

Queen Victoria, Africa and Slavery: some personal associations

Liz Dimock
La Trobe University

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The theme of the conference 'Africa in a re-structuring world' could be applied to many periods, if not continuously, in the last two hundred years, but Victoria's reign in a re-structuring British empire was markedly one of political and economic structural change in Africa. Early in her reign, the trans-Atlantic trade in slaves, funded by commercial organisations across many European countries was still significant, draining Africa of much adult labour. In Britain, while the influential anti-slavery movement had brought to a close British trade in slaves, there remained the significant issue of slavery itself in British territories in the Caribbean, Africa and India, an issue that was in transition when Victoria became monarch in 1837. During the course of her reign British trading interests replaced slaves with resources, thus changing local economies. This paper is concerned with Victoria's personal links with issues around the slave trade and slavery, examining how the anti-slavery movement focused on the young monarch, then discussing three former slaves who had personal contact with the Queen at different times.

Recent scholarship in this area of study has drawn attention to ways in which the Queen's name was invoked, as standard procedure in British colonizing projects, in negotiating treaties, shaping terms of trade and in missionary and educational projects (Parsons 1998). The construct of the 'Great White Queen' was promoted by merchants, envoys and administrators. But, as with India (Taylor 2004), the early years of her reign are under-researched in terms of Victoria's relations with Africa¹.

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In the year around her accession the anti-slavery movement was reaching a crescendo, which I suggest was influential in her thinking about Africa. The Emancipation Bill of 1833 had specified that freed slaves in British territories should become 'apprenticed' labour in a transition period, a clause that raised opposition in a fragmenting array of anti-slavery organisations who saw 'apprenticeship' as little better than slavery, allowing continuing control by 'masters' of slaves. The anti-slavery movement had been a powerful force during Victoria's childhood, and in women's circles was a cause for organised activism². In 1838 a petition was sent to the Queen signed by nearly half a million English women, followed shortly after by one from Scottish women, which together totalled 630,000 (British Emancipator 14 March 1838). This out-pouring of women's voices may be associated with a wave of

¹ I would like to thank Yvonne Ward, my colleague at La Trobe University, whose research into Queen Victoria's life has been a source of much discussion over a number of years.

² Midgley, C. (1995; 1998); Ferguson, M. (1992)

‘feminine partisanship’, a phrase borrowed by Dorothy Thompson, author of *Queen Victoria: gender and power* (Thompson 1990), in describing the support that women gave to the new monarch after several decades of her aging, unpopular, Hanoverian uncles³. But drawing the new Queen’s attention to slavery was part of a strategy organised by the broader anti-slavery movement, and should also be understood within a context of other reforms/re-structuring of the period, which I will not go into.

Lord Brougham, Scottish-educated founder of the *Edinburgh Review*, linked together his understandings of liberty and justice with the new monarch when he addressed a large gathering of anti-slavery supporters in Exeter Hall: ‘An opportunity has been afforded for the display of the untiring energy of this country in the prosecution of a great cause and the consummation of the act of liberty has been delayed till it may take place under the happiest auspices; and I think our young and lovely Queen herself might be almost thankful that it has been delayed until now, that it may take place under her sanction, if not accelerated by her expressed wish, and that thousands of slaves in her Majesty’s dominions may associate her name with the glorious deed of justice, and shout with glad and joyful exultation “Victoria for ever” (loud and long continued applause)’ (*British Emancipator* 31 March 1838).

Outpourings of poetry, expressive of many women’s anti-slavery feeling, were extended to the Queen, in homage and appeal to her supposed authority. The words of one, grandly titled ‘To the Queen’ hoped that she might
‘behold the faithful page,
in which is chronicled the negroes’ wrongs’,
and be aware of
‘those who crowd thy throne,
With tongues attuned to flattery’s softest key,
And craving appetites, to drown the voice
That cries aloud, with the concentrate force
Of waken’d millions,
for the wretched slave’ (*British Emancipator* 11 July 1838).

