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Truth, Lies, and Misdeeds at Mauritius: The Story of the Schooner *Industry*

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When one thinks of the African slave trade, the image conjured is one of the Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean: millions of captured men, women, and children forcibly transported thousands of miles to the Americas doomed to lives of hard labor, some arbitrarily thrown overboard when food was in short supply and beaten within an inch of their lives on the whims of their Western European captors. While it is correct that this was often the case, the African slave trade was not always carried out by a renegade brig, overloaded with hundreds of captives, streaking across the Atlantic Ocean to avoid detection before making landfall. Countless African slaves were transported over the Indian Ocean—not just to Arab ports where the trade was allowed to continue under treaty with the British Crown, but also to British territories themselves.

Access to the report books of His Majesty's Treasury, chroni-

cling the interception and transaction of illicit trade of human labor and contraband in the nineteenth century, has helped to illustrate the bygone era of Indian Ocean slave trade in the years following its abolition by the British Crown and Parliament. British physical presence in the Atlantic was decreasing, notably manifest by the independence of United States—the opposite was true in the Indian Ocean. The British Empire was actively “expanding and consolidating its positions in the Indian Ocean...[capturing] strategic points from the Cape of Good Hope...to Malacca,” its influence growing exponentially which in turn brought widespread “pressure to enforce British anti-slave trade laws.”¹

Application of these laws were not fully enforced until 1813, three years after the British took control of Île de France—today’s Mauritius. Nonetheless, the slave trade continued to the island from East African ports due to “the French neither seriously enforcing their own anti-slave trade legislation nor allowing the British to search vessels flying the French flag.”² This is where the Treasury reports begin to tell the untold stories of ships captured en route to the Mascarene Islands, some overloaded with African captives being transported to the sugar plantations there. Despite an attempt to prevent the enforcement of the Abolition Act to Mauritius due to its being a “new” British colony put under British rule after 1807, Governor Robert Townsend Farquhar was overruled by his superiors and put the law into effect.

1 Robert Harms, *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, ed. Robert Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, and David W. Blight (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 8.

2 *Ibid.*, 9.

The capturing of offending vessels began in earnest shortly thereafter, and by February 1817 a total of 1,312 slaves had been freed from slave ships.³ Despite this, Farquhar estimated a total of 30,000 slaves had successfully been imported to Mauritius between 1811 and 1821, with only 19 percent of slaves intercepted before making landfall.⁴ Some of those 19 percent freed before reaching Mauritius were the 127 people aboard the schooner *Industry*. This paper will, with the aid of the report books of His Majesty's Treasury and various first-hand accounts, argue for the exceptional nature of the *Industry* through compelling evidence of false identities and assumed names, and outline a story shrouded by a scandal that reached the upper echelons of His Majesty's Admiralty Court.

The *Menai* and Captain Moresby

The peace following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 was frustrating for many young naval officers, who felt they were now “condemned to inaction.”⁵ One of the ships charged with blockading the island of St. Helena to prevent the escape of an imprisoned Napoleon Bonaparte was placed under the command of one such young officer in 1819—the future Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Fairfax Moresby. Soon after, the sixth-rate frigate *Menai*⁶

3 Moses D.E. Nwulia, *The History of Slavery in Mauritius and the Seychelles, 1810-1875* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1981), 39-44.

4 *Ibid.*, 46.

5 John Moresby, *Two Admirals: Admiral of the Fleet Sir Fairfax Moresby and His Son, John Moresby* (London: John Murray, 1909), 14.

6 T.A. Heathcote, *The British Admirals of the Fleet, 1734-1995* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Books, 2015), 177; A British sixth-rate frigate numbered anywhere from 20 to 28 guns on the main artillery deck and measured from 450 to 550 tons. A ship like the

was relieved of seaguard duty and ordered to sail for the Cape of Good Hope to assist with the establishment of a new settlement at Cape Colony. After the founding of Port Elizabeth, Sir Moresby was sent to Mauritius to “suppress the infamous slave trade carried on between Africa and the French colonies and Arab ports about the Persian Gulf.”⁷ As the senior naval officer at Mauritius, Captain Sir Moresby commanded the *Menai* until September 1824. During this period, Moresby patrolled the western Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea for slave ships and carried out “extensive surveys” of coastlines and islands, to the extent that he was “reduced to the lowest state of debility.”⁸

