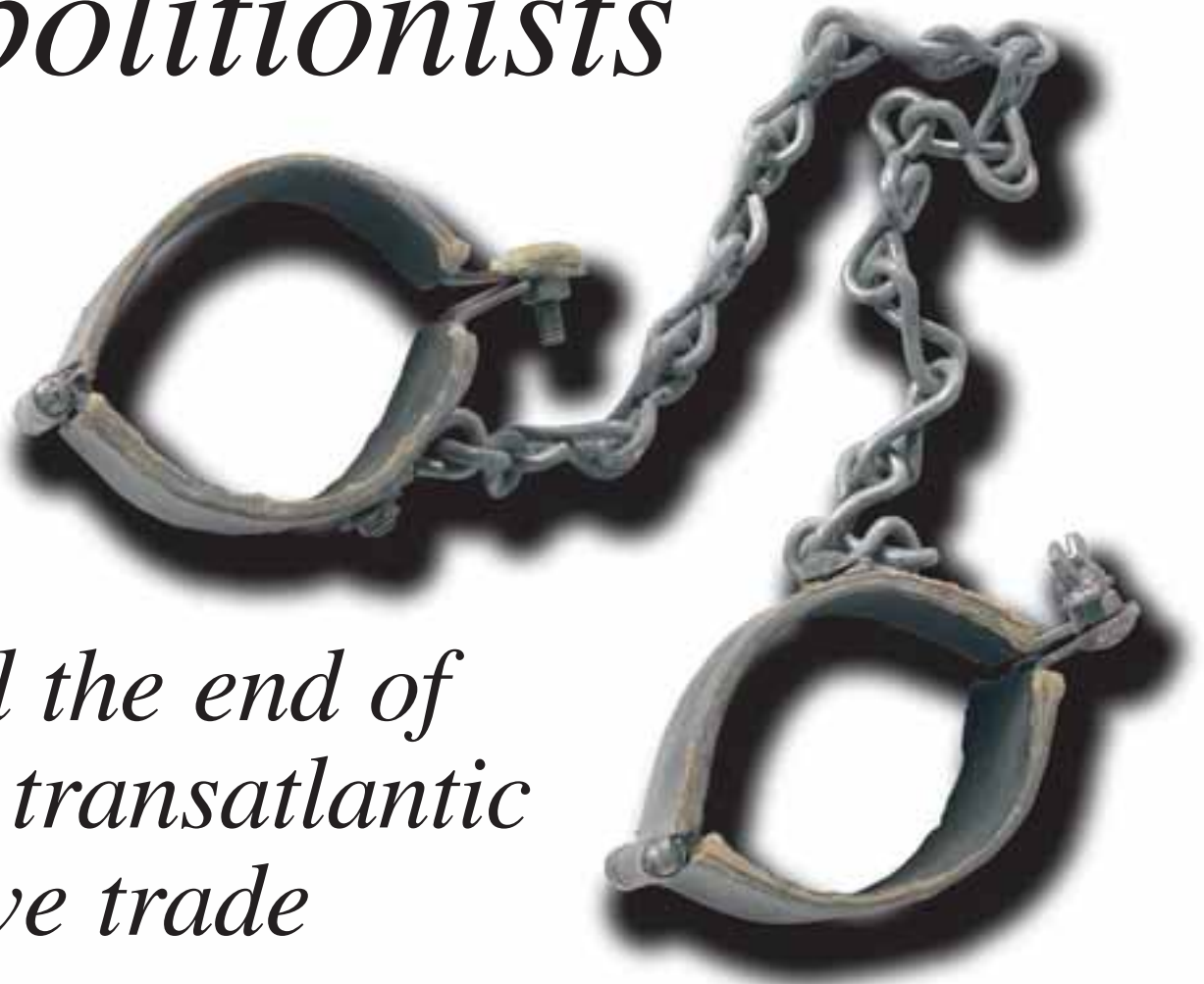


Black abolitionists



and the end of the transatlantic slave trade

'They will remember that we were sold but they won't remember that we were strong. They will remember that we were bought, but not that we were brave.'