If the Queen were indeed to read the poem, there were multiple coded messages within, and hope that the Queen would be in sympathy with the thousands who supported anti-slavery. But we do not really know her response. Male political and establishment figures were undoubtedly concerned to mould ‘the young and lovely Queen’, and to merge this with a construction of her that suited their purposes (Homans 1998; Ward 2004). Analysis by Homans of the anxieties of this patriarchal body about female rule after Victoria’s accession, and of representations of the Queen as a middle class wife and mother in the period after her marriage fit well with Brougham’s imagining the Queen as an anti-slavery supporter (Homans 1998: 4-8). Middle class women supported anti-slavery, a feature that late twentieth century scholars have analysed as part of feminist awakenings in the early nineteenth century (Ferguson 1992), and an aspect of ‘the development of British feminist discourse in an imperial context’ (Midgley 1998: 162). But was the Queen really so committed, and do we know her personal thoughts?

³ H.G.Wells, on the childhood of his mother, quoted in Thompson, D, *Queen Victoria: gender and power*

As Walter Arnstein has succinctly noted, the Queen was more pregnant than regnant during the 1840s and Prince Albert played an increasingly important role (Arnstein 2003: 67). As a foreign prince, at a time of social tensions and xenophobia his concern with anti-slavery was strategic in wooing public acceptance and less threatening than domestic political issues (Thompson 1990: 33). The decision to make his first public speech at a meeting for the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and for the Civilization of Africa, three months after his marriage to the Queen in 1839, met favour with anti-slavery supporters. Though brief, it covered his personal moral repugnance of slavery and linked Christian and ‘civilized’ values with the need for England to continue the work that had been started: ‘I deeply regret’, he said, ‘that the benevolent and persevering exertions of England to abolish that atrocious traffic in human beings (at once the desolation of Africa and the blackest stain upon civilized Europe) have not as yet led to any satisfactory conclusion. But I sincerely trust that this great country will not relax in its efforts until it has finally, and for ever, put an end to a state of things so repugnant to the spirit of Christianity, and the best feelings of our nature’ (Albert, Prince Consort 1862: 82). The Prince became involved in subsequent activities of the Society. He supported the founding of the Niger Expedition, even visiting the three vessels on the Thames prior to their sailing (Walker 1938: 17). Support from the Prince, not of itself involving the Queen, was followed by his further interest in the complex progress of the Niger Mission against the problem of slave-raiding and internal warfare in West Africa and his backing of a further Church Missionary Society (CMS) venture in East Africa involving his own countryman, Dr Krapf (Stock 1899, Vol. 2: 129).

The rapid expansion of CMS work on the Niger, among the Yoruba and in Sierra Leone, during the 1840s and 1850s invoked the Queen’s name and encouraged lawful commerce, bringing new opportunities to chiefs and merchants; their recognition of the Queen and a perception that she was directly involved in the anti-slavery movement are indicated in events of 1848. Gifts and a letter sent to the Queen by Yoruba chiefs with the missionary Townsend were forwarded in person to Her Majesty and Prince Albert by Lord Chichester, the President of the CMS. The letter contained thanks to ‘the Queen of England for the good she has done in delivering our people from slavery’ along with suggestions about the tardiness of the citizens of Lagos to forego trade in slaves and Yoruba need for access to the port. The mediating role of the CMS is clear, but the missionary society was one facet of the larger anti-slavery theme, a theme which after the Emancipation Bill shifted emphasis from the West Indies and Americas to a broader civilizing, Christianising and trading premise that incorporated a wider geographical area.

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A singular mention of the Queen’s interest in the Niger is seen in a document written by Samuel Crowther, himself a freed slave, during a visit to Britain in 1851 when an appointment was made for him to meet the Prince Consort. Crowther’s text comes from *The Memoir of H. Venn*, (a rare volume, which I have been unable to access), but is repeated in Eugene Stock’s three volume history of the Church Missionary Society. Henry Venn, Secretary of the Church Missionary Society from 1841 to 1872, worked closely with Crowther in founding the Niger Mission.

