

The historical debate on the abolition of the British slave trade

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From time to time historical themes erupt into controversy. Just such an eruption has taken place recently in the intensive debate on New World slavery and is associated especially with the writings of Tannenbaum, Elkins, Stamp, Davis, Genovese, and Fogel and Engerman. Less in the public eye, but of comparable importance, is the slower-tempo debate over the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807. It is particularly appropriate to review the debate upon this event in the present volume since abolition had important implications for Liverpool. We shall draw especial attention to all that has followed the publication in 1944 of Eric Williams' important and controversial *Capitalism and slavery*,¹ and look particularly at a number of very recent contributions to the debate.

The first major study of British abolition was by Thomas Clarkson, himself an important protagonist, in his two-volume *History of the rise, progress and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade by the British Parliament* (1808). An important key to his interpretation is given in his peroration where Clarkson speaks of the abolition campaign as 'a contest between those who felt deeply for the happiness and the honour of their fellow-creatures, and those, who, through vicious custom and the impulse of avarice, had trampled underfoot the sacred rights of their nature, and had even attempted to efface all title to the divine image from their minds' (2, pp. 580-1). The essence of Clarkson's book is narration of a conflict between good men and wicked. It is invaluable on the structure of the abolition campaign, on its inspiration and grass roots organisation, and is a

useful survey of the parliamentary debates; naturally it represents only the insight of a campaigner.

Thirty years later, and significant for the hardening of historiographical tradition, came the *Life of William Wilberforce* (5 vols.) in 1838 and the associated *Correspondence of William Wilberforce* (2 vols.) in 1840, both the work of Wilberforce's sons, Robert and Samuel. Emphasising the primacy of religious and humanitarian motivation in their subject, the leader of the abolitionists, the result was to confirm in the national consciousness a conviction of abolition as a demonstration of the triumph of altruism.² This conviction was both enshrined in and further fortified by W. E. H. Lecky's famous dictum (in 1869) that 'the unwearied, unostentatious, and inglorious crusade of England against slavery may probably be regarded as among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations'.³

It remained for the earlier twentieth century to elaborate a fully historical approach to abolition and at first this was informed by the Lecky ethos. Especially notable were three contributions by Sir Reginald Coupland. With the publication of *Wilberforce* in 1923, a work which is a general exposition of British abolition as well as a biography, the groundwork was laid of a scholarly interpretation with the emphasis on religious and moral enthusiasm. In the survey entitled *The British anti-slavery movement*, published ten years later in 1935, Coupland accounted for the ending of the British slave trade in this way:

The British slave trade may be said to have been doomed when Sharp, Clarkson, Wilberforce and their little band of propagandists opened their countrymen's eyes to the actual brutalities it involved, when such men of light and leading as Wesley, Adam Smith, Porteous, and Bentham came out against it, and when the House of Commons, headed by Pitt and Fox and Burke, was converted to the principle of Abolition. It is not surprising that the Revolution and the war delayed its achievement. More remarkable, indeed, is the fact that, only twenty years after the campaign had started, while the war was still continuing and at a critical phase, a commercial organisation, so great and old-established, so immensely profitable, buttressed by such powerful vested interests and regarded so recently as a permanent, if regrettable, necessity of European civilization, should have been destroyed.⁴

Last of the three pieces was Coupland's contribution to the second volume of the *Cambridge history of the British empire* (1940), entitled, simply, 'The abolition of the slave trade'. Though still based exclusively on printed sources this article was

a quite close study of its theme. Writing in much the same period, Frank J. Klingberg in *The anti-slavery movement in England* (1926)⁵ followed a broadly similar line to Coupland but briefly suggested that account must also be taken of the inexpediency of supplying slaves to conquered islands—necessarily rivals of the established centres of sugar-production within the empire—as a cause of British abolition. C. M. Innes in *England and slavery* (1934) and H. A. Wyndham in *The Atlantic and slavery* (1935) treated abolition much as Coupland had treated it.