William Prescott, former slave (speaking in 1937)

The shameful truth

The 2007 commemoration of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act (1807) gives the Church an opportunity to address the controversial and painful truth that whilst a number of Christians, both Black and White, mobilised the first mass human rights movement to bring about abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, many of their Christian brothers and sisters were committed to maintaining the trade in enslaved Africans.

Most Christian denominations supported the slave trade. Some, such as the Quakers and the Church of England, held slaves at some point during the 17th and 18th centuries. In general, British planters opposed the idea that their slaves should be exposed to Christianity because they feared instruction in the English language would allow their African chattel to plot sedition and create unrest. So much was this fear in evidence, that on plantations bequeathed to the Society of the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in 1710, with the then Archbishop of York and Bishops of the Church of England as managers, not a single slave was baptised for over 120 years, despite the expressed wish of the benefactor of the legacy, Colonel Codrington.

Nonetheless, a number of enslaved Africans did learn to read and write and demonstrated that they were capable of organising themselves in the struggle for their own freedom. To suggest other-

wise is to maintain the debate about the superiority of one group and the inferiority of another.

Emancipation and insurrection

For enslaved Africans the struggle for freedom began at the very moment of their capture. Many threw themselves overboard from the ships transporting them to a strange land. Upon arrival in the Americas they sought countless ways to escape rather than remain bound in chains, flogged as common criminals or branded like animals to work until they literally dropped or died. These were a proud people who came from their own forms of civilisation but now found their lives sacrificed to a system that stripped them of their dignity and abused their humanity. In essence, the transatlantic slave trade was a barbarous mechanism by which a mostly Christian, overwhelmingly European plantocracy 'created' wealth.

Some missionaries preached that Christianised slaves would 'seek their reward in heaven.' But such a message was insufficient to combat the earthly cruelty of whips and chains.

Rebellion was an endemic feature of chattel slavery during the three centuries the institution endured in the colonies. If we think of the 20th century and the many groups that fought for self-governance such as Indians, Kenyans and South Africans, it is clear that the human spirit will always rise up to liberate itself from occupation or captivity, whether it is by violent methods or intellectual means.

Even before setting sail, Africans were reported to have blown up the slave ship *Le Couleur* on the Coast of Guinea (*York Herald*, 31 March 1792). In the West Indies plotting, rioting, and running away were just three ways in which enslaved Africans challenged their condition. A group known as the Maroons resisted British efforts to dislodge them from their mountain hideout in Jamaica. They remained an uncontrolled threat to plantations until they won their freedom from Britain.

At times insurrection completely destroyed the planters' interests as in Grenada in 1795 when slaves pillaged plantations and killed their owners. Sometimes plantation owners successfully made the case for military reinforcements from Britain to put down rebellions, as was the case in St Lucia and Guadeloupe. On other occasions, as in Tobago

When slavery was finally abolished in 1833, the Bishop of Exeter received £12,700 in compensation for his 655 slaves



After a long working life in the City of London in Trade Mark management, Linda Ali returned to the University of York where she completed a Masters in History concentrating on 'Black Presence in Britain' and, in 2002, she was employed by the National Archives to research and write for an online exhibition of the same title. She is now conducting research on York and Yorkshire's connection with the slave trade and abolition for a travelling exhibition to be shown in schools during the 2007 Bicentenary Commemoration of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act.

Linda is a member of the House of Laity of the General Synod, the *Set All Free* executive and is Deputy Chair of USPG (United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel).

Linda was Churchwarden at Christ Church Streatham Hill London until 1997. When she relocated to York she began worshipping at Heslington Church (an Ecumenical Partnership) where she also held office as Churchwarden for four years. As a member of General Synod, Linda also participates on Deanery and Diocesan Synods.

on the plantations belonging to the Lascelles family of Yorkshire, planned conspiracies were quashed before they got out of hand.

