

SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL: REPARATIONS FOR LIVERPOOL IMPERIALISM AND WEST AFRICA

**LIVERPOOL SLAVERY IN THE WEST INDIES
MADE THEM RICH, LIVERPOOL IMPERIALISM
IN WEST AFRICA MADE THEM RICHER.**



STEPHEN SMALL

We know that many men in Liverpool became rich during British slavery, like the Aspinalls, the Tarletons, the Pinnocks and the Earles.

Some of these men became richer from the abolition of slavery. For example, almost ninety Liverpool residents got financial compensation when British slavery was legally abolished in the 1830s. Philip Tinne got more than £90,000, Samuel Sandbach, more than £35,000 and John Moss more than £40,000. Their families also prospered on the basis of this wealth. John Gladstone got more than anyone in the entire nation – he received a payment of £106,769, the equivalent today of between £10.2 million and £544.5 million, depending on how it is calculated (www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/8961). Not one of the 800,000 enslaved children, women and men in the West Indies received a farthing or a penny. Many men became rich from trade with nations that kept slavery long after Great Britain abolished it, like the United States (abolished in 1865), Cuba (finally abolished in 1886) and Brazil (abolished in 1888). Together, these three nations enslaved millions.

During the US Civil War when Great Britain was supposed to be neutral, cotton from the United States still got through to Liverpool, and money, guns and ships from Liverpool got through

*John Gladstone*

to the US Confederacy. For example, Arthur and William Forwood made a fortune helping the Confederacy. Their father was a shipbroker and their grandfather a cotton broker. Both of them became mayors of Liverpool and Arthur became an MP. When Arthur died in 1898 his estate was worth more than £87,320 (more than £9 million as of 2022). William's estate when he died in 1928 was vastly greater – more than £356,000 (over £21 million as of 2022). They worked with James Dunwoody Bulloch of Georgia who was sent to Liverpool to help the Confederacy. Bulloch was from a slaveholding family. He liked Liverpool so much he settled and died here. He's buried in Smithdown Road cemetery. And they worked with the Laird shipbuilding

company of Birkenhead which supplied ships like The Alabama, built in 1862, to the Confederacy. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CSS_Alabama)



Alabama ship

In the final decades of the 19th century Liverpool merchants controlled 45% of all British imperial trade; and they controlled more than 90% of trade with West Africa. Palm oil and palm kernels, both of which were indispensable to British industry, were the most valuable products traded from West Africa to Britain. Palm oil was used in industry and railroads; palm kernels were used in soap, candles and margarine. By the 1850s the Merseyside region produced more soap than any region and Liverpool was responsible for more than 80% of soap exports from Great Britain.

Exports to West Africa from the port included metalware, tobacco, firearms, gunpowder and alcohol. Surprisingly, salt was also exported. Salt had been produced in Cheshire and surrounding areas for centuries. It was sent in massive amounts to West Africa because it was cheaper and more plentiful in England than it was there. For example, in 1845 Liverpool exported 8,000 tons to West Africa, 3,000 tons going to the port of Old Calabar alone, the largest single market on the coast.

Some of the world's biggest, most profitable and most well-known shipping lines emerged in Liverpool in the imperial period. Just think of Cammell-Lairds, Elder-Dempster, Alfred Holt's Blue Funnel Line and Samuel Cunard's luxury liners. Millions of emigrants departed Liverpool to the Americas; and hundreds of thousands of immigrants arrived in Liverpool from across the world. That was more than any other city in Great Britain, including London. The biggest and most

important docks in Liverpool's history were built in the imperial period, like the Albert Dock in the 1840s and the Gladstone Dock in the 1920s.

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A wide range of ancillary businesses like iron-founding, metal production and chemicals were expanded or developed alongside or to support primary businesses. Birkenhead, Warrington, Widnes and Runcorn all expanded during this period, taking advantage of their proximity to the port of Liverpool and benefiting from its trade in general and with West Africa in particular.

Colonisation of Africa was a key element of British imperial policy. In Egypt, control of the Suez Canal and trade with India provided the most income and the biggest profits for Great Britain. In southern Africa, profits from diamonds and gold were the main goal. In West Africa initial profits for Britain were tiny compared to those from other regions in Africa, but the profits for Liverpool merchants were massive. And the British government expected that far more profits would arise once roads, railways and ports in West Africa were improved. But that didn't matter because immediate profits were not the only goal. A far more important imperial goal for politicians was to prevent Britain's competitors – like Germany and France – from controlling land and claiming the upper hand in West Africa. So, Great Britain invaded territories even when there were no immediate economic gains or profits to be made. This was at the core of imperial policy around the globe, buttressed in a belief in what was called 'Greater Britain'. In the case of West Africa this suited Liverpool merchants very nicely.

