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Transposition(s) and Confrontation(s) in the British
Isles, in France and Northern America (1688-1815)

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Movement(s) in Elizabeth Helen Callender Melville's Travel Letters from Sierra Leone

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Movement(s) in Elizabeth Helen Callender Melville's travel letters from Sierra Leone.*

Introduction

A Residence at Sierra Leone, described from a journal kept on the spot and from letters written to friends at home was written by Elizabeth Helen Callender Melville and published anonymously in 1849. It depicts her six-year sojourn, between 1840 and 1846, in the African British colony. This paper will try and show that Melville's stay in Sierra Leone was marked by movement in various ways and forms – political movements, as well as personal, outward but also inward movement. The definition for the term movement is multiple. Movement can refer to the fact of moving from one place to another. Movement can also refer to change and evolution. Movement can lastly be associated with the actions of groups of people for the promotion of the ideas and ideals they share. Melville participated in all of those to some degree.

Bought by British activists of the abolitionist cause in the late 18th century to shelter Black survivors of the slave trade, Sierra Leone as a territory was marked, as Melville, herself gradually discovered during her stay, by the political movement of abolitionism. When Sierra Leone became a British colony in 1807, this event caused a massive movement of population towards this territory, that of White British settlers such as Melville and her husband, who, took part in colonization, another form of socio-political movement. But, in Melville's travel letters and diary, one also notes that her own physical movement from Northern Europe to the Western coast of Africa and then within Sierra Leone, brought forth shifts, transformations to her interior world leading to profound shifts in her personality and eventually to an entire reshuffling of her identity.

Melville's moving to Sierra Leone: a woman at the crossroads of two political movements, abolitionism and colonialism

Elizabeth Melville was born in Dunipace, Scotland, on 14th March 1818 and moved to Africa at the age of 22: in 1840, her husband's professional activities led the couple and their first child to settle in Sierra Leone. The family returned to Britain in 1846, after spending six years in this colony. In 1849, three years after her return, Elizabeth Melville anonymously published her diary.

Melville's stay took place in a colonial context. But Sierra Leone, given its historical background was not any colony of the British Empire... Indeed, in 1787, Granville Sharp, a British abolitionist activist and a member of the London *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, established a charity named the *Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor*. The project's aim was to support the Black poor living in London and to offer them the possibility of settling in Sierra Leone. In May 1787, a first group of 400 Black Britons arrived in Sierra Leone and established the Province of Freedom, also known as Granville Town. In 1792, former slaves who had been relocated to Nova Scotia also arrived in Sierra Leone. They established the city of Freetown, the country's capital-to-be. When the slave trade was made illegal in Britain and its colonies, in 1807, the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron, based in Freetown, enforced the ban. When the squadron intercepted slave ships, it landed the released slaves in Freetown where they settled. Elizabeth Melville witnessed such events several times when she lived in Sierra Leone.

In 1808, one year after the abolition of the Slave Trade, Sierra Leone became a British Crown Colony, causing massive influxes of White settlers, among whom Melville, her husband and their child, to arrive in Sierra Leone. Her stay in Sierra Leone, therefore, put the young woman at the crossroads of two important British socio-political movements, namely imperialism on the one hand and abolitionism on the other. This very original situation probably contributed to cause this White and somewhat prejudiced colonist to change radically.

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Melville's initial xenophobic feelings

When she arrived in Sierra Leone in 1840, Elizabeth Melville tended to look down on the Black population, outspokenly expressing her despise in her letters and diary. Melville asserted for instance, that "All Black people seem alike" (Letter II, 22), mocked the Black population's physical appearance, ridiculed the "wooly-haired children" (Letter I, 7) and the Black women whose "gait is exactly that of a goose" (Letter 2, 21). Melville also proved to be afraid of the Black population, revealing in several letters that she found the "everlasting tom-tom" (Letter II, 27) and the "kettle-drums" distressing, because she associated these sounds with "the dark deeds of savage and treacherous warfare" (Letter II, 27). In several letters, she also accused the Black population of laziness, depicting them as "naturally apathic and indolent people" (Letter VII, 72) and complaining that domestics need to be consequently more numerous than in England to perform the same tasks :

The domestics here are all men, and they appear to be very indolent, so that you require eight or nine household servants, where in similar establishment in England three or four would be found sufficient. (Letter I, 13)

In order to prove her point, Melville gave a full description of the attitude of a sewing lady whom she employed for only one day, considering that she was too arrogant and not hard-working enough to remain at her service:

[She was] fanning herself all the while with a handkerchief redolent with musk, so as to display the numerous silver rings which glittered on her large hand [...] She came to enter upon her duties next morning an hour or two later than had been fixed upon, and after sitting for a short time in my dressing-room, said : "Sun too hot here", and that she would like to go into the front piazza, where she amused herself by looking out of the windows for about ten minutes between each stitch. About two hours earlier than she had agreed to work, she asked leave to "fold up" and go home for that day; to which I at once assented; and seeing that a child of eight years old could have done as much in one hour as this professed "sewing girl" in what she considered a whole day, I added that I should not require her to come back. (Letter II, 23)