Planters ensured that local laws were sufficiently severe to prohibit slaves from running away. However, archives across Britain hold newspapers from the 18th and 19th centuries containing articles demanding the return of runaways, often for a reward: 'runaway from master with pock-holes in his face'; 'black about 17 years with short woolly hair'; 'runaway from his master a Negro boy, Mr Beckford in Pall Mall will give a handsome reward.'

Many escaped to Cuba where they believed they would earn their freedom after embracing the Catholic faith. Spanish colonies saw an opportunity to convert 'the heathens' because Anglican planters were opposed to baptism for their slaves. Ignatius Sancho, a freed slave, wrote: 'Few Englishmen possessed charity enough to admit dark faces into the fellowship of Christianity.'

Resistance and freedom

Religious meetings were the only gatherings allowed for slaves and Sam Sharpe used these gatherings to share his vision of freedom with his fellow slaves. Sam Sharpe was a respected Baptist Deacon in Jamaica. He took very seriously the teachings of the Bible that all are equal in the sight of God and believed he was equal to his master. Sharpe travelled around the island preaching against the inhumane treatment meted out to slaves but in gathering support for his movement he insisted on non-violent action. He encouraged



Mola (left) and Yoka (right). Severed limbs were 'proof' that uncooperative or run-away slaves had been 'punished'

The story of those who worked tirelessly to end slavery in the 19th century cannot be told without giving due prominence to Black abolitionists

enslaved Africans to stop work unless they were paid for their labour. A few among them were unable to suppress their anger and, despite Sharpe's plea, the action turned violent. Over £1 million worth of damage was done to property; 200 Africans and 15 White men were killed. Sharpe was captured and just before his execution said, 'I would rather die than live in slavery.' After his death, Sam's owners were paid 16 pounds and 10 shillings as compensation for their 'lost property'.

Freedom writers

Violence was not always used as a means of emancipation. In the 18th century a number of Africans used intellectual means to promote the message of abolition. One such African was Olaudah Equiano who learned to read and write as a way of improving himself and charting a way out of slavery. Equiano was born in Benin in 1745; enslaved in 1756 and taken to Barbados and then Virginia; bought by a British Naval Officer in 1757; and baptised in London in 1759. In 1789 he published his autobiography: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Equiano travelled around Britain, using his book to campaign for the immediate abolition of slavery. He worked with the English abolitionists, petitioning Parliament against what he described as 'unchristian behaviour.' Knowing George III and his son were very firmly in the pro-



Enslaved Africans are shackled and forced below deck



Liberated slaves in Saint Domingue hang their oppressors

slavery camp, Equiano wrote a letter to Queen Charlotte appealing to her sympathetic nature.

Equiano's contemporaries also used their writing skills to advance the abolitionist agenda. Ignatius Sancho taught himself to read and found support for his work in London's fashionable literary circles. With help from Equiano, in 1787 Ottobah Cugoano published: *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*. By now these Black abolitionists, fully conversant with the Scriptures, were able to demolish the pro-slavery claims that 'slavery had divine sanction' and 'Africans were by nature suited to slavery.' Cugoano wrote: 'Any man who buys another and compels him to slavery without any agreement... is a robber and a defrauder... it is the duty of the [enslaved] man who is robbed in that manner to get out of the hands of the enslaver.'

Black women also added their contributions to the abolition movement by means of their writing. Phyllis Wheatley was captured from Senegal c1753 at the age of eight and sold to a wealthy family in Boston, Massachusetts. She had an aptitude for learning languages and was encouraged by her more humane owners to develop her writing skills. In London she published a collection of poems. Mary Prince was assisted to write about her painful experiences to spread the anti-slavery message in a way that appealed to women, many of whom later organised anti-slavery societies throughout Britain.

Slaves in British colonies were encouraged in their acts of resistance when enslaved Africans in the French colony took control of a large part of the island of Saint Domingue. At a time when the Napoleonic wars were being fought out in the

Caribbean Seas, French planters offered the island of Saint Domingue (Haiti) to England in 1791 and fierce battles raged between the two states for this prize which became known as the world's sugar bowl because it was the largest sugar producer in the 18th century.

