



Book review

**Sweet Water and Bitter:  
The Ships that Stopped the Slave Trade:**

Kate Colquhoun has mixed feelings about Sweet Water and Bitter: The Ships that Stopped the Slave Trade by Siân Rees

For six decades after the abolition of slavery in Britain in 1807 successive governments, along with the Admiralty and Foreign Office, took it on themselves to enforce not only our own law but that of much of Europe and even America. The Particular Service – later reformed and renamed the Preventive Squadron – liberated around 160,000 slaves during that period but lost 17,000 British seamen in battle or by disease. Comprising only a handful of ships, the squadron was evaded by thousands more, each packed with hundreds of slaves. Unpopular at home and abroad, the cost of the enterprise was fiercely criticised by the British public – and its effects fostered ill will with the governments of Spain, Portugal, France and America, complicating both trade and diplomacy.

Siân Rees's book aims to rescue this attempt to abolish slavery from the shadows of history. Her canvas is enormous. The narrative moves from the slaving coast of West Africa and reaches into the tributaries and heartlands – the “dense, sticky web of slave trails” – where local rulers profited from the sale of human flesh.

It embraces the history of early settlements like Freetown, the creation of Sierra Leone as a haven for “recaptives” (rescued slaves), the “factories” where slaves were herded prior to shipment, and the experience of the British naval crews on mosquito-infested coastal patrols. It covers British legislation designed to tighten loopholes and the manipulation of the laws by foreign captains.

Hers is a packed history of bounty-hunting and piracy, of high principle and low skulduggery, of roiling surf and disease-infested swamps and of the seemingly endless African coast.

The glittering profits promised by the supply of slaves to France's West Indian colonies and to the Caribbean as well as Brazil and Cuba lured slavers to flout law, treaty and pledge. Their ships were loaded with shackled humanity, packed in pitifully squalid conditions. Many were sick and most were left unfed; some were simply thrown overboard, still fettered and sometimes packed into water barrels, as soon as the mast of a British warship broke the horizon.

In a dense tapestry of disparate elements, Rees examines the courts of mixed commission that sat in judgment on captive slave ships and on their captors. Bounty on each liberated slave could make a crew rich; compensation for the illegal arrest of a slave ship could bring a naval captain to bankruptcy. With so much at stake, foreign commissioners generally set about obfuscating the squadron's mission. Confusing everything was a myriad of dissolute princes and multiple, multiplying, conflicts of interest.

Sweet Water and Bitter is a book about suffering and exploitation and of one nation's determination to suppress slavery through a tangle of false starts, clumsy treaties, Foreign Office advances and enforced retreats. Rees's research is formidable and she is a gifted writer with a wry turn of phrase, an ear for the seductions of technical vocabulary and a talent for forceful, elegant description.

Though she does an impressive job of wrestling the detail into something manageable, readers not intimate with the geography of Africa will find it hard to keep up with her fast changes of tack.

More urgently, without a clear argument to propel her narrative forward, the book can become weighed down by its crowded content, and it is easy to become rather lost.

While she should be applauded for bringing to our attention Britain's unique role in the international abolition of slavery, Rees falls short of a full investigation of the reasons behind the country's actions and for this reason her book never quite soars. Was Britain's decision to impose its ideals on the rest of the world a product simply of its naval might? Did it spring from goodwill or commercial opportunism and imperialism? What exactly lay behind America's decades-long delay in enforcing its own laws and what of the wilful indifference of other countries? These questions are never convincingly answered and, as a result, Sweet Water and Bitter veers between the gripping and the disappointingly slow.

Sweet Water and Bitter: the Ships that Stopped the Slave Trade

by Siân Rees

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