Public Opinion and the Abolition of the Slave Trade

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I. Defending the Slave Trade

By the eighteenth century the leading states in western Europe, including Britain, France, Spain, Portugal and the Dutch Republic had established colonies in the Americas. Where they established plantations to grow such crops as sugar, tobacco and coffee, they required to import black slaves from Africa because they could not procure sufficient wage labourers who could tolerate the hard work, hot and humid climate, and endemic diseases. As these crops became more popular in Europe, slavery and the slave trade expanded enormously. Millions of black Africans were transported as slaves across the Atlantic between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. By the eighteenth century, Britain was the leading supplier of slaves to the Americas, followed by Portugal, France and the Dutch Republic in that order. In the eighteenth century France transported just over one million black slaves from Africa to the Americas, while Britain transported a little over twice as many. In Britain, Liverpool, London, Bristol and Glasgow were the leading home ports of the slave traders. Although the risks could be considerable, so could the rewards of successful voyages. The slave trade reaped considerable benefits to the British economy as well as to the traders involved in it. The slave trade was triangular. British merchants exported British manufactured goods and Indian textiles to Africa, where these products were exchanged for blacks already enslaved by local rulers or Arab traders. These slaves were then carried to European colonies in the Americas, not just to British colonies in the West Indies and in the southern parts of British North America. The slave ships then returned to Britain with valuable cargoes of sugar, tobacco, coffee, etc. This lucrative trade helped to build up British ports, the shipping industry and the supply of experienced sailors. It also increased British exports and imports, increased government revenue, and provided capital to invest in other economic activities.

Although there had long been some critics of the slave trade and attacks on it grew enormously in the late eighteenth century, there were many who defended the slave trade (and chattel slavery) in printed and oral debate. It was frequently pointed out that slavery had existed throughout recorded history and one English clergyman even went to considerable lengths to argue that there was much scriptural evidence in support of slavery. It was also claimed that British slave merchants did not themselves make free blacks into slaves, but rather transported those who were

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already slaves from Africa to a better location and life in the Americas. Most
defenders of the slave trade maintained that black slaves were essential to produce
the valuable crops that could be grown in the Americas and that the production and
sale of these crops greatly benefited the British economy as a whole. Moreover,
Britain was in competition with European rivals in the Americas and it served her
strategic, commercial, imperial and naval interests to be the paramount slave trader.
Humane considerations should not be allowed to attack the private property
of British merchants or planters, or to undermine the nation’s power. To argue against
slavery and the slave trade was to advance arguments against the facts of life and the
experience of centuries.2

The public defence of the slave trade was primarily advanced by those who
had a strong economic investment in its activities. Rich planters, particularly in the
West Indies, employed agents in Britain, lobbied Members of Parliament (MPs)
from the British slave ports, or themselves returned to Britain to gain seats in
Parliament in order to build up a political interest that could defend slavery and the
slave trade. The Society of West Indian Planters and Merchants in London mounted
impressive propaganda campaigns from the later eighteenth century onwards in
order to combat the arguments of those who were increasingly criticising the trade.3
The supporters of the slave trade found it difficult to defend the trade on religious or
moral grounds, but they were aware that their economic and political arguments
would carry great weight with leading politicians in Parliament and the government
and so they concentrated their arguments and their lobbying on the political elite.
They subsidised pro-slavery propaganda to hand out to politicians and they ensured
evidence in defence of the slave trade was made available to parliamentary
committees investigating the conduct of the trade.4 Their efforts delayed the
successful abolition of the slave trade for nearly twenty years after they had lost the
propaganda war outside Parliament.

II. Challenges to the Slave Trade before 1787

From the earlier eighteenth century a growing number of critics of the slave
trade advanced their philosophical, moral, religious and practical arguments against
slavery and the slave trade. Montesquieu, in his L’Esprit des Lois and the Abbé
Raynal in his historical survey of European settlements in the Indies were both very
critical of slavery and their views had very considerable influence on such
enlightened Britons as George Wallace, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith and Richard
Price in the 1760s and 1770s. In Philadelphia, the French-born Anthony Benezet,
who had joined the Society of Friends (the Quakers), began to produce a succession
of tracts attacking slavery and the slave trade. The Quakers in America resolved in

2 See, for example, Robert NORRIS, A Short Account of the African Slave Trade, London:
1789.
3 Lillian M. PENSON, “The London West India Interest in the Eighteenth Century”, English
Historical Review, vol. 36, July 1921, pp. 373-392; and Andrew J. O’SHAUGHNESSY, “The
formation of a commercial lobby: the West India interest, British colonial policy and the
4 James A. RAWLEY, “London’s Defense of the Slave Trade, 1787-1807”, Slavery and
the 1760s not to own slaves or to participate in the slave trade and they urged their co-religionists in London to support their efforts to abandon all involvement in both of these crimes against humanity. Benezet’s works also influenced John Wesley, a Church of England minister in the process of creating the Methodist movement that would later break away from the established church. In 1774, Wesley published his *Thoughts on the Slave Trade*, which did much to convert his followers into opponents of the trade. Other committed adherents of the Church of England, the Evangelicals, were also persuaded by their strong religious convictions to attack the slave trade. In 1784, James Ramsay, who had served for a time as a surgeon in the West Indies, attacked slavery in *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the Sugar Colonies* and condemned the slave trade too in *An Inquiry into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade, and of Granting Liberty to the Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies*. In 1785, Thomas Clarkson, a devout member of the Church of England, wrote an essay in Latin, which he submitted for an academic prize at Cambridge University on the topic of ‘*Is it right to enslave others against their will*’. He wrote this essay without having had any personal contact with other critics of the slave trade. In 1786, however, James Phillips, the leading Quaker publisher in London, printed Clarkson’s tract, translated into English as *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, particularly the African*. It was to change Clarkson’s life.\(^5\)