During his time as commander of the *Menai*, Sir Moresby completed the Moresby Treaty with the imam of Muscat in 1822, an agreement “designed to inhibit the shipment of slaves to French sugar plantations in the Mascarene Islands (Mauritius and Réunion)... [but] allowing the transport and sale of slaves along the western Indian Ocean rim to continue unabated...from southern Africa, to the west coast of India.”⁹ A year later, Sir Moresby undertook a harrowing capture of a slave vessel named *Camilla*, securing 140 slaves and 10,000 Spanish dollars “despite [the ship] being protected by the local Arab governor.”¹⁰ The biographer of Sir Fairfax Moresby, his son Sir John Moresby, described the *Camilla* as “a prize in all respects well worthy of her reputation...nor had rumor overstated her beauty

Menai could have had 240 crew, including up to 19 officers. Brian Lavery, *Nelson's Navy: The Ships, Men and Organization* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 328.

7 Moresby, 19.

8 Moresby, 25.

9 *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, 9.

10 Heathcote, 178.

and her sailing powers.”¹¹ Not present in his biography, however, is mention of one of his first captures as commander of the *Menai* not long after he was appointed senior naval officer at Mauritius.

The Capture and Condemnation of the *Industry*

Captain Sir Moresby, during patrol aboard *Menai* off the coast of Zanzibar in mid-1821, encountered the schooner *Industry*.¹² Described as a vessel with certain notoriety as a slaver, the *Industry* was intercepted not incidentally but for “consequence of previous information” of having “violated the laws of Great Britain for the abolition of the slave trade.”¹³ Indeed, the *Industry* may have been caught previously, nearly ten years earlier, when a ship called *L’Industrie* was captured in 1811 by the British sloops *Race Horse* and *Astrea* as it sailed from the coast of Madagascar to Mauritius with 208 enslaved Africans aboard.¹⁴ While it is virtually impossible to confirm if they are the same vessel or not, the accounts and correspondence given by authorities in Mauritius, including Deputy Registrar George Cabin, plainly validate the reputation of the *Industry* and that it was specifically sought by British patrols for its being “continually engaged in conveying slaves, sometimes to Mauritius and sometimes to [Île de] Bourbon (Réunion).”¹⁵

11 Moresby, 24.

12 The spellings *Industry* and *Industrie* are used interchangeably within the HCA volumes.

13 Account of George Augustus Nantz Cabin, 21 December 1821, HCA 35/6, The National Archives of the UK, London, 298.

14 Appeal from the Cape of Good Hope, 11 July 1813, HCA 42/444, The National Archives of the UK, London.

15 Cabin, HCA 35/6, 298.

The *Industry* was captured sometime in early- to mid-September 1821. The schooner was prosecuted at Port Louis by Captain Sir Moresby and condemned by George Smith, “esquire, barrister-at-law in the Court Official, Principal and Commissary General, and special Judge and President in the Court” at Port Louis, Mauritius on October 31, 1821.¹⁶ The condemnation included “the vessel, her guns, boats, tackle, apparel, furniture, and goods, wares and merchandise laden therein, [and] also the persons in number, one hundred and [thirty], as scheduled...having been slaves at the time of their seizure.”¹⁷ Also charged was the owner of the ship, Desiré Bataille, captain Jean Baptiste Mongin, and cargo supervisor Pierre Lange, each fined £13000—£100 for each slave captured.¹⁸

The Crew of the *Industry*

Just as the *Industry* was not unfamiliar to British authorities at Mauritius, neither was its crew. Upon discovery of correspondence onboard the schooner, British authorities had quickly determined the names given by the captain and cargo supervisor were not their true identities. Jean Baptiste Mongin was in fact Bernard Mongin, and Pierre Lange was a pseudonym given by Fortuné Dubignon.¹⁹ The former, Bernard, had engaged in the illicit trade of slaves before, and was captured as a mate aboard the *St. Jacquet* and as the commander of the *Voyageur* – each time swearing on oath to be Bernard

16 Cabin, HCA 35/6, 297.

17 Ibid.

18 Cabin, HCA 35/6, 301.

19 Cabin, HCA 35/6, 300.

Mongin, “subject of His Britannic Majesty” and inhabitant of Mauritius.²⁰ Jean Baptiste Mongin, it was revealed in letters found in his possession, was his older brother and officer in the French service stationed at Bordeaux. Furthermore, testimony of his sisters who resided at Port Louis had recognized him as Bernard Mongin.²¹