The meeting with the Prince occurred on 18 November 1851, and to Crowther's surprise the Queen joined them. Crowther described the focused discussion on local West African politics, covering the tensions between the slave-trading kingdom of Dahomey (mentioned above), the port of Lagos that was also trading slaves and Abeokuta, pincered between and threatened by both. In Crowther's terms the Queen expressed sympathy with the slaughter of Dahomey's female warriors, the Amazons, at Abeokuta, and pleasure at the firm stand taken in particular by female Christians there.

For Crowther and Lord Wriothlesley Russell who accompanied him, this informal meeting with the Queen was problematic. What were the protocols and how and when was he to speak? Dependent on Russell to guide him, he nevertheless contributed knowledge and opinion to the discussion, and was impressed by Her Majesty's obvious interest in his, and his wife's, former state of slavery.

Crowther's astute observations of this interview, and his comment 'she did not come in state, but simply like any other lady', are doubly significant since this is perhaps the first reference to an African meeting with, and commenting on, the Queen, and would be relevant to his reporting of the event in Africa. There is no notion of the 'warrior queen' (Arnstein 1998) in Crowther's reading of her. He was meeting an English 'lady' in her home, and although his narrative suggests certain anxieties and protocols operating, it does not appear to carry any construct of racism, although it does refer, in under-statement, to xenophobic tensions concerning Germany. The meeting was informal and information was passed between Crowther and the royal couple in a direct manner, with Crowther representing the Queen as a woman of good humour with likes and dislikes and a range of emotions.

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About the same time, and referred to in Crowther's account, a further event involved the Queen's participation in African affairs. Captain Frederick Forbes, a naval captain working with the West African squadron, the naval unit that patrolled the West African coast to deter or capture slave ships, accompanied a mission to Dahomey to the court of King Gezo in 1849 and 1850, the purpose of which was to encourage Gezo to involve with other forms of trade. Forbes journal was published, and for the purpose of this paper I am concerned only with the child, named by Forbes, Sarah Forbes Bonetta, whom he met in her captivity in Dahomey. Prisoner of the slave-trading monarch, whose military power had proved destructive of many neighbouring peoples, Sarah, captured in war, was allegedly the orphaned daughter of 'a good family' whose parents had been decapitated, the fate of her siblings unknown. Forbes explained her two year detention in Gezo's palace: 'It is usual to reserve the best born for the high behests of royalty, and the immolation on the tombs of the deceased nobility'. He feared that she too would be sacrificed. (Forbes 1966: 206-9).

Behind this encounter and the extraordinary gift of the small African girl by Gezo to Forbes lay a complex diplomatic negotiation. As Joan Anim-Addo has indicated, Dahomey had gained prestige in the eighteenth century as a supplier of slaves to British traders, in process of which the monarchy had thrived with its own additional labour supplies (Anim-Addo 2003). Implicit in Forbes' narrative is the need to re-

negotiate the terms of trade between the two countries in the wake of abolition and the Emancipation Bill concluded in 1838. British ships of the West Africa squadron had, since 1808, cruised the eastern Atlantic to capture slave-carrying vessels and free those aboard, and had put pressure on African rulers to conform to the new arrangements. Captain Forbes was part of the squadron, his objective to persuade Gezo to halt his wars and raiding for slaves, and encourage him in the name of Queen Victoria to pursue other trade with his countrymen. Gezo sent rich gifts with Forbes for the Queen, mindful of the power of this trading nation that now turned its back on trade in slaves, and doubtless inquisitive concerning the power of this female monarch.

