

Britain's Anti-Slavery Campaigns, 1787-1838

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Focus

British abolitionism emerged rather suddenly in the 1780s; a growing empire of slaves in the Americas and a leading role in the 18th-century slave trade had previously attracted little serious political challenge. In the British West Indies, tensions between resident slaveholders and slave traders had generated contentious battles over taxation of re-exported captives; in some less prosperous North American colonies, such as Georgia, slavery had been initially banned as an incentive to attract British migrants. The clearest precedent for a challenge to slavery as an institution lay in the Quaker communities of Pennsylvania, focused on the



Josiah Wedgwood's famous campaign image of a slave kneeling before an abolitionist.

Delaware Valley, who started to criticise slaveholding and, by 1761, ban slave traders from their Society.

Only a few American Friends went as far as John Woolman in shunning all products involving slave labour at any stage in their production. However, periodic debate of these issues within a religious community eventually stimulated a political challenge to Parliament: in 1783, a group of Friends in London sent a petition to the House of Commons and sustained a modest campaign to insert anti-slave-trade pieces into the periodical press.

Their efforts found little support, however, until they helped found a broader-based Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787. This group included Anglicans, such as Rev. James Ramsay, who had denounced the slave trade based on his own experiences in the Caribbean. Early subscribers included evangelical members of the Clapham Sect, such as Tory MPs William Wilberforce and John Thornton.

The Society also drew on the experience of Granville Sharp, a philanthropist who highlighted the plight of slaves aboard the ship *Zong*, whose crew threw 132 Africans overboard when supplies of drinking water ran low during their 1781 voyage to Jamaica. Sharp had crucially championed the 1772 case of James Somerset, an enslaved man brought from the Americas to England. The judgement of Lord Chief Justice Mansfield in Somerset's case dodged questions about the legality of slavery within England, but forged a widely-held belief that mastery could not be enforced outside of those colonies whose laws positively endorsed the ownership of fellow humans.

Crucially, the Society embraced the young Thomas Clarkson, who had become committed to abolition of the slave trade after answering a 1785 prize essay competition at Cambridge University. Famously, Clarkson realised that the glory he won from his Latin thesis (soon translated into English and published by the committee) was trifling compared to the higher purpose to which he was called by its subject matter.

The choice of essay topic by the University Vice-Chancellor may have owed its inspiration to the religious arguments voiced

by the Quakers and Sharp during these formative years; Clarkson's principal contribution was to see national, public agitation as the best means to secure serious attention in Parliament. Rather than circulating tracts or magazine articles, he set off on tours of the country's leading towns and cities. There, he sought local allies and prepared them to raise petitions at the moments of maximum impact on legislators' deliberations.

Throughout the principal period of public agitation to ban the slave trade, 1787-92, abolitionists made an effort to show that they did not demand – or even support – any law banning slave ownership. Clarkson's instructions to his Scottish emissary, William Dickson, reveal that emancipation was a topic to avoid, along with questions about the exact economic costs of abolition.

Even after the abolition law of 1807, campaigners focused on the peace process with France (through extensive petitioning in 1814), a Slave Registration Act (passed in 1815) to make illegal importation difficult, and further powers for the Royal Navy's campaign to suppress illicit traffickers (throughout the 1820s). Abolitionists had long insisted that abolition of the slave trade would force slave-owners to reduce the high mortality of the sugar colonies by commuting slavery into a gentler, civilising system of labour.

The switch to demanding emancipation and denying any rights of property in human beings did not originate from the anti-slavery movement's London-focused leadership. Their parliamentary leader from the 1820s, the liberal MP Thomas Fowell Buxton, accepted a government focus on 'amelioration', whereby Parliament would ensure colonial compliance with existing legislation and thereby moderate the grossest cruelties in the West Indies.

