

DT026 - How West African natives originally asked for British rule

Lady Gavron cannot know much history if she thinks (report 17 October 2000) the Battle of Trafalgar was 'bad' for Britain and that the British Empire was something we 'did' to the Africans, not with them. Here is one example of how mistaken the latter sentiment is.

When constitution-making for Dr Nkrumah in the Ghana of the late 1950s I had to research in local archives the way Britain took power in the Gold Coast, Ashanti, and neighbouring territories of West Africa. It sprang from the activities of traders and missionaries. By the 1820s one trader, Captain George Maclean, had gained such local respect that he was able to secure lasting peace between the Ga tribe in the coastal region and their inveterate Ashanti enemies of the interior. Maclean was already acting as magistrate in the forts established there.

The Ga and Ashanti tribes implored him to extend this British justice to their own people. He later reported of his own administration: 'Let but the local government deny or cease to administer even-handed justice to the population for a single day, and the whole country would again become a scene of warfare, rapine and oppression'. Only with great reluctance, and after much pressure from the locals, did the British government agree to take over rule in this area.

A House of Commons select committee spelt out the terms: the relationship of the chiefs and their peoples to the British Crown should be 'not the allegiance of subjects, to which we have no right to pretend, and which it would entail an inconvenient responsibility to possess, but the deference of weaker powers to a stronger and more enlightened neighbour, whose protection and counsel they seek . . .'