Of the young Sarah's subsequent life, Stock's centenary history of the Church Missionary Society gives some account. While the following details indicate the importance of Queen Victoria in Sarah's life, biographers of the Queen have not mentioned Sarah Forbes Bonetta in their narratives, a statement that begs further understanding. Stock claims that:

'the Queen was interested in her, took her into Buckingham Palace, and then handed her to the CMS to be educated, "paying all expenses". She was sent to the Female Institution at Sierra Leone, then brought back to England and placed under the charge of Mr and Mrs Schöen at Chatham. The Queen often sent for her, and gave her valuable presents from time to time. When Mr Schöen's daughter became Mrs Higgens (now of Ceylon) in 1858, Sarah Forbes Bonetta – her baptismal name – was one of the bridesmaids. She was married herself in 1862, at Brighton, to a leading Negro merchant at Lagos, Mr J. P. L. Davies, Henry Venn performing the ceremony. The Queen was Godmother to her first child, who was baptized at Lagos by the name of Victoria, Captain Glover representing Her Majesty on the occasion. Venn was a father to her all through her younger days, and frequently wrote to her in Lagos after her marriage' (Stock, 1899 Vol II: 108). Mrs Davies died in 1880.

Stock's summary is a narrative of nineteenth century Evangelicalism, and should be read as a promotional text. Nevertheless, the Queen and Prince Albert had Evangelical leanings, they supported the Church Missionary Society with donations and, as we have seen, the Prince was concerned with the organisation of the 1st and 2nd Niger expeditions. Henry Venn was the most significant figure in the Society through mid-century, Secretary from 1841 until a few weeks before his death in 1873. J.F. Schöen had been on the 1st Niger expedition with Crowther and became a noted linguist of Hausa languages. Sarah, as Mrs Davies, became part of the African elite in Lagos, moving, as was common, with ease between the West coast and Britain.

Scholarly analysis of Sarah Bonetta Forbes' extraordinary life has suggested that decisions made after her arrival in England were based on stereotypical and racialized views about Africans living in England (Bressey 2005: 255). There was considerable correspondence around her placement first within families, then her move to the CMS School in Sierra Leone, her return to Britain and her marriage. It would seem that the Sierra Leone option for schooling was based on her health in England and concern for her well-being. The incidence of sickness and high mortality rates in children did not augur well for any young person prone to ailments. Much of the newspaper reporting of her wedding, Bressey notes, was based on racial distinction, an inevitable consequence of a ceremony which drew a large number of

black and white guests, Sarah's links with the royal household being an added point of interest. Nonetheless, skin colour and race were curiosity factors in a provincial-town wedding in 1862, at a time when the overwhelming majority of the population in such towns was white.

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My narrative of Queen Victoria moves on to the last few years of her life when she received Mrs Martha Rix, (spelt Ricks in other sources, and followed here) at Windsor. Martha Ricks had been born a slave on a Tennessee plantation, part of a family scattered across plantations by virtue of the system of sale and dispersal. Her father, George Erskine, bought and gained manumission with the aid of a Presbyterian minister; he became a Presbyterian and eventually a minister. He purchased the rest of his family from slavery and in 1830 moved them, with the assistance of the American Colonization Society, to Liberia. Kyra Hicks has researched the settlement process of freed slaves in the new land, the trades and skills represented in early censuses and Martha's personal history. She was thirteen on arrival in Monrovia, with sewing and quilting skills probably learned from her mother or grandmother, who were part of the re-settled family (Hicks 2004). Martha's story is an element of the history of African America quilt-making that originated on plantations, developed from a Euro-American tradition, and acquiring cultural significance, at least at the end of the twentieth century, in the historiography of African American art. Transferred to Liberia by families such as Martha's, freer designs developed, along with the making of lighter-weight quilts suited to tropical conditions and using locally grown cotton. Martha Ricks spent much time on making quilts and one in particular made when she was an older woman she was determined to take personally as a gift to Queen Victoria. Hicks notes that the Evangelist and singer Amanda Smith spent some years in Liberia and commented 'Everybody has quilts' (Smith 1893: 411). The recovery of this history has been firstly by African American quilters such as Cuesta Benberry (1987) and Hicks, and secondly through the Presbyterian connection (Apperson 2002).