The cruelty and inhumanity of slavery and the slave trade were attacked by some critics, most notably Granville Sharp, another devout Evangelical, on the grounds that they infringed English law and the liberties of the subject. Sharp corresponded with Benezet, published his own work, *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery*, in 1769, and began helping poor blacks he found being mistreated in London. He was shocked to find that a slaveowner visiting England could claim that he was legally entitled to retain power over any slave he brought with him, even if that slave sought to escape mistreatment and refused to return to the Americas with his master. Sharp feared the consequences for the liberty of English subjects if this claim could be upheld in the law courts. In 1772, Sharp supported in the courts the appeal of James Somerset, a black slave who had left his master and who had no wish to return to the Americas with him or any other master. When the case came to trial, the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Mansfield, returned an ambiguous verdict that acknowledged a master’s right to the services of his slave, but not the right of the master to enforce his claim in England if the slave decided to leave his service. A slave remained the master’s property in the colonies, but the master could not assert his property rights over a slave who left his service when in England. Although Mansfield was careful to avoid denying the legality of chattel slavery in the colonies, his decision did make it very difficult for a master to defend his claims over a slave in an English court. Thereafter, both black slaves and white masters acted as if Mansfield had, in fact,

outlawed slavery in England. In 1778, the law courts in Scotland decided more clearly that slavery could not be practised in that country. James Knight, a slave brought over to Scotland from Jamaica, sought his freedom and was able to take his case to the Court of Session in Edinburgh. There, Lord Auchinleck declared:

Although in the plantations they have laid hold of the poor blacks, and made slaves of them, yet I do not think that it is agreeable to humanity, not to say to the Christian religion. Is a man a slave because he is black? No. He is our brother; and he is a man though not of our colour; he is in a land of liberty, with his wife and child: let him remain there.

This verdict was received enthusiastically in Edinburgh’s newspaper, the *Caledonian Mercury*, on 17 January 1778.

By the early 1780s, therefore, a number of individuals had condemned slavery and the slave trade, but they had not united their efforts or sought ways of mobilising public opinion in order to convert the people, the legislature or the government to their more humane point of view. They had expressed their own moral abhorrence of slavery and the slave trade, but they had not taken positive action against these entrenched practices that still had the support of the powerful institutions of the state. John Wesley, for example, had no confidence that such action might bear results. He confessed:

Should we address ourselves to the Public at large? What effect can this have? It may inflame the world against the guilty, but it is not likely to remove the guilt. Should we appeal to the English nation in general? This also is striking wide: And is never likely to procure any redress. –As little would it in all probability avail, to apply to the Parliament. So many things, which seem of greater importance lie before them that they are not likely to attend to this.

Wesley believed that little could be done except to endeavour to convert the individual slaveowners, slave merchants or seamen to a more humane standpoint.

The Quaker critics of slavery and the slave trade had also been content to persuade their co-religionists to give up any participation in these practices, but had not for some time attempted to persuade those beyond the Society of Friends to join with them in attacking these activities. In June 1783, however, a group of Quakers in London appointed a small committee to consider the slave trade. This committee advocated petitioning Parliament against the slave trade. The arguments they

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8 John WESLEY, *Thoughts upon Slavery*, London: 1774, p. 43.
presented to the House of Commons were based on Anthony Benezet’s new tract, *The Case of our Fellow-Creatures, the Oppressed Africans*, respectfully recommended to the serious consideration of the Legislature of Great Britain, by the People called Quakers. James Phillips produced 11,000 copies of this tract and had it distributed to the royal family, every member of both Houses of Parliament, and to many magistrates and clergymen across the country. The House of Commons accepted the petition, but no politician spoke in its favour. Lord North pointed out that all Britain’s maritime rivals participated in the slave trade and they would gladly take over Britain’s share of the trade if she abandoned it. The Quakers responded by redoubling their distribution of anti-slave trade propaganda and by establishing links with other critics of this cruel trade.

It was not until 1787, however, that the various critics of Britain’s participation in the slave trade decided to transform their personal objections to this inhuman trade into a nationwide political campaign to bring popular pressure to bear on Parliament so that it could be legally abolished. Early in 1787, a small group of Quakers and Evangelical members of the Church of England founded the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, an organisation generally known as the London Committee, with the object of stirring up public agitation against the slave trade on an unprecedented scale. Within a relatively short time their heroic efforts brought the issue of abolishing the slave trade into the legislative arena, where it remained until the slave trade was finally abolished by legislative action in 1807.

