

by Nigel Biggar

How a narrative of black victimhood and white guilt has torpedoed a tribute to one of the noblest episodes in our history

THE heroics of HMS Black Joke, a Royal Navy clipper that waged a fearless five-year war to put an end to the slave trade, are worthy of a Hollywood action movie.

She was once a slave ship herself, sailing under the Brazilian flag and known as the Henriqueta. But when the British captured her in 1827, this brave little vessel was transformed into the scourge of mercenary slavers who traded in human beings.

Her crew took unimaginable risks to hunt down Spanish and Portuguese ships and free the men, women and children crammed below decks in conditions of horrific misery.

On the last day of January 1829, Black Joke sighted a Spanish vessel, the El Almirante, sailing toward Havana in Cuba. She gave chase. And she kept on chasing for 31 long hours, until she came within firing range of the Spaniard.

El Almirante sported 14 cannon to Black Joke's two but, after 80 bloody minutes of broadsides, the British prevailed and 466 African slaves were set free — at a cost of six wounded sailors, of whom two subsequently died.

In another engagement two years later, Black Joke (named after the filthy lyrics of a street ballad, the sort enjoyed by sailors through the centuries) captured a 300-ton ship called the Marinerito, also flying the Spanish flag, and saved 496 slaves.

One sailor, Midshipman Pierce, had his hat blown off by a musket ball, before he was knocked overboard by a sword thrust. Yet he hauled himself back on to the deck by clambering up a sheet of trailing canvas, and rejoined the fight.

When the battle was over, the rescued slaves showed their gratitude with songs. Perhaps they were able to express their thanks in words, too, since a good many British sailors 200 years ago were African-born themselves, escapees from the slave trade who could act as translators.

WE SHOULD all be proud of this heroic, humanitarian action, part of the Royal Navy's anti-slavery campaign carried out for most of the 19th century. Yet a proposal for a memorial has now been refused in the Royal Navy's hometown.

Landsec, the commercial owner of Gunwharf Quays in Portsmouth, has turned down plans for a statue honouring these ships and their crews. This week it announced that, after consulting its 'employee diaspora network', it had decided the tribute was out of keeping with the 'inclusive environment' and lacked 'sensitivity to what is a very emotive topic and dark part of our history as a nation'.

In other words, Landsec is afraid of looking racist, though it is apparently not concerned about revealing its utter ignorance of history.

Presumably, the 'diaspora' refers to people of African descent. Some of them may be the distant descendants of slaves. But they might also include descendants of those African slavers — and the traders who dragged their fellow Africans to the coast for sale to Europeans — as they had been doing for centuries, first to the



Home of the navy: Portsmouth and the proposed memorial



Romans and then to the Arabs.

So why on earth would they or anyone else regard a statue as 'non-inclusive' and 'insensitive' for commemorating the Royal Navy's heroic anti-slavery West Africa Squadron? Why would they not want this important, admirable part of the truth about Britain's history remembered?

The obvious reason is that it's a story of white Britons doing good to black Africans. As such it distracts from the Black Lives Matter-inspired mission to keep our focus absolutely fixed on the evils of African enslavement and on British guilt for it.

Any celebration of how Britain fought against the slave trade disturbs the politically advantageous, comic-book narrative of unremitting black victimhood at the hands of white oppressors.

Landsec's response exactly echoes the one I received earlier this week from the Kelvingrove Museum in Scotland. On Monday

I wrote an eight-page letter to the museum's manager in protest against the travesty of history represented by its display, 'Glasgow — City of Empire'.

In this display, every possible association between Glasgow and slavery is highlighted. But as for the city's world-leading role in the abolition of slavery, what has the Kelvingrove got to say?

Nothing at all. In answer to my complaint, Duncan Dornan, head of museums at Glasgow Life, which runs Kelvingrove, defended the display, saying that it had been designed in response to extensive discussions with 'diverse communities'.

By 'diverse', we can assume he meant 'non-white ethnic minorities'. What he implied was that these communities all think the same thing about Britain's imperial record... and that what they think represents the only acceptable view.

The fact that there's a diversity

of opinion within ethnic minorities, that the average non-white Briton knows no more about history than their white counterparts, and that certain ethnic minority activists have political reasons for deliberately distorting our understanding of the past — none of this seems to have crossed his mind.

After abolishing slave-trading throughout her empire in 1807, Britain took the lead in suppressing slavery at sea and on land, worldwide, over the course of the following century and a half.

In all, according to the Navy's records, some 150,000 Africans were liberated by the West Africa Squadron between 1808 and 1860.

The cost was exorbitant: one sailor died for every nine slaves freed — 17,000 men over that period — in action or of disease.

One sailor whose diary has survived, Midshipman C. Henry Binstead aboard the HMS Owen, described a voyage in the 1820s.

'Upwards of 200 rescued slaves are lying about, most of them sick. There are also several bad cases of fever amongst our own crew,' he wrote. 'Many large whales and sharks are about us, the latter is owing to the number of poor fellows that have lately been thrown overboard.'

A week later Binstead recorded that he had lost one of his closest friends, Midshipman Richard McCormick — 'a most amiable young man beloved by all his messmates. He died of the African Fever [probably malaria], which had attacked him while away in the boats up the Old Calabar River [in Nigeria].'

Royal Navy ships, sometimes 30 or more, were stationed for decades off the coast of west Africa, to disrupt the export of slaves. At its height, the West African Squadron employed 13.1 per cent of the Royal Navy's manpower.

By 1845 the Slave Trade Act authorised the Navy to treat as pirates Brazilian ships suspected of carrying slaves, to arrest those responsible, and to have them tried in British admiralty courts.

Royal Navy ships sometimes even entered Brazil's harbours and on one occasion exchanged fire with a fort.

In 1850 Brazil yielded to the pressure, enacted legislation outlawing the slave trade, and began to enforce it rigorously.

It is estimated that, between 1807 and 1860, the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron alone seized about 1600 slave-ships and liberated 150,000 African slaves. In the process, more than 2,000 sailors lost their lives, mostly through disease.

ECONOMIC historian David Eltis has reckoned the cost to British taxpayers of transatlantic suppression alone as a minimum of £250,000 per annum — billions in today's values. The British spent almost as much attempting to suppress the trade between 1816 and 1862 as they received in profits over the same length of time leading up to 1807.

The American political scientists Chaim Kaufmann and Robert Pape conclude that Britain's effort to suppress the Atlantic slave trade was 'the most expensive example [of costly international moral action] recorded in modern history'.

Some would argue there was an obvious commercial advantage to Britain in disrupting our European rivals' slave trade. But Kaufmann and Pape found the real driving force was not economic but religious: in the churchgoing 19th century, moral duty counted for more than any financial incentive.

The British were among the first people in history to repudiate and abolish slave-trading and slavery — at colossal cost in money, diplomatic effort, naval resources and lives.

Rather than kowtow to the distorted, biased agenda of the BLM movement, imported from the U.S., Landsec should try to copy the moral courage of HMS Black Joke's heroic sailors — and salute one of the noblest episodes in our national history.

■ **PROFESSOR Nigel Biggar** is the author of *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning*.