This was also a time when Tom Paine's ideology of liberation and equality travelled across the seas from the Sans Culottes in Paris to the American war and to this small island. Revolution was surely in the air when Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave, led an army of enslaved Africans to defeat both the French and British and helped to establish the first Black republic. In August 1793 L'Ouverture decreed the liberation of slaves and France had no alternative but to endorse this formally by freeing all slaves in its empire. Although L'Ouverture was later captured and imprisoned, the Saint Domingue revolution was the most significant action by 18th century Black abolitionists with some 50,000 French soldiers killed, more than at Waterloo.

Ignatius Sancho, a freed slave, wrote: 'Few Englishmen possessed charity enough to admit dark faces into the fellowship of Christianity.'

The Clapham Sect

Slave trading was one of the most lucrative investments for any would-be entrepreneur wishing to be promoted to the nobility. But, however hard the traders tried to justify their activities, White campaigners in America and England condemned the inhumane trafficking. The first signs of opposition to the trade came from American Quaker circles in a speech by George Fox. John Woolman, another American Quaker brought the abolition message to England in 1772. There after, Christian men and women in England, known as the Clapham Sect, committed their lives to work tirelessly towards abolition.

A few days before he died in 1791, John Wesley wrote to the young William Wilberforce, stating: 'Unless God has raised you up for this very thing [the abolition of slavery], you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils... go on in the name of God and in the power of His might till even American slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun shall vanish.'

At a time when most of England knew virtually nothing about slavery, Rev Thomas Clarkson

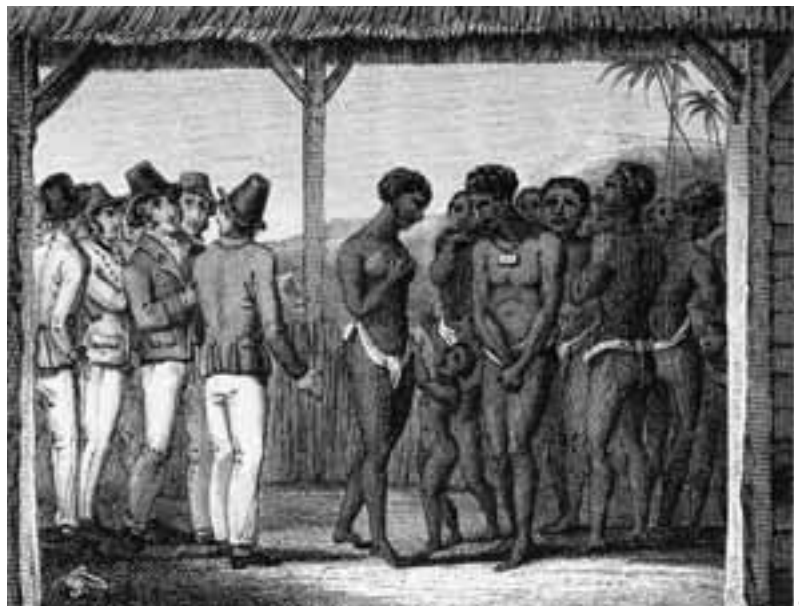
By all means, thank God for the work and witness of White abolitionists like William Wilberforce. But we should also give thanks for the work and witness of Black abolitionists like Mary Prince, Phyllis Wheatley, Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano

plunged his efforts into gathering evidence about the scandal of how British captains, among whom were John Newton (a later convert and abolitionist) and those on Royal Navy ships, transported millions of Africans across the Atlantic. Clarkson's contemporary and friend, Granville Sharp – whose grandfather was Archbishop of York – was also engaged in a solitary legal battle to prevent West Indian slave owners from taking enslaved Africans out of England by force.

While Sharp pleaded for immediate abolition, Wilberforce and his colleagues – fearing the strength of the pro-slavery lobby in Parliament – argued for gradual abolition.