**III. Explaining the Appeal of Abolition**

**Religious and Economic Motives**

It is relatively easy to explain why a few enlightened thinkers or committed Christians raised objections to slavery and the slave trade, but it is much harder to explain why, in the late 1780s, the leading abolitionists decided to launch a public and parliamentary campaign to abolish the slave trade and why so many of the public rallied to this cause so quickly. Soon after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the leading campaigners maintained that their success owed everything to God’s providence and His decision to work through a small band of pious and active Christians to abolish this terrible wrong. There might be disputes as to whether Thomas Clarkson or William Wilberforce deserved the greater credit, but this explanation for the success of the abolitionists dominated any historical account until 1944. In that year, Eric Williams published *Capitalism and Slavery* which claimed that the religious leaders of the abolitionist cause did not display a genuine concern for the plight of black slaves and showed no real commitment to the abolition of the slave trade. In 1948, the historian E. P. Thompson published *The Making of the English Working Class*, which provided a different perspective on the origins of the English working class. He argued that the working class was not a natural formation, but rather a product of the industrial revolution. This view was later picked up by historians such as Paul B. Thompson, who argued that the English working class was not a natural formation, but rather a product of the industrial revolution. He argued that the working class was not a natural formation, but rather a product of the industrial revolution.

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9 Thomas CLARKSON produced his own account, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, in 1808. William Wilberforce’s sons, Robert Isaac and Samuel WILBERFORCE believed he had not given enough credit to their father and they sought to redress the balance in *The Life of William Wilberforce*, published in five volumes in 1838, after their father’s death. This resulted in an unseemly dispute in print with Clarkson. Wilberforce tended to garner most credit for achieving abolition until recent studies, which have stressed Clarkson’s achievements.
political rights and economic interests of poor white Britons. He regarded the leading abolitionists as hypocrites, whose motives were economic rather than religious or humanitarian. In his view, they took up the abolitionist cause when the sugar economy of the British West Indies was in decline, fewer slaves were needed to work the plantations, free labour was more economical than slave labour, and sugar could be bought more cheaply from French West Indian islands. In the 1960s and 1970s this kind of economic interpretation carried considerable weight, though it was refined by other scholars such as David Brion Davis, who argued that abolition was achieved because socio-economic changes in British society led to a transition from the old mercantilist British Empire to a new one dominated by free trade and laissez-faire principles. Davis maintained that the rising capitalist class in industrialising Britain became committed to free trade with all the world rather than restricting commercial links with the declining West Indies. He saw the abolitionists as men committed to a hierarchical society and a disciplined British workforce. They could show their moral values and Christian principles by ending the slave trade and freeing black slaves rather than granting political rights to poor white Britons who might challenge the economic interests of the capitalist and governing elites.

For several decades these materialistic explanations dominated the historical literature, but they then came under sustained attack, particularly by Roger Anstey and Seymour Drescher. These historians have argued convincingly that the economic and political evidence will not sustain a materialistic explanation for the actions of the leading abolitionists or their supporters. They have shown that the slave trade was actually flourishing when abolition became a major issue and the trade was abolished when exports to and imports from the British West Indies were not in decline and the West Indian economy was still in a healthy state. Moreover, the West Indies were still a vital strategic part of the British Empire, the mercantilist system still had massive political support, and free trade and laissez-faire principles did not triumph until well after 1807. Historians have, therefore, had to search for

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other explanations for the sudden explosion of public support for abolitionism from the late 1780s.

**Impact of Revolution**

One approach has been to link abolitionism with the secular campaigns for greater political liberty in the age of the American and the French revolutions. Both of these revolutions saw the middling and even the lower orders of society campaign for political liberty based on the natural, universal and inalienable rights of man. The British were already familiar with these political principles and a radical movement for political reform had begun with John Wilkes in the later 1760s, but there is no doubt that the revolutions in America and then in France had an enormous impact on British reformers. Some leading abolitionists, including Wilberforce, Wesley and Hannah More, were opposed to parliamentary reform and to a major extension of the franchise. Others, however, did support the cause for political reform. Granville Sharp wanted more frequent general elections and Thomas Clarkson showed sympathy for the French Revolution. It is also highly significant that the leaders of several of the reform movements of the early 1780s and the early 1790s, including prominent members of the Yorkshire Association, the Society for Constitutional Information, the London Corresponding Society and the Manchester Constitutional Society, who were influenced by revolution abroad and the demand for political reform at home, were also active supporters of the abolitionist movement. The leading Rational Dissenters of these years, whose religious views were based on reason rather than revelation, committed themselves to several reform movements. They adhered to natural rights, religious toleration, and parliamentary reform, sympathised with the American and French revolutions, and they also strongly supported the campaign to abolish the slave trade. Leading Rational Dissenters and liberal members of the Church of England sharing these opinions included Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, John Cartwright, Thomas Cooper, Thomas Walker, Andrew Kippis, and William Roscoe. The support of reformers, radicals and Rational Dissenters for these causes was not based just on religious, intellectual or humanitarian principles, however. There was also a degree of self-interest because they sought, above all, to reduce the power and privileges of the elite in church and state and to confer greater influence and status on men like themselves. 14 Thomas Hardy, the founder and secretary of the radical London Corresponding Society of the early 1790s and a humble shoemaker, was sufficiently influenced by the appeal to natural rights to declare that: 'The rights of man are not confined to this small island but are extended to the whole human race, black and white, high or low, rich or poor'. 15

Another recent approach to understanding why abolitionism stimulated such a major public campaign from the later 1780s stresses how much the whole American crisis from the 1760s to the 1780s forced Britons to re-assess their views of liberty.