Another work of this period also subscribed to a more or less humanitarian interpretation of abolition but at the same time stressed that between 1763 and 1833 the West Indies were in economic decline. This was L. J. Ragatz, *The fall of the planter class in the British Caribbean, 1763–1833* (1928).⁶ Its 'decline thesis', as it may conveniently be termed, not only came to be generally accepted but had implications for an economic interpretation of abolition which later scholars were to seize upon. In the meantime, however, it would seem that at the scholarly level, the dictum of Lecky was an only slightly extreme form of the view commonly held until about the midway point of the present century, a view elaborated and justified by the Coupland school.

At least a minor shock to the hardening complacency came when C. L. R. James, in his *The black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo revolution* (1938), advanced, albeit incidentally, the thesis that Pitt's abolitionist enthusiasm was subservient to a design of acquiring San Domingo and continuing to stock it with slaves, all part of a global strategy aimed at breaking the French grasp of the Continental market and replacing it with British colonial sugar. The real historiographical change came however with the publication of Eric Williams' *Capitalism and slavery* in 1944. Neither Williams nor other contemporary scholars seem to have known of Franz Hochstetter's study, *Die wirtschaftlichen und politischen Motive für die Abschaffung des britischen Sklavenhandels im Jahre 1806–7*, published at Leipzig in 1905. This is a work in the 'perfidious Albion' tradition of German historiography, and it employs a species of Marxist analysis. But within the limits of its unidimensional approach, it is a good and detailed economic interpretation, stressing *inter alia* the need to note the relevance of changes in the West Indian economy after 1783, and to distinguish both between

action against the British foreign slave trade and action for the supply of slaves to British islands, and between the May 1806 and February 1807 abolition bills. Williams, for his part, argues that from the time of the American War of Independence onwards the traditional role and privileged position of the British West Indies in the supply of tropical produce, above all sugar, was increasingly being questioned in Britain. The British islands could not compete on the European market with the French Caribbean islands, especially the very fertile San Domingo, and it became clearer every year that the natural links of the expanding British economy were with countries outside the system of imperial protection. Pitt sought to reverse the loss of the European market to San Domingo by an international abolition of the slave trade which would ruin the still expanding foreign West Indian sugar possessions, leave relatively unharmed the largely 'saturated' British islands, and pave the way for the recapture of the European market by British East Indian sugar. When the San Domingo planters, out of fear of Jacobinism, white and black, offered the island to Britain, Pitt's zeal for abolition necessarily dried up and the abolitionists could avail nothing. During the Napoleonic wars there was overproduction of British sugar in relation to available markets, such that 'overproduction in 1807 demanded abolition'. Williams does not disregard humanitarianism completely. That would be 'a grave historical error and to ignore one of the greatest propaganda movements of all time. The humanitarians were the spearhead of the onslaught which destroyed the West Indian system and freed the Negro. But their importance has been seriously misunderstood and grossly exaggerated.'

A number of cogent criticisms of *Capitalism and slavery* were made in G. R. Mellor's *British imperial trusteeship, 1783-1850* (1950), particularly in regard to the alleged encouragement of East Indian sugar production by Pitt. Other specific criticisms appeared in the present writer's 1968 article, 'Capitalism and slavery: a critique'.⁸ It was there argued that Williams had certainly performed a valuable service to scholarship by drawing attention to the economic context of the British slave trade as it affected abolition; but that when one came to particular applications of the Williams thesis, especially his account of the impact of the San Domingo events and of Pitt's failure to press for aboli-

tion, and his argument that overproduction afforded an explanation of the 1807 act (not to mention his dismissal of Palmerston's later zeal against the slave trade as spurious), Williams could be shown to have ignored or misused evidence. Above all, he did not attempt a meaningful study of the political process in Britain where the all-important impingement of his allegedly dominant economic forces must be shown to have taken place.

