

The Royal African Company of England in West Africa 1681–1699

Professor Robin Law FBA has recently completed a three-volume edition of correspondence relating to the English in West Africa during the last two decades of the 17th century. Although the period covered by this correspondence is brief, it was one of great historical significance. Below, Professor Law illustrates the scope of the correspondence, and discusses the range of sources used, highlighting in particular the importance of documentation of the Royal African Company that passed into private hands, and is now found in the Rawlinson collection in Oxford.

Fontes Historiae Africanae (Sources of African History) is a British Academy Research project, engaged in the publication of scholarly editions of source material relating to sub-Saharan Africa, mainly in the pre-colonial (i.e. pre-20th century) period. The *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project was initiated by the Union Académique Internationale in 1962, and operates through committees established by national Academies affiliated to the UAI. The UK national committee was set up by the British Academy in 1973, and has for some time been the most active of these national committees, having published a total of 18 volumes to date.

The most recently published (December 2006) volume in this series is *The English in West Africa 1691–1699*, edited by Robin Law (who is also the current Chair of the UK *Fontes* committee). This is itself the concluding volume of a set of three, carrying the general subtitle *The local* [i.e. African] *correspondence of the Royal African Company of England 1681–1699*, following earlier volumes published in 1997 and 2001. Work on this edition was begun in 1990, and its completion now, after 17 years in production, marks a major landmark in the work of the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project.

The material included in these volumes comprises correspondence of the Royal African Company of England relating to its activities in Africa during the years 1681–1699 (though with some gaps). The Royal African Company was chartered in 1672, with a legal monopoly of English trade with West Africa. This trade was for a range of African commodities, including ivory, wax, and dyewoods, but mainly for gold and slaves, the latter for supply to the English colonies in the Caribbean and North America. For the purposes of this trade, the Company maintained forts or factories on the West African coast, mainly on the Gold Coast (corresponding roughly to modern Ghana), but also at the River Gambia and in Sierra Leone to the west, and on the ‘Slave Coast’ (the modern Republic of Bénin) and in the kingdom of Benin (in modern Nigeria) to the east. Its local headquarters in West Africa was at Cape Coast (or, in the original form of the name, ‘Cabo Corso’) Castle, on the Gold Coast. The Company lost its legal monopoly of the African trade in 1698; initially, it was granted a compensatory duty of 10% on goods exported to Africa by other traders, but this privilege lapsed in 1712. Forced to compete in an open market, the Company went into terminal decline, effectively ceasing to operate as a trading concern in the 1720s. It continued, however, to manage the English possessions on the West African coast, with the support of a government subsidy, until 1752, when it was replaced by a new body, the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, which was a regulated company (i.e. one open to all English merchants, who could use its facilities, on payment of a subscription) rather than a trading firm.

The main body of the surviving records of the Royal African Company is preserved in the National Archives at London. For the purposes of the Company’s activities along the West African coast, the most informative

of these records are the series of Letter Books containing correspondence received from its agents in West Africa. Most of this correspondence, in fact, was received from its local West African headquarters at Cape Coast Castle, since most of the other African establishments did not usually correspond directly with London. As preserved in the National Archives, however, this correspondence is disappointing for the historian. The letters received were not recorded in their full original texts, but only in the form of extracts and summaries made for the information of various Committees of the Company, and these are often very brief. In consequence, as the Royal African Company’s principal historian, K.G. Davies, has observed, these documents characteristically have a somewhat ‘telegrammatic character’, in which brevity often truncates the information and even obscures the meaning, and ‘reduces considerably the value of the records’.