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14 James WALVIN has perhaps done most to link abolitionism with political reformers. See his works listed in the Select Bibliography below and also Christine BOLT & Seymour DRESCHER (eds.), *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform*, Folkestone, Kent: Dawson, 1980.
and slavery, and their attitude to the empire. In challenging the British legislature’s sovereignty over the whole empire, American Patriots claimed in their Declaration of Independence that ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal’. This provoked British supporters of parliamentary sovereignty to retort that this was a hypocritical stance coming from men who had nearly half a million black slaves in their midst, who were denied civil liberties as well as political rights. It enabled such Britons to claim that Britain was actually a freer country than America, whatever the claims advanced by American Patriots, because there was no institutionalised slavery in Britain. It also enabled these men to validate British rule over the colonies and, in their opinion, it invalidated American resistance to British authority. Even when Britain had lost the War of American Independence, some Britons could argue that Britain demonstrated a greater commitment to liberty than their victorious opponents because Britain not only freed many American black slaves who had rallied to the British cause during the war, but insisted that these black Loyalists should be evacuated as free men with the British forces when they finally left New York at the end of the war. Granville Sharp, John Clarkson and other abolitionists subsequently helped to settle these freed blacks in Nova Scotia and especially in Sierra Leone. 16

Disputes between the American colonists and British commentators also led to an argument about who was doing most to assist the blacks in the Americas. The American Patriots responded to British criticisms of them, as slaveowners, by insisting that there were so many black slaves in America because British merchants had transported them there for their own economic advantage. In contrast, it was the Americans who were the first to attempt to abolish the slave trade and to emancipate the slaves. We have already noted how Anthony Benezet and the Quakers in Pennsylvania were the first to commit to the abolitionist cause. By 1788 six American states had abolished the slave trade and two others had suspended it temporarily. Those Britons, like Richard Price, who had been sympathetic to the Patriot cause during the whole American crisis urged the Americans to promote abolitionism if they were to demonstrate that they were true to their principles. On the other hand, some British conservative critics of the American Patriots could argue that Britain should outdo anything that the Americans did with regard to the blacks in order to demonstrate that Britain not America was the true home of liberty. 17 They therefore should become the leading critics of the slave trade.

The loss of the American colonies inspired doubts about Britain’s political system and the nation’s moral character and seemed to foreshadow national decline. It had a particularly strong influence on Evangelicals, who believed in a more vital and active Christianity, but who feared that they might be regarded by the more moderate majority in the Church of England as dangerous and subversive


enthusiasts like the Puritans of the earlier seventeenth century. They were anxious to avoid the charge that they were only interested in their own eternal salvation and hence they sought to involve themselves in good works that would gain them status, public acceptance and even admiration by combating the corruption, injustice and immorality of British society. They began therefore to support a whole series of reforms that did not involve a direct political challenge to the governing elite. They supported reforms of education, prisons, hospitals, and lunatic asylums; promoted temperance and missionary activity; and endeavoured to persuade the ruling elite to set a better moral standard. In the later 1780s some of the most active Evangelicals like William Wilberforce came to the conclusion that the greatest sin of which the nation was guilty was its involvement in the slave trade. They realised that an active campaign against this cruel and inhuman trade would satisfy their deep need to be committed Christians and active moralists, without appearing politically subversive. Opposing the slave trade answered their own inner needs as well as benefiting black Africans. What needs exploring in more detail, however, is why so many people who were not active Evangelicals of this kind followed their lead.

IV. Mobilising Mass Support

The London Committee and Abolitionist Propaganda

It was the agreement made in 1787 between the leading Quaker and Evangelical activists who were opposed to the slave trade that began the movement to enlist mass support for a campaign to abolish the slave trade. On 22 May 1787, a small number of these activists, including a number of middle-class Quakers based in London, including the printer, James Phillips, and Granville Sharp, the defender of oppressed blacks in London, Thomas Clarkson, the essayist, and, soon after, William Wilberforce, an MP in the House of Commons and a friend of the Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, agreed to set up the Society for the Purpose of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Known generally as the London Committee, this small group made heroic efforts to enlist mass support in order to persuade Parliament to abolish Britain’s involvement in the slave trade. These men were critical of chattel slavery in the Americas, but they decided in the first instance to concentrate on seeking the abolition of the slave trade. They believed that there were fewer active supporters of the slave trade in Britain than there were supporters of slavery in the Americas and they recognised that Parliament could prevent British merchants engaging in the slave trade more easily than it could interfere in the property rights of men in the colonies. Moreover, they anticipated that, once the slave trade was abolished, either slavery in the colonies would collapse or at least the slave masters there would realise that they must treat their slaves much better so that they were able to reproduce new generations of slaves better than they were able to do at present.