After *Capitalism and slavery*, it was to be another two decades before a burgeoning concern with the intellectual origins of abolition led to the appearance of a book which shifted the debate decisively forwards. But from the mid-thirties a number of significant contributions illuminated specific aspects of abolition very substantially. An Oxford thesis of 1935 by Anne T. Gary on 'The political and economic relations of English and American Quakers' not only examined the structure of English and American Quakerism in the eighteenth century but shed much light on the origins of Quaker abolitionism. An Oxford thesis of 1952-3 by A. M. Rees on 'The campaign for the abolition of the British slave trade and its place in British politics 1783-1807' is also good on the Quaker role, and for the rest is characterised by the judiciousness of its judgments. A Manchester thesis of 1959-60 by E. M. Hunt on 'North of England agitation for the abolition of the slave trade' is a most valuable study of the grass roots of the movement.⁹ Patrick C. Lipscomb first attracted notice with his 1960 University of Texas doctoral thesis and he subsequently distilled his ideas into an article on 'William Pitt and the abolition question: a review of an historical controversy'.¹⁰ As well as being instructive on the numerous parliamentary debates on abolition, and on the political process, Lipscomb has definitively defined Pitt's role, not least in relation to the political and constitutional limitations under which he laboured. Much later, F. E. Sanderson's 1973 article, 'The Liverpool delegates and Sir William Dolben's bill',¹¹ began an examination of the virtually unstudied area of the activities of the opponents of abolition. The following year, on a quite different tack, Robin Furneaux provided a much-needed, well-researched and sympathetic biography of Wilberforce.¹² Meanwhile an overall, if relatively brief, study of abolition had appeared in 1970 in the shape of Dale H. Porter's *The abolition of the slave trade in England, 1784-1807*.¹³ Porter enlightens our understanding in many ways: in his examination of the West

Indian interest and of other dimensions of the political scene, in his emphasis on the role of Prime Minister Grenville in the final passage of abolition, and in his relation of the abolition campaign to M.P.s' sense of the national interest. But Porter gives disproportionately little attention to the crucial, final stages of the abolitionist campaign and, especially, is misled in his acceptance of Eric Williams' notion of overproduction as a key cause of abolition.

Four years before Porter published, the study of abolitionism had been moved decisively forwards by a major book on the intellectual origins of anti-slavery. This was David B. Davis' *The problem of slavery in western culture* (1966).¹⁴ Of course there had been earlier work on the religious and intellectual origins of abolition: one thinks immediately of Sir James Stephen's *Essays in ecclesiastical biography* (1849); of F. T. H. Fletcher's *Montesquieu and English politics, 1750-1800* (1939); of Wylie Sypher's article 'Hutcheson and the "classical theory of slavery"' (1939) and his *Guinea's captive kings: British anti-slavery literature of the XVIIIth century* (1942).¹⁵ But *The problem of slavery in western culture* was the most profound study of the development of European and American attitudes to slavery yet to appear. The work is far more than even a sophisticated singling out of views of slavery: it is a study of changes in attitudes to slavery in the full context of the intellectual history of Europe and America. The book's particular bearing on British abolition consists in the demonstration of the religious (especially Quaker) and philosophical springs of anti-slavery thought in the eighteenth century to about 1770. A major conclusion to be drawn from the book is that by that epoch those who still defended slavery and the slave trade on philosophical, religious, or legal grounds were outnumbered and outweighed by those who rejected any such defence.

One of the few lines of criticism of this book—it was deservedly well received and gained a Pulitzer prize—was that if long on the delineation and analysis of ideas it was short on the explanation of action. This perhaps suggests why a successor volume, *The problem of slavery in the Age of revolution, 1770-1823* (1975), is concerned to relate the abolition of the British slave trade to socio-economic change within British society, and to seek, at this level, explanations of why anti-slavery feeling was

converted into anti-slavery action. The essence of Davis' interpretation of British abolition is best conveyed by quotations.