Pierre Lange, alias of Fortuné Dubignon, was identified through evidence given by an informant. The court at Port Louis had found that he had “never...defeated his allegiance to the British government” and that it had “testimony [and] records that he participated with that same Mongin in the nefarious transactions of the *Voyageur* and that when he is now found embarking with this same individual onboard the *Industry*...it is impossible to draw any other conclusion than that he is a sharer in the crime of Mongin.”²² The account of the *Industry* given by Cabin shows Mongin as the primary perpetrator, and that it is “impossible to perceive” that Desiré Bataille was the “director of the movements of the *Industry*” and that Bataille spoke “evidently of our (British) interests.”²³ Apart from the fines levied on Mongin, Bataille, and Dubignon, there is no mention in the Treasury report of any other punitive measures that may have been levied by the British government. The reason for this is that, at least in the case of Mongin, the verdict returned in the Vice Admiralty Court was not guilty. For his shipmates, the official record is inconclusive as their bills of verdict have been misplaced; it is reasonable to assume they too were found not guilty.²⁴

20 Cabin, HCA 35/6, 299.

21 Ibid.

22 Cabin, HCA 35/6, 299-300.

23 Ibid.

24 *Papers Relating to Slaves in the Colonies: Two Volumes – Contents of the First*

Auction and Sale of the *Industry* and her Wares

Upon condemnation of the *Industry* on October 31, 1821, a decree was handed down by His Majesty's Instance Court of Vice Admiralty at Mauritius to proceed with the auctioning of the ship and all effects found aboard. James Sanders Reader, the deputy marshal of the Court, was charged with carrying out the operation.²⁵ He includes in his report of his duties the careful cataloging of all costs incurred, as well as proceeds from the sale and subsequent distribution of those monies to concerned parties. The report, dated December 21, 1821, shows that the *Industry* was sold at Port Louis to a man named Samuel Nolbross, esquire and mariner, on December 1, 1821 for the sum of 5,310 Spanish dollars (denoted as Sp^{sh} D^{rs}).²⁶ A table of the costs to British authorities, subtracted from the total revenue, are included at the end of his report:

Charges		
Scheduling blacks @ 1 D ^r each	127	
Taking inventory and copies	12	
Shipkeeping from 14 th September to 1 st Dec. 1821 inclusive, 3 D ^{rs} per day	237	
Cryer and trumpeter twice	6	
Advertisement in Gazette and hand bills	21	
Commission on sale @ 2 ½ per cent	132.75	535.75
	Net amount sales	4774.25

and to whom they were awarded, notably the registrar of the Vice Admiralty, the crew of the *Menai*, and the Crown.

Volume (London: The Honorable House of Commons, 1828), 79, <http://bit.ly/2JrBiHq>.

25 Reader, HCA 35/6, 301.

26 Ibid.

This is also the first mention of monies found aboard the *Industry*, in the sum of 4448.25 Spanish dollars. This is included in the table and brings the total revenue from the *Industry* incident totaling 9222.50 Spanish dollars:²⁷

Brig Schooner <i>Industry</i> in Account		
1821 Dec 28 th	To amount paid Charles Telfair, Esquire, his commission as Registrar on the amount sales of the said Brig Schooner <i>Industry</i>	238.71
	To amount paid Richard Sholl, Esquire, purser of His Majesty's Ship <i>Menai</i> by order of Captain Moresby	712.86
	To amount paid L.N. May, Esquire, proctor, his Bill by order of Captain Moresby	2263.50
	To amount paid Charles Telfair his commission as Registrar on Spanish Dollars found on board the Brig Schooner <i>Industry</i> – Sp th D ^{rs} 4448	222
1822 May 1 st	To amount paid Richard Sholl, Esquire, agents for captain, officers and crew of His Majesty's Ship <i>Menai</i> , being the proportion award to the seizors by sentence of Court In Sp th D ^{rs} 2113.12 ½, in paper D ^{rs} 779.59	2892.71 ½
August 1 st	To amount forwarded to England to the Registrar of the High Court of Admiralty being the share awarded to the Crown by sentence of the Court	2892.71 ½
		9222.50
1821 Dec 28 th	By amount received from J.S. Reader, Esquire, Deputy Marshal of the Vice Admiralty Court being the net amount sales of the said Brig Schooner <i>Industry</i>	4774.25
	By amount received from James Sanders Reader being Spanish Dollars found on board the said Brig Schooner <i>Industry</i>	4448.25
		9222.50