The London Committee made immediate use of its Quaker and Evangelical networks across England to solicit financial subscriptions to pay for printed literature and to circulate this abolitionist propaganda. It employed Clarkson as a

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18 This is another major theme running through BROWN’s *Moral Capital*. 
full-time agent, who was sent around the country, particularly to the slave ports of Bristol and Liverpool and towns near them, in order to collect evidence about the cruel nature of the slave trade. He also gave speeches and even sermons to stimulate interest in the abolitionist cause and encouraged the setting up of provincial associations that would bring more and more local activists to support the abolitionist campaign. Between 1787 and 1794 Clarkson made seven lecture and research tours around England, travelling about 35,000 miles, mostly by night. He became the public face of the abolitionist cause in the provinces, sometimes attracting large crowds and often converted local middle-class men to promote the cause in their towns.

In January 1792, the London Committee also paid for William Dickson to tour many of the towns of Scotland, which rapidly rallied enthusiastically behind the abolitionist cause. The London Committee also sought overseas support for its campaign because it recognised that its opponents would argue that the abolition of the slave trade by Britain would simply allow commercial rivals in other countries to take over the lucrative slave trade. Support was sought from abolitionists in America.
and in Europe, especially in France where reformers such as Brissot, Condorcet, Mirabeau and Lafayette established La Société des Amis des Noirs in 1788. Brissot visited the London Committee in January 1789 and Clarkson then visited France for some months to lobby members of the Constituent Assembly to support the abolitionist cause.

The London Committee drew up lists of potential subscribers and raised several thousand pounds in order to pay for the printing of tens of thousands of copies of dozens of different pamphlets setting out the case for the abolition of the slave trade. New works such as Thomas Clarkson’s *A Summary View of the Slave Trade, and of the Probable Consequences of its Abolition* (1787) and his *Essay on the Impolicy of the Slave Trade* (1788), James Ramsay’s *Abolition of the Slave Trade with Answers* (1788), John Newton’s *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (1788), and William Roscoe’s *A General View of the African Slave-Trade, demonstrating its Injustice and Impolicy: with hints towards a Bill for its Abolition* (1788) were rapidly produced and widely distributed. Copies of the debates in the House of Commons were also printed in large numbers and were distributed across the country. Altogether, in its first year of activity alone, the London Committee printed 26,000 reports and accounts of parliamentary debates and over 51,000 books and pamphlets at a cost of over £2000. Many local associations also printed or reprinted abolitionist propaganda. Both the London Committee and many provincial associations also ensured that their meetings, resolutions and publications were mentioned in newspapers across Britain.

Abolitionist views were also propagated and distributed in other forms. The slave trade was attacked in printed sermons, poems, plays and even children’s literature. Former black slaves with first-hand experience of slavery and the slave trade produced accounts of their lives that proved extremely popular and influential. In 1787, Ottobah Cugoano produced his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* and, in 1791, Olaudah Equiano published his *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* and toured throughout the British Isles for many months selling copies of it and giving lectures. In the spring of 1789 the London Committee produced a plan of a real slave ship, the *Brookes* of Liverpool, showing how dangerously crowded were the conditions endured by the black slaves when crossing the Atlantic. Copies of this were stitched into pamphlets and thousands of copies were pasted up on the walls of inns and coffee houses. Wilberforce had a realistic wooden model made of this slave ship, which he used as a visual aid when he was attacking the slave trade in the House of Commons. During his tour of slave ports Clarkson collected a variety of implements used to shackle and discipline slaves during their voyage across the Atlantic. He displayed these when giving evidence before the House of Commons and when lecturing around the

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20 There are modern paperback editions of both of these works. For Equiano, see Vincent CARRETTA, *Equiano the African: biography of a self-made man*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005.
country. Leading engravers sometimes produced graphic prints that highlighted the cruelty experienced on board slave ships. James Gillray produced a print, *Barbarities in the West Indies* (23 April 1791), showing a slave captain mistreating a female slave aboard his ship. Other critical prints include Isaac Cruickshank’s, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade* (10 April 1792), and several illustrations by William Blake for J.G. Stedman’s *Narrative of a five years Expedition against the revolted Negroes of Surinam* (London, 1796).

George Morland exhibited a painting, *Execrable Human Traffic*, at the Royal Academy in 1788 and John Raphael Smith produced an engraving of it in February 1791, entitled *The Slave Trade*, which was published in France in 1794 to mark the National Convention’s abolition of the French slave trade. Probably the most influential and widely distributed visual image, however, was that of a kneeling black slave, in chains, with hands clasped imploringly, and with the motto around him ‘Am I not a Man and a Brother?’

This was produced by the leading porcelain manufacturer, Josiah Wedgwood, to serve as the emblem or seal of the London Committee, of which Wedgwood was a member. It was first designed to appear in printed form on many of the London
Committee’s publications, but it was then turned into a handsome jasper and porcelain cameo that was used as a medallion, pendant, or brooch, and also appeared on bracelets, cuff-links, hairpins, rings, walking-stick handles, snuff boxes, and even trade tokens. It was sold and distributed in many forms and in many thousands.