The new hostility to human bondage cannot be reduced simply to the needs and interests of particular classes. Yet the needs and interests of particular classes had much to do with a given society's receptivity to new ideas and thus to the ideas' historical impact . . . [Abolition] helped to ensure stability while accommodating society to political and economic change; it merged Utilitarianism with an ethic of benevolence, reinforcing faith that a progressive policy of *laissez faire* would reveal man's natural identity of interests. It opened new sources of moral prestige for the dominant social class, helped to define a participating role for middle class activism, and looked forward to the universal goal of compliant, loyal, and self-disciplined workers . . . The use of anti-slavery sentiment in Britain coincided with an urgent domestic problem of labor discipline and labor management . . . Because the slave system was both distinctive and remote, it could become a subject for experimental fantasies that assimilated traditional values to new economic needs. An attack on the African slave trade could absorb some of the traditionalist's anxieties over the physical uprooting and dislocation of labor . . . By picturing the slave plantations as totally dependent upon physical torture, abolitionist writers gave sanction to less barbarous modes of social discipline . . . Abolitionists could contemplate a revolutionary change in status precisely because they were not considering the upward mobility of workers, but rather the rise of distant Negroes to the level of humanity . . . British anti-slavery provided a bridge between pre-industrial and industrial values; by combining the ideal of emancipation with an insistence on duty and subordination, it helped to smooth the way to the future . . . [Thus] the anti-slavery movement, like Smith's political economy, reflected the needs and values of the emerging capitalist order.¹⁶

Not to be overlooked is an important strand in Davis' argument which asserts that British abolition, as a major part of emerging anti-slavery achievement, had profound implications for general reform in human status, that is, for social reform. And this was no less the case if the abolitionists did not themselves always perceive the drift of what they were doing.

One spring of judgment on Davis' thesis in his second work, is whether the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, which inspired the theme that a dominant class needs to assert a moral hegemony, are persuasive. But whether or not one is beguiled by Gramscian ideas in general, in this particular historical analysis doubt must arise. This is because Davis fails to define the dominant class convincingly. The most credible analysis along these lines would presumably have it that the new commercial and industrial classes were in the vanguard of anti-slavery whereas the landed interest

would line up behind the old system of protection with its consequential support of the slave trade (as Eric Williams argued). In fact, the voting figures on the bill for the suppression of the foreign slave trade in 1806 and on the general abolition bill in 1807 simply do not support such an analysis. In the case of the latter, in the Lords the landed interest must have divided about equally and the new classes were unrepresented, while in the Commons the defeated minority was so small and the majority so overwhelming that a class analysis is meaningless. This said, the fact remains that the insights and erudition of this book make it an outstanding work.¹⁷

Very shortly after Davis' second volume was published, work on the abolition began to appear from the pen of Seymour D. Drescher. One such contribution is included in the present volume, but his *A case of econocide: British abolition and economic development*¹⁸ is the statement of his original argument. Drescher begins by challenging the decline thesis of Ragatz and Williams. Although the West Indies were of manifestly declining importance by 1833, Drescher argues that this decline did not begin before *c.* 1820. He invokes overseas trade statistics to demonstrate that the percentage share of the total trade of the British West Indies in the overall long-distance trade of Britain was never as high prior to the quinquennium 1768–72 as it was in that quinquennium, and that it was higher than that level in every succeeding quinquennium up to 1813–17. This is but one statistic which must rule out any interpretation of the abolition of the British slave trade as dictated, or even made possible, by perceived decline. Rather than dying of old age, 'British slavery was still riding the wave of the future' on the eve of abolition; and 'abolitionists were face to face with a dynamic system'. Nor was the slave system identified with the mercantilism with which it was integrally associated by Williams: the slave-traders in particular wanted nothing better than complete free trade. Moreover the abolition measures of 1806 and 1807 were enacted in the context of a wave of mercantilist measures—indeed the first act, abolishing the foreign slave trade, was defended on (though not inspired by) mercantilist grounds. Nor, turning to the presumed positive side of the ledger, can any support for abolition from newly emerging capitalist groups be discerned. 'It seems evident', concludes Drescher, 'that the "economic interest"

theory will not account for either the timing, the occurrence, or the maintenance of the abolition of the slave trade between 1787 and 1820'. The clue to abolition instead lies 'in the mass petitions of the British people between 1788 and 1814 and the "massiveness" of the abolition movement, its ability to mobilize an innovative political pressure group, and to demand potential economic risks'.

