

Understanding Slavery Initiative

The Campaign for Abolition

Complaints about the slave trade were unusual before the mid-18th century. Although details of its harshness were well known (not least from information provided by the thousands of sailors who worked the slave ships), any moral qualms were off-set by the trade's unquestioned benefits.

The maritime nations involved were keen to promote their own share of the trade and to hinder their rivals. In addition, planters and colonial officials recognised that the wealth flowing from the plantations depended on a regular supply of Africans to work on the plantations. To suggest that the slave trade was wrong – immoral or un-Christian – was to threaten the creation of material well-being. Why challenge a form of trade that clearly benefited the Europeans and their colonists?

Yet from the earliest days of the trade, some voices had been raised against it, suggesting that there was something ethically troubling about it. Catholic churchmen saw problems with it in terms of religion, and others were deeply concerned by the sheer brutality involved. These objections went unheeded, however, in the rush to advance and expand plantation prosperity based on African slave labour.

Religion and revolution

All this began to change in the late 18th century. Quakers had been questioning the morality of slavery since the days of their first leader George Fox in the 1670s. The issues posed by trading in humanity surfaced regularly in their debates and writings. In particular, American Quakers, who saw slavery at first hand, were roused to opposition by the campaigning of Anthony Benezet. It also had a wider impact. For example, Benezet's writings influenced English evangelist John Wesley who, in turn, swung the growing body of Methodists behind the idea of ending the slave trade.

The broader question of slavery and the slave trade took on a new urgency during the conflict between Britain and her American colonies that began in 1776. Debates about political and social rights and who should have them were at the heart of the American Revolution.

In Britain itself – now the dominant force in the transatlantic slave trade – the question of slavery had already been publicly raised by the radical gadfly Granville Sharp who, from 1765, had been campaigning about slavery there. In a series of legal cases, including the one resulting from the massacre aboard the slave ship *Zong* he publicised the broader issues about the slave trade. But his was a solitary crusade, directed primarily at stopping African people being returned, against their will, from England to the slave colonies.

Thomas Clarkson

During the course of the American war (1776–83), religious antagonism towards the slave trade increased. At Cambridge University in 1785, two years after the Revolutionary war, 25-year-old Thomas Clarkson won an undergraduate essay competition on the topic 'Is it lawful to enslave the unconsenting?', which had been set by an abolitionist vice-chancellor. Translated into English from the original Latin and published by the Quakers, it became an early and significant rallying point against the slave trade.

Clarkson was then introduced to London Quakers keen to see the slave trade ended. When the same men formed the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, Thomas Clarkson, though not a Quaker himself, agreed to lead an abolition campaign in the country at large. His was to be a critical role.

The importance of the Quakers and Nonconformists

In those early months of the formal abolition movement, the Quakers were vital. They had an active London-based core of individuals with important links to Quakers across the country. In effect, they put their own national organisation at the disposal of the new abolitionist movement. And that organisation was run efficiently, with active local groups, all of them literate, and with publishers in London and the provinces keen to print and distribute appropriate literature.

Other churches associated themselves with the movement, notably the relatively new Nonconformist chapels. Methodist and Baptist congregations joined the abolitionist ranks, and via meetings held by these religious groups, the abolitionist message reached people normally excluded from conventional political activity.

Indeed the spread of Nonconformity in the new urban and industrial communities enabled the abolition message to reach large numbers of working people – both men and women – who were traditionally barred from such things. Abolition began to seep into places untouched by active politics, and herein lay the basis for the most striking feature of abolition after 1787: its remarkable popularity, which surprised even those involved.

Abolition of the trade, not of slavery itself

The London Abolition Committee was keen to present its arguments to Parliament. Indeed only Parliament could answer the abolitionists' demands. The abolitionists decided not to press for an end to slavery itself (though some members of the committee wanted total emancipation). Instead they opted to demand the abolition of the slave trade, which seemed more practical and manageable. After

all, the bulk of the slave ships left from British ports, and Parliament could regulate – or ban – the movement of shipping from Britain itself.