A radical Leicester dissenter, named Elizabeth Heyrick, published (at first anonymously) her call for *Immediate Not Gradual* Emancipation in 1824. She chastised the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Dominions for accepting merely a statement of intent from the Government. Within a few years, the leaders of the re-named

Anti-Slavery Society had followed her in demanding a Westminster law to terminate slavery, rather than ameliorate it – though they still expected a gradual preparatory programme.

Contention

The relative absence of any moral censure of Britain's slave trade, before the 1780s, and the economic focus of all legislation concerning it speaks to the radicalism of abolitionists' demands. While 18th-century writers might express distaste for slave dealers and stereotype West Indian whites as degenerate *nouveaux riches*, projects of imperial reform did not contemplate abolition as a political possibility.

Indeed, Britain's Caribbean slave-owners were experienced in manipulating colonial tariffs and laws in favour of their sugar business, thanks to paid agents in London and well-organised MPs voicing their concerns. By contrast, there was no precedent for abolitionism, not least because lobbying for trade regulations or property law was usually confined to those with a clear interest in the proposals.

The campaigners of 1787-92 lacked a traditional economic stake in the slave trade. The West Indian lobby challenged the admissibility of early abolitionist petitions to the House of Commons on the basis that the petitioners had no legitimate interest in the matter they raised. In applying religious concerns to a matter of trade policy, abolitionists expanded – geographically and philosophically – the boundaries of the public interest in colonial affairs.

Indeed, one historian has persuasively argued that, during the American Revolution of 1776-83, blame for the slave trade first became a political liability in rhetorical conflicts over Britons' or colonists' greater love of liberty: partisans on either side of this civil war attributed the tyranny of slaveholding to residents of the other side of the Atlantic.

Abolitionist campaigners broke new ground in demanding recognition of some measure of humanity in enslaved Africans – and especially in representing African domesticity, disturbed by the wars stimulated by European demand for captives. Throughout

the 18th century, sentimental literature and plays had presented the personal tragedy of a captured African (invariably a prince, whose enslavement was therefore especially regrettable to the author). Abolitionists went much further in attacking the entire slave system, especially by challenging the myth that slaves were criminals or prisoners of war, deported to civilised European colonies rather than being executed.

It is a grave mistake to cast abolitionists as early racial egalitarians, however. Repetition of the bible's dictum that 'God hath created all nations of one blood' spoke to the slave trade's murderous blasphemy rather than equality. While 18th century notions of human difference were more fluid and situational than we might expect, in light of later essentialist or biological racism, a strong cultural bigotry could safely use skin colour as a proxy for civilisation or barbarism.

Abolitionists, before and after they turned from the slave trade to slavery, expected their reforms to aid a process of what they thought of as 'civilising' Africans; indeed, one common argument suggested that the slave trade hindered the spread of Christianity in Africa and among black West Indians. Few Britons would have imagined freed slaves rising beyond the status of a poor peasantry.

Indeed, many observers have noted that Josiah Wedgwood's famous campaign image – of a slave kneeling before an abolitionist – embodied their supposed roles of subservience and paternalism. Abolitionist efforts to establish a model colony of freed slaves in Sierra Leone soon fell back on white authority and coercive labour to deliver the desired results.

The successful revolt against French colonial rule in Haiti, by black citizens and slaves, did not offer a welcome model for the British West Indies. Campaigners back in the United Kingdom barely acknowledged slave resistance and rebellion as part of their political struggle; rather, the threat of insurrection might be proffered as a risk inherent in keeping, not ending, slavery in Britain's colonies.

In attacking the slave trade rather than slavery, abolitionists respected hackneyed English traditions about the sanctity

of private property. Parliament enjoyed an established prerogative to regulate trade, even if American rebels had innovatively demanded representation alongside taxation. Even so, slave traders protested the extermination of a business long promoted, not discouraged, by parliamentary activity. Long before abolitionists advocated emancipation, they promoted the abolition of the slave trade and amelioration of West Indian labour regimes precisely because they would transform the nature of slavery. So, abolitionist respect for property rights lay in the eye of the beholder, depending on exactly whether an established trade or the disposability of human property should be honoured.