Melville's scorn was most probably related to her country's imperialism as she referred to Sierra Leone as "**our** African colony" (emphasis mine, Letter I, 6) in a number of her letters. Several times in her diary, she expressed her admiration for those "missionaries and school-teachers who, with their good wives, have all the trouble of rough-polishing these wild native children" (Letter XXV, 204). Speaking for herself, she declared that she had given up "the ambitious attempt of civilizing a barbarian" (Letter XXV, 204). She lamented that "[her] directions are constantly mistaken. On asking one of the servants to bring me a breakfast cup, he first brought me a cream jug" (Letter I, 13).

Melville's movement from prejudices and fright to discovery, understanding and eventual hybridization

Now, in spite of her numerous prejudices and fears, however, Melville, gradually developed a very strong bond to Sierra Leone and its Black inhabitants. It is first of all thanks to her travels within Sierra Leone, that she came to discover the country in more detail and to fall literally in love with it. After settling in Freetown, Elizabeth and her family decided to move to a mountain overlooking the city: "We are now preparing for our departure to an abode which, viewed from town, seems built on the very face of the mountains" (Letter III, 30). Melville considered this move as an opportunity to explore the country, its fauna and its flora:

Then one cannot explore when driving quietly along in a carriage, and I suppose it would not be deemed quite *comme il faut* in the Sierra Leone capital to spring out to examine every flower or plant

that attracts notice. I therefore delight in the prospect of going into the country, besides that this mountain dwelling is one of the healthiest localities in the colony, being considered above yellow fever range. (Letter III, 30)

Elizabeth Melville was immediately seduced by the landscapes of Sierra Leone which she lavishly described:

I looked eagerly out and saw [...] buildings glittering the glorious light of a tropical sun; and beyond, the lofty mountains of Sierra Leone. Through the faint shadowy haze, their verdure appeared more soft and beautiful than that of the foliage near us, which flashed on the eye with supernatural tint, and formed a striking contrast to the deep cornelian colour of the earth in the paths and banks of the river -- the whole landscape conveying the idea of a perpetual summer. (Letter I, 5)

And, because movement indeed characterizes her whole stay, she herself moved a lot within Sierra Leone, constantly walking and exploring the vicinity around her house:

Sauntering through the grounds next evening, we came upon a garden of pine-apples, and believe me the anana on a plate, or in a hot-house, and when growing in its native soil, are very different things. A brilliant purple blossom, resembling the single bell of a hyacinth, opens from each of the diamond-shaped divisions of the fruit itself, which when young is of the same rich hue, surmounted by a crest of pink corded leaves, and protected all round by others much larger and broader, with saw-like edges and spiked points. (Letter I, 10)

These walks were an opportunity to become familiar with the fauna and to marvel at its diversity and incredible difference with that of Scotland :

Birds of every colour are for ever flitting past, and though their notes want variety, they are far from being unmusical. The humming-birds, scarcely larger than humble-bees, with plumage of green, blue, and purple, haunt the graceful boughs of the tamarind tree close to my room windows, and flutter round the scented yellow blossoms of a wild acacia that grows near the house. Their song is lively and quick, and they dart about in the sunshine with a merry rapid motion. (Letter IV, 37)

A magnificent moth measuring fully six and a half inches across the wings, has just been brought in. It is all of a rich dark-brown colour, with the exception, upon each of the hinder wings, which are also barred with white, of a large eye-like spot, with a brown centre surrounded first by a circle of black, then of crimson, and lastly a white one. But the peculiarity of this fine insect is that when lying flat with its head towards you, it exactly represents the face of a cat. (Letter XV, 129)

Melville's eager interest in the country's traditions led her to opt for African instead of European furniture in her house, choosing "Some specimens of African workmanship" (Letter II, 24) among which "a footstool of white wood [...] with four feet curiously cut out" (Letter II, 24).

Gradually embracing her new environment, Melville pragmatically adapted to her servants by learning their language ("I now give my household orders with perfect fluency, in a patois that would certainly puzzle both a linguist and grammarian" (Letter XII, 111), and by adopting the local culinary customs, relishing for instance palm-cabbage, "one of the strangest and best eatables that Africa affords", an "odd-looking substance [...] when boiled has a far more delicate flavour than a common cabbage" (Letter III, 35). This movement of adaptation, not to say assimilation to Sierra Leone, even led Melville at some point to refer to Britain as a foreign country, while considering Sierra Leone as her homeland. See for instance this quotation, in which, describing flowers, she wrote: "**We** have different sorts of small white starry cups, that I like from their resemblance to **your** wood anemone" (emphasis mine, Letter XXXV, 297). This gradual assimilation, combined with the progressive discovery of Sierra Leone's political origins, led Melville to experience a profound identity evolution.

