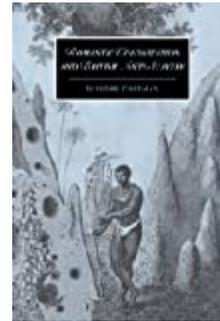




**Deidre Coleman.** *Romantic Colonisation and British Anti-Slavery.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xv + 273 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-63213-3.



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### Termites, Fantasy, and White Settlement

In this work, Deidre Coleman, associate professor of literature at the University of Sydney, examines Romantic-era discourses associated with two 1790s British zones of colonization—Sierra Leone and Botany Bay. She argues that, since slave plantations no longer were allowed as a basis of colonization, all Romantic would-be imperialists had to devise new rationales for their settlements.

Most of the monograph focuses on Sierra Leone. Henry Smeathman, who in 1786 proposed a scheme to resettle London's black population there, comes in for extended treatment. Of particular interest are his entomological studies of termites—Africa's premier insect colonist and imperialist. Smeathman used his pioneering entomological study of the termites, as well as his many phallic drawings of their mounds, as an explicit analogy of the way in which colonists could both organize themselves and dominate Africa. Clearly an out-of-the-box thinker, Smeathman also proposed using the emerging technology of hot air ballooning to explore Africa and to exploit its resources. Pornographic letters he sent out from the West African coast also receive some comment.

No less bizarre was a small group of British-based Swedenborgians who settled in Sierra Leone in 1792. This group believed that a large, peaceful, mysterious nation of Africans—closer to God than any other branch of the human race—existed in the African interior. The dozen or so Swedenborgians who landed at Freetown hoped to locate this group, and then settle and intermarry with them in order to create a utopia they called “New Jerusalem.” Predictably, and mercifully, the project collapsed due to high mortality and the interference of reality.

The problem I have with this material is the obscurity and lack of prominence of the Swedenborgians, and Smeathman, who died several years before the founding of Sierra Leone. Call me old-fashioned, but I question whether such extended focus on ideas that had very limited circulation and even more limited impact is necessary. The central lesson I draw from this material is that there were as many self-absorbed people writing books in the Romantic era as there are today.

Coleman next focuses on the ideas of the first rulers of the Sierra Leone colony, such as Thomas Clarkson, and their relations to the Nova Scotian settlers. This is well-

trodden Africanist territory, and I am not sure whether Coleman tells us much more about the labor relations between the Sierra Leone Company and the black colonists than we have already learned from Christopher Fyfe and others.[1]. The rest of the book proceeds in a similar vein for the Botany Bay colony in Australia.

A concluding chapter is definitely warranted since the various strands of argument are very diffuse. The

book perhaps was conceptualized as an exposition in romantic literary criticism as it bears on Africa and Australia, because Coleman's treatment of Africa falls well short in demonstrating romanticism's historical significance.

Note

[1]. Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

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