



# The Scottish History Society Learning Resource

## Scotland and Black Slavery to 1833

### **What was the extent of Scottish involvement both in the slave trade and slavery and in their abolition?**

The answers to this question are only beginning to be developed. There was undoubtedly strong Scottish involvement in trade to the West Indies as part of the crucial 'triangular trade' between Britain, Africa and the West Indies (the principal mechanism whereby slaves were delivered into the Atlantic economy). Scottish involvement was especially strong in Jamaica, where, by 1800, Scots owned some 30 per cent of estates. Jamaica itself contained nearly 40 per cent of the West Indies' slave population and Scots were actively involved at all levels: as owners, investors, overseers, doctors and slaving crews.

Demonstrating Scots' involvement in the transportation, sale and use of slave labour only answers one part of this question. Other more difficult questions are how far the Scottish economy was dependent on or linked to trade with societies based on unfree labour. The link between the Scottish economy and the West Indies was a strong one after the American Revolution and both imports from the West Indies (especially of slave-grown produce such as sugar) and exports to the West Indies (especially of textiles) grew rapidly towards the end of the eighteenth century. Similarly, trade with North America also involved the products of slave labour. Scottish tastes for slave-grown tobacco from Virginia or for slave-grown sugar from the West Indies supported the slave trade and the institution of slavery by maintaining their profitability.

### **Why were the slave trade and slavery abolished?**

Historians have tended to focus on the role of abolitionists and their activities, but given the importance of the slave trade and slavery to Scotland's economy it is important to realise that Scotland also produced many men who defended the slave trade and slavery in this period. For example, the Glasgow West India Association in the early nineteenth century was a lobbying group that tried to convince people of the economic and social benefits of slavery, not only for Scottish people but for the West Indian slaves themselves. Some of this can be seen in the anonymous novel, *Marly; or a Planter's Life in Jamaica* (Glasgow/London, 1828), which was written from the perspective of a young Scottish planter in Jamaica and attempted to make excuses for slavery. Thankfully such efforts to persuade people in Britain of the good of slavery were unsuccessful.

Historians principally argue over the different reasons for the abolition of, first, the slave trade in 1807 and, second, slavery in 1833. It is clear there was no single reason but the following are all factors that historians consider to be important:

## Events in the West Indies

It used to be thought that there was an economic explanation for abolition rooted in the declining profitability of West Indian slavery: as slave labour became less profitable so the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery itself became more popular and more palatable. This argument has become less important in recent work, which demonstrates continuing profits from and the economic importance of slave labour. More recently, however, historians have taken more interest in what was happening in slave societies themselves, rather than focusing on the activities of abolitionists in Britain. For example, the role of slave resistance and uprisings in bringing about abolition is being explored.

## Ideas

A second approach is to focus on ideas and their role in convincing people that the slave trade and slavery were immoral, uneconomic and unpatriotic. Historians would now suggest that these ideas had different and complex roots. Three important sources of abolitionist ideas, however, could be found in the Scottish Enlightenment, in legal thought and in religious thought. The first of these, for example, saw a wide range of authors questioning the meaning of freedom in society and encouraged new thinking about slavery. Emerging disciplines such as economics also addressed the question of slavery and Adam Smith's famous *Wealth of Nations* (1776) could conclude that slavery was uneconomic as well as being immoral. Ideas about freedom were also encouraged by the American and French Revolutions, though the latter of these also made the ideas of abolitionists seem more dangerous to conservatives.

## Abolitionists

Historians have focused most attention on a range of groups, individuals and institutions both in Britain and the West Indies, which had a crucial impact in calling for abolition. In Scotland, churches, civic bodies, abolitionist societies and the courts of law were all important in explaining abolition. The Court of Session reached a landmark, if slightly ambiguous decision in 1778 in the case of Joseph Knight (see below). A mass campaign for abolition of the slave trade really took off from the late 1780s. Abolitionism is seen as the first modern mass political movement in British and Scottish history. It involved the mobilisation of large numbers of people in a single-issue campaign involving petitions, economic boycotts (especially of sugar), societies and the production and circulation of propaganda. Charity wristbands, for example, are direct descendants of the famous image of a kneeling slave and the motto 'Am I not a Man and a Brother', which was prominent on abolitionist propaganda. Items such as brooches and stamps bearing this image allowed people to identify themselves and be identified by others as part of a movement. Scottish women were also extremely active in the abolitionist cause and this provision of opportunities for women to be involved in extra-parliamentary politics is another thing that marks the movement as modern. It might be argued that the combined pressure of a mass extra-parliamentary movement, especially in the 1830s, led to the abolition of slavery. The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 seems to have depended more on the activities of abolitionists inside parliament.