While the inclusion of these tables is helpful and facilitates the understanding of how and to whom monies were dispersed, the auction and sale of the *Industry* appears unremarkable. Upon perusing accounts of other captures in these and other volumes of His Majesty's Treasury report books, the overall sum is relatively average. However, within these tables is mention of a man that presents another extraordinary instance in an otherwise ordinary story.

27

Reader, HCA 35/6, 301. Both tables can be found on the pages 301 to 303.

The Telfair Affair

Charles Telfair was a colorful character. A renaissance man of sorts, he has been described as a “product of the Irish Enlightenment”—a botanist and naturalist, not unlike Charles Darwin in the Pacific or Hans Sloane in the Atlantic.²⁸ First arriving at the Mascarene Islands in 1810 as a ship surgeon in the service of the Royal Navy, Telfair curated the botanical garden at Pamplemousses and held many government offices at both Réunion and Mauritius.²⁹ His many accolades include introducing the yellow Cavendish banana to Mauritius and discovering many plants, having a whole genus, *Telfairia*, named for him.³⁰ Among the many government positions held at Mauritius, none were more consequential to the story of the *Industry* as serving as the personal secretary to Governor Farquhar and as registrar for the Vice Admiralty Court at Port Louis.³¹ As

28 Marc Serge Rivière, “From Belfast to Mauritius: Charles Telfair (1778-1833), Naturalist and a Product of the Irish Enlightenment,” *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* 21 (2006): 125.

29 Pico Iyer, “Mauritius’s Past Enhances its Beauty,” *Financial Times*, May 2, 2009, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/89bb0fbc-35dc-11de-a997-00144feabdc0.html>. Page has since been deleted, only access is now through the Internet Archive at <https://web.archive.org/web/20090605235330/http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/89bb0fbc-35dc-11de-a997-00144feabdc0.html>.

30 Elizabeth Findlay, “A Colonial Conundrum: Boy with Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo,” *Melbourne Art Journal*, no. 3 (2008), 5, <https://emajartjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/findlay.pdf>; M.O. Akoroda, “Ethnobotany of *Telfairia occidentalis* (Cucurbitaceae) among Igbos of Nigeria,” *Economic Botany* 44, no. 1 (1990): 29.

31 Charles Telfair, *Some Account of the State of Slavery at Mauritius Since the British Occupation in 1810: In Refutation of Anonymous Charges Promulgated Against Government and That Colony* (Paris: H. Lamirault, 1830), 11. First edition access provided by Internet Archive, complete with handwritten front matter, https://ia802606.us.archive.org/18/items/someaccountofsta00telfrich/someaccountofsta00telfrich_bw.pdf.

registrar, Telfair would have overseen all official records and financial transactions on Mauritius. As such, his office was made aware of the capture of the *Industry* in early- to mid-September 1821 and was responsible for the chronicling of events as well as the sale and disbursement of monies related to the captured schooner.

Captain Sir Moresby alerted customs and treasury officials in May 1823 that Charles Telfair had “retained five percent of the money found on the persons captured onboard the *Industry* slave trader,” and implores “their Lordships to take steps to make Mr. Telfair refund to the captors the illegal charge on their moiety of the prize as well as to the Crown on the other moiety.”³² Telfair responded quickly to the accusation posited by Moresby, replying on May 15 from his office in Port Louis that he was appealing to the “proper authorities in England, who will decide more equitably upon the particular case, when the statements of both sides shall be before them.”³³ He is defiant in his tone, adding that he would “cheerfully obey any orders [he] may receive...but until that decision convinces [him to] the contrary, [he] must still consider the money in question as a part of the original seizure.”³⁴ Customs officials responded in kind later in 1823, stating that despite the “documents [being] regular,” it was “advisable to suspend the payment of bounties”³⁵ until it could be discovered what had occurred.