The pro-slavery lobby

Whilst Black and White abolitionists busied themselves with petitioning Parliament against the 'disgraceful traffic', their adversaries argued that the slave trade was a European economic adventure. The pro-slavery lobby included merchants, shipbuilders, financiers and plantation owners, known as the West India Committee. Liverpool alone spent over £10,000 on lobbying Parliament in favour of maintaining the transatlantic slave trade.



Slaves were stripped before being auctioned to fully-clothed Europeans

Pro-slavers including Robert Norris, Lord Rodney and Sir Peter Parker told The Privy Council that ‘slaves had sufficient room and provision on board ships, they were well fed and clothed, and amused themselves with dancing.’ They went on to argue that ‘the [transatlantic] journey was one of the happiest periods of a Negro’s life.’

Fortunately, Equiano was able to expose these accounts as nothing more than lies. From personal experience he was able to describe conditions on board slave ships as ‘a multitude of Black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow.’

Clearly, merchants had the ears of a great many Parliamentarians in the House of Commons such as Colonel Banastre Tarleton (MP for Liverpool) and the Duke of Clarence (son of George III). A significant number of Bishops in the House of Lords were among those in favour of maintaining the slave-owning plantation system. They argued that any move to abolish the trade would result in planters being ruined or massacred. Their interest was substantial. When slavery was finally abolished in 1833, the Bishop of Exeter received £12,700 in compensation for his 655 slaves. The family of William Gladstone (British Prime Minister 1868–74, 1880–85, 1886 and 1892–94) earned over £41,000 in compensation for slaves freed from their plantations in Demerara (now Guyana). The strength of the pro-slavery lobby ensured that when William Wilberforce (MP for Hull) tabled his abolitionist Bills in 1789 and 1791 they were soundly defeated in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

Winning the argument

Slave transporters also tried every trick in the book to secure as much as they could for their African cargo. Equiano brought the horrors of the *Zong* incident to the attention of his friend, Granville Sharp. Captain Collingwood ordered 130 sick Africans to be thrown overboard in batches when he lied about the low level of supplies on board his ship. Equiano was confident that Granville Sharp would take this case through the courts as

The family of William Gladstone (British Prime Minister 1868–74, 1880–85, 1886 and 1892–94) earned over £41,000 in compensation for slaves freed from their plantations in Demerara (now Guyana)



© Anti-Slavery International

Toussaint L'Ouverture defeated both the French and British armies

confirmed by Sharp’s own comment reported in a London newspaper ‘Gustavus Vassa Negro called on me with an account of 130 Negroes being thrown live into the sea, from on board an English (Liverpool) slave ship’. Collingwood’s criminal behaviour went unpunished and attracted a moving comment by Ottobah Cugoana: ‘Our lives are accounted of no value... we are doomed to destruction as the beasts that perish.’ Despite failing in court, there can be no doubt that the widely-publicised *Zong* case touched a great many English people and helped to take the abolition debate forward. An amendment Bill finally succeeded in 1792 calling for a gradual end to the slave trade. It took 15 years before the British Parliament finally prohibited the carrying of slaves in any British ship and even then there were dissenters. The Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed on 25 March 1807, having been approved by the House of Lords (by 100 to 34) and the House of Commons (by 283 votes to 16).

Even then, enslaved Africans still had to wait a further 30 years to achieve full emancipation throughout the British Empire. Nevertheless, the 1807 result was a turning point. By that time a grand coalition of assorted Christian abolitionists – Black and White; female and male; those pursuing political means; those advocating non-violent resistance; and those leading armed rebellion – had emerged as champions.

Lessons learned

The story of those who worked tirelessly to end slavery in the 19th century cannot be told without

giving due prominence to Black abolitionists. By all means, thank God for the work and witness of White abolitionists like William Wilberforce. But we should also give thanks for the work and witness of Black abolitionists like Mary Prince, Phyllis Wheatley, Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano.