A broader libertarian tradition, stretching self-consciously back to the 1688 Glorious Revolution, lent itself less ambiguously to abolitionists' appeals. However, campaigners found themselves denying the liberties of free-born English slave traders in defence of the liberties of Africans, and so this familiar language required rather novel deployment. Incisively, Clarkson and other authors drew on widespread suspicion of West Indians to depict slavery as corrupting, debasing, and inimical to British traditions.

Hence, abolitionists consistently portrayed their target (whether the slave trade or slave holding) as a long-term threat to liberties in Britain. Appeals to justice, in this sense, complemented the deep religious terms of anti-slavery campaigning. Though the growth of non-conformist dissent had fractured the Church of England's claims to social hegemony, protestant Christianity remained a common cultural touchstone. In applying selective biblical verse and existing theology to colonial slavery, abolitionists turned old tools to new work.

Some parliamentarians found the providential – almost apocalyptic rhetoric – of evangelicals like Wilberforce to be old fashioned: predictions that abolition would stop God unleashing disasters, such as a war-time victory for France, evoked a waning faith in supernatural interventions.

However, more general expectations about God's natural order in the world allowed campaigners such as Clarkson to fall back on the maxim that what was sinful was impolitic, and vice-

versa. This appeal to moral repulsion and religious duty helped abolitionists dodge their opponent's frequent complaints about the imperial wealth and national hazard involved in ending the slave trade or slavery.

Anti-slavery activists, then, tended to prefer to fight on social, moral and cultural issues, defending economic criticisms in general terms or denying their relevance to a religious duty. When Liverpool merchant James Cropper promoted economic arguments for the productive superiority of free labour in the mid-1820s, he worried those allies who feared empirical tests would be a distraction.

More commonly, abolitionists relied on moral claims to lead; the long-term policy advantages of abolition rested on the assertion that such inhuman cruelty and destruction of life could never be a rational policy. In hindsight, the promiscuity of abolitionist arguments was more of a blessing than a curse, since it produced a range of theologies, ideologies, or priorities with appeals to different constituencies of support.

The religious tenor of abolitionism helped shield campaigners from greater state suspicion that their innovative campaigns posed a subversive or revolutionary threat to the United Kingdom. After 1792, Pitt the Younger's repression banning public meetings in response to the fear of regicidal rebellion spreading across the Channel, killed off abolitionist agitation for the duration of the wars with France. However, the support of respectable local and national elites, together with the subversion of pre-existing mechanisms of loyal dissent, especially petitioning, avoided other reprisals or crackdowns.

In this sense, abolitionists worked within the frame of loyal respectability, adapting existing traditions to achieve a surprisingly radical set of goals. The movement's breadth of support meant that a radical such as Thomas Clarkson could work alongside Wilberforce, a close friend of Pitt and defender of order.

Methods

In 1787, when the Society began its public campaign, abolitionists called for abolition of the slave trade through parliamentary

legislation. It is striking how quickly they won their first victory, in the form of Sir William Dolben's 1788 act limiting slave ships to three Africans per ton in a bid to avoid the worst overcrowding (which, parliamentarians acknowledged, might result from news that the trade's future was being debated).

Prime Minister William Pitt proposed a government inquiry in the same year to publicise the facts of the slave trade and resolve disputed facts. The abolitionist victory on his motion to the House of Commons would be a pyrrhic one, since the April 1791 vote on the inquiry's findings rejected abolition by 163 votes to 88. The intervening time had allowed the slave traders and the West India lobby time to offer their own alternative facts and steel MPs against humanitarian demands.

In pressing the interest of all British subjects in the conduct of a particular trade or colonial government, abolitionists already stretched existing norms of popular political participation. Their tactics, in raising such anxieties, stretched the limits of parliamentary sovereignty still further. Drawing on previous outbursts of petitioning in recent decades, such as during the American Revolution or Yorkshire's campaigns for electoral reform, Clarkson and his allies encouraged national petitions to Parliament with tactical timing.