Melville's shifting self: from movement to Sierra Leone to a whole identity re-shuffling

a. Discovering the History of Sierra Leone and the horrors of slavery and the slave trade

As she travelled through Sierra Leone and places whose meaningful names struck her, Elizabeth Melville gradually discovered the origins of the country: "We passed the site of Granville Town, the first free black settlement at Sierra Leone, and commenced (I think) about 1787, but afterwards wantonly burnt down by the French in an attack on the colony" (Letter II,19). Staying in Sierra Leone gave Melville the sad opportunity to witness with her own eyes the horrors of the Slave Trade and Melville wrote her outrage in her diary: "Oh! Vile trade! — is it never to cease? How long is its name to remain a blot upon the nations whose flags it dishonours?" (Letter XXVI, 214). Britain was among the first European countries to abolish this commerce, but slave ships still approached the African Coasts and captured slaves. Melville thus became proud of her country, and aware of the reality of this practice, turning her more compassionate towards Black people. From her home, and using her binoculars, she could see slave ships intercepted by the British navy:

A Portuguese prize came in one day in November. It was a most gracefully symmetrical vessel, and laden with slaves. With the glass I could see the miserable beings huddled so closely together on deck. There were neither second deck laid nor mats — merely loose grass strewed over the water-casks for the poor unfortunate creatures to sleep on. A feeling of patriotic pride always mingles with my pity on seeing a slaver brought in, to think that — thanks to Britain [...] soon these, our so unjustifiably oppressed fellow-mortals, will be blessed with a happier freedom than they ever knew in their heathen homes of the far interior. (Letter XVII, 136)

Living in Sierra Leone and witnessing the sufferings of the Black population led Melville to completely change her opinion of the African population, as proves this remark in letter XXXI: "As a people, they have been enslaved and oppressed for upwards of four hundred years" (Letter XXXI, 251).

b. From a White woman in Africa.... To a white woman from Africa

This movement of compassion changed Elizabeth Melville's perception of herself. At the end of her stay, she considered Sierra Leone as her home and had difficulty leaving:

Of course the few remaining days were busy ones with us, and gave rise to considerable regret on my part; as being the last I was ever to spend in the land which, in spite of all the bodily suffering I had both endured and witnessed on its shores, and the great anxiety undergone thereby, had nevertheless been my *home* for so long that it could not but be endeared to me by many associations. (Letter XXXVII, 308)

This was the sign that the inner movements experienced by Melville during her six-year stay had led her to some of identity hybridization causing her to perceive herself less and less as a Scottish, British or simply White woman and more and more as a human being from Africa. She was regarded as such by her fellow countrymen as suggests the discriminatory incident she faced on returning to Britain:

At eight this morning we all mustered on the gangway to have [...] our appearances scanned by the health inspectors in their boat alongside [...] the customhouse officials, who in their turn looked up at us with as much wondering curiosity depicted upon their features as if we had been all fresh from Timbuctoo. (Letter XXXIX, 326)

Attempting to land in Ireland, the boat in which Melville was travelling was indeed put on quarantine for health security reasons despite the fact that every traveller was in sound condition:

But although the vessel is provided with a clean bill of health, and there have been no deaths on board [...] fancy our astonishment and chagrin to have it intimated to us, not only that we are *not* at liberty to land, but that until an answer be received from authorities in Dublin (to whom the case has in the first place to be reported), it cannot be known whether we are to be admitted to pratique, or to undergo quarantine for an indefinite period! (Letter XXXIX, 327)

And, as Melville made it clear in her diary, the reason why they were subjected to such a humiliating experience was the fact that the boat was coming from Africa. As Melville noticed in letter XXXVIII, all boats arriving from Africa were treated that way: “We are not alone in our unjust detention. The P-----, which came in from Sierra Leone on Tuesday morning, is in the same agreeable position with ourselves” (Letter XXXIX, 329).

Conclusion

Elizabeth Melville’s sojourn in Sierra Leone from 1840 to 1846 was marked by movement(s) in all possible ways : first, movement from Britain to Africa, then, movement within the territory of Sierra Leone as Elizabeth Melville visited the country ; but also political movement, with Melville finding herself at the crossroads between colonialism and abolitionism, the latter movement having powerful impact, together with her daily experience of life in Sierra Leone. Her identity and self-perception were altered; and witnessing the reality of the slave trade on the African coasts, she learnt about the history of Sierra Leone and its bond with abolitionism. Living alongside Black people whom she learnt to know and appreciate, Elizabeth Melville experienced inner personality shifts which durably altered her identity even from the perspective of her British or Scottish compatriots. Her encounters with new plants and animals, new food, and a new civilization, along with the witnessing of the slave trade brought about a change of perspective. The experience of racist prejudices and rejection were at once ludicrous and a source of anxiety, upon her returning from Africa to Britain. It enabled her to develop an unconventional bond to Sierra Leone, very different from that of common colonists in the British Empire in the 19th century.

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