We should make no mistake: the transatlantic slave trade made the UK wealthy and powerful, and it made the Church wealthy and powerful. Profits from the slave trade paid for the construction or refurbishment of many public buildings, including churches and cathedrals, town halls and public libraries, schools, colleges and universities. Today, in so many ways, the UK population still benefits from the forced abduction, inhumane treatment and unpaid labour of African women and men centuries before any of us were born.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that in a fallen world, we should find Christians on both sides of the slavery debate two hundred years ago. Yet, we cannot help but wonder how our Christian forebears failed to accept the truth we accept so easily today: slavery and human trafficking is incompatible with the Gospel of Christ Jesus. Surely, we reflect, if we follow Jesus' command to love God and to love our neighbours, how can we condone their enslavement and exploitation? How can we condone their degradation and brutalisation?

Historians do not guide history, but they can and do help us all to learn from history. What can we learn today from the history of the abolitionist movements of the 18th and 19th centuries? What does God want to teach us, I wonder, about our response (or lack of it) to the new and ancient forms of slavery which are all too present in the 21st century?

■ Linda Ali

Organisations

Anti-Slavery International

Many people think slavery no longer exists. Yet we know that in the world today at least 12 million men, women and children are forced to lead lives as slaves. In 2007 we have a huge opportunity to open people's eyes to the realities of modern-day slavery and to engage them in the struggle for its ultimate eradication.

Anti-Slavery International was founded in 1839 by the same abolitionists who led the campaign against the transatlantic slave trade in 1807 and fought for the abolition of slavery in 1833. We continue to work for an end to all forms of slavery throughout the world and are the leading organisation in this field.

Anti-Slavery International's *Fight for Freedom 1807–2007* campaign seeks to revitalise the abolitionist spirit of the past and harness it for the



eradication of slavery today. We are also calling for measures to better understand the transatlantic slave trade; action to tackle the legacies of the trade in enslaved Africans, such as racism and discrimination; and the development of countries affected by the transatlantic slave trade.

For further information and to sign the 'Fight for Freedom Declaration', visit www.antislavery.org/2007

Anti-Slavery International, Thomas Clarkson House, The Stableyard, Broomgrove Road, London SW9 9TL

T: 020 7501 8920 F: 020 7738 4110

E: info@antislavery.org W: www.antislavery.org

Set All Free

Set All Free has been established by Churches Together in England to commemorate the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 2007 in ways which challenge modern society to engage with Christian values. The project aims to highlight how the abolitionists' values can transform our relationships on an individual, community and society level.

Set All Free has a holistic approach to the bicentenary, aiming to:

REMEMBER

- the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade
- the abolitionists – Black and White; male and female; mostly Christian
- the role of the Church in both slavery and abolition

REFLECT on the consequences of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery on:



- racism
- under-development
- commerce

RESPOND to legacies of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade by:

- taking action to end modern forms of slavery
- working to effect healing and reconciliation

Set All Free, 27 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HH

T: 020 7529 8141

E: info@setallfree.net W: www.setallfree.net

References

Anti-Slavery International (2005) *1807–2007: Over 200 years of campaigning against Slavery*.

Darling, C. (1884) 'Mr Gladstone and the Slave Trade', *The Standard* (London, newspaper), 5 February 1884.

Fryer, P. (1984) *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*. London: Pluto Press.

James, C.L.R. (1980) *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Saint*

Domingue Revolution. London: Allison & Busby.

Hart, R. (1980) *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery Vol 1 Blacks in Bondage*. University of the West Indies, Jamaica.

Lester, J. (1998) *To Be A Slave*. London: Puffin Books.

Smith, S. (2006) *Slavery, Family and Gentry Capitalism in the British Atlantic: The World of the Lascelles 1648–1834*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walvin, J. (2000) *An African's Life: The Life and Times of Olaudah Equiano 1745–1797*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Williams, E. (1964) *Capitalism and Slavery*. London: Andre Deutsch.

www.antislavery.org/2007

www.parliament.uk/archives

www.setallfree.net