**Petitions and Boycotts**

The London Committee did not just produce printed and visual propaganda. It soon declared itself interested in enlisting active support for its cause. On 15 January 1788, it issued its first public report of its activities, announcing that it was ‘earnestly requesting [...] the assistance of every individual in impressing on the minds of our legislatures the necessity of entering into a serious investigation’ of the slave trade. Although William Wilberforce advised against setting up popular associations to put pressure upon Parliament, the London Committee did follow the initiative of the Manchester association for the abolition of the slave trade that advocated organising a petition to Parliament. By December 1787, after only a few weeks of campaigning, the Manchester abolitionists collected nearly 11,000 signatures supporting a petition to the House of Commons requesting the abolition of the slave trade. It was therefore supported by about 20 per cent of the town’s inhabitants and by a majority of its adult males. This petition was advertised in most newspapers in the country as the Manchester abolitionists called for similar action elsewhere. At least 27 public meetings were held across the country and substantial numbers signed petitions in London and such towns as Exeter, Hull, Birmingham, Sheffield, York, Plymouth, Southampton and Northampton. Petitions were sent in by town corporations and by universities, guilds, provincial synods, etc. There was even support for petitions in the leading slave ports of Liverpool and Bristol. Altogether, over one hundred petitions, signed by perhaps 60,000 men, were sent into the House of Commons by May 1788.

In 1791, following the suggestion of Thomas Clarkson, William Fox produced his *Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Utility of Refraining from the Use of West India Sugar and Rum*. This short tract was priced at a mere one penny and it went through many editions. About 70,000 copies were distributed in only four months. It also inspired several other pamphlets, such as Thomas Cooper’s *Considerations on the Slave Trade; and the Consumption of West India Produce* (London, 1791). The result was a nationwide boycott of West India sugar that was reputed to have involved 300,000 families. It also allowed women to demonstrate their opposition to the slave trade. Although they were discouraged from signing petitions, though a few apparently did so, women did produce printed propaganda in prose and verse, sent in subscriptions to the London Committee and to local associations, and spoke at public meetings against the slave trade. Many women took pride in wearing the Wedgwood cameo and large numbers were active in the boycott of West Indian sugar. 21 Parliament responded by pegging the price of sugar and the boycott did not last long, but the excitement generated by this campaign helped prepare the public for the next wave of petitioning.

In 1792, the abolitionists organised an even more impressive petitioning campaign. The London Committee took the initiative, sending out Clarkson and Dickson to tour England and Scotland. The London Committee did not just restrict its appeal to men qualified to vote in parliamentary elections, as was often the case with petitions. It declared:

> Even those who have no vote, are nevertheless comprehended in our idea of the public mind, nor is any man of sense and virtue, let his situation in a free country be what it may, to be deemed of no account. Upon his judgement, his voice (if not his vote), his example, much may depend.\(^\text{22}\)

The results were spectacular. This time 519 petitions were submitted to the House of Commons, the largest number ever yet submitted on a single subject or in a single parliamentary session. It has been estimated that about 400,000 men signed these petitions. Every single English county sent in petitions, but most were submitted by towns in the north of England and in Scotland. This time the Manchester petition was signed by nearly 20,000 inhabitants. The Sheffield petition was signed by 8,000 men, the petition organised by the London Corresponding Society was supported by 10,000, and the Edinburgh petition by nearly 11,000. These petitions received support overwhelmingly from the urban middle classes and from skilled workers. They were sent in by town corporations, parishes, universities, trade organisations and religious bodies. When critics complained about the low status of some of the petitioners, a London newspaper, *The Diarist*, responded:

> What did this prove but that individuals of all sorts, conditions and ages, young and old, master and scholar, high and low, rich and poor, the risen and the rising generation, had unanimously set every nerve on stretch for the overthrow of the […] abominable and the indefensible?\(^\text{23}\)

The defenders of the slave trade questioned the policy and efficacy of abolition, and the sincerity, humanity and even the sanity of the abolitionists, but not their popularity. They organised a few counter-petitions, but they accepted that they were in a minority. They were stunned and demoralised. Samuel Romilly observed:

> ‘All persons, even the West Indian planters and merchants, seem to agree that it is impossible the trade should last many years longer.’\(^\text{24}\) It was now clear that a majority of the informed public deplored the slave trade and that the London Committee had firmly placed the abolition issue on the parliamentary agenda. Their opponents, however, had greater influence in Parliament, especially in the House of


Lords, and it was to take many years for popular pressure to produce legislative action.

