During the course of the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade the town of Liverpool was particularly identified with the 'horrid trade'. Liverpool spearheaded the parliamentary resistance to abolition, sending at least 64 petitions to the Commons or the Lords (as compared to 14 from the London merchants and 12 from Bristol Corporation and merchants). Her representatives in parliament were the most persistent advocates of the trade; and a delegation, maintained at corporation expense, remained in London throughout the major parliamentary investigations and discussion of the slave trade which took place during the last two decades of the eighteenth century and up to 1807. Typical of contemporary attitudes was the comment of one of Matthew Gregson’s London correspondents, writing in 1788, that on this question one was either a 'Humanity Man' or a 'Liverpool Man'. His inference was that outside Liverpool the popular bias was very much in favour of humanity, whereas within the town the voice of abolition could not be heard.

Posterity has been rather unkind to that small, cautious and beleaguered group of Liverpool humanitarians whose voice was heard, even though it was a muted voice, during the great period of abolitionist euphoria in 1787–8, and to some extent later. None of the major histories of abolition produced during the past two centuries allows them a significant place in the movement as a whole. Thomas Clarkson’s *History* accords them generous praise for their assistance to the London Committee during the opening period of the campaign; but those who, like James Bandinel, drew heavily on Clarkson as a source of information either ignore them completely or give them the barest mention. Klingberg's
important study gives no indication of their contribution to abolition; nor does Coupland’s, except in relation to Clarkson’s visit to Liverpool in 1787. Howse’s examination of the Clapham Sect and abolition is equally uninformative in this respect, in spite of the close correspondence of Roscoe and Currie with Wilberforce and other members of the London Committee; so too is Ford K. Brown’s analysis of the ‘age of Wilberforce’.

Naturally, historians of Liverpool have sometimes sought to redress the balance, though few would go as far as the modern biographer of William Roscoe in describing him as a leader of the abolitionist movement. Gomer Williams’ somewhat muckraking history of the Liverpool slave trade devoted space to the activities of the Roscoe Circle; Mackenzie-Grieve used the Currie and Rathbone papers and the early biographies of the Liverpool abolitionists to demonstrate their isolation in the town and the courage of their protest. Jean Trepp’s article, ‘The Liverpool movement for the Abolition’, is the only specialist study of its kind and was apparently written without access to manuscript sources. However, she did attempt a just appraisal of the movement, describing it as a campaign in miniature analogous to that of the country as a whole.

Unfortunately for the Liverpool apologists, any analysis which seeks to give prominence to the town’s abolitionists is bound to be heavily dependent on the papers and correspondence of the main interested parties: Roscoe, Rathbone and Currie. The problem is that these were men who preferred to work under cover, not seeking the kind of publicity that would bring them to the notice of the African traders of their home town. Consequently, although they were known to the London Committee, they were not identified by the public at large as abolitionists. There is no evidence, for example, that Pitt or Fox or Lord Hawkesbury knew them as such; they did not appear before the privy council or the parliamentary committees or provide written information against the trade; they did not organise petitions to Parliament on the subject (though they did on other matters); and they failed to establish a branch committee of the Society for Abolition. Of course, they considered themselves important to the movement as the guardians of the liberal conscience of Liverpool, and their friends and correspondents outside the town helped to preserve and foster their resolution. But by no stretch of the
imagination can they be accounted national figures in this context; the historical significance of their activities is that they demonstrate that Liverpool was not wholly bound by mercantile self-interest at this crucial period in her history.

**THE ROSCOE CIRCLE**

When the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed in London in May 1787 its committee obviously expected to find reliable informants in Liverpool. John Barton, one of the original members of the Quaker Committee of Six in 1783, had been in contact with William Roscoe for a number of years, and it was James Phillips, another member, who first introduced Thomas Clarkson to William Rathbone early in 1787. From January 1787 Roscoe and his friends were exploring the possibility of setting up a local abolitionist society similar to the one in Manchester. Nothing came of it, but they were able to supply the London Committee with much detailed information on the African trade, and a few months later Rathbone procured the copies of the muster rolls of 52 Liverpool slavers which Clarkson was to use to great effect during his examination before the Privy Council. Thus, well before Clarkson began his famous tour of the country in search of evidence against the slave trade, the abolitionists in London had established contacts with their counterparts in Liverpool.

In the early stages of the campaign, at least eight Liverpudlians seem to have been involved. They are indicated on the 1788 list of subscribers to the Society for Abolition:

- **Anonymous** £2 - 2 - 0
- Dr. Jonathan Binns 1 - 1 - 0
- Mr. Daniel Daulby 1 - 1 - 0
- Mr. William Rathbone 2 - 12 - 6
- Mr. William Rathbone Jr. 2 - 2 - 0
- Mr. William Roscoe 1 - 1 - 0
- Mr. William Wallace 2 - 2 - 0
- Rev. John Yates 2 - 2 - 0

‘Anonymous’ was almost certainly Dr. James Currie. He was on friendly terms with the other subscribers and William Wallace was his father-in-law. To this number may be added Edward
Rushton, the blind poet and author of the *West Indian Eclogues*, whom Clarkson knew, and the Rev. William Shepherd, who was appointed pastor of Gateacre Chapel in May 1791. All these men were dissenters: Binns, Daulby and the Rathbones were Quakers; Currie was a Scots Presbyterian and the others Unitarians. All were whiggish in their politics and none (with the notable exception of the Rathbones) was engaged in a trade or business likely to bring him into direct contact with the slave trade. Together they constituted the 'Liverpool Saints': closely knit, self-regarding members of the local literary society, exercising virtually no political influence as a group but sometimes playing a vital part, as individuals, in the anti-corporation or Whig politics of the town. There was one Anglican associated with the movement. This was the Rev. Henry Dannett of St John's, who published a pamphlet under his own name in 1788 in which he attacked the scriptural justification of the slave trade. He was not connected with the Roscoe Circle, though well known to them. Another Anglican, William Smyth, son of the mayor of 1788, tutor to the Sheridan family and subsequently Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, was a member of the Roscoe Circle but not an abolitionist. The sad dearth of Anglicans reflects something of the organisation of the Church at this time: the Anglican livings were in the gift of the Corporation and that body was solidly anti-abolitionist in its sympathies.

The oldest member of the group was William Rathbone III (1726-89), the son of an Anglican, a timber merchant. His father and grandfather had joined the Society of Friends in or around 1730, when the family moved from Cheshire and established themselves in Liverpool in a substantial line of business. The timber firm was the mainstay of the Rathbone fortunes in the mid-eighteenth century, and both father and son were inevitably involved in supplying the African ships of the town. Even after the Quaker injunction of 1763 forbidding members to supply materials for the trade, William Rathbone III, and later Rathbone and Son, continued this practice; they could hardly have remained in business otherwise. Meanwhile, the Rathbones developed interests in the North American, West Indian and Baltic trades, a diversification which not only enriched them but allowed them eventually to escape serving the slave trade without seriously damaging the family interests. It is recorded that,
towards the end of his life, Rathbone senior was tempted to take a share in an African ship but was dissuaded by his son on religious grounds. Clarkson spoke highly of him as a man of fine understanding, of extraordinary simplicity of manners and of great humility, adding that ‘... he would not allow any article to be sold for the use of a slave-ship, and he always refused those who applied to him for materials for such purpose’. It is not certain when he made this decision to boycott the trade, but it was probably in the early 1780s.

His son, William Rathbone IV (1757–1809), was a man of an altogether different temperament. Quick to rouse, passionate and outspoken, he was at the heart of virtually all the major political disputes in Liverpool during the latter part of the century. A radical in politics, he supported universal suffrage and free trade and was a vigorous opponent of the war with France in 1793. His lack of restraint made him so unpopular in the early 1790s that the strain is said to have turned his hair prematurely white, earning him the sobriquet ‘the hoary traitor’. Although he continued the timber business, his main interest was in the American trades. It was his boast that his firm imported the first consignment of American cotton ever landed in Britain: 8 bales and 3 barrels in 1784. In 1789 his brother-in-law, Robert Benson (no relation to Moses Benson the slave trader), joined the firm, serving until his retirement through ill-health in the late 1790s. Rathbone also had an interest in the Coalbrookdale ironworks through his marriage in 1786 to Hannah Mary, the daughter of Richard Reynolds, the Quaker ironmaster of Bristol. Rathbone’s home at Greenbank in Liverpool was proverbial for its hospitality. Most of the important Whigs and dissenters visiting the town found their way there; Yates and Shepherd, the Roscoes, Earles and Clarke were all frequent visitors, as were Rathbone’s sea-captains. A friend of the family permanently in residence was Theophilus Houlbrooke, a former Church of England clergyman and an associate of Joseph Priestley, who resigned his living to become tutor to the Rathbone children. John Dalton, the great Manchester scientist, spoke of their ‘stilish manner of living’ for which, however, he had little taste. ‘Breakfasting at nine, getting little till after three, and then eating and drinking almost incessantly to ten, without going further than to the door, does not suit my constitution’, he told his brother.
By far the best known of the Liverpool reformers was William Roscoe (1753–1831). In the course of time he has been subject to a good deal of acclaim, not wholly merited, as the saviour of the town’s political and cultural reputation when Liverpool was popularly regarded as no more than the lair of the English slave trade. One local historian, in tribute to his moral fearlessness and intellectual superiority, has described him as an ‘internationally revered figure’ who ‘led, in some cases, not only Liverpool and England, but also the world’. The comments of some of his contemporaries also approached adulation. Washington Irving said that he experienced an ‘involuntarily feeling of veneration’ on first meeting with Roscoe in the Liverpool Athenaeum. ‘The man of letters who speaks of Liverpool speaks of it as the residence of Roscoe. The intelligent traveller who visits it inquires where Roscoe is to be seen. He is the literary landmark of the place, indicating its existence to the distant scholar. He is like Pompey’s Column at Alexandria, towering alone in classic dignity.’ Thomas Creevey, in 1832, found it miraculous ‘that a man whose dialect was that of a barbarian and from whom in years of familiar intercourse I never heard above an average observation, whose parents were servants (whom I well remember keeping a public house), whose profession was that of an attorney, who has never been out of England and scarcely out of Liverpool...’ should achieve such distinction as an author.