The deficiencies of the material in the National Archives, however, turn out to be offset by the existence of significant bodies of documentation of the Royal African Company’s activities which, having passed into private hands, are preserved in other archives. The most important series of such documents is preserved in the collection of Richard Rawlinson (1655–1755), held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, which comprises correspondence relating to the last two decades of the seventeenth century. It is contained in three bound volumes, containing a total of around 1,300 folios (or 2,600 pages). The material consists of 33 separate letter-books, and includes a total of 3,095 documents. These contain correspondence received in the Company’s West African headquarters, Cape Coast Castle, from elsewhere in West Africa, between January 1681 and February 1699 (though with some gaps). Most of these letters are from the Company’s forts and

factories elsewhere on the Gold Coast itself, but there are also a number from its factories at Offra and Whydah on the Slave Coast; a substantial minority were rather from ships of the Company trading along the coast, and a small number from foreign Companies trading in West Africa, especially the Dutch West India Company, which had its own headquarters at Elmina, 10 km west of Cape Coast. Unlike the material in the National Archives, the documents in the Rawlinson corpus are preserved in their full original texts, and therefore afford much greater density of detailed information. Since it comprises letters received in Cape Coast from elsewhere in West Africa, it also has a much wider geographical range.

This material, of course, primarily documents the operations of the Royal African Company itself. However, it also offers substantial information on the activities of other traders who were competing with the Company. In particular, the Company's factories regularly reported on the operations of English merchants outside the Company, termed in contemporary usage 'interlopers', who were trading in breach of its monopoly. This documentation of the 'interloping' trade is especially valuable since, being illegal (until 1698), it did not generate records of its own comparable to those of the Royal African Company.

Something of the flavour of this correspondence may be seen from the following example, a letter written by John Gregory, chief of the RAC's fort at Charles Fort, Anomabu, one of the Company's major establishments on the Gold Coast, on 24 April 1692 (vol.iii, no.646). It illustrates the frequently difficult relations of the Company's factories with the local communities in which they were located, recording a dispute with 'Bonnishee' and other leading African merchants of the town, arising from their preference for trading with 'interlopers', rather than with the Company. In the event, the Council of Chief Merchants at Cape Coast Castle did not support Gregory, as he requested, but ordered his removal, and instructed his successor to conciliate the aggrieved merchants.

Having received so many unsufferable abuses from Bonnishee and several others belonging to this town, [I] thought it fitt for the intrest and honour of the Company to seize upon him, which accordingly yesterday in the afternoon I did, together with Humphrey, Finny, Eggen & Peter Quashi, they all supplying Captains Parish, Bill & Chantrell with slaves, corne &ca, likewise threatning to s[e]ize all goods that is bought out of the Factory, oblidging all to buy of them, insomuch that since the interlopers came here I have not taken one taccoe [i.e. 1/192 of an ounce] of gold, Capt. Parish also keeping a white man in Bonnishees house with goods. We have done very well as yett, and don't doubt but to make them comply to our just demands. I have but one months provision in the Fort, but de[s]jires you would ease me of some of the women slaves [i.e. those employed in the Fort] with their children, being about 12 in number. I have burnt all the house[s] about the Fort & am well provided of all ammunition, but powder [I] have not above 2 barrells, [and] desires you to supply me with some and hand granadoes. I have released Peter Quashee upon promise that he will forward this.

The correspondence also refers to the trade of foreign competitors, and thus constitutes a potential source for Dutch, Portuguese, French, Brandenburger and Danish, as well as English trade. This may be particularly valuable for the Portuguese and French trades, since relatively little documentation of these appears to be preserved in their own national archives before 1700.