V. The Long Campaign in Parliament

Early Setbacks due to the French Revolution

The London Committee recognised that the slave trade could be abolished only by an Act of Parliament. From the outset until final success, the abolitionists depended upon the efforts of William Wilberforce, an MP and a friend of the Prime Minister. While he was not the most able manager of Parliament, he was the abolitionists’ best hope of keeping the issue before the House of Commons. It was in Parliament, more than in the country, that the defenders of the slave trade could mount a defence not only of their own commercial interests, but also of the economic, financial, naval, imperial and strategic interests of Britain. Unfortunately for the abolitionists, conservative attitudes in Parliament became more entrenched in the early 1790s as the French Revolution became more violent and unstable and Europe and the West Indies were wracked by war for many years. Wilberforce and the weight of public opinion did succeed in forcing the abolition issue onto the parliamentary agenda quite quickly. On 11 February 1788, a royal Order in Council directed the Privy Council to investigate the slave trade and the London Committee began submitting evidence before it. Following a wave of petitions, Prime Minister Pitt laid the Privy Council’s report before the House of Commons on 25 April 1789 and then informed the House of Commons on 9 May that the slave trade was ‘a subject, which it was evident from the great number and variety of petitions presented […] had engaged the public attention to a very considerable extent, and consequently deserved the most serious notice’.26 Although Pitt could never commit the King or his cabinet colleagues to the abolitionist cause, he was supported on this occasion and subsequently by such leading opposition MPs as Charles James Fox and Edmund Burke.27 On 12 May, Wilberforce put forward twelve propositions favouring abolition, but, on 21 May, the House decided that it would make its own investigation into the slave trade. This investigation by a Select Committee dragged on for many months before it reported in April 1791. It had been supplied with much evidence and many witnesses by the abolitionists. By the time Wilberforce introduced his Abolition Bill a serious slave revolt had broken out in the French West Indian colony of St Domingue and there were fears that slave revolts would occur in British colonies.28 The West Indian interest was able to accuse the abolitionists of seeking ‘to put an end to the distinction between the white man & the

27 The proceedings of the many debates in Parliament on the slave trade can be read in the relevant volumes of COBBETT’s Parliamentary History and in its successor work, William COBBETT (ed.), Parliamentary Debates (from 1803), London, 1803-1807, vols. III-IX.
black, the master & the labourer, to give up all the wisdom, the joy, & the benefits of society and to bring mankind to one universal level’. Wilberforce’s proposal was defeated on 19 April, despite support from Pitt, Fox and Burke.

This defeat inspired the abolitionists outside Parliament to renewed efforts and to their massive petitioning campaign of 1792. Early in April 1792, Wilberforce opened another debate on the slave trade in the House of Commons, but he was outmanoeuvred by Henry Dundas, the Home Secretary, who successfully moved for the gradual rather than the rapid abolition of the slave trade. A date of 1796 was suggested. When the question was put to the House of Lords, however, that chamber voted that it should conduct its own investigation into the slave trade. By the time the House of Lords was ready to debate abolition, in April 1793, Britain was already at war with France and the propertied elite was increasingly alarmed at the spread of revolutionary ideas beyond France. On 11 April 1793 the Earl of Abingdon referred to the correspondence between the London Committee and abolitionists in France:

> What does the abolition of the slave trade mean more or less, than liberty and equality? What more or less than the rights of man? And what are the rights of man, but the foolish principles of this new philosophy ... look at the colony of St Domingo, and see what liberty and equality, what the rights of man, have done?

The Bill failed to pass the Lords and another effort by Wilberforce was again rejected by the Lords in February 1794. The French Revolution and the Revolutionary War provoked such a conservative reaction that the London Committee suspended regular meetings after April 1794. Wilberforce continued to introduce Abolition Bills in 1795, 1796, 1797 and 1798, but he then fell silent. The London Committee did not meet between 1797 and 1803.

**Success at Last**

The abolition movement lay dormant outside and inside Parliament until 1804. It revived as an issue because Napoleon had restored slavery in the French Empire in 1802, radicalism no longer posed a serious threat within Britain, and British abolitionists again strove to prove that Britain (not France) was the true home of liberty. On 23 May 1804, the London Committee, which had attracted new members such as James Stephen, Zachary Macaulay and Henry Brougham, resumed its meetings and began publishing new propaganda such as George Harrison’s *Notices on the Slave Trade in Reference to the Present State of the British Isles* (1804). In May-June Wilberforce persuaded the House of Commons to pass an Abolition Bill, but the House of Lords again delayed debating the issue. The London Committee began lobbying opinion inside and outside Parliament and Thomas Clarkson renewed his tours of the provinces. He found popular support for abolition unabated and local associations were re-established in many towns. On 15 August 1805, a royal Order in Council prohibited the supply of slaves to the French sugar colonies

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that were being captured by British forces. When a new administration was formed in 1806, after the death of Prime Minister Pitt, this ministry, led by Lord Grenville and Charles James Fox (both abolitionists), secured an Act of Parliament that prohibited the supply of slaves to all foreign colonies in the West Indies. Supporters of the slave trade in Manchester raised a petition against this measure signed by 439 men, but, to counter this, Thomas Clarkson raised a petition in its support signed by 2,354 inhabitants in a matter of hours. The defenders of the slave trade were slow to act, in part because they did not realise that this Foreign Slave Trade Act would put an end to at least two-thirds of the British slave trade since most British slave traders supplied foreign rather than British colonies with slaves.

The new government informed Parliament that it would introduce an Abolition Bill in the next session, but, before that, a general election was held. This gave the London Committee and the leading abolitionists the opportunity of rallying support in many parliamentary constituencies in support of candidates who favoured abolition and against candidates who defended the slave trade. The abolition issue proved important in several elections, including those in Yorkshire, Cumberland, Westmorland, Durham, and Northampton. William Roscoe, a long-time abolitionist, was actually elected for the slave port of Liverpool. After the election, Bamber Gascoyne, the other member elected for Liverpool and a staunch defender of the slave trade, protested in the House of Commons:

Every measure that invention or artifice could devise to create popular clamour was resorted to on this occasion. The church, the theatre, and the press, had laboured to create a prejudice against the Slave Trade […] The attempts to make a popular clamour against this trade was never so conspicuous as in the late Election, when the public newspapers teemed with abuse of this trade, and when promises were required from the different candidates that they would oppose its continuance. There never had been any question agitated since that of parliamentary reform, in which so much energy had been exerted to raise a popular prejudice and clamour, and to make the trade an object of universal detestation. In every manufacturing town and borough in the kingdom, all these arts had been tried.