What followed was a court investigation into whether Charles

32 Letter from Fairfax Moresby, 12 May 1823, HCA 35/6, The National Archives of the UK, London, 246-47.

33 Letter from Charles Telfair, 15 May 1823, HCA 35/6, 248.

34 Ibid.

35 Letter from G. Harrison, December 1823, HCA 35/4, 2.

Telfair had embezzled or otherwise improperly acquired the funds in question. A June 30, 1825 letter to the Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury from an advocate of the Admiralty stationed in Vernon Place at Bloomsbury Square, London issued a verdict. It was found that Telfair had given a faulty statement and that "the charge of five percent made by Mr. Telfair...[was] excessive," and that "His Majesty's and the Advocate of the Admiralty do not advise any proceedings to be instituted on behalf of His Majesty, [only the] regular mode of recovering from him the amount he has improperly charged."³⁶ The letter goes further, adding perhaps why no further discipline were to be brought upon Telfair: "I am not aware that any regular table of fees for the Vice Admiralty Court at the Mauritius has been sanctioned by authority in this country," adding "two pence on the pound was recommended...to be allowed...at the Cape of Good Hope" and that "there does not appear any reason for allowing larger fees...at the island of Mauritius."³⁷ The advocate concludes that Telfair should have only taken two pence on the pound, or two percent, rather than the five percent he took in late 1821.

The letter sent by Telfair to Moresby in response to the charge against him certainly shows that he believed he was due the extra money taken from the 4448.24 Spanish dollars seized by Moresby and his crew following the capture of the *Industry*. According to the investigation, five percent was ultimately an arbitrary value that Telfair had settled upon.

36 Letter from Advocate W.R., 30 June 1825, HCA 35/6, 252-3.

37 Letter from Advocate W.R., 30 June 1825, HCA 35/6, 253.

There is no mention of this incident, Captain Sir Moresby, nor any financial impropriety in *Some Account of the State of Slavery at Mauritius*, the memoir of Telfair that describes his governmental work at Mauritius during the 1810s and 1820s. Instead, *Some Account of the State of Slavery at Mauritius* reads as an apology for the actions of his superior, Governor Farquhar, who had responded with hesitation to the abolition of slavery.

Conclusion and Aftermath

The capture of the *Industry* is unique and compelling for three reasons. The crewmembers that commanded the ship and imprisoned the captives aboard it, Bernard Mongin and Fortuné Dubignon, had substantive pasts in the slave trade and sought to avoid the consequences of their actions by masquerading as Frenchmen, who could not be held fully accountable by British authorities. The 4448.24 Spanish dollars found aboard their vessel were improperly handled after seizure by none other than the registrar of His Majesty's Vice Admiralty Court at Mauritius, who consciously took a larger moiety than he was due. The fallout of that fateful decision would reach His Majesty's Advocate and the Advocate General of the Admiralty and spur a new policy that extended to all future slave ship captures under the purview of the Vice Admiralty Court at Mauritius. And, perhaps whimsically, the story of the *Industry* intersects two of the more consequential men of the nineteenth-century British colonial Indian Ocean space—Fairfax Moresby and Charles Telfair.

Though not the heroic capture of the *Camilla* or the lucrative seizure of the *Succès*, the *Industry* is a story of redemption for young

Fairfax Moresby. Cast out from Port Elizabeth after missing out on the excitement of the Napoleonic Wars, Moresby quickly found favor as a successful slaver hunter in the Indian Ocean. The triumph of securing embezzled funds from Telfair for his own men on the *Menai* would appear to not go unnoticed by the Admiralty. Moresby quickly rose in rank in the following decades, awarded the command of larger ships-of-the-line *Pembroke* and *Canopus*, and assuming the ranks of Admiral of the Blue in 1862,³⁸ Vice-Admiral of the United Kingdom in 1869,³⁹ and Admiral of the Fleet in 1870.⁴⁰ The capture of the *Industry* is as momentous to Fairfax Moresby as it is to the wider incidence of the African slave trade across the Indian Ocean, and stands as a distinctly human story of truth, lies, and misdeeds in a time both temporally and spatially distant from the present.

38 "Admiralty," *London Gazette*, May 20, 1862, <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/22627/page/2615>.

39 "Whitehall, July 17, 1869," *London Gazette*, July 20, 1869, <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/23518/page/4063>.

40 "Admiralty," *London Gazette*, February 1, 1870, <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/23582/page/598>.

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