The campaign for abolition of the slave trade

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 publically 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 docksides, 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.

Petitions

The rise of popular opinion against the slave trade can be measured by looking at the proliferation of abolitionist petitions. Sending a petition to Parliament was already a well-tried means of seeking redress and reform, but the abolitionists pushed the system to an entirely different level.
Unprecedented numbers of people signed petitions against the slave trade. Each stage of a parliamentary debate on a Bill to end the trade was accompanied by growing numbers of petitions descending on Parliament. In 1788 alone, 102 of them were delivered to the legislators. The petition from Manchester, a town of about 50,000 people, had attracted almost 11,000 signatures. In 1792, the number of petitions rose to 519. And when, in the 1820s, the abolitionists turned against slavery itself, the numbers of petitions and signatures were even greater.

The Sons of Africa

Perhaps the most distinctive voices against the slave trade were those of the Africans. The African community in Britain had long been active in the campaign against slavery in England led by Granville Sharp. And in 1787 a group of nine - calling themselves 'The Sons of Africa' - came together to thank Sharp for his work on their behalf.

Two of the members were to add their own distinctive voices to the abolitionist side. In the same year in which the Sons of Africa was formed, Ottobah Cugoano, born in what is now Ghana in about 1757, captured in 1770 and brought to England after enslavement in the Caribbean - published his tract *Thoughts and Sentiments*. It was both a personal account of slavery and enslavement and a frontal attack on slavery, not merely on the slave trade.

Another member, Olaudah Equiano (also known as Gustavus Vassa), was active in the contentious 'Sierra Leone scheme' of 1787-8, which aimed to encourage London's poor Africans to resettle in Sierra Leone. In 1788, Equiano petitioned Queen Charlotte in support of abolition, but he gained his greatest fame in 1789 when he published his autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, a book that established him as the African voice of abolition.

He published the book himself and travelled the British Isles promoting and selling it along the abolitionist networks. The sales made him a moderately successful man, but the book had a wider significance than its commercial achievement, for it made an authentic and specific African addition to abolitionist arguments previously dominated by outsiders. Although others had preceded him, Equiano was, in effect, the founder of a new genre of African writing. And from that day to this, he is remembered as the African voice of enslavement whose words contributed a new element to the campaign against the slave trade.

The parliamentary debates begin ... and stall

Through all this, few contemporaries doubted that the public mood had turned sharply and quite unexpectedly against the slave trade. The slave lobby found itself hopelessly outmanoeuvred by the abolitionists. It had its own influential backers, and promoted its own counter-propaganda, but it
could never match the abolitionists for volume or effectiveness of publicity. Planters and slave traders were always playing catch-up against the abolitionists who had, quite suddenly, captured the political and moral high-ground.

However, for all the public agitation against the slave trade, Parliament remained the critical arena for ending the trade - legislation to end the trade could only come from there. Parliamentary debates on the slave trade finally began in 1789 when Wilberforce presented his famous 12 abolitionist propositions.

For two years, evidence and arguments swirled through Parliament before abolition was defeated: it passed the Commons in 1792 by 230 votes to 85 but the Lords resisted. By then, circumstances had turned against the cause, as the French Revolution cast a long shadow over politics. The idea of the 'Rights of Man' - which lay at the heart of abolition - turned sour as the revolution lurched into extremism and eventual war with Britain.

But it was the slave revolution in St Domingue (now Haiti) and the consequent bloodshed, foreign invasions and British military involvement (and defeat) there that delayed the progress of British abolition. It seemed a bad time to consider tinkering with slavery when rebellions were flaring across the Caribbean and a major uprising threatened the stability of the entire slave system in the Americas. Planters angrily pointed the finger at abolitionists, claiming that they were responsible for inciting the slaves to revolt.

**The slave trade ends**

After 1793, the abolitionists were on the back foot. Even so, the issue continued to be debated in and rejected by Parliament. In 1798, Wilberforce resolved not to press for abolition of the slave trade until times changed. Then, after a short peace in 1802 and Napoleon's subsequent reintroduction of slavery into French colonies, Wilberforce was reinvigorated enough in 1804 to again bring abolition to the Commons. His abolitionist colleagues returned to their well-tried tactics, but again the Lords was resistant. It was only the death of Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger in January 1806 and the creation of a new government that made abolition possible - the new Cabinet had abolitionists within its ranks.

In 1806, the Foreign Slave Trade Act was passed, which banned the trade in slaves to non-British islands. But as, by then, the bulk of the trade was actually directed to such islands, this meant that, at a stroke, the bulk of the British trade had been outlawed. Following a general election in 1806, in which abolition had been a central issue, the House of Commons was filled with abolitionist MPs and the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed by 283 votes to 16. In March 1807, the Act received royal Assent and the British slave trade was abolished.
But the campaign was only partially successful. Other nations continued to trade in Africans after 1807, and slavery itself remained in place, in the British colonies surviving until 1838. Even so, the ending of the British slave trade was a remarkable turn-about. The Atlantic’s major slave trade henceforth became the Atlantic’s major abolitionist power.