Whatever credit belongs to the London-based Society, the success of abolitionism lies in the provincial communities embracing the cause of slave-trade abolition so suddenly after 1787. Not only did they call meetings to rally inhabitants to petition, but they distributed or developed literature to persuade fellow Britons of their responsibility to end a practice sanctioned by a Parliament which represented all the King's subjects.

For example, in 1789 the group in Plymouth devised and printed a broadside poster featuring the illustrated plan of a Liverpool slave ship, the *Brooks*, with 300 Africans tessellated into the inhuman geometry of a 297-ton ship. They used the horrific image to appeal for funds to subsidise the costs of transporting witnesses to Parliament for Pitt's inquiry. Not only did it conjure the reality of the middle passage better than any prose, but the

accompanying text noted that a second layer of planks held a further 300 in the hold of the Brooks.

This powerful iconography – familiar with us to this day – was paired with Josiah Wedgwood's 'Am I not a man and brother?' cameo image to offer what some scholars consider the first examples of humanitarian visual culture. In texts, abolitionist pamphlets adapted the sentimental tone of 18th-century literature to evoke sympathy for slaves. Plenty of individuals – including Hannah Moore and William Cowper – privately published poetry inspired by the romanticised plight of Africans.

The former slave Oluadah Equiano raised a subscription to publish his *Interesting Narrative* in 1789, often considered the first narrative testimony of slave experience. Though evidence now calls into question the empirical details of his early life – especially his claims to have been trafficked from Africa rather than born in the Americas – Equiano's book is typical of the testimony sought and offered from those with personal experience of Atlantic slavery.

Moreover, parliamentary rejection of abolition in 1791 generated new models of political participation. The radical bookseller Martha Gurney published a pamphlet by William Fox calling on Britons to abstain from the consumption of West Indian sugar and rum, in order to achieve through the shopping basket what elected representations had failed to secure in the lobbies of the Commons. That tone, disrespecting parliamentary deliberation, worried MPs such as Wilberforce and coincided with Pitt's repression of civil disobedience within Britain.

Still, this essay, which identified all consumers as accessories – nay, commissioners – of the crime of slave trading, quickly went through 26 editions. While petitioning had sometimes included men without the parliamentary franchise, abstention from consumer produce involved an even wider range of Britons in direct action: contemporary evidence suggests that many families, led by women's or children's wishes, laid off sugar. Thomas Clarkson later declared that 300,000 families (in a nation of 8 million souls) had participated in the 1790s, though we (and he) have no way of knowing.

This tactic enjoyed further popularity in the 1820s, since Elizabeth Heyrick had placed it at the forefront of her demands for immediate abolition. Unfortunately, when the abolitionist James Cropper invested in alternative South Asian suppliers of sugar (as opposed to complete abstention), he immediately attracted criticism that West Indian emancipation must be a populist front for greedy rival producers.

Anti-emancipationists shunned the populist appeals of their enemies, relying instead on economic and patriotic warnings of disaster. One of their most effective rebuttals involved drawing attention to the conditions of the British poor, supposedly worse off than enslaved Africans. This did not undermine truly popular support for abolitionism, but we should be cautious in assuming anti-slavery campaigners obliterated distinctions of class. Certainly, some committed abolitionists fiercely disliked Tories such as Wilberforce and Pitt. While petitions broadened the political public, especially from the 1820s, the role of women and poorer men remained mediated by husbands or social superiors.

Abolitionists also struggled to avoid tactical splits. At a local level, there is evidence that disagreements over other issues – especially religious controversies such as the emancipation of Catholics – distracted or splintered longstanding anti-slavery alliances. Nationally, a younger group of activists formed an agency committee in 1830 to tour the country, stirring popular pressure on MPs during elections and demanding pledges over how they would vote. While this helped push emancipation into rowdy constituency debates (which traditionally focused on rival candidates' claims to independence and patriotism), it offended parliamentary traditions concerning a deliberative parliament. By 1832, a separate Agency Society split away to campaign for immediate abolition and reject the cautious approach supported by parliamentary emancipationists.