Roscoe was of humble background, though his family was not impoverished. His father kept a public house and owned a market garden, and Roscoe worked for him for a few years after leaving school at the age of twelve. He was not unduly sensitive about his background—which was just as well since the squib-writers of Liverpool did not let him forget it—but throughout his life he sought the kind of recognition that could only befall men of very exceptional talent or of high birth. Roscoe’s ambitions were literary and scholarly; his public talents lay elsewhere. Beginning as an attorney’s clerk, he was admitted attorney of the King’s Bench in 1774, but left the legal profession in 1796 to concentrate on land speculation and property development and, later, banking. He was very much the self-made man, with a sharp eye for profit, a characteristic he regarded as something of a failing but in which he nevertheless indulged. In the early 1790s he was doing well in the coal trade. In the late 1790s he was concerned
with Thomas Wakefield in projects for the draining of Chat Moss and Trafford Moss, near Manchester. Then he moved, very reluctantly and under the close obligations of friendship, into a banking partnership with William Clarke. His arrival heralded a revival in the Clarke fortunes, though the business was eventually to prove his undoing. In 1816 the collapse of the bank brought about his bankruptcy and the sale of his treasured library and art collection. He seems to have lost his touch in old age.33

Roscoe’s literary activities are of little relevance here except to show the quality of the man, the achievement of one who emerged from a stultifying background, with little formal education, to become a classical scholar, poet and litterateur of national merit. His first major poem, Mount Pleasant, written at the age of 18, shows him already an abolitionist in his sympathies. His long abolitionist poem, The Wrongs of Africa, and his pamphlets of 1787–8 were undoubtedly of service to the movement and were highly appreciated by the London Committee, which arranged for their publication.34 His poetic inspiration came from his two favourite poets, Shenstone and Gray; and, indeed, it may be remarked that the quality of his verses is not appreciably worse than the generality of theirs. But it is surprising that Roscoe, who wrote a eulogy on Robert Burns (as did James Currie and Edward Rushton) and who admired Coleridge and Wordsworth, should have persisted with the rhetorical, prosaic, and rather stilted style of his youth. There seems to be a second-hand quality to his poetry, as if he could not translate direct feelings to paper; he had a fine technique but little to convey. His most successful poem, and the one for which he had least regard, The Butterfly’s Ball and the Grasshopper’s Feast, was approved by George III and set to music for the royal princesses by Sir George Smart.35 Its simplicity of line and air of artless fantasy suggest that he might have achieved lasting fame as a children’s poet had he chosen to lower his sights. His two most ambitious enterprises were his biographies of the Renaissance figure, Lorenzo de Medici, and of his son, Pope Leo X, which ran into a number of editions and brought him international notice, being translated into Italian, French and German. Horace Walpole praised the life of Lorenzo for its ‘Grecian simplicity’36 and Fox is reported to have appreciated the other work.37 However, the Critical Review referred to Roscoe’s mawkish style, and the Edinburgh
Liverpool abolitionists

Review to his affectation of sentiment. The works display an enormous industry and a most skilful use of source materials; their subjects serve as a screen for the true intentions of the author—to present Quattrocentro Florence as a forerunner of Roscoe's bustling Liverpool (thus, as some have said, transforming Lorenzo into a Liverpool Unitarian banker). Roscoe's view of the world was always coloured by his strong attachment to his home town.

James Currie (1756–1805) was a comparative newcomer to Liverpool, one of the substantial community of Scots whose prosperity and clannishness caused some resentment amongst the older families of the town. Like the Liverpool merchants George Dunbar, Edgar Corrie and William Ewart, he derived from Dumfriesshire. The second son of a clergyman, Currie was orphaned when young and obliged by the decline in family circumstances to seek employment abroad. At the age of 15 he emigrated to America and became apprenticed to a Virginia merchant. But the rebellion of 1775 ended his prospects. He refused to join the rebels; and although he was drafted unwillingly into the rebel army, he absconded, escaped arrest, and made a perilous crossing to the West Indies. Early in 1777 he managed to find a passage to England, returning home destitute. However, his relatives came to his rescue and supported him whilst he studied for a diploma in medicine at Edinburgh University. After qualifying in 1780 he considered an offer of employment in the West Indies but was eventually persuaded by his uncle, Dr Currie of Chester, to settle in Liverpool. There he soon gained a post as physician at the Infirmary. Despite his interrupted education, Currie proved to be a fine product of the more rigorous Scots tradition. He was sharper in intellect and perhaps more able than any other member of the Roscoe Circle. He was well read in the philosophy of Berkeley, Locke, Hume and Adam Smith, well versed in the works of modern medicine, and in time was able to establish a wealthy practice in the town. He was the author of the first life of Burns, a project born of a single meeting with the poet for whom the Roscoe Circle shared a common admiration. Roscoe assisted him with the biography, which ran into four editions of 2,000 copies each, though it did not meet with much critical acclaim. Of greater contemporary significance were his medical writings which secured him national
recognition, in 1788 as a member of the Medical Society of London, in 1792 as a Fellow of the Royal Society. His political views and his opposition to the corporation did not inhibit the common council from electing him a freeman of the borough in January 1802 in recognition of his services to the town.

It is uncertain when he became a committed abolitionist, for his brief experience in the West Indies did not immediately produce a revulsion towards the institution and practice of slavery. Perhaps he was prompted by his marriage in 1783 to the daughter of William Wallace, a Liverpool merchant who supported the cause; and Roscoe and Rathbone completed the conversion. But on this issue Currie was never as uncompromising as his two friends. Being of a more practical and cautious disposition than they, he preferred a gradualist approach to the problem and resented the tactics of the London Committee in pressing for a total and immediate abolition by means of a wholesale attack on the African traders. In character he was less approachable than the others, being stiff and unaccommodating on first acquaintance. His grave and melancholy cast of mind was compounded of his native reserve, his Presbyterian upbringing and his persistent ill-health. Shortly after his marriage he began to show the symptoms of tuberculosis and, though by strict self-discipline and self-diagnosis he was able to keep the disease at bay, he was frequently in pain and subject to long fits of depression during which he confessed he longed for death.

Beyond this, however, he possessed a certain timidity which could be exasperating to his friends. He preferred to work in the background, warning them against excessive zeal, and frequently pointing out the dangers in a particular course of action. He seldom took the initiative himself and when he did, as in the Jasper Wilson affair of 1793, he burnt his fingers and so reinforced his caution.

Of the others in the group, Edward Rushton (1756-1814) achieved the widest recognition through his poetry and his uninhibited attacks on the slave trade. Strictly speaking, he was not a fully fledged member of the Roscoe Circle, though he shared many of their literary interests; to some extent he was cut off from them by his poverty and blindness. According to Rushton, his conversion to abolition was the consequence of his last voyage to Africa. As a youth he had served as an apprentice with the
firm of Watt and Gregson, and at the age of 16 was appointed second mate on one of their African ships. Some years later, off the coast of Africa, he befriended a negro slave, Quamina, whom he began to teach to read. One day, as he and Quamina were plying between shore and ship transporting slaves, their craft overturned. The African secured himself to a water barrel, but when he saw Rushton in difficulties he thrust the barrel towards him. This was a conscious act of heroism; Quamina had no chance in the fierce tide and waved farewell as he disappeared from view and was drowned. Later, when the ship was on passage to Dominica, there was an outbreak of ophthalmia amongst the slaves. Since the other officers refused to enter the holds, Rushton himself treated the victims. On arrival in the West Indies he found that he had contracted the disease. He returned to Liverpool completely blind. There, ‘preserved from destruction by the humanity of a negro slave’, he became a fervent opponent of the trade. For many years thereafter he lived in comparative isolation, in penury; trying his hand unsuccessfully as a tavern-keeper, then as editor of the Liverpool Herald. The newspaper brought him a certain notoriety because of its attacks on the government and the corporation, but it was a short-lived enterprise; an indiscreet article on the press-gang brought officialdom down on his head and he and the proprietor parted company. He also wrote abolitionist poems, the first appearing as early as 1782, shortly after his return from the West Indies. If one excludes John Newton, who left the town thirty years earlier, Rushton was the only Liverpool abolitionist to have direct experience of the trade. It gave an edge to his writing which is lacking in the works of Roscoe and Currie. Probably his blindness saved him from active persecution, for he made no secret of his position. Clarkson sought him out when he visited Liverpool in 1787 and spent many hours in his company. But he did not persuade him to appear as an abolitionist witness in London. During the early years of the French Revolution, his outspoken views again got him into trouble with authority. By this time, however, he was able to earn something of a living as a bookseller. The last years of his life were relieved by the partial restoration of his sight after a series of operations in Manchester in 1805.

Concerning the others there is a paucity of information which is probably a fair reflection of their overall contribution to the
movement. The Rev. John Yates (1755–1826) was an active member of the anti-corporation group and is reputed to have been in serious trouble with his congregation for his abolitionist sermons in 1788.49 He trained at Warrington Academy, was invited to join the Kaye Street Chapel in 1777 when he had completed his studies, and within a few months of settling in the town he pulled off the remarkable coup of marrying a wealthy heiress, the daughter of John Ashton of Woolton Hall, whose family vigorously but unsuccessfully opposed the match.50 Yates built on her fortune to become one of the richest men in Liverpool. He was a neighbour of William Roscoe in Toxteth Park, a frequent visitor to the homes of Currie and Rathbone, and a close friend of the Rev. William Shepherd who resided with him in the early 1790s.51

William Shepherd (1768–1847) was too young to participate in the early stages of the abolitionist campaign; he was absent from the town during 1787–8, though it was clear where his sympathies lay. He came from a long-established Liverpool family, the son of a shoemaker who was a freeman by birthright and a noted supporter of Sir William Meredith and the Whig Party in the 1760s. Shepherd was educated at the Dissenting Academy at Daventry and at New College, Hackney, where Priestley was trained. In 1790 he was appointed tutor to the children of the Rev. John Yates and the following year minister to the English Presbyterian Chapel at Gateacre.52 A terrier in size and disposition, Shepherd proved to be one of the liveliest members of the Roscoe Circle, a witty and caustic squib-writer for the local Whigs to set against Sylvester Richmond for the Tories and the corporation. His wit disguised his strong sense of political commitment, for he was prepared to put his freedom at risk by supporting some of the victims of the political repression following the war with France. He stayed in London during the arrest and trial of Jeremiah Joyce, who was charged with treason alongside Horne Tooke and Thomas Hardy, and he visited the Rev. Gilbert Wakefield who was imprisoned at Dorchester for sedition in 1799–1800, in order, so he said, to become familiar with prison conditions before it was his turn to suffer.53 Living in Toxteth, he too was a neighbour of Roscoe and a member of his literary society, contributing poetry to its meetings. William Smyth ranked him with Roscoe and Currie as part of the 'Liver-
pool Literary Triumvirate’. In 1803, shortly after a visit to Paris, he published *The Life of Poggio Bracciolini*, which bears all the hallmarks of Roscoe’s influence. The work was translated into French, German and Italian and earned him the honorary degree of LL.D. of Edinburgh University. His abolitionist writings (if any) have not survived, but his biography of Edward Rushton brought deserved notice to one of the most courageous and neglected of the Liverpool abolitionists.

**THOMAS CLARKSON’S VISIT TO LIVERPOOL**

It is unfortunate that the main source of information on Clarkson’s activities during 1787–8 is Clarkson himself, for members of the London Committee who authorised his tour of the country in 1787 had considerable misgivings about his fitness for the task. A popular crusade was one thing; but collecting and preparing evidence to present before hard-headed ministers and M.P.s was another and a more delicate matter. With some reluctance, the Committee allowed Clarkson to recruit Alexander Falconbridge for his visit to Liverpool, but stressed the need for economy and discretion. John Barton asked Roscoe and Rathbone to keep an eye on the pair when they arrived and to send a confidential report on Falconbridge. He also forwarded copies of the Committee’s anti-slavery advertisements and Clarkson’s abridgement of the evidence collected so far for their comments, adding of Clarkson: ‘His zeal and activity are wonderful, but I am really afraid he will at times be deficient in caution and prudence, and lay himself open to imposition, as well as incur much expense, perhaps sometimes unnecessarily. I would not however have this go further than ourselves . . .’