A little known fact is that Denmark, Norway and Sweden also profited from imperial trade with Great Britain in general and Liverpool in particular, including trade in West Africa. During slavery those nations had established colonies in Africa and slavery in the West Indies, but Great Britain, France, Spain and Portugal beat them back. So, they decided if you can't beat them join them. During slavery they provided raw materials like timber, iron ore, cereals and fish to Great Britain, Netherlands and France. And they consumed products like coffee, cotton, sugar and tobacco produced by the enslaved across the Americas.

During imperialism they massively expanded production of these goods as well as others like pork and butter from Denmark, and electronics from Sweden. Scandinavian shipping expanded greatly too. And again, Liverpool was at the centre of all this trade. The Bryant and May factory that used to be in Garston, producing tens of millions of matchsticks, is a case in point, with timber from Scandinavia.

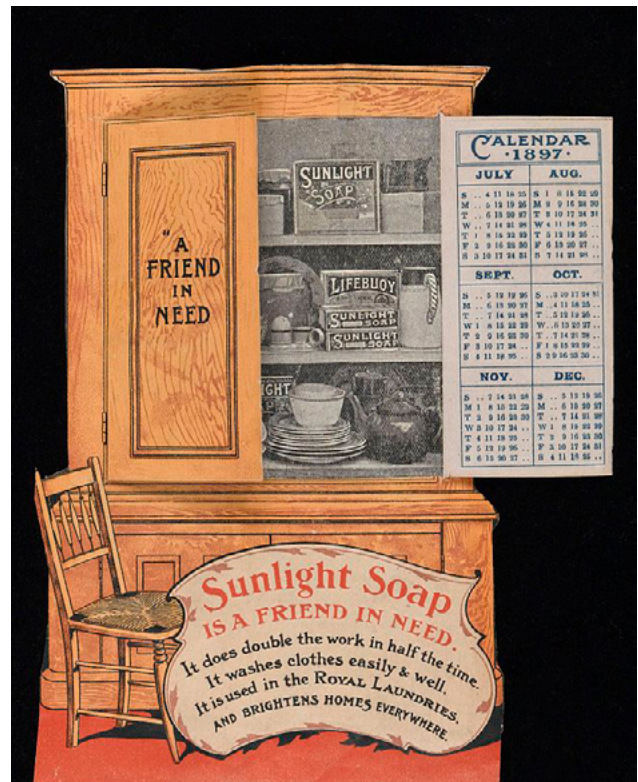


Bryant and May

Who prospered the most from Liverpool's imperial trade with West Africa? **Alfred Lewis Jones became immensely rich and highly influential in imperial Liverpool. In West Africa he had his fingers in more pies than anyone else.** He was into boats and ships, sail and steam on rivers, seas and oceans; he was into railways, roads and harbours. He was into banks and hotels, insurance and assurance. He was into palm oil, palm kernels, cocoa, gum and cotton **from West Africa**, and salt, soap, candles and cloth **to West Africa**. And oil and coal going both ways. And just for fun, bananas from the West Indies. He was described as the "Uncrowned King of West Africa".

Jones began working with Elder Dempster and Company in 1879, took it over in 1884 and directed it until his death in 1909. By then the company held a virtual monopoly of trade with West Africa and continued to dominate this trade after his death well into the 20th century. He achieved his success with brutal monopolistic competition. African workers were forced into the worst and most risky jobs, were paid far less than white workers, and were disposed of at will when jobs were needed for white men. When Jones helped found the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM) – and initially donated almost £1000 to it – he made it clear that it was an investment that was expected to pay dividends. He was just one of the many Liverpool imperialists who wanted to turn the white man's grave in West Africa into the white man's garden of production and profit.

Jones also profited from the horrific actions inflicted on African people in the Congo by King Leopold of Belgium, providing him with business, shipping services and medical advice. By the early 1900s Jones had a monopoly on the Congo-Antwerp mail traffic as well as consular duties in Liverpool for King Leopold's Congo State. He also provided it with access to the LSTM for information and medical training. He was probably the richest man in Liverpool at the turn of the century. Jones was not married and had no children. When he died in 1909 he left more than £580,000 in his will, part of which went to his sister and two nieces. He also left a number of charitable donations, including £80,000 to LSTM.