Outcome

While some historians pointed to the rising influence of powerful vested economic interests against West Indian slaveholders,

most scholars now credit the success of anti-slavery campaigns to the impact of popular contention. Even so, the broader economic context and the high politics of elites played pivotal roles in the timing of abolitionist victories, whatever the scale of national support.

The abolition of the slave trade (1807) during the Napoleonic wars came long after the petitioning and abstaining activism of 1787-92. The *de facto* suppression of rival European slave traders by British naval supremacy (after the 1805 battle of Trafalgar) made abolition less risky in the international context. However strong the continuing influence of pre-war popular agitation, the passage of slave-trade abolition illustrated the insider tactics of parliamentarians and campaigners who pushed, first, to abolish the supply of slaves to foreign colonies and, then, to close down Britain's trade entirely.

The Emancipation Act (1833) was more clearly the climax of popular campaigning rather than insider lobbying. In some ways, the tone of the final parliamentary debate reveals the extent of anti-slavery's ideological victory, as opponents felt obliged to frame their points in terms of gradualist caution rather than defending slavery as an institution. Yet, the Whig government and anti-slavery leaders in Parliament sought to see a peaceable, sensible transition from slavery to freedom; they accepted an intermediary stage of so-called 'apprenticeship' for black freed people to work, without wages, for up to six years.

More radical abolitionists, such as those in the Agency Society, opposed the case for £30 million compensation to be paid to West Indian slave owners. While such reparations rewarded – and acknowledged – the sin of owning fellow humans, other campaigners accepted the rights of property or highlighted the nature of colonial slavery as a *national*, not *individual*, sin – something which had long justified abolitionist interest in the sins of their countrymen. Joseph Sturge and other veterans from the Agency Society successfully campaigned for the premature end of apprenticeship in 1838, using the threat of black resistance to terminate this slavery by another name.

Such disagreements mask broader points of consensus over the other terms of Britain's very conservative revolution against slavery. Abolitionists rarely imagined racial equality, but sought the political and religious freedom required for labourers to gradually improve themselves. Criticism of West Indian tyranny over black Britons would re-emerge later in the century, in controversy over the brutal suppression of the 1865 Morant Bay rising in Jamaica. However, the continuing British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society was perfectly comfortable with supporting the expansion of empire in Lagos (1861), the Gold Coast (1872), or Uganda (1892).

While anti-slavery sentiment became a point of patriotic pride in Victorian Britain, few people could agree on what abolitionism meant after emancipation. This made for a confusing clash of competing anti-slaveryes, as well as varied attempts to appropriate or monopolise the legacy of a successful campaign. A wide variety of political campaigners aped the tactics of anti-slavery activists, using petitions, propaganda, and parliamentary pressure.

Despite significant female participation during Britain's campaigns, there is no comparably clear link to women's rights activism as we find in the United States; even if Josephine Butler's campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts consciously claimed the Victorian mantle of 'abolitionism', following her anti-slavery father, we have no equivalent of the 1848 Seneca Falls conference held by American women who had met opposing slavery.

In roughly 50 years (1787-1838) abolitionists enjoyed considerable success. But the halting nature of their progress (with a wartime hiatus in 1793-1805 and tactical confusion in 1815-1824) underlines the contingency of this success. Moreover, modern audiences should recognise the limits of anti-slavery – which was not anti-racism or anti-colonialism – and the patchy legacy for popular politics in modern Britain.

Further reading

Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006)

Nicholas Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-Ownership, Compensation And British Society at the End Of Slavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery* (Macmillan, 2005)

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Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* (Ashgate, 2009)

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