Clarkson and Falconbridge arrived from Bristol by way of Chester some time early in September. They proceeded first to Rathbone’s house and were then introduced to Roscoe, Currie and Rushton. Prudently, the Liverpool abolitionists did not offer them the hospitality of their homes but persuaded them to lodge at the King’s Arms tavern where they might have direct and uninhibited contact with the seamen and captains who frequented the place. Thereafter Roscoe and his friends seem to have kept their distance. In any case, Clarkson preferred to make his own contacts, and was soon optimistic that the town would provide
him with all the information he required. In his view, Liverpool
was far more hardened to the trade than Bristol: the allegedly
peculiar tools of the trade (handcuffs, shackles, and thumb screw)
were openly sold in the shops; and a constant procession of sea-
men coming off the African ships made it easy to find informants
and to note the disembarking of 'sickly and ulcerated' crews and
the brutalisation of the seasoned traders. But when it came to
naming names he found the seamen less forthcoming; in spite of
hundreds having left the trade, none would testify against it for
fear of reprisals: 'they would have their houses pulled down'.

Perhaps through lack of tact, or simply because the nature of
his task made it inevitable, Clarkson gave great offence to certain
respected merchants of the town. He met Edward Chaffers, a
member of the Common Council, and a former slave-ship cap-
tain, who introduced him to Ambrose Lace, an African and West
Indian merchant of substance. Much to Chaffers' embarrass-
ment, Clarkson accused Lace of being implicated in the notorious
massacre of Africans at Calabar in 1767. Lace made no reply
but left their company and reported to his fellow-merchants that
Clarkson was collecting evidence against them. Until this time
the merchants had been unaware of the true intentions of the
visitors. Earlier Robert Norris had met Clarkson and the elder
Rathbone on the quayside and, according to him, had talked
freely about the slave trade, as had others they had met; he did
not suspect they were abolitionists.

Clarkson and Falconbridge now met with considerable hos-
tility; they were harassed and forced to change lodgings; anony-
mous letters were received, threatening their lives. Clarkson
alleged that a definite attempt was made on his life:

I was one day on the pier-head with many others looking at some little
boats at the time of a heavy gale... I had seen all I intended to see,
and was departing, when I noticed eight or nine persons making towards
me. I was then only about eight or nine yards from the precipice of the
pier, but going from it. I expected that they would have divided to let
me through them; instead of which they closed upon me and bore me
back. I was borne within a yard of the precipice, when I discovered my
danger and perceiving among them the murderer of Peter Green, and
two others who had insulted me at the King's Arms, it instantly struck
me that they had a design to throw me over the pier-head... There
was not a moment to lose. Vigorous on account of danger, I darted
forward. One of them, against whom I pushed myself, fell down. Their
ranks were broken. And I escaped, not without blows, amidst their
imprecations and abuse.
Thus when the two agents of the London Committee left Liverpool in November they had little to show for their pains. Without a single person prepared to testify openly against the trade, they had only hearsay evidence to present before parliament. Fortunately, London and Bristol proved more forthcoming. Rathbone’s and Roscoe’s views on the visit have not survived, but there seems to be no reason to suppose that Currie was at variance with them when he complained to Wilberforce that it was a near-disaster. The Liverpool merchants, he said, went openly and fairly to Clarkson and were prepared to assist him in an impartial inquiry into the slave trade. Naively, perhaps, but honestly, they believed that there was nothing improper or illegal in its operation. Yet in effect Clarkson spurned their advances; he made no particular application to them, preferring to go about in disguise, seeking information amongst the lower class of seamen. No wonder, then, the merchants became alarmed and hostile.\(^65\)

Currie was obviously concerned that the blackguarding of Liverpool merchants would undermine the position of the abolitionists in the town. Theirs was very much minority opinion, but members of the group were on terms of friendship with many African traders; so far they had not experienced any trouble. Now Clarkson’s visit had created alarm, and the abolitionists were at a serious disadvantage. Therefore Currie warned the London Committee of the dangers inherent in the present approach to the question:

To persons not in the habit of reflecting upon it, the traffic in slaves cannot be mentioned without kindling a degree of warmth that tends to repel all arguments concerning it. Their reprobation of the trade itself leads to reprobation of those engaged in it; and their criminality is supposed to be proportionate to the evil produced . . . Believing the African merchants and traders not only accountable for the consequences of this trade, but conscious of their guilt in conducting it, men, purposely employed in acquiring information concerning it, have shunned all intercourse with them, and drawn a great part of their intelligence from the lowest class of seamen. Nor is this all: conceiving that every enormity might be expected from the masters of vessels, who could conduct such a trade, they have listened eagerly to the accounts of their cruel usage of the seamen, and to the rumours of their dreadful barbarities of various kinds, with which the ears of the credulous have been abused. That there is no foundation for any of these reports I am, however, far from asserting . . .

When they (the Committee’s agents) assert that the slave-trade is the destruction of two thousand seamen annually, and that the masters of the ships employed are, in general, men of such barbaric dispositions
as to inflict unprovoked cruelties on their crews, they bring forward positions, which, in my opinion, cannot be proved, and which, I doubt not, may be opposed by a reference to facts. It is a truth, that, in those of my acquaintance who are and have been master of Guinea-men, a great majority are men of general fair character—that some of them are men of considerable improvement of mind—and that I could point out amongst them more than one instance of uncommon integrity and kindness of heart. The same may be said of the body of the merchants concerned in the slave-trade; who are, some of them, men of liberal education and enlightened understandings; and, for spirit and enterprise in commerce, very much distinguished.

The Committee ought to enquire why seamen are attracted to this particular trade against which such barbarities are alleged and in which mortality is undoubtedly high:

A sailor is seldom a nice casuist. He takes a trip to Guinea because the wages are good; and, if he lives, rises, perhaps, first to be a mate, and afterwards a master: in this station, a few voyages more enable him to live at home, and to take shares in vessels commanded by younger adventurers. His children inherit his fortune, his commerce, and his opinions of the slave-trade; in which, perhaps, they are deeply engaged before they have ever heard that a doubt is entertained of its lawfulness.

This remarkable defence of the African merchants and masters by an avowed abolitionist is not at all untypical of the general approach of the Roscoe Circle. In private, Currie could be most passionate in his condemnation of the trade and incisive in his criticism of particular abuses; in public, however, he showed a pragmatism which must have engendered doubts in the minds of some of the London Committee as to his reliability. It was felt that negative criticism of tactics did not help the cause; and Currie's views were very similar to the more subtle arguments put forward by the anti-abolitionists prior to the opening of the parliamentary campaign. Early in March 1788 a letter to the Gentleman's Magazine from 'Gustavus' damned Clarkson with faint praise, advising him to temper zeal with discretion. The African and West Indian merchants were quite prepared to see the slave trade regulated and even to consider the possibility of gradual abolition, but they were prevented from assisting Clarkson and his friends by the 'uncandid manner in which they have been treated . . . One active gentleman, when at Liverpool, is said not only to have declared the most violent prejudices against [the merchants], and to have treated their attentions with neglect, but to have employed himself in obtaining materials to incrimin-
ate them, from the most unprincipled common sailors and dock landladies. Meanwhile, Roscoe was urgently pressing the Committee to adopt a gradualist approach. He advised them that a frontal assault on the slave trade was unwise in point of tactics and unjust to those merchants who had a large proportion of their capital engaged in it and who, till then, had seen nothing irregular in their commercial ventures. He sought to impress upon them the severe economic dislocation that he believed would result in Liverpool from a total and immediate abolition. John Barton in London was sympathetic to his Liverpool friends' opinions and said they would receive careful consideration; but the Committee was in fundamental disagreement with them on all counts: 'Nothing short of an entire and immediate abolition will satisfy.'

LIVERPOOL'S LITERARY WORKS

Though rebuffed by the London Committee in the matter of general tactics, the Liverpool abolitionists were keen to make some contribution to the cause. As their situation precluded a public campaign like that in Manchester, they found their outlet through the literary society which, from 1787 to 1789, functioned almost as if it were an unofficial branch of the Society for Abolition. Here interested members could present their poems and articles for the consideration of their friends and, by rigorous vetting, produce works of sufficient merit to be published in London or through the auspices of the London Committee itself. The published poetry included Roscoe's *The Wrongs of Africa*, Rushton's *The West Indian Eclogues* and Roscoe and Currie's *The African*, all of 1788. These writings (which are discussed in detail in the appendix) were of limited literary value and in the current poetical mould. As Sypher has observed, British anti-slavery literature was so firmly set in a neo-classical form that even the most knowledgeable observers of the slave trade and of plantation slavery adopted its conventions when they lapsed into verse. The hero was almost inevitably an African of noble birth, idealised out of all semblance of reality ('a pseudo-African in pseudo-Africa'), yearning for freedom, speaking the traditional language of rebellion against oppression, and dying in circumstances of high drama.
Prose publications began when Roscoe published a pamphlet anonymously, apparently in January 1787. Barton was delighted with it and prepared to publicise it in London. 'I rejoice to find that thy Pamphlet has occasioned a ferment amongst the African Merchants of Liverpool', he wrote. 'I trust it will occasion a ferment amongst our Senators likewise & produce that conviction we so much wish to feel.'

He was less happy with a sonnet Roscoe sent him in March. It disturbed him that the poet had diverged so far from the path of discretion that he praised philosophy before Christianity and was abusive towards their opponents. Later in the year Roscoe produced another short pamphlet, *A General View of the African Slave Trade, demonstrating its Injustice and Impolicy; with Hints towards a Bill for its Abolition*. A thousand copies were printed for distribution in London and Liverpool. It contained nothing new apart from a statement of Roscoe's gradualist philosophy: indeed, excepting this, it was typical of the general approach to the question at that time, and typical of its author, then a practising lawyer, in that it was almost exclusively concerned with legalistic and moral issues. The correspondence of the Liverpool abolitionists in late 1787 gives ample evidence of their sensitivity towards the economic aspects of abolition, but nothing of this appeared in their publications. Yet by January 1788 the London Committee was clearly worried that its propaganda was losing impact by being tied exclusively to the humanitarian justification for abolition. As an example, the Committee cited Clarkson's successful use of statistics of the mortality of slave-ship crews in order to demolish the argument that the slave trade was a nursery for seamen. The elder Rathbone, of course, was responsible for procuring the mortality figures, but his associates took no heed of the advice. They seem to have simply accepted what the African merchants told them, that a severe economic depression was the price of immediate abolition.