Martha Ricks' life was contemporary with another post-slavery narrative. As the colonized settlement of Liberia moved towards independence in 1847, women, both settler and native-born, were called upon to create the new national flag. Although women were not enfranchised under the state constitution, their participation was part of a process of nation-building, and Hicks has noted the ritual handing over of the flag during independence celebrations by the flag-making women, inclusive of a speech by the Committee Chairwoman (Hicks 2004: 4). Martha Ricks was not part of this group, but her name is found in the records of a National Fair in 1858 for her entry of a pair of silk cotton socks of special quality, and in subsequent archival collections such as *The African Repository and Colonial Journal*, a valuable source for African American histories.

Her desire to see the English Queen is of relevance here. Liberia's colonizing settlement was from America, but America did not recognize Liberia as an independent nation until 1867. Britain did, soon after 1847, and Liberian government representatives were posted to London from that time. Britain's example and influence in ending the slave trade, and slavery, were renowned. Martha would have been aware of the West Africa squadron that sailed the eastern Atlantic to stop illegal

trading, no doubt calling at Monrovia from time to time. Hicks has suggested that Martha viewed Queen Victoria as a symbol of the safeguarding of freedom (Hicks, personal communication).

The placing of an article in the *Antigua Observer* followed formal, brief statements in the *Times* concerning Queen Victoria receiving Mrs Ricks at Windsor. The *Liverpool Echo* (18 July 1892) published short reports also: on 22nd July she was ‘entertained at luncheon’ by the Lord Mayor of London and the Lady Mayoress and driven in the Lord Mayor’s carriage; on 26th July, the Prince of Wales’ visited her where she was staying; on 26th July there was a report of Martha’s attendance at Exeter Hall for an anniversary celebration of the Salvation Army. The latter item framed a description of merriment in the audience at Martha’s undoubted Evangelical fervour after being welcomed by General Booth:

‘Mrs Rix, still beaming with delight, stood patiently beside the General until he had finished, and the cheers had subsided: then she suddenly became animated. “ My children “ she said, with a slightly foreign accent. “I joined this army six years ago. Long since. Long before I saw the Queen, Jesus was my great Captain. That is all. I have ‘salvation-filled.’ ” The statement was greeted with fresh cheers, which seemed to give Mrs Rix additional energy. Amid peals of laughter she suddenly began to dance a kind of jig, facing first to one side, then to the other, gesticulating towards the platform, then towards the meeting, shouting something that could not be heard, shaking hands with the people close to her, but never for a moment ceasing her dance. As she showed no sign of stopping several members of the Army came forward and led her back to her place, where for some time she sat with her eyes closed, swaying herself backwards and forwards, the picture of perfect content.’

The reporting of this, I suggest, displays racist superiority, more timely in terms of imperialist euphoria and jingoism of the 1890s than were reports of Sarah Bonetta Forbes wedding three decades earlier, and lacking sensibilities concerning cultural difference.

The final report in the *Liverpool Echo* came on August 4th at the time of her departure from London for home. A month after the first report of Martha Rick’s visit to the Queen, the *Antigua Observer* reported it to island readers, at greater length than any of the *Liverpool Echo* statements. It is appropriate to consider the significance of the story to Antiguans, many of whom had African origins, and had been slaves. In the 1890s trans-Atlantic links were probably stronger than ever before, shipping links were faster (three to four weeks from Liverpool to St John’s) and during the course of this decade, the seeds of a Pan-African movement were being sown in the West Indies, West Africa and Britain. Martha Ricks’ meeting with the Queen had relevance to the meeting of ideas as well as people, and this story concerned the agency of an African woman.

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To conclude, I have shown some points of contact between Queen Victoria, slavery, the anti-slavery movement, Africa and Africans that go beyond the un-problematized idea of Victoria as the ‘Great White Queen’, setting my own narrative against a broader and changing nineteenth century framework. Towards the end of Queen

Victoria's life, Africa's relations with the world had become powerfully interconnected with Europe, specifically with countries that claimed colonial oversight of newly demarcated territories, a re-structuring of African politics and economies. Britain was foremost among them. A century, and more, after Victoria's death Britain's and Europe's role in Africa is changing and again there is transition and re-structuring as other nations seek trade and an entry into an aggressive and competitive acquiring of Africa's resources.

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