It might appear, at first sight, that, since it relates to the activities of foreigners in Africa, this material falls outside the scope of the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project, which is concerned rather with the documentation of the history of indigenous African societies. In practice, however, since the Rawlinson material focuses specifically on the African end of the trade, it provides extensive documentation on the activities of

indigenous Africans, as well as of Europeans. For example, it documents the important role played by African servants and employees within the Company itself, in conducting trade, carrying messages, mediating disputes, and by implication in determining policy. It also illustrates the dependence of Europeans on the supply of goods and services from local African communities, for example in the supply of foodstuffs, for the provisioning of slave ships, as well as of the local factories; and the employment of African canoes and canoeemen, for coastwise communication, as well as to carry goods to and from European ships standing offshore. Additionally, it provides information on the factories' relations with African merchants and the local political authorities (categories which in practice usually overlapped) in coastal West African societies. To the extent that the European factories operated in close physical proximity and social interaction with the local communities where they were located, their correspondence also represents a source for the social history of West African coastal towns more generally. Moreover, it contains incidental information on events and more general conditions within African societies, including sometimes those in the interior as well as those at the coast, which were reported in so far as they materially affected the state of trade: wars among African states, for example, might threaten the security of the Company's factories or disrupt the delivery of gold and slaves to the coast, but might also yield captives which were available for sale to Europeans. The Rawlinson material is thus an important source for indigenous African history, as well as that of Europeans in Africa, and thus finds an appropriate place among the publications of the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* series.

Although the period covered by this correspondence is brief, it was one of great historical significance. During these years English trade with West Africa, especially in slaves, was expanding rapidly, leaving the English as the principal carriers of slaves by the end of the seventeenth century. At the same time, however, the Royal African Company itself was experiencing severe difficulties in sustaining its legal monopoly against the competition of English 'interlopers', a problem which became critical after its political position at home was

weakened by the Revolution of 1688, given the Company's close association with the Stuart monarchy, and more particularly with the deposed King James II (who had served as Governor of the Company since its foundation), leading eventually to the loss of its legal monopoly in 1698. The Rawlinson material documents the local West African dimension of this struggle, in the increasing scale of interloping activity on the coast. During the same period also, the volume of slave purchases by all Europeans was also increasing substantially, overtaking gold as the principal European interest in West Africa; and (at least partly in consequence of this growth of slave exports) indigenous African societies in parts of the coastal area were undergoing radical changes, with a disintegration of the existing political order and the rise of new military states, such as Akwamu and Denkyira in the hinterland of the Gold Coast.

The value of this correspondence, especially by comparison with the better-known Royal African Company material preserved in the National Archives, would be difficult to exaggerate. Beyond question, it represents the most important body of source material relating to West Africa in the seventeenth century which is held in the UK. Because of its location outside the main body of the Royal African Company's records in the National Archives, this material was entirely neglected by the early pioneers of the history both of West Africa and of English trade with it. For example, the classic study of the RAC by K.G. Davies, *The Royal African Company* (1957), and the pioneering study of the Gold Coast by K.Y. Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast 1600–1720* (1970), were both written without benefit of these documents. Attention was drawn to this material only in the 1970s, and it has still not yet been fully assimilated in the study either of English

trade in Africa or of African history. The continuing general neglect of this material has undoubtedly been due, in large part, to its user-unfriendly arrangement. This is not only, or even mainly, due to problems of legibility, but more critically because of its confusing arrangement, the letters being entered according to the date of receipt at Cape Coast, without regard to geographical provenance, which makes the process of locating documents which relate to any particular locality extremely tedious. The edition now brought to completion will bring it more effectively within the public domain, not only by establishing a definitive text, but also by re-arranging it in a more intelligible order (essentially, geographically, grouping together all letters from each particular factory). The edition also supplies explanatory and critical commentary, in particular through comparison with other Royal African Company documents and with contemporary non-English (especially Dutch, French and Danish) sources, and drawing upon recent work in the history of Africa to elucidate the local background. Publication in this new critical edition should serve to ensure that this important source is more fully utilized by interested historians. In particular, it will increase its accessibility to scholars based in Africa, whose geographical mobility to consult archives outside the continent is severely limited (by financial as well as time constraints), and for whom it represents a potentially invaluable but as yet largely unexploited resource.

The English in West Africa 1691–1699 (three volumes, edited by Robin Law) is published by the British Academy.

Details of all publications in the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* new series can be found at www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/cat/fha.html