In contrast to versifying, pamphleteering was more direct, more overtly political, and probably reached a wider audience. But it was a difficult field for Roscoe and his friends to enter. They lived too far from the metropolis and were probably too concerned with preserving their anonymity to be of much service to the London Committee. In any case, the Committee had already some formidable talents at its disposal. It published the speeches of Wilberforce, Pitt, Fox, and William Smith on the
subject; it used abstracts of the evidence before parliament to acquaint the public with its case; and in James Ramsay and Thomas Clarkson it possessed two of the most redoubtable pamphleteers in the country. It is therefore unlikely that the Committee would have commissioned works by comparatively unknown writers unless it had felt they could make a special contribution. Such a situation arose in March 1788 when the Rev. Raymond Harris published his *Scriptural researches on the licitness of the slave trade*, dedicated to the mayor, aldermen and councillors of Liverpool. As Currie put it: 'A little scoundrel, a Spanish Jesuit, has advanced to the assistance of the Slave-Merchants & has published a vindication of this traffic from the Old Testament. His work is extolled as a prodigy by these judges of composition, & is in truth no bad specimen of his talents, tho' egregiously false & sophistical, as all justifications of Slavery must be. I have prompted a little parson to answer him by telling him that if such be religion I would have none on't.' The 'little parson' was the Rev. Henry Dannett. Meanwhile, Harris's pamphlet was extensively advertised in Liverpool and London and promoted by no less a person than Lord Hawkesbury, President of the Board of Trade. Liverpool anti-abolitionists were so delighted with its reception that the common council was moved to grant Harris a pension in recognition of his services to the African interest. It has been suggested that Harris's defence of the trade was provoked by Roscoe's pamphlet, *A General View of the African Slave Trade*. This may well have been the case, as the London Committee appeared most anxious that Roscoe himself should write a reply. By May 1788 there were already three writers in the lists, including James Ramsay; in June, Roscoe's name was added to those anxious to refute 'this Apostle of Inhumanity'. In the second edition of his *Scriptural Researches* Harris retorted by laying about his detractors with considerable venom: they were illiterate and illiberal; Ramsay, 'the Canonical Planter', was mean in spirit, motivated by spite, incoherent, and neither a gentleman nor a scholar; 'the sneering Mr. Dannett', alias 'the incautious M.A.', to whom Harris devoted most attention, is also 'the equestrian Minister of St. John's' and a great 'Ass-rider'. Harris was convinced that Roscoe's pamphlet, under cover of anonymity, was the work of a triumvirate, 'an unnatural coalition of Law and Gospel', from
which we may infer that he suspected Yates and Rathbone had a hand in it. He reminded them all that the very trade against which they inveighed was in part responsible for their several fortunes and offices. A reviewer of the various refutations of Harris would find it difficult to understand why Roscoe’s was given pride of place by the abolitionists. Like Ramsay’s, it is a very slight affair. Dannett’s is the most substantial, and longer than the others put together, the author being concerned to tackle his opponent on his own chosen ground, point by point, verse by verse. It is the more praiseworthy since it was published openly in his own name in circumstances when Dannett, a minister of the established church in a living in the gift of the corporation, could expect little but abuse for his pains. His object, he said, was to defend his calling and to show that the Church of England possessed a true friend to humanity in the heart of Liverpool.

From the amount of attention Harris devoted to Dannett it would seem that he regarded ‘the mighty Rider of St. John’s’ as his most potent critic. However, Roscoe’s pamphlet may have received more attention in London because of its timing: it appeared during the critical slave trade debates in the Lords just before the close of the session and was thought to have helped to counteract Lord Hawkesbury’s influence.

By mid-1788 pamphleteering against the slave trade had passed its peak. Indeed, the same is true of all anti-slavery literature. The public had been saturated with poetry, drama, pamphlets, abstracts from the evidence, and extracts from the parliamentary debates appearing in virtually all the main London and provincial newspapers and journals for more than a year. Even without the widespread interest aroused by the events in France from 1789 it is doubtful whether the abolitionist movement could have maintained its momentum. A reaction was apparent before the end of 1788, not only in parliament where the African and West Indian interests were putting their case across more effectively, but also in such journals as the Gentleman’s Magazine and the Critical Review which now gave preference to the anti-abolitionist point of view. Books published by two of the Liverpool delegates—John Matthews’ A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone and Robert Norris’s Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomey—received long and favourable reviews. Later, Archibald Dalzel’s history of Dahomey, Bryan Edwards’ account of
the St Domingo rebellion, and writings on Africa which were thought to confirm in certain aspects the propriety of African slavery (e.g. those by Mungo Park and James Bruce) were quoted extensively in the press and in parliamentary debates by the opponents of Wilberforce and the London Committee. The comparative dearth of anti-slave trade literature was attributed by one reviewer to the 'publack at large, as well as the senate, being tired of the tedious proceedings'.

ABOLITION IN DECLINE

Some measure of the numerical strength of the abolitionists in Liverpool compared to other towns is provided by the distribution of the annual reports of the Society for the Abolition. In August 1788 the London Committee sent William Rathbone 25 copies only; it sent 200 each to Bristol, Manchester, Birmingham and York, 100 to Leeds and 50 to Lancaster. Earlier in the year the London Committee was active in promoting local branch committees, concentrating on Bristol and the south of England but including the north and midlands, in order to co-ordinate the gathering of information on the African trade and the treatment of seamen. Committees were formed in Bristol, Manchester and elsewhere—but not in Liverpool, the town best situated for such intelligence. In fact, with the exception of Newcastle, Liverpool was soon the only large town in the country which lacked a branch committee of the Society. It was left to neighbouring Manchester as the leading representative of the north-west to take the initiative in petitioning parliament and procuring witnesses.

The Liverpool abolitionists were always conscious of their isolation in the town and of the need for discretion. Currie asked Wilberforce not to frank letters sent to him at Liverpool but to conduct his correspondence with unsigned letters conveyed by unsuspected intermediaries. He was unwilling to send an anti-slavery polemic to a London publisher, preferring to use a well-connected London acquaintance as an intermediary, admonishing him to 'keep silence'. In writing to his uncle about the publication of his poem *The African*, he enjoins him to maintain the vow of secrecy, otherwise 'it would play the deuce with me here'. Edgar Corrie, a prosperous corn merchant who wrote to Lord Hawkesbury in February 1788 making a long attack on the
conduct of the slave trade in Liverpool, asked that his name should be concealed from all except Pitt since it would cause him ‘irreparable prejudice’ in the town if his letter became known. Hawkesbury respected his wishes and included the letter in the evidence before the Privy Council under the pseudonym ‘W.I.’ It is difficult to know what to make of this cloak and dagger conduct of abolition. A number of writers, echoing Clarkson’s History, have referred to threats and reprisals against members of the Roscoe Circle; but the evidence for this is flimsy. In spite of their precautions, the identity of all the Liverpool abolitionists (if not the full extent of their activities) must have been known in the town. Rathbone (himself no model of discretion) and Roscoe were in business association with slavers; Currie, Roscoe and Shepherd were the close friends and confidants of William Smyth, whose father had strong connections with the trade and who was well informed of their attitude to abolition; Yates certainly, and doubtless also Dannett and Shepherd, attacked the slave trade from their pulpits; the Rathbones, Binns and Daulby were Quakers, and the town was well aware of the attitude of the Society of Friends to this question; and, as we have seen, the Rev. Raymond Harris could identify his detractors. Even so, there is little to suggest that any of the abolitionists experienced active persecution. Clarkson claimed that Dr Binns suffered in his practice for assisting in his enquiries and he mentions an unspecified mischievous plot laid against Binns which misfired. If so, one wonders why Binns was singled out for this treatment since he was not a prominent abolitionist, and others merited the town’s resentment more than he. William Rathbone’s biographer alleges that the family doctor asked leave to visit him after dark for fear of injuring his practice should his carriage be seen outside Rathbone’s house. Yet no damaging opprobrium seems to have been attached to William Rathbone III who, until his death in 1789, was the main correspondent with the London Committee. His son was unpopular in the town for a number of reason of which his espousal of abolition was not the most important.

The Liverpool abolitionists, interestingly, were not persecuted: indeed, one might say that the merchants of Liverpool were remarkably tolerant towards them. There is nothing surprising in Edgar Corrie’s fear of ‘irreparable prejudice’ should his letter to Hawkesbury become known; he was, after all, attacking his
fellow-merchants before the Board of Trade and the king’s chief minister. And within the Roscoe Circle James Currie’s caution was proverbial; on one occasion Rathbone wrote to his friend, Samuel Greg of Styal, that though he held Currie in high regard he was an alarmist in some matters and to heed his advice would be to curtail conversation and correspondence beyond all endurance. Naturally there was need for discretion. In the somewhat claustrophobic atmosphere of the town, a small coterie, meeting in each other’s houses for literary and political discussions, sharing a common interest in abolition, setting themselves apart from their neighbours to some extent, could easily become the subject of ridicule, jealousy or persecution. Furthermore, they were virtually all dissenters in a town dominated by Anglicans; and some were Scots Presbyterians, which was one step lower on the scale of popularity. Generally they had nothing to fear, though loyal celebrations could provide a sharp reminder of their vulnerability when the windows of Quakers were smashed as the price of their religious scruple in not decorating their houses like the rest. But this was untypical: in Liverpool the mob seldom got out of hand.

It was not so much abolition that put them at risk but the political transformation which followed upon the events in France between 1789 and 1793. Without exception, the members of the Roscoe Circle welcomed the news of the French Revolution as the herald of better times ahead for Whigs, Reformers and dissenters:

... France rises up, and confirms the decree
That tears off her chains, and bids millions be free

wrote Roscoe with buoyant optimism. They met to celebrate the fall of the Bastille and to read poems and political manifestos; they shared in the euphoria of the Whig revival which helped to produce Tarleton’s great victory in the parliamentary contest of 1790; they played a leading part in the campaign to wrest control of municipal affairs from the exclusive common council (a campaign which might have succeeded but for the outbreak of war with France in 1793); they raised an agitation against the monopoly of the East India Company and organised a petition to the commons in 1792 signed by all the leading merchants of the anti-corporation group. Rathbone, of course, was in the thick of it: the merchants elected him Chairman of the Committee of
Subscribers to the Fund for Asserting the Rights of Freemen in 1791 and auditor of the corporation accounts; he sparked off fierce controversy by distributing the handbill *Equality* which he and Roscoe composed in 1792, and he engaged in a public quarrel with the mayor over the issue of parliamentary reform. Even Currie was swept along on the tide of enthusiasm and in 1790 emerged as the leader of an abortive campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. It was the high point of their political activity in Liverpool during the late eighteenth century.

