a fool to trust anything that is now said. But from what we know, hundreds of thousands of pages of documents were destroyed and over a million hidden, not just starting in the colonial period but dating all the way back to 1662. This operation was only exposed to the public in 2011 as part of a court case between the survivors of British concentration camps in Kenya and the government.

What this means is that it is completely impossible to write a truly accurate history of the British Empire, and anything written before Operation Legacy was revealed is certainly incomplete. It's revealing that some 'historians' – that is people whose profession is supposed to be guided by evidence – have not taken to reviewing their thoughts about the wonders of the British Empire even after such a revelation. The destruction of historical memory is not limited to documents – while Britain has preserved the HMS *Victory* as a tribute to Nelson, as well as other ships from key periods of British history, not a single slave ship survives.[26] You have to stand in awe of the intellectual obedience it takes to still cheer for empire after the revelation that the government hid or burned a good portion of the evidence of what that empire actually consisted of, but such is the use to which we put our free thinking. You see, imperial apologists would like to view themselves as the apogee of Western thinking, as great contributors to the impressive history of Western intellectual inquiry, when in fact they actually represent its ossification. They represent the very 'decline of the West' that they bemoan. Say what we might about the

brutality of European colonial expansion but we cannot deny that European thinkers from Giordano Bruno to William Tyndale, Thomas Paine to Bertrand Russell, have faced persecution and even death to push the intellectual envelope in their respective societies and times. Liberal apologists for empire are nothing but glorified cheerleaders for the current powers and status quo, who on the one hand bemoan the moralism of critics of empire, yet simultaneously claim that what made the British Empire superior to all others in the world's history was its apparently enlightened morals.

Thus the propaganda continues. Most people are still not at all aware of what has been done in their name, such as the deliberate starving to death of millions of people in India, the imprisonment and mass torture of British-Kenyans in concentration camps in the 1950s, the removal of the population of Diego Garcia for a US army base, widespread use of torture and a swathe of secret wars that have seen the British military active for almost all of the last 100 years, including the supposed 'post-war' period. People are also unaware of the degree to which British rule was violently resisted everywhere it trod across the globe. This resistance was so widespread that the historian Richard Gott has been able to fill an entire mammoth tome with just these episodes of rebellion and tell the story of the empire in reverse, through the eyes of its resistors.[27] It's rather odd, then, that if what the British Empire was offering was so self-evidently a good deal for all, the restless natives so often picked up their guns to fight against it. Either the natives were too stupid to know what was good for them, or perhaps what was being offered was not such a sweet deal after all.

But the final reason we don't have a greater critical dialogue about the empire is plain old racism: many would not care even if they knew the history well. What we do is OK, what others

do is bad. It is worth quoting the historian John Newsinger at length here:

> What they have to be asked is how they would respond if other states had done to Britain what the British state has done to other countries. How pro-imperialist would they feel for example if, instead of Britain forcing opium on the Chinese Empire, it had been the other way round? What would their response be if, when the British government had tried to ban the importation of opium, the Chinese had sent a powerful military expedition to ravage the British coastline, bombard British ports, and slaughter British soldiers and civilians? What if, instead of seizing Hong Kong, the Chinese had seized Liverpool and used Merseyside as a bridgehead from which to dominate Britain for nearly a hundred years? What if further British resistance provoked another attack that led to the Chinese occupying London, looting and burning down Buckingham Palace and dictating humiliating peace terms? What if today there was an Imperial Museum in Beijing that still put on display the fruits of the Chinese pillage of Britain? None of this is fanciful because it is exactly what the British state did to China in the nineteenth century.[28]

The primary difference between Britain and other empires was not that 'we were not as bad as the Belgians or the Third Reich' – which is true but is such a shit boast – but that Britain succeeded in dominating the globe and still kind of does, albeit as a second fiddle to the USA in the Anglo-American Empire. The question we should ask today is not 'were we as bad as the Germans?' But rather, is it possible to critically and honestly reflect on Britain's history in an attempt to build a more ethical

future? Can Britain ever behave in the world like the democracy it claims to be, or is such a thing entirely impossible? Is it more important to cling on to power and prestige and outdated Victorian notions of dominance and superiority even if such a tendency may well help to accelerate another World War and helps cause unspeakable suffering globally? 59 per cent of Britons apparently think it is more important, and their prophets cannot even begin to imagine a world without empires and, you know what, it's entirely possible that they will be proved right. One could quite reasonably argue based on world history that brutality, corruption, duplicity and aggression are actually good politics and the public just need to 'grow up' and accept that, but that is an entirely different conversation than pretending that British imperialism was and is motivated by a higher morality.

However, as much as a tendency to dominate, divide and brutalise has been a seeming constant for the past few millennia at least, so too has the tendency of sharing and co-operation, of rebellion against dominant powers and attempts to create a more just order. The degree to which humans have secured a more just world has been born out of the struggles against empires as much as anything else.

While I'm sure Mr Ferguson and others would accuse me of 'working myself up into a state of high moral indignation' about the crimes of the British Empire, I'll bet that he and others like him will be wearing their poppy every 11 November; that is, they will be 'working themselves up into a state of high moral indignation' about dead people when those dead people are truly British – the Kenyans tortured in the 1950s were legally British citizens but naturally there will be no poppies or tears for them. The implications are clear – some ancestors deserve to be remembered and venerated and others do not. Those that kill for Britain are glorious, those killed by Britain are unpeople.

If we truly cared for peace, would we not remember the victims of British tyranny every 11 November too?

I speak about the British Empire so much not just because I live here and have been shaped by it – not that any historical interest needs explaining – but because its legacies are so clear and visible and because unlike the Spanish, Portuguese, German or Japanese Empires it still sort of exists, albeit in attenuated form as second fiddle to the American Empire, despite what our free press likes to pretend. Our ruling class and much of the citizenry seem to believe that it is still 'our' divine right to police the world and to hell with what the rest of the planet thinks. What is most fascinating about British intellectual discourse is that we can see brutality ever so clearly when it wears Japanese or German or Islamic clothes, but when it comes to looking in the mirror at the empire on which the sun never set – the eighteenth-century's premier slave trader, the mother country of the Commonwealth and one of the pioneer countries in developing and then putting into practice the Enlightenment philosophy of white supremacy – so many suddenly become blind, deaf and dumb, unable to see murder as murder.