Sunlight Soap

Across the River Mersey from Jones was William Lever, far richer, far more influential, with his fingers in far more pies across the world, and whose legacy and reputation are far more well-known today, for better or for worse, than Jones (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Lever,_1st_Viscount_Leverhulme). You've probably heard of Unilever and the Leverhulme Foundation, right? Lever was born in Bolton and worked for his father's grocery business. He launched his soap production in the 1880s, including the building of Port Sunlight in the Wirral. Lever attained unprecedented levels of international business success, including in West Africa. Most of his business activities passed through Liverpool. Palm oil for factories and palm kernels in soap, candles and margarine

production earned him vast profits. I bet many older people reading this article are familiar with Lifebuoy and Lux soap. Lever rivalled and far surpassed Jones in his exploitation of Africa and Africans, including substantial business dealings with King Leopold of Congo. **Lever had friends in high places, especially in Parliament. He was an avid supporter of Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone and of the British Empire.** And he became an MP for a short time himself in the Wirral. When Jones died in 1909, Lever became chairman of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine.



Cammell Laird

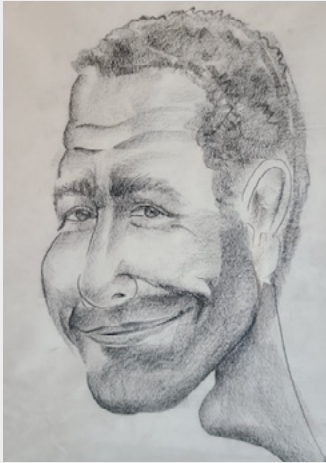
Then there's the shipping successes of the Lairds – brothers John and Macgregor, and John's sons, John, William and Henry. The Lairds began the first regular steamship service to West Africa in the 1850s with the African Steam Navigation Company, and in doing so substantially increased the extent of trade and the number of people involved (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Steamship_Company). Their shipbuilding business and related economic and political activities probably played the most important role in expanding

Birkenhead's population from less than 500 in 1801 to more than 200,000 in 1911. And then there's the Holts – George Sr., George Jr., Alfred and John. And the list goes on and on. By the way, I suspect there were hundreds of other men profiting immensely from these businesses. I could be wrong about that, but I'm probably right, probably certainly right. More research will tell us the truth and name names, research that I am doing over the rest of the year.

What became of the wealth, properties, jewels and other valuables of the Gladstone, Jones, Lever, Holt, Laird and other families that became rich under imperialism? What businesses thrived as a result of their endeavours? What mansions, halls and houses, what parks and gardens, did they leave behind? How did their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren prosper on the basis of their inheritance? What donations were made to imperial museums, universities and schools? What statues, street names and buildings dedicated to these men still exist? Who among these and other families are still alive today? And how can our knowledge and education be made more accurate and more comprehensive about who these men really are and what they really did? These are the questions that must be asked if we are to really demand appropriate reparations and reparatory justice, and if we are to decolonise knowledge and education.

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Stephen Small is a Professor in the Department of African American Studies and African Diaspora Studies where he has taught since 1995; and he is Director of the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues (since June 2020). He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley (1989); his M.Sc in Social Sciences from the University of Bristol (1983); and his B.A. (honours) in Economics and Sociology from the University of Kent at Canterbury (1979). He researches the history and sociology of Black people across the diaspora, including the United States, Western Europe, the Caribbean and Brazil. He has held visiting positions at universities in Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Brazil, Japan and Zimbabwe.

His most recent book is *20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe* published in January 2018. His next book is tentatively entitled: *Inside the Shadows of the Big House: 21st Century Antebellum Slave Cabins and Heritage Tourism in Louisiana*, to be published in 2022. He is currently writing a book on

Slavery, Imperialism and their legacies in Black Liverpool. As part of that project, he's investigating the voices and visions of Black men and women from across Africa and the diaspora in anti-colonial movements for self-determination. He is co-editor of *Black Europe and the African Diaspora*, 2009.

Stephen is a child of the Windrush Generation, his dad having arrived in England from Jamaica in 1947. He was born and raised in Liverpool – the city with the nation's longest-standing Black population. He was a member of several Black and multi-racial organisations across England, and in the 1990s was research assistant to the Right Honourable Bernie Grant, MP, researching and lecturing on reparations and museums. He was a member of the Consortium of Black Organisations and the Federation of Black Liverpool Organisations, both in Liverpool, in the early 1990s. And he was a Guest Curator at the Atlantic Slave Trade Gallery at the Merseyside Maritime Museum (which became the International Slavery Museum in 2007).