Abolition, meanwhile, though far from being a lost cause, was overshadowed by these more pressing events. In any case, Roscoe and his associates knew that they stood no chance of incorporating abolition into the Whig programme. A large body of merchants could be recruited in the campaign for the reform of parliament, or the removal of civil disabilities on dissenters, or against the East India Company; but none would openly eschew the African trade. This was a divisive issue and the opponents of abolition knew it. As the news from France showed that moderates there were being upstaged by the extremists, so the ‘men of 1789’ in Liverpool found themselves under increasing pressure to define their positions more carefully. Currie was disturbed by the ease with which the African interest could represent the abolitionists as upholding the same creed as the Jacobins in Paris; he urged that they should dissociate themselves from the ‘dangerous zeal’ of some of the dissenters: ‘they fear no violence; and they almost court opposition; as if the object were rather to excite, than to remove prejudice. . . .’ His friends took little heed of his advice at first, but the Birmingham riots of July 1791, which destroyed the houses and property of Joseph Priestley and other prominent dissenters, threw them into alarm and caused them to discontinue their meetings on Bastille Day. Thus, when Rathbone later decided to engage the mayor in a very public and acrimonious dispute about the form of a loyal address to the king, he found that ‘all classes, even my particular friends disapproved’ of his tactics. The mob demonstrated in favour of the mayor, and the dissenters, remembering Birmingham, went in fear for their safety. Undoubtedly, the Liverpool abolitionists were deeply shocked by the barbarities of the French Revolution and shared in the popular revulsion towards all things French; but they were not deflected from their extensive correspondence in
pursuit of reform. They were bitter towards Pitt and his repression of radical and liberal movements, and they reserved their special venom for the ‘renegade’ Edmund Burke. But generally they kept out of print and were inactive in local politics after 1792. Shepherd expresses the prevailing mood in a sonnet he addressed to Roscoe at the height of the troubles. He advised the reformers to take shelter until the storm was past:

When wrath and discord through the nations roam,
Thrice happy who possess and prize a peaceful home.111

Thus the members of his circle published little of a political nature in the years that followed. Roscoe, ‘surrounded with cows, hogs, turkeys, geese, cocks, hens and pigeons’, increasingly devoted himself to his botanical pursuits (which culminated in his membership of the Linnean Society and his founding, with others, of the Liverpool Botanical Gardens)112 and settled down to write his Life of Lorenzo and the monumental study of Pope Leo X. Currie, equally domesticated, put aside his projected flight to America and concentrated on medical studies and his Life of Burns.113 Shepherd was concerned for his freedom in the late 1790s, and poor Rathbone, who believed he was under surveillance by the collector of customs and that his letters were being tampered with, was reduced to uncharacteristic caution, advising a friend in Glasgow not to write on political matters except with great care for the consequences.114

Their only foray into abolitionist literature in the 1790s was Roscoe’s An inquiry into the causes of the insurrection of the negroes in the island of St. Domingo (1792) and Rushton’s poem Toussaint to his troops which seems to have been written in 1798. The slave revolt in San Domingo was, of course, a by-product of the French Revolution and a considerable embarrassment to the abolitionists. Many explanatory pamphlets appeared, but they could not disguise the connection between the French abolitionists, Les Amis des Noirs, and the fomenting of a most bloody insurrection.115 Brissot, Mirabeau, Layafette, Abbé Siyes, Abbé Gregoire, all hated names in Britain, were members of the French society, and after the outbreak or war in 1793 the Jacobins attempted to subvert the slave populations in the British West Indies, with some success. Roscoe wrote his pamphlet before the full facts of the insurrection were known, but he was bold enough
to rise to the defence of the French abolitionists. This was a dire warning to the British planters to mend their ways:

When the native ferocity of Africa is sharpened by the keen sense of long-continued injury, who shall set bounds to revenge? . . . Resistance is always justifiable where force is the substitute of right: nor is the commission of civil crime possible in a state of slavery . . . The punishments that have been devised in the French islands, to repress crimes that could only exist by the abuse of the slave-holders, are such as nature revolts at.  

The outbreak of war in February 1793 was a severe blow to the Liverpool reformers. They immediately recognised that it would inflame passions at home and put an end to their hopes for the extension and improvement of the franchise and the removal of civil disabilities on dissenters. Abolition became very much a secondary issue. The bill for gradual abolition had been lost in the Lords in 1792 and the prospects for its revival were poor. The war commanded their whole attention; it was unjust and unnecessary; it played into the hands of all the reactionary forces in the country; it was ruinous to Liverpool commerce and manufacturing and produced a crisis of confidence in the stability of Liverpool banking. Roscoe, who published *Thoughts on the Causes of the present Failures* in 1793, ascribed the nation’s economic ills directly to its effects.

The issue of the ‘poor slaves’ was in abeyance in Liverpool as elsewhere. It could no longer be agitated in public except through the medium of parliament, where Wilberforce attempted to keep the subject alive with his annual motions for abolition, in spite of official indifference and some hostility, especially in the Lords. An attempt to put Dundas’s gradualist motion into effect failed in 1795 and a new bill was lost in the Commons the following year. The war was going badly and the abolitionists were being pressed on all sides to wait for peace. Liverpool, whose parliamentary representatives were resolutely opposed to any interference in the slave trade, was not to experience any significant local agitation on the subject until 1804. The African merchants and the corporation continued to petition throughout the later 1790s against parliamentary bills for regulation; but abolition was not raised as an issue in either of the electoral contests of 1796 and 1802. Roscoe and his friends seem to have been completely suppressed. They had to wait until 1806, when Pitt’s death and Britain’s
improving prospects in the war transformed the political climate for abolition, before they felt able again to stand up and make themselves heard.

THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 1806–7

It seems unlikely that the Society for Abolition could have been satisfied with the performance of the Liverpool abolitionists, even taking into account the particular difficulties of sponsoring the cause in Liverpool. For Wilberforce and the members of the Clapham Sect regarded the slave trade as an unmitigated social evil, a blight on the country’s honour which put it in danger of divine retribution. The debates on gradualism in the House of Commons in the early 1790s showed that most of the committed abolitionists (the true ‘Humanity Men’) regarded immediate abolition as a test of personal virtue. Fox, who spoke ‘out of his Soul, not his Mind’, was particularly scathing towards the compromisers; and Pitt stated that he trembled for the wrath to come should England fail to purge herself of the guilt and shame of the past. The emotion engendered by the parliamentary debates did not escape the notice of the Liverpudlians, but they failed to meet the proclaimed test of purity: in their public and private utterances they consistently favoured gradual abolition as the only way of mitigating the likely damage to the economy of the town. Hence, when the issue was revived during the Liverpool election of 1806, Roscoe went out of his way to stress his support for gradualism and full compensation for the African traders. Had Currie been alive to share in his triumph he, like Rathbone and the others, would have thoroughly approved of this stand.

The 1806 election was one of the most remarkable in Liverpool’s parliamentary history. William Roscoe, almost the antithesis of the military man, was chosen by the Whigs and Reformers to stand against two soldiers, General Banastre Tarleton and General Isaac Gascoyne. For more than a decade he had been inactive in local politics. He was an abolitionist in a town still wedded to the slave trade; he was a dissenter in a community dominated by Anglicans and Tories. Moreover, he had no personal following to compare with that of Tarleton, an M.P. in the Whig interest since 1790, or Gascoyne, the corporation’s successful nominee since 1796; and he was, by his own admission, a
nervous and hesitant public speaker, lacking in popular appeal. Since it was the parliament of 1806-7 that swept away the slave trade, a causal link between Roscoe’s election and the abolitionist movement has been deduced. It has been suggested on the basis of very tenuous evidence that the election was fought on the issue of the slave trade; or, alternatively, that Roscoe’s nomination and success showed that the Liverpool merchants were reconciled to the inevitability of abolition. But there is no doubt that the African interest was very much alive and kicking at this time. Just six months before the election the Liverpool merchants had raised one of their largest-ever petitions against abolition, containing over a thousand signatures, and headed by that of the mayor, Henry Clay; and the town’s delegates, led by George Case and P. W. Brancker, had been instructed to oppose all restrains on the trade, without compromise.

In the Commons the nagging persistence of the Liverpool M.P.s on the subject caused Lord Howick to remark of Gascoyne that ‘he considered the slave trade so great a blessing, that if it were not in existence at present, he should propose to establish it’. Thus it would seem poor judgment on the part of the Liverpool Whigs to have chosen Roscoe at such a juncture. ‘... how in the Name of Earth or Heaven a Foe to the Slave Trade & a Dissenter could be elected by the Captains, Coopers & Carpenters of L’pool, the Church & King Firebrands & all the stupid ignorant People who must have had to decide between yr. Father & his Opponents ...?’ inquired William Smyth from Roscoe’s son.

However, the slave trade had little or nothing to do with this election. Until 1806 the Whigs and anti-corporation clique in the town had supported Tarleton as their candidate, but with increasing misgivings. He had outgrown his early reputation as a rake, but not his desertion of Fox and the peace party. In 1802 there had been an unsuccessful attempt to replace him. Now it was alleged that he had become a mere placeman of the Tory government, and his neglect of his constituency was the final straw. The problem was to find a suitable candidate to put against him. The Whigs tried to persuade Lord Sefton to stand and, failing, turned successively to Sir Thomas Hesketh, Admiral Sir Isaac Coffin, and Thomas Earle, before finally arriving at Roscoe. Tarleton, to avoid being left stranded without party support, went into coalition with the Corporation’s Gascoyne.
That Roscoe’s known views on the slave trade carried no weight is shown by the fact that he was nominated by two of the leading African merchants of the town: Thomas Leyland and Thomas Earle.130 This was a straight fight between the Tory Corporation and its opponents, conducted along traditional lines. And abolition was hardly mentioned at all during the whole course of the campaign.131

According to Shepherd, superior organisation and the dedication of Roscoe’s canvassers won the day.132 Others, less charitable, pointed to the prodigious bribery of the electorate. Since Tarleton and Gascoyne were successful in splitting their votes it was necessary for Roscoe to obtain plumpers to offset them. This meant he had to spend at least as much as his two opponents put together, which he was able to do with generous financial support from the African and American merchants in his camp. A biased source claimed he spent between £11,000 and £12,000 compared to £4,000 by Tarleton and £3,000 by Gascoyne.133 In all probability he spent in excess of this. By the end of the contest he had received or been promised £12,270, not including sums paid out of his own substantial purse.134 The money was well spent. On the fifth day of the poll Roscoe had a majority of the votes cast and on the seventh day Tarleton capitulated. At the end of the poll Roscoe addressed his supporters at the party headquarters in Islington. According to his son, the bulk of his speech was taken up with the question of parliamentary reform and religious liberty. But there was one significant passage on the African trade which must have made some of his supporters very uneasy. He expressed his conviction that abolition was inevitable and the town must reconcile itself to this. Economic sense required that the trade should be terminated gradually. Justice required that the merchants should be compensated for their losses since, in pursuing this trade, they had worked within the law. ‘But, sir, there is another compensation of a much higher and better nature to which the merchants of this country are entitled. That compensation is to be found in the more extended trade and commerce of this country’. The overthrow of the East India Company monopoly and the establishment of free trade to the continent of America would provide the true compensation for abolition.135 Here he seems to be playing down his earlier promise to support gradualism and full compensation; nor was his espousal of free
trade likely to endear him to those merchants with property and investments in the British West Indies.

The breach between Roscoe and Thomas Leyland, his sponsor and business associate, occurred soon after the 1806 election; their partnership was publicly dissolved on 31 December.\(^\text{138}\) Since Leyland was not unsympathetic to Roscoe's interest in parliamentary and religious reform, one may conclude that the clarification of the new M.P.'s attitude to abolition was a determining factor. For within a short time of his arrival in London, Roscoe came under the direct influence of men like Wilberforce, the Duke of Gloucester, and William Smith, the M.P. for Norwich, who would have no truck with gradualism, and would make no concessions to the slaving interest. Houlbrooke reported that Rathbone had received one of his 'mighty Visions' and wished Roscoe to ensure that the issue of compensation was vigorously pursued. He himself was totally opposed to this course, and so were Roscoe's closest parliamentary colleagues.\(^\text{137}\)

When the abolition bill reached the Commons in February 1807, Gascoyne and the counsel for the delegates of Liverpool at first made all the running, trying to negative the bill, and, when this failed, moving to receive evidence on the matter of compensation. This was a familiar delaying tactic and they found the House totally unsympathetic. Roscoe made a brief intervention in favour of considering compensation after the bill had been passed, but Robert Thornton curtly replied that commerce was always fraught with risks and the African merchants should expect no preferential treatment. The admission of further evidence was refused; Gascoyne protested vigorously and Roscoe kept silent.\(^\text{138}\).

