

Please note: This text contains content and descriptions of slavery which may cause distress or that some may find triggering.

John Cass 1661-1718

Louis-François Roubiliac, *Sir John Cass*, 1751

This statue of Sir John Cass is an interesting metaphor for how the most violent elements of the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans can appear in plain sight, disguised as something benign and unassuming.

The City of London greatly profited from the economy of the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans. In 1660, City merchants and the Stuart royal family set up 'The Company of Royal Adventurers of England trading with Africa' to exploit the west coast of Africa¹. This organisation would become the Royal African Company (or RAC) led by the Duke of York, later to become King James II. It was predominantly concerned with trading enslaved Africans before switching to the trade of extracted resources of gold and ivory. As a result of a new charter in 1672, the company monopolised trade to Africa until 1698². Between 1672 and the early 1720s, the Royal African Company used

¹ See Charter of the 'Company of Royal Adventurers of England Trading into Africa' was signed by King Charles II in 1663 and can be viewed online via [Still We Rise](#) (Source: British Library).

² The RAC's trading monopoly after the 1672 charter, and onwards through to 1698, are discussed on page 8 of Professor Miles Ogborn's report on Cass – titled, *Sir John Cass, the Royal African Company and the Slave Trade, 1705-1719* (2021). Other notable scholars on empire document this information – including historian Professor Trevor Burnard (please see, for example, p. 70 in: Burnard, T. (1996) Who bought slaves in early America? Purchasers of slaves from the Royal African company in Jamaica, 1674–1708, *Slavery & Abolition*, 17:2, 68-92); and Dr Madge Dresser, who writes '... the Royal African Company, which until 1698 had the monopoly of the British slave-trade between Africa and the Americas' (p. 169 in: Dresser, M. (2007) 'Set in Stone? Statues and Slavery in London,' *History Workshop Journal*, 64(1), pp. 162–199).

ships sailing from London, Bristol and Liverpool, to forcibly transport nearly 150,000 African people into slavery³, and shipped more enslaved African women, men, and children to the West Indies (also known as the Caribbean) and the Americas, than any other single institution during the entire period of the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans⁴.

This statue was Commissioned by the Sir John Cass Foundation (renamed the Portal Trust) on its founding in 1751. In 2020, due to Cass's active role in the Royal African Company, the foundation commissioned further research to explore his involvement. Cass was one of only fifty-four investors who owned 43% of RAC shares. Owning more than five thousand pounds in stock was an election requirement for the role of company assistant. The research found that alongside this role (1705–1708), Cass sat on two of the five RAC committees, and as a member of the Royal African Company's Court of Assistants, was responsible for tasks such as setting budgets and giving detailed instructions to the captains of the slave ships. Cass directly dealt with Slave agents in the African forts and Caribbean.⁵ During his tenure there were fifty-five

³ [Sir John Cass The Royal African Company 1705-1718](#), Professor Miles Ogborn (2021), Queen Mary University for the Portal Trust, and Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade – Database, [Slave Voyages](#)

⁴ W.A. Pettigrew (2013) *Freedom's Debt: The Royal African Company and the Politics of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill) p. 11.

⁵ Madge Dresser (2007) *Set in Stone? Statues and Slavery in London*. 'Like his Whiggish counterpart, Clayton, John Cass was also a City Alderman, but in the Tory interest. Though never Lord Mayor, Cass served as Sheriff then as Member of Parliament for the City of London and became a Knight of the Realm. He too was involved in the slave-trade, being a member of the Royal African Company's Court of Assistants from 1705 to 1708. The Company records show him (then 'Colonel John Cass of Hackney') to have been on their 'committee of correspondence' which directly dealt with slave-agents in the African forts and in the Caribbean. We know too that Cass retained shares in the Royal African Company until his death. Cass, like Clayton, also seems to

voyages, transporting over 14,000 enslaved persons, 2,347 of whom died on the voyage.

It is worth noting that the RAC's records of enslavement demonstrate how people were dehumanised as an accounting exercise. This further perpetuated the devaluation of human life.⁶ These accounts dispassionately note: how many people could be transported; how to exercise control to increase productivity; how many deaths during the Middle Passage (the treacherous journey from Africa to the Americas across the Atlantic Ocean) were acceptable to create a profit margin; how those who had died perished, and how to minimise this for calculations related to insurance claims and trading profits. This mindset was continuous and reflected again some 60 years later in the legal proceedings related to the Zong Massacre of 1781⁷. The case, initially heard at the Guildhall in 1783, centred on an attempt to claim compensation for the deaths of over 130 enslaved Africans, who were thrown overboard by the crew of this ship, as they had been insured as cargo, and could

have been linked by family and friends to colonial plantation interests, in his case to Virginia.' (Dresser 2007, p. 173).

⁶ See [Slave Voyages database](#). Using search date filters 1705-1708 and the Vessel ownership name "Royal African Company".