In 1975 the present writer published his *The Atlantic slave trade and British abolition, 1760-1810* and believes that he has thrown light on a number of facets of abolition. The early part of the book, a study of the slave trade, is not relevant to our purpose here, but the bulk of the chapters are devoted to the intellectual and religious origins, the politico-economic circumstances, and the politics of British abolition. These chapters first demonstrate that the predominant currents of eighteenth-century thought in Britain had latent anti-slavery implications and that black slavery was specifically condemned by the majority of moral and legal philosophers. The dynamic for actual reform, however, which is so explored as to suggest a not unexciting relationship between religion and reform, was religious, mainly Quaker and Evangelical. The political circumstances which for so long prevented the attainment of abolition are then analysed and the strength of the abolitionists and of their opponents assessed. It is suggested that committed abolitionists and 'West Indians' were about equal in numbers, and that the attitude of uncommitted parliamentarians, and their view of the manner in which abolition would impinge on the national interest, were crucial. The usual importance is attached to the change of ministry in 1806 but the book further argues that the major key to the passage of abolition lies in the decision first to abolish the slave trade to all areas except the older West Indian possessions. The consequential Foreign Slave Trade Act of 1806 was justified by the abolitionists almost entirely on national interest grounds. Its successful passage facilitated passage of the 1807 act, but that act stood four square on the appeal to humanity.

Anstey's book is of course not the last word in the debate, but by virtue solely of its culminating concern in the abolition of 1806-7 it can constitute reasonably the last work considered in this essay. All in all the historiography of abolition has changed remarkably over two decades. A rather crude economic determinism

sought to replace a received view which almost unquestioningly attested the primacy of humanitarianism. The intellectual origins of anti-slavery thought and commitment have been brilliantly examined, and the religious and political dimensions of the British abolition have received substantial attention. The very least result of all this activity is that abolition can no longer be seen as something eccentric in and to British history, but as a process which focused various gathering and potent forces and which may have initiated the wave of subsequent reforms in human status.

NOTES

- 1 Published at Chapel Hill, N. Carolina, reprinted New York 1961, and later, with the same pagination. The place of publication of works mentioned in the text, but without a note, is London.
- 2 Another work of similar strain, but less of a guide for abolition as a whole, was Prince Hoare's *Memoirs of Granville Sharp* (1820), in two volumes.
- 3 W. E. H. Lecky, *A history of European morals* (1869), 6th edition 1884, 1, p. 153.
- 4 Quotation from p. 111: the work was reprinted 1966, with an introduction by J. D. Fage.
- 5 Published New Haven and London.
- 6 Published New York.
- 7 Quotations from pp. 152 and 178: for Williams' view of abolition, see especially pp. 135-53 and 178-83.
- 8 *Ec.H.R.* 2nd ser., 21 (1968), pp. 307-20.
- 9 Theses for D.Phil. (Gary), B.Litt. (Rees), M.A. (Hunt).
- 10 *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*, 12/4 (1967), pp. 87-128.
- 11 *THSLC* 124 (1973), pp. 57-84.
- 12 R. Furneaux, *William Wilberforce* (1974).
- 13 Published Hamden, Conn.
- 14 Published, as is Davis' later volume, Ithaca, N.Y.
- 15 Published Durham, N. Carolina, reprinted New York 1969: Sypher's article is in *Journal of Negro history* 24 (1939), pp. 263-80.
- 16 Quotations from pp. 49, 350, 384-5, 466-7.
- 17 This comment on Davis' second volume is based on a review by the present writer, *E.H.R.* 91 (1976), pp. 141-6. During 1975 two further studies touching on abolition appeared, Michael Craton's *Sinews of empire: a short history of British slavery*, and C. Duncan Rice's *The rise and fall of black slavery*, both good surveys and original contributions to the history of slavery, but ignored here since they have little new to say about British abolition.
- 18 To be published Pittsburgh (1976). Quotations are from a typescript kindly made available by the author.