During the crucial second reading on 23 February, Lord Howick and Gascoyne confronted each other with irreconcilable statistics. The former estimated a total loss to the port of a mere £5,000 in dock duties; the latter argued that 40,000 tons of shipping and £2 millions of investments would be destroyed. It was at this point that Roscoe intervened to make his major speech. Without reference to the preceding discussion, he reiterated almost word for word that section of his election speech which dealt with the slave trade, linking the question of abolition with the need to expand trade generally and to break the monopoly of the East India Company. On the timing of abolition he admitted a change of heart since he had addressed his consti-
tuents, being now convinced that ‘six to nine months’ notice was perfectly adequate. On compensation he was almost perfunctory. What he wished chiefly to stress was that Liverpool was by no means unanimous in defence of the slave trade and it was his intention to represent that ‘great and respectable’ body which opposed it. He concluded: ‘I have long resided in the town of Liverpool; for 30 years I have never ceased to condemn this inhuman traffic; and I consider it the greatest happiness of my existence to lift up my voice on this occasion against it, with the friends of justice and humanity.’

It was a speech that marked both the climax of his long career as an abolitionist and, because it could not fail to antagonise the merchants, the end of his brief political career. Earlier he had received much well-meaning advice from his friends, particularly Rathbone, on how to conduct his case. He preferred his own judgement, whatever the consequences. But Shepherd was delighted: ‘Your explanation of the term gradual abolition (which had certainly been misunderstood) electrified me with pleasure. I am truly happy that you have now left not the slightest ground for suspicion that by the use of that term you wished to curry favour with the Slave dealers by letting them down gently. At the same time you have done both well and wisely in abstaining from vituperative epithets. These were not needed. I trust Geo. Case & Co. will, without your kicking at them, be sufficiently mortified to find with what sentiments they are regarded by the nation at large.’

Wilberforce gave him fulsome praise at the inaugural meeting of the African Institution, where the Duke of Gloucester was in the chair. Here was a man, he said, who by strength of character had risen above the deep-seated prejudices of his townspeople and eventually won their respect. His future was secure. Roscoe thought so, too; and when there were rumours of an impending dissolution of parliament he was optimistic that his conduct during the slave trade debates would not prevent his re-election. Rathbone, however, warned him that knives were being sharpened; he would not find things easy when he returned.

The abolition of the slave trade was virtually the only achievement of the short-lived ‘Ministry of the Talents’. Criticism of its conduct of the war and the bitter controversy surrounding the issue of Catholic emancipation not only helped to bring the ministry to its knees but produced a political climate most
unfavourable to the Whigs and dissenters. In Liverpool the reformers found that any cause espoused by them was regarded as suspect, so they found it politic to withdraw from the campaign against the East India Company. It was Roscoe's further misfortune that the mayor was Thomas Molyneux, a close business associate of Thomas Leyland in the African trade (his bailiff was William Rigg, formerly of the slaving firm of Tarleton and Rigg), who did not scruple to use his influence to bring down the representative who had betrayed the African interest. Even before the dissolution was announced Molyneux had worked up a campaign against him. 'The Mayor has established himself in his true Colours, & shown all the Violence and Rancour of Party Spirit without any of the liberality of a Gentleman', observed Lord Derby; whilst Shepherd reported that the Tories expected a new ministry would be anti-peace, anti-Irish, anti-Catholic and anti-abolition. The new election would be fought uncompromisingly on the platform of 'Church and King'. He did not need reminding that Roscoe's last speech in parliament was in favour of Catholic emancipation. When Roscoe returned to Liverpool, he put on a bold face, marching in procession through the constituency with a large band of freemen. At Castle Street he was waylaid by a gang of unemployed seamen armed with cudgels. In the ensuing violence no one was seriously hurt, but the whole procession was thrown into disarray and Roscoe himself was badly shaken. It was enough. Roscoe had not been happy in parliament, feeling a novice amongst the seasoned politicians, suffering from nerves, neglecting his business at home. He was too nice a man, too domesticated, too insecure outside the close circle of his friends ever to make a successful politician. Probably he recognised this himself, for he seized upon the incident to withdraw from the contest. In a long notice to the press he announced that he and his supporters had suffered physical abuse, studied misrepresentation and prejudice, and had been denied the protection of the magistrates; therefore, to prevent further violence and likely bloodshed, he had decided not to stand for re-election.

Nevertheless, the freemen of Liverpool were not to be denied a contest. A group of freemen led by Thomas Green determined to press Roscoe's candidature in spite of his refusal; and it is a tribute to his standing with a considerable section of the town
that they were able to raise a subscription to canvass on his behalf sufficient to extend the poll to nearly seven days. Roscoe’s interest polled 379 unbrilled votes, including 297 plumpers.119 His opponents were sufficiently alarmed to spend time and money attacking him as an enemy of the king and destroyer of the African trade. A crudely satirical pamphlet, supposedly signed by the Pope, called on ‘all Apprentices, Raganuffins, Presbyterians, Rogues, Methodists, Jail-birds, Whores, etc., to assist our Holy Cause’ and vote for Roscoe.150 Both Gascoyne and Tarleton promised that if elected they would restore the slave trade.151 Indeed, the slave trade was more an issue in 1807 than in any previous election. Tarleton actually campaigned under the banner, ‘The Church and the Slave Trade for ever!’, and sent two black boys through the streets with a placard announcing ‘The African Trade Restored!’ Green countered this by parading two former slaves with the notice, ‘We thank God for our Freedom’.152 Of course, Roscoe stood very little chance of success: Tarleton came top of the poll with 1461 votes and Gascoyne second with 1277.153

There was some talk of raising a petition against an improper election. It came to nothing, though William Smith, the abolitionist, advised Roscoe that there was a good prospect of unseating both members.154 Commiseration was showered on the defeated candidate. Lord Derby offered to propose him as deputy lord lieutenant of Lancashire, but Roscoe felt that he could not in conscience take the oaths and declined.155 He returned to his business and literary pursuits, and, though he remained in contact with the London Committee, his place as the leading abolitionist in Liverpool was eventually taken over by James Cropper. Once the town had been purged of the slave trade the prejudice against the abolitionists was soon dissipated. Ex-slavers co-operated with Roscoe when in 1807–11 he worked to ensure that the merchants did not circumvent the 1807 Act. In 1814 Liverpool raised its first petition against the slave trade; amongst its signatories were many former African traders headed by the mayor, Thomas Leyland. And in 1815 Roscoe was presented with the freedom of the borough in testimony ‘not only of his great literary talents but of his private worth and value as a member of society’.156

In conclusion, one might say that although the Liverpool
movement for abolition followed the national pattern in micro-
ocosm, given the size and importance of the African trade in the
town the practical effects of their local campaign were minimal. It
could hardly have been otherwise. It needs men of extraordinary
intelligence, strength of character and ruthlessness of purpose to
reject the way of life of their friends and neighbours in pursuit of
an ideal; it needs the qualities of saints and fanatics. The men
of the Roscoe Circle identified with the town, were dependent on
it for their livelihood, and sought (and obtained) social recogni-
tion within it. It is inconceivable that they could have pursued
the logic of their intellectual position to extremes. For abolition
was just one of a number of political and social objectives; and it
was not a matter of such immediacy as the repeal of the Test
and Corporation Acts, or reform of the franchise, or the under-
mining of the closed corporation of Liverpool. Not so bound by
mercantile self-interest as most of their social peers, more con-
scious of the intellectual movements of the period, they followed
the fashion when abolition was a popular crusade with the upper
and middle classes; and when the fashion changed and the exigencies of wartime inhibited open discussion, they remained
sympathetic to the cause but were no longer active in its promo-
tion. After 1805 they were able to resume their activities, but by
this time the London Committee had no need to call upon their
services. Roscoe’s election as M.P. in 1806 was not a part of the
abolitionist scheme, yet it is entirely appropriate that Liverpool’s
most vocal and consistent critic of the slave trade should have a
place of honour beside Wilberforce on that historic occasion when
abolition was finally achieved.

APPENDIX

The first major literary offering of the Liverpool abolitionists, and the
first to be received by the Society for Abolition from any source, was
Roscoe’s The Wrongs of Africa, the first part of which was completed early
in 1787 and published in the summer of that year. This was not Roscoe’s
first abolitionist piece: in 1777 he had published his youthful poem Mount
Pleasant which contained much on this theme, though it was little noticed
at the time. But The Wrongs was a more direct piece of propaganda:
Currie, who kept a critical eye on the whole enterprise, wrote the preface.
Originally it was Roscoe’s plan to write a long three-part examination of
the slave trade, dealing first with the African coast, then with the Middle
Passage, and finally with the West Indian plantations. He never finished
the project; the second part, though in draft as early as February 1787, was not published until a year later, after much revision; the third part was never begun. It is not clear how well the poem sold, though its sale more than covered the cost of production, and Roscoe offered the profits to the London Committee.\textsuperscript{157} It received favourable reviews and was subsequently translated into German.\textsuperscript{158} Clarkson records that the Committee gave it an enthusiastic reception: ‘To find friends to our cause rising up from such a quarter, where we expected scarcely anything but opposition, was particularly encouraging.’\textsuperscript{159}

Part one of \textit{The Wrongs of Africa} describes the character of the slave trade along the coast of West Africa. It depicts the Africans before the arrival of the Europeans as living a simple, idyllic existence, surrounded by the bounty of nature, and having no use for material wealth. Then comes the foul pestilence from overseas in the shape of a white trader who dangles baubles before these ‘sable sons of innocence’, tempting them until they are irrevocably corrupted. Innocents no longer, they commence to plunder their neighbours for human wealth:

\begin{verbatim}
Whilst he, the white deceiver, who had sown
The seeds of discord, saw with horrid joy
The harvest ripe to his utmost wish;
And reap’d the spoils of treachery, guilt, and blood.
\end{verbatim}

The poet warns that unless this wicked avarice of Europe is suppressed, divine retribution will surely follow. Part two, which is more stereotyped in form than the first, concerns the sorrows of the Middle Passage. Its hero is Cymbello, an African prince of Zaire, whose royal father has provided him with a truly Platonic education, sending him out amongst the people to learn the responsibilities of kingship and the real meaning of freedom. Grown to manhood and in love with a beauteous maid ‘as chaste as the cool beams of evening’, Cymbello seems likely to fulfil all that is expected of him. But one night, under a rapturous moon, he and his mistress are surprised by a group of black banditti. Seized in ‘sacrilegious rape’, he is taken to the coast where his freedom is exchanged for a few trinkets. On board the slave-ship Cymbello is afflicted by bitter despair; as the ship leaves the coast his grief momentarily blinds him to his princely duties. But then, roused by a vision, he understands that his destiny is to vindicate the wrongs of Africa, and thereupon he leads the slaves to rebellion. The ensuing battle is short, fierce, and inevitable in its outcome. On deck, Cymbello is recognised by his beloved who interposes herself between him and certain death; as she dies in his arms he, too, is cut down and killed. The poem ends with a long panegyric in praise of liberty and recalls the noble example of Greece and Rome, long since polluted by man’s coarseness and greed. The muse warns that mankind is destroying its birthright, but promises new hope as the abolitionists rise up to break the chains of slavery and blunt the knives of cruelty. Apparently Roscoe, who numbered some of the African merchants amongst his friends and business associates, was remarkably ignorant of the true situation of the slave trade and of conditions obtaining on the west coast of Africa. How could he be so romantically naive? But Roscoe was consciously putting aside reality to write in accordance with the well-established conventions of his day which required an extreme simplification of the slaver-slave relationship.