Yet even that was a massive task. Abolitionists needed an influential spokesman in Parliament, a man who knew his way around the corridors of power, who could impress Parliament, and whose careful judgement would not be doubted by others. William Wilberforce was the natural candidate.

The opposition

To persuade Parliament to end the British slave trade, the abolitionists had to win over opinion in both the Commons and the Lords. But they faced resolute opposition from powerful interests in Parliament, especially in the Lords, and in the country at large. After all, major commercial interests were determined to see the slave trade continue. Merchants, shippers, financiers, planters, colonial officials – all these and more saw their future livelihoods tied to the slave trade.

Thus, the abolition campaign had to overcome this powerful sectional group – which had its own spokesmen in Parliament – and the part of the general public who opposed them. In 1787, the slave trade lobby felt confident that their arguments and their economic position were secure. So unassailable did the slave trade (and slavery) seem that few could have imagined how effective and how quick the abolitionist campaign would prove to be. From 1787, the abolitionists soon outflanked the slave trade lobby.

The public campaign

The abolition movement operated on two levels. First, there was the parliamentary campaign led by Wilberforce, but the real engine behind abolition was its public following. This campaign was led by Thomas Clarkson who quickly transformed himself from a young researcher, initially destined for a clerical career, which had been won over to abolition by what he had read, into a hugely influential speaker and persuader. It was his empirical research, carried out among sailors in British slave ports, that yielded astonishing and irrefutable data about the slave trade.

The popular and influential Clarkson covered 35,000 miles between 1787 and 1794, lecturing wherever he went and gathering data for further use in the cause. He spoke to packed audiences in churches, chapels and meeting halls. At the dockside, sailors told him the squalid details of life (and death) on the ships. In addition, ships' documents revealed that the slave ships, far from being a nursery for the Royal Navy, devoured sailors in extraordinary numbers. They both violated the Africans and killed off or crippled the seafarers.

Information and propaganda

Clarkson built up a list of experienced men who had spent time on the slave ships so, when Parliament, prompted by Wilberforce, began its official scrutiny of the trade; he was able to marshal persuasive witnesses to add their voices to the abolitionist cause. What those men said – about the ships and their sailors, about the nature of enslavement on the African coast, about African rebellion and the ensuing violent repression, about the miseries and data of the Atlantic crossing all added up to a picture of systematic brutalisation that shocked even those already opposed to the trade. In the process, more and more people were persuaded that here was a form of trade that was hard to justify – even though it yielded such material bounty to Britain, among others.

With the launch of the abolition campaign in 1787, information about the slave trade found its way into all corners of British life. In large part, it did so because of the remarkable propaganda campaign orchestrated by the abolitionists.

Their most persuasive weapon was the printed material distributed across the country, free, by local abolitionists. Tracts published in London were reprinted and distributed in the provinces. Local sympathisers put their own thoughts in writing, in pamphlets or as contributions to local newspapers. Older abolitionist writing was reprinted, new lectures were printed, and evidence given to parliamentary committees was published. The volume of printed abolitionist material was staggering. And so too was the number of people turning out to hear abolitionists speak against the trade. They filled chapels and lecture halls to overflowing, eager to hear the abolitionist message.

A new argument

On his lecture tours, Clarkson carried with him a chest filled with commodities and products from Africa. Dozens of items were paraded before his audiences – cotton, peppers, hides, wood, dye, and African artefacts – all to show that Africa had more to offer the outside commercial world than its enslaved humanity. Normal trade could readily replace the trade for slaves.

The more Clarkson talked to men who had worked on the African coast, the more commodities he added to his chest. Here was a new argument in the denunciations of the slave trade. Not only was the trade cruel and un-Christian, but it also blocked the development of more normal forms of trade. To those who said that abolition of the slave trade would bring about economic disaster, Clarkson (and, later, others) answered that normal trade with Africa would flourish – if only the slave trade were abolished.

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