⁷ For further reading, see Baucom, Ian (2001) 'Specters of the Atlantic,' *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100 (1): 61-82; Walvin, James (2011) *The Zong: a massacre, the law and the end of slavery*. New Haven: Yale University Press, Professor Fred D'Aguiar's [Feeding the Ghosts](#) (1997) offers a novelistic account of the 1781 massacre and Marlene NourbeSe Philip (aka M. NourbeSe Philip), 2008. [Zong!](#). Furthermore, to understand the language of racism in relation to enslavement and empire see African history scholar Professor Sandra Elaine Green from the USA (Cornell University), and the internationally renowned British academic with Jamaican heritage Professor Hazel Carby (Yale University, USA). Please see endnotes about Professor Hazel Carby for an exemplification of this point, taken directly from her celebrated book *Imperial Intimacies* (2019). Source: Carby, H.V. (2019) *Imperial intimacies: a tale of two islands*. London and New York: Verso. (see, in particular, Part 4: Accounting. "Bookkeeping" pp. 243-255).

not be claimed as a loss if they had died on board the ship. The insurers ultimately refused to pay, and the public legal proceedings became a key argument for the abolition of slavery with Olaudah Equiano and Granville Sharp, campaigning further to have the ship's crew prosecuted for murder. While the perpetrators of the Zong Massacre were not prosecuted, it is key to communicate that what had begun as a dehumanising accounting procedure was rightly judged for what it was: an episode of heartless mass murder of African people. This is why it is important to highlight the tone of the 1663-1821 records of the RAC, which are filled with displays of this brutal accountancy approach to human life⁸.

There is evidence to suggest that Cass chose to be involved with the RAC for political gain. After unsuccessfully campaigning to become Alderman for the City of London ward of the Portsoken in 1701, he achieved 'greater prominence in City circles by becoming... an assistant in the Royal African Company'⁹. It seems that his philanthropy also served his political ambitions. After establishing in 1709 that his will would provide for the founding of local schools in the London borough of Hackney and the Portsoken, where children would be educated 'in the knowledge of the Christian religion according to the principles of the Church of England'¹⁰, he campaigned for a fourth time

⁸ Catalogue description for Company of Royal Adventurers of England Trading with Africa and successors: Records, the [UK National Archives](#) [accessed 4th March 2023]

⁹ P. Gauci (2002) '[John Cass \(1661-1718\)](#)' [Accessed 4th March 2023]

¹⁰ Beaven, i. 185; Strathmore mss at Glamis Castle, box 70, folder 2, bdle. 3, newsletter 31 Oct. 1702; Mdx. Poll of 1705; Luttrell, Brief Relation, vi. 250; Brunning, 6; Post Boy, 3-6 Mar. 1711.

for the position of Alderman in the Portsoken and was successfully appointed (1709). Therefore, we can see a picture painted of philanthropy for the local poor and disenfranchised in London, being funded by wealth gained from participation in the violent industry of the trade in Enslaved Africans. The leverage gained from his position as RAC company assistant, and the good will generated by his local philanthropy clearly served his personal and political ambitions. These acts were not unique to Cass and are part of a common pattern for those who became rich and powerful directly from the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans.

This statue was made 30 years after Cass's death when his incomplete will was enacted, creating an endowment for the Sir John Cass Foundation. This statue was not designed to be seen on a human to human scale. It would have been viewed from below installed at The Portsoken school, established by Cass during this time, overlooking Aldgate Road. This statue was posthumously designed and displayed to evoke the patriarchal image of a founding father and in gratitude for the endowment created by his ill-gotten wealth, the details of which have been marginalised in the retelling of Cass's history.

The statue has been on loan to the Guildhall since 1980, however in 2001 on the 250th anniversary of the Sir John Cass Foundation, many replicas were commissioned¹¹. The recent reckoning with Cass's

¹¹ 'Sir John Cass (1661-1718)' Louis François Roubiliac (1695/1702-1762) (copy of) David Game College, Aldgate, City of London, [Art UK](#) [accessed 4th March 2023]

legacy was accompanied by the removal of the other statues of his likeness, so numerous effigies of this man remain to be re-contextualised.

If we end by returning to the metaphor that I see in this artwork: the most violent elements of the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans appearing in plain sight, disguised as something benign and unassuming. The orphaned status of the statue, but long-term residence in a significant public and political space mirrors the untold stories of Britain's trade of enslaved Africans, and the wider colonial past. These violent acts against human beings were transposed into numbers through cold accounting exercises, so that the economy of slavery would grow the wealth of the City of London and the United Kingdom at large. This history is here publicly for anyone to see, the impacts and legacy built into the infrastructure of the City and indeed the nation. But the story is often orphaned without anyone taking responsibility for unpacking the truth and leading a process of healing and reconciliation that begins with recognition and accountability. Instead, it has languished, unaddressed, in plain sight, treated as discrete and irrelevant. It is worth reflecting on who benefits from these stories remaining untold, the violence removed or minimised, and considering if and how we can heal from this unaddressed trauma?

Hopefully this text and further research will be the start of a process of confronting these histories, so that we can ultimately reach justice and healing.

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