Lord Grenville decided that, on this occasion, the Abolition Bill should be first introduced into the House of Lords, through which he successfully steered it in February 1807. In the House of Commons it now met very little resistance, although one new MP protested that it was ‘one of those wild projects of reform, to which the spirit of modern philanthropy has given birth and of which the civilized world has lately seen the terrible results’. The Bill was passed by the Commons by the massive majority of 283 votes to a mere sixteen in March 1807. It received the royal assent on 25 March and the date for abolition was fixed for 1 January 1808.

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Although the ministry resigned the day the Bill received the royal assent, the passage of the Act was welcomed by the London Committee and celebrated in many parts of the country. Several publications claimed that public opinion rather than the government had secured the Abolition Act. The Edinburgh Review declared in April that ‘the sense of the nation has pressed abolition upon our rulers’.

VI. Making Abolition Effective

Simply passing the Abolition Act did not end the slave trade, even by Britain, since illegal trading continued. Although the United States and Denmark also abolished the slave trade in 1807 they lacked the naval forces to make their acts effective against their own traders. And nothing had been done to end the trade by France, Portugal or Spain. Protests were sometimes made in Parliament lamenting the failure to make the Abolition Act effective, although between 1810 and 1814, Britain did sign treaties with Portugal, Sweden and Denmark that bound these nations to restrict their slave trading activities. When peace was made between Britain and France in 1814, however, the British government agreed with the restored Bourbon monarch that France could continue its slave trade for at least five years. This threatened to make the enforcement of Britain’s abolition even more difficult. To the surprise of the British government, this decision produced a storm of protests across the country. Wilberforce attacked this decision in the House of Commons and, with Clarkson, he appealed to the Tsar of Russia and the King of Prussia to condemn this decision. One correspondent of The Times newspaper wrote on 24 June 1814: ‘My Countrymen! Let us arise as one man throughout the kingdom. And at once cry NO to the further continuance of this detestable crime […] Let the voice of the British nation once declare itself and the African Slave Trade must universally cease’. Provincial newspapers were full of reports of protest meetings. One commented: ‘No measure for many years past has excited so much public attention, and met with such universal condemnation as the article in the Definitive Treaty which allows France to continue the hateful Slave Trade for five years to come’.

Massive efforts were made to collect signatures for petitions to Parliament denouncing this agreement with France. Some 800 petitions with perhaps as many as 1.5 million signatures rained down upon Parliament. Samuel Whitbread commented: ‘The Country never has, and I fear never will, express a feeling so general as they have about the slave trade’. The British government recognised its mistake and tried to retreat from the agreement it had made with France. The Duke of Wellington spent his first six months in Paris trying to re-negotiate the agreement made with France about the slave trade. When Napoleon briefly returned to power in 1815, he decreed the abolition of the French slave trade in order to drive a wedge between Britain and her European allies. After Napoleon’s defeat, Britain renewed its pressure on France and also pressed Portugal and Spain to give up the slave trade. Britain threatened not to renew its loans to Spain and Portugal unless they gave way

on this issue. Lord Castlereagh, the British Foreign Secretary, informed Britain’s ambassador in Madrid:

>You must really press the Spanish Government [...] the nation is bent upon this object, I believe there is hardly a village that has not met and petitioned upon it; both Houses of Parliament are pledged to press it; and the Ministers must make it their policy.  

This was a very strong statement about the strength of British public opinion coming from such a conservative minister who normally despised popular opinion. It is therefore very clear that public opinion had exerted a very considerable influence on Parliament and the government. Thomas Clarkson was undoubtedly justified when he wrote in September 1814:

‘I cannot but think, that we have to thank the Petitions for this Energy. No other satisfactory reason can be given why Administration was so apparently indifferent to the Subject when the Treaty was made, and why so interested since.’

Britain’s diplomatic pressure achieved results. When the Bourbon monarchy was restored once again, the French agreed in the Second Treaty of Paris in November 1815 to abandon the slave trade. In 1817, Spain and Portugal agreed to limit their slave trade to Africa south of the equator. The European slave trade continued, however, with hundreds of thousands of black Africans being transported, especially to Brazil and Cuba until the mid-nineteenth century. British abolitionists remained active in seeking to make abolition effective. In 1822, Thomas Clarkson produced *The Cries of Africa to the Inhabitants of Europe* and in the same year the Yearly Meeting of the Quakers in London printed *An Address to the Inhabitants of Europe on the Iniquity of the Slave Trade*. Both these works were translated into the major European languages and were widely distributed. Britain tried to enforce the Abolition Act with regard to its own merchants, with growing success, and she also used her naval dominance to limit the activities of other European slave traders, but it was a long, slow process before this inhuman trade was eliminated.

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