Rathbone seldom put pen to paper for publication; nor did his son.
But Edward Rushton frequently wrote on slavery themes. His best-known work, *The West Indian Eclogues*, dedicated to Bishop Porteus of Chester, appeared in 1787 and brought him to the notice of Clarkson and the London Committee. Its form is characteristic of the period, describing slavery through the eyes of Africans who speak the language of cultivated humanitarianism. His poetry is more direct and vigorous than Roscoe’s and contains fewer poetic devices:

Oh! for the pow’r to make these Tyrants bleed!
These, who in regions far remov’d from this,
Think, like ourselves, that liberty is bliss,
Yet in wing’d houses cross the dang’rous waves,
Led by bale avarice to make others slaves:—
These, who extol the freedom they enjoy,
Yet would to others every good deny:—
These, who have torn us from our native shore
Which (dreadful thought!) we must behold no more.

In the first eclogue two slaves converse. Adoma relates how he was cruelly punished by an overseer for attempting to defend his mistress, Yaro, from a beating. Jumba, his friend, counsels revenge. In the second, Adoma is tormented by the fear of retribution if he is caught plotting against his master. He is reminded of the slave who was gibbeted alive for attempting rebellion and took six days of fearful agony in dying. In the third, two new characters appear who inform us that Jumba was betrayed by Adoma and narrowly escaped the clutches of his master only to be killed later in an ambush. In the fourth part, Loanga’s wife, Quamva, is violated by their master. During a thunderstorm he plots revenge. Othello-like, he imagines that his wife has succumbed to the seductive powers of the white man:

. . . Come dark revenge, and death,
And steel my soul to stop a wanton’s breath.

Rushton knew conditions in the West Indies at first hand and his description of the topography and conditions on the plantations is convincing. Yet he does not draw on his experience for his main themes. The description of the gibbeting of a slave seems to be derived from an account of an execution at St Eustacia in 1759 which received wide publicity in abolitionist circles in the 1780s. His account of the violation of Quamva and Loanga’s revenge was apparently inspired by another poem, *The Wrongs of Alooma*, which was published anonymously in Liverpool in 1788 and to which Rushton referred in a footnote to his fourth eclogue, describing it as a true story of an incident in 1655 when a slave took advantage of the British attack on Jamaica to kill his unfaithful wife and her Spanish master. *The Wrongs of Alooma* dresses up the action in heroic style: the African, being of noble birth, does not strike furtively but meets his oppressor fairly on the field of battle. The Spaniard, too, is not without nobility of soul; for as he dies he begs Alooma’s forgiveness. His repentance of his past misdeeds wrings tears from the slave who vanquished him.

In the midst of this outpouring of the Liverpool abolitionist muse, James Currie, another occasional poet, at first preferred a supporting role, merely advising his friends. But in March 1788 a poem composed jointly by Currie and Roscoe appeared anonymously in the London papers. This
was *The African*, originally entitled *The Negroe’s Complaint*, which told the story of Maraton, another African possessed of all the breeding of an English nobleman and all the virtues of an English gentleman. Maraton is torn from his homeland and his mistress, Adila, to become a slave. Thrown into the dank hold of a slave-ship, he emerges from despair after being granted a vision of Adila beckoning him the way to freedom. He resolves to die:

Tomorrow the white man in vain  
Shall proudly account me his slave;  
My shackles I plunge in the main,  
And rush to the realms of the brave.\(^\text{164}\)

The poem consists of twelve stanzas of four lines each, a form intended to make it suitable as a music-hall song. In fact, it was set to music in Liverpool prior to publication. Currie entertained justifiable doubts as to its merits and sent it to an influential friend, Admiral Sir Graham Moore, for his advice. Moore made some slight alterations, changed its title and placed it in what he considered the most fashionable London paper, *The World*. He acceded to Currie’s urgent request that its authorship should remain secret from the editor.\(^\text{165}\) It is uncertain whether the poem (or song) caught on in London, but it was subsequently reprinted in the *Carlton-House Magazine* in 1793 and in *Mrs. Riddle’s Metrical Miscellany* in 1802.\(^\text{166}\) This was Currie’s only known venture into print on the subject.

## NOTES

The research on which this paper is based was undertaken in 1971–4; and I am indebted to the Principal and Council of Edgehill College of Education for granting me study-leave in session 1971–2, to the School of History, University of Liverpool, for affording me facilities as an external research student, and to Dr P. E. H. Hair for supervising my research.

1 Liverpool Public Libraries Record Office (LPL), Samuel correspondence, 920 GRE 2/17, David Samwell to M. Gregson, 11.10.1788. See F. E. Sanderson, ‘Liverpool and the Slave Trade: a guide to sources’, *THSLC*, 124, pp. 154–76, for a full account of source material on Liverpool. Since this publication the LRO has acquired a valuable set of papers relating to one of the town’s most prominent slavers: Letter book of Thomas Leyland, 1786–8, 387 MD 59, amounting to 780 pages and 2,262 letters.


3 James Bandinel, *Some account of the trade in slaves from Africa* (1842).


9 Gomer Williams, *History of the Liverpool privateers, with an account
of the Liverpool slave trade (Liverpool, 1897) (subsequently Gomer Williams).

10 A. Mackenzie-Grieve, *The last years of the English slave trade* (1941).


12 Roscoe of course made his position clear when elected to Parliament in 1806.

13 Edgar Corrie, the corn merchant, wrote to Lord Hawkesbury in favour of abolition in 1788: BM Add. MSS. 38416, ff. 35–7; and his letter was presented as part of the evidence before the privy council. He was not a member of the Roscoe Circle and seems to have been acting entirely on his own account.

14 Their first letter in the Roscoe Papers is dated 1786, but they are likely to have been in contact much earlier. Barton married Maria Done who had once claimed Roscoe’s affections and to whom he addressed his early love poems: she died in 1784.


16 LPL, Roscoe Papers, 920 ROS 239, John Barton to Roscoe, 21.1.1787. Roscoe visited Barton in London the following month.

17 BM Add. MSS. 21254, 7.6.1787. Rathbone was paid £2–12–0 for the charges he incurred in this task.

18 Gomer Williams, p. 570; E. A. Rathbone (ed.), *Records of the Rathbone family* (Edinburgh, 1800), p. 94. E. A. Rathbone describes this as a branch committee of the society, but she is mistaken.


20 His dealings in the slave trade were not entirely voluntary: see *ibid.*, p. 253.


22 Clarkson, 1, p. 413.

23 The last reference I have found to Rathbone and Son supplying timber to the African trade is in 1783, for the third voyage of the bark *Preston*, owned by Thomas and William Earle: Keele University Library, Davies-Davenport MSS. As the Earles had close personal and political ties with the Rathbones, presumably it would have been difficult to refuse them.

24 E. Rathbone, *op. cit.*, p. 27.


32 LPL, 920 ROS 1446, W. Enfield to Roscoe, 14.5.1791.


There is a haziness about Roscoe’s financial affairs which his son’s biography does nothing to dispel. This is partly because the biography is based on the subject’s voluminous correspondence, which
inevitably leads to the depreciation of Roscoe the Liverpudlian in favour of Roscoe the cosmopolitan man. It is inexcusable, however, and does not enhance the father’s memory, that Henry Roscoe should have ignored the important business and social relationship with Thomas Leyland, who broke with Roscoe in 1806 and should have minimised the close association with those, like Thomas and William Earle, who were prominent African traders.

34 See, for example, the letters of John Barton in LPL, 920 ROS 239–57 and BM Add. MSS. 21254–5, ‘Proceedings of the Committee for Abolition’, Minute Books 1 and 2.


37 LPL 920 ROS 1578–82, correspondence on The Life of Leo X.


41 Thornton, op. cit., p. 136, estimates he was earning about £2,000 p.a. towards the end of his career.


43 LPL, Currie Papers, 920 CUR 112; Williamson’s Liverpool Advertiser, 31.12.1792.

44 LPL, Minutes of the Common Council, 6.1.1802.


47 Ibid., p. xx. Apparently no copies of the paper have survived.

48 Ibid., pp. xv–xxiv. He was eventually able to read without spectacles.


50 Ibid., p. 216.


52 Ibid., pp. 24 ff.

53 Ibid., pp. 52 ff. and 77–80.

54 LPL, 920 ROS 4559, William Smyth to Roscoe, 6.12.1796.

55 Letters of Shepherd, op. cit., pp. 86–90.


57 Ibid., 7.8.1787. See also LPL, 920 ROS 245, Barton to Roscoe, 16.6.1787.

58 LPL, 920 ROS 247, Barton to Roscoe, 15.8.1787.

59 Clarkson, 1, pp. 370–2 and 385–8.

60 Ibid., 1, pp. 375–7 and 394–6.

61 Ibid., 1, p. 359.

62 Ibid., 1, pp. 383–4. Three years later Lace was called before the Select Committee of the Commons to explain his conduct, in the course of which he substantiated Clarkson’s account of their meeting:
Clarkson claimed he did not at this stage believe the visitors were abolitionists because Clarkson asked him to find employment for Falconbridge as master of a slave-ship. Both Clarkson and Falconbridge vehemently denied this accusation.

Clarkson, 1, pp. 409–10. This alleged murder attempt has been retold ad nauseam. A recent publication (Jack Gratus, The Great White Lie, London, 1973, p. 28) even embellishes the account by describing the sailors as ‘evil-looking men’ who gave Clarkson ‘bad blows’. On the face of it, it seems unlikely that such an attempt would be made in broad daylight in front of witnesses unless the men were drunk, which Clarkson does not infer. Possibly it was meant to scare him. His final comment—‘I escaped, not without blows, amidst their imprecations and abuse’—would seem to support this. Clarkson was without the stalwart support of Falconbridge on this occasion; a determined bid to kill him by eight or nine men in these circumstances could hardly have failed.

Currie, op. cit., 1, p. 122.

Currie to Wilberforce, 31.12.1787, quoted in ibid., 1, pp. 113–16. Currie mentioned one specific case, of Clarkson’s allegations against ‘Capt. H. of the King Joe’ (this seems to be the ‘King Jos’ [sic], master Josiah Hort, owned by Hort and Miles Barber), which the Committee had asked him to authenticate. The charges, he said, were completely unfounded.

See, for example, LPL, 920 CUR 108, 111 and 113.


LPL, 920 ROS 253, Barton to Roscoe, 6.3.1788. Roscoe was not without support from influential quarters: Bishop Porteus was also a gradualist.

W. Sypher, Guinea’s Captive Kings (1942) (subsequently Sypher), pp. 4–5 and passim.

LPL, 920 ROS 241, Barton to Roscoe, 7.2.1787. No copies seem to have survived.

LPL, 920 ROS 243, Barton to Roscoe, 17.3.1787. Roscoe seems to have suppressed the poem at Barton’s request. Both poem and pamphlet apparently escaped the notice of his son, for they are not mentioned in his biography.

Henry Roscoe, op. cit., 1, p. 83 and note. Again, it was published anonymously.

Gentlemen’s Magazine, 58 (1788), pp. 161–2, citing the Report of the Committee for the Abolition, 15.1.1788, which does not appear in the extant Committee records.

Wilberforce never wrote anything on the slave trade for publication; he approved of petitions to parliament but distrusted what he called ‘systematic agitation’: R. I. and S. Wilberforce, The life of William Wilberforce (1838), 1, p. 184.

LPL, 920 CUR 108, Currie to Sir Graham Moore, 13.3.1788.

LPL, Minutes of the Common Council, 4.6.1788.

Ian Sellers, ‘William Roscoe, the Roscoe circle and radical politics in Liverpool’, THSLC, 120, p. 49.

LPL, 920 ROS 254–6; Henry Roscoe, op. cit., 1, pp. 87–8. The Com-
mittee adjudged Roscoe's contribution to be the work of a master and the best answer Harris received. A second edition was printed early in July 1788.

81 Ibid., p. 123.
82 Ibid., pp. 141 ff.
83 Ibid., p. 211. Roscoe's work, A scriptural refutation of a pamphlet lately published by the Rev. Raymund Harris (London, 1788), does not give the impression of being written by more than one hand, though Harris is so emphatic that he may have had good grounds for this assertion. Certainly he knew Roscoe was concerned in it, though he respects his anonymity.
84 Henry Dannett, A particular examination of Mr. Harris's scriptural researches on the licitness of the slave trade (London, 1788), p. ix.
85 LPL, 920 ROS 256; Henry Roscoe, op. cit., 1, p. 88.
86 The reviewer in the Gentleman's Magazine, 58 (1788), p. 435, described Matthews as 'a sensible, humane, and well-informed writer'. In the same volume, on p. 725, there is a review of an anti-abolitionist pamphlet from Liverpool which begins: 'Let it not be thought, because this address comes from Liverpool, it speaks the sentiments of persons interested in the violation of humanity, as it is now the fashion to call the slave trade.'
87 Ibid., 60 (1790), p. 638.
89 Clarkson, 2, pp. 4–5.
91 For an early examination of this concern, see LPL, 920 ROS 241, 7.2.1787.
92 Life of Wilberforce, op. cit., 1, p. 355.
93 LPL, 920 CUR 106–9, March to April 1788.
94 LPL, 920 CUR 110, Currie to Rev. George Duncan, 5.7.1788.
95 BM Add. MSS. 38416, ff. 35–44; 38310, f. 14b. In particular Currie wanted his name to be concealed from Wilberforce.
96 Clarkson, 1, pp. 389–90. Mackenzie-Grieve, op. cit., p. 253, apparently quoting from the Binns Papers (LPL), states that Binns was called at night to the house of Robert Benson which lay beyond Salthouse Dock, a place notorious for footpads and drunken sailors, but that being suspicious he made inquiries and found the message to be false. This seems to be the 'mischievous plot' to which Clarkson refers.
97 E. Rathbone, op. cit., p. 27.
98 Liverpool University Library (LUL), Rathbone Papers, II.i.46, Rathbone to Greg, July 1799 (?).
99 The local press charitably blamed 'small boys' for this gratuitous violence, e.g. Williamson's Liverpool Advertiser, 30.3.1789.
100 Except, of course, at election times, when free beer was available.
101 From Unfold Father Time, which he wrote in 1790. At the outbreak of the Revolution, Roscoe produced an Ode to the People of France, which was published in Liverpool. He sent a complimentary copy to Fox: H. Roscoe, op. cit., 1, p. 106.
Currie and Roscoe continued to supply information to the London Committee. For example, in 1790 Clarkson wrote asking them to help refute the evidence of Captain Hall and Ambrose Lace before the Commons: *Life of Wilberforce*, op. cit., 1, p. 262.

Currie to Dr W. C. Wells, n.d. but presumably late 1789 or early 1790, quoted in Currie, *op. cit.*, 1, p. 110.

Currie to Dr Percival of Manchester, 7.2.1790, in *ibid.*, 2, pp. 57–8.

H. Roscoe, *op. cit.*, 1, p. 108.

Rathbone, *op. cit.*, 1, p. 265.


C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (2nd ed., New York, 1963), p. 73, claims that Clarkson had a hand in the initial revolt of the mulattoes by bringing the St Domingo deputy, Oge, to London and giving him letters of credit to buy arms: no reference is given.

H. Roscoe, *op. cit.*, 1, p. 91.

F. E. Hyde, B. B. Parkinson and S. Marriner, 'The port of Liverpool and the crisis of 1793', *Economica*, 18 (1951), argue that the crisis was not, in the first instance, a result of the war but a product of the bad harvests of the preceding year and a reduction in circulation when the country banks stopped payments. However, Roscoe and Currie believed it was caused by war and thought it more serious than it eventually proved.

H. Roscoe, *op. cit.*, 1, p. 125. Lord Lansdowne referred to it approvingly in a speech in the Lords. But of all the Roscoe Circle, Currie was the most distressed by the war and complained bitterly to Wilberforce of 'the lamentable star-chamber oppression, produced by the folly and fanatical bigotry of the times': R. I. and S. Wilberforce, *The correspondence of William Wilberforce*, 1 (1840), pp. 95–9. His open letter to Pitt in 1793 under the pseudonym of Jasper Wilson had a wide circulation and ran to several editions in a few months. When Currie's identity became known he was subject to much abuse, some of it orchestrated by George Chalmers of the Board of Trade, and Currie contemplated quitting the country to escape persecution. Wilberforce wrote kindly, advising him to lie low and wait the resolution of the war. He added that the cause of the slaves must suffer too, but, 'If I mistake not, there is one who does not forget them, but is likely to assert their Cause & punish their oppressors': LPL, 020 CUR 54.

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120 LPL, 920 CUR 47, William Smyth to Currie, 10.4.1792.
121 Parliamentary History, 29, debate of 2 April 1792. Of course, Pitt became less forthright after 1793.
122 Rathbone supported him in this, Houlbrooke did not. See LPL, 920 ROS 2154, Houlbrooke to Roscoe, 14.2.1807.
124 Sellers, op. cit., p. 58.
125 House of Lords Record Office, petition of May 1806.
126 LPL, Minutes of the Common Council, 1.4.1807. These two and the other delegates, John Weston and Thomas Hinde, were given a special vote of thanks by the council.
127 Hansard, 6, p. 946. During the debate of 28 February 1807, by which time Roscoe had replaced Tarleton as Liverpool's other M.P.
128 LPL, 920, ROS 4584, Smyth to William Roscoe jun, n.d.
129 LPL, Poll Book and Addresses, Wright and Cruickshank, 1806, p. vi. Thomas Hodgson offered to stand, but withdrew when Roscoe was nominated: ibid., p. 105.
130 LPL, Poll Book and Addresses, Jones and Wright, 1806, p. 8.
131 This is a well-documented election. Four volumes of poll books and addresses have survived, representing all parties, in addition to Roscoe's copious correspondence on the subject, the Rathbone Papers and the local press.
132 LPL, 920 ROS 4381, Shepherd to Roscoe, n.d.
133 LPL, Poll Book and Addresses, Wright and Cruickshank, 1806, p. ix.
134 LPL, 920 ROS 3873-3878. His accounts are not entirely clear, but they name the leading contributors and sums received or promised. It was suggested in 1807 that several thousands of the promised money did not materialise: 920 ROS 3883; but the 1806 accounts show only £1129 outstanding.
136 Gomer Williams, p. 620n. There is no mention of the breach in the surviving Roscoe and Leyland Papers, or in Henry Roscoe's biography.
137 LPL, 920 ROS 2154, Houlbrooke to Roscoe, 14.2.1807.
138 Hansard, 6, pp. 717 ff., debate of 10 February; pp. 940 ff., debate of 20 February. This of course assumes a fair degree of accuracy in the Hansard account.
140 LPL, 920 ROS 4382, Shepherd to Roscoe, n.d.
141 LUL, Rathbone Papers, II i. 157, Roscoe to Rathbone, 19.4.1807. In his diary Wilberforce described Roscoe as 'mild, quiet, unaffected, and sensible': Life of Wilberforce, op. cit., 3, p. 299.
142 LPL, 920 ROS 3058, Rathbone to Roscoe, 28.2.1807; LUL, Rathbone Papers, II i. 157.
143 LPL, 920 ROS 3059, Rathbone to Roscoe, 30.3.1807; and 3060, 22.4.1807.
144 LPL, 920 ROS 1189, Lord Derby to Roscoe, 25.3.1807.
145 LPL, 920 ROS 4386, Shepherd to Roscoe, 3.4.1807; and 4387, 14.4.1807.
146 H. Roscoe, op. cit., 1, pp. 384-5.
147 Ibid., 1, p. 392.
148 Liverpool Chronicle, 6.5.1807. Roscoe gave a similar explanation to the Duke of Gloucester who had offered to support him in the event of a contest: LPL, 920 ROS 1750. Gascoyne also made accusations of intimidation and misrepresentation against Tarleton, no doubt with equal justification.
149 H. Roscoe, op. cit., 1, p. 403; LPL, 920 ROS 1750, Roscoe to Duke of Gloucester, 16.5.1807 (draft); Poll Book and Addresses, Wright and Cruickshank, 1807, p. viii. By comparison with 1806 this is a poorly documented election.
150 LPL, 920 ROS 3883 and 3886.
152 LPL, 920 ROS 1190, Lord Derby to Roscoe, 20.8.1807.
153 Gore’s Poll Book for 1807. It is interesting to note that most of the gentlemen and merchants who voted for Roscoe in 1806 did not switch allegiance, but abstained. Thus the total poll of 2014 is remarkably high in the circumstances.
154 LPL, 920 ROS 4540, Smith to Roscoe, 10.6.1807. Smith absolved Roscoe from the charge of irresolution and over-prudence, though he must have felt that the Liverpool Reformers had given in easily.
155 LPL, 920 ROS 1190, Lord Derby to Roscoe, 20.8.1807.
156 LPL, Minutes of the Common Council, 6.4.1815.
159 Clarkson, 1, pp. 279–80. John Barton told Roscoe that he alone knew of the authorship, but other members of the London Committee evidently knew that it originated in Liverpool.
160 Clarkson, 1, p. 372.
162 The difference in the original story is that the slave took three days to die, not six.
163 Sypher, p. 191. The poem was at one time wrongly attributed to Roscoe, but it seems to be from the pen of Hugh Mulligan, an Irishman who settled in Liverpool and died about 1798–9. There is a tribute to him from Rushton in William Shepherd (ed.), Poems and other writings by the late Edward Rushton (1824), pp. 30–2. Shepherd omits the fourth eclogue from his collection of Rushton’s poems, perhaps because the theme was too indelicate for public taste.
164 Chandler, op. cit., p. 273. Mackenzie-Grieve, op. cit., p. 193, says it was Dr Binns, not Currie, who collaborated with Roscoe on the poem.
165 LPL, 920 CUR 106–8.
166 Sypher, p. 181.