## Timing

Explaining the timing of legislative measures involves balancing all of these factors with an understanding of the contexts in which abolitionist campaigns took place. For example, when the abolitionist movement was at its height in the years before 1792, the French Revolution and violent slave uprising in the French colony of Saint Domingue (present day Haiti) made many in Britain nervous about the possible consequences of abolition. By 1807 these concerns seemed less important and the abolition of the slave trade could be presented as proof of Britain's moral superiority over Napoleonic

France. Similarly, after 1830 the campaign for emancipation was helped by the political turmoil and sense of a 'new dawn' which surrounded the agitation for and the passing of the Reform Acts of 1832. In both cases the crucial factors in any explanation are: events within colonies themselves; the attitudes and activities of ordinary men and women outside of parliament; the decisions of powerful men in parliament.

## Key figures

### **Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846)**

A clergyman and an extremely active figure in the abolitionist movement. His chief activities were the collection of information (especially from sailors) and the distribution of propaganda. One novel way of getting the message across was provided by a chest of objects, chiefly products of African societies, which Clarkson carried around the country. He used it as a kind of eighteenth-century powerpoint to illustrate his lectures and to demonstrate the potential for peaceful trade.

### **William Dickson (?)**

Born in Moffat, Dickson was a dynamic force in the abolitionist campaign in Scotland and a member of the London Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. He had lived in Barbados and seen the mistreatment of slaves at firsthand and in January 1792 he left London for Edinburgh. He made extensive tours of Scotland, distributing anti-slave trade literature and propaganda and making key contacts. One historian has called him 'the Thomas Clarkson of Scotland'.

### **Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797)**

A former slave, who had bought his freedom and wrote a famous memoir *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), which provided detailed descriptions of his life in Africa and his enslavement. Olaudah became a major figure in the abolitionist movement and travelled around the country. In 1792 he toured Scotland and spoke to audiences in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Paisley, Perth, Dundee and Aberdeen.

### **Joseph Knight (b. c. 1753)**

Knight was a slave, originally from West Africa, who had been brought to Scotland by his master, John Wedderburn. Knight had a child with and subsequently married a chambermaid. On reading that a slave in England, James Somerset, had been freed by the courts, Knight left Wedderburn and went to work in Dundee. In the legal cases that followed the court in Perth and then the Court of Session in Edinburgh both (somewhat ambivalently) arrived at the conclusion summed up in Lord Swinton's decision: 'That the State of Slavery is not recognised by the Laws of this Kingdom'.

### **William Wilberforce (1759-1833)**

Born in Hull and part of a very wealthy mercantile family, Wilberforce was MP for the town and a close friend of the prime minister, William Pitt. His evangelical Christianity gave him a strong sense of the immorality of the trade and his reputation as a great orator and his Westminster contacts made him a major leader of abolitionism. As MP he introduced numerous bills in opposition to the slave trade and, after 1807, for the abolition of slavery. He died only 3 days after the bill to abolish slavery passed parliament in 1833.

# Suggested Reading

## General

Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition* (London, Macmillan, 1975)

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

## Scotland

Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2006)

C. Duncan Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists 1833-1861* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1981) [covers a later period]

D. Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750-1820* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005)

## Fiction & Film

Anon., *Marly: or a Planter's life in Jamaica* (Glasgow/London, 1828)

James Robertson, *Joseph Knight* (London, Fourth Estate, 2004)

*Amazing Grace* (2006, dir. Michael Apted)

## Brief account of events

DATE(S)

EVENTS

**1707**

Anglo-Scottish Union creates opportunities for more active Scottish involvement in the economic activities of the British Empire, including in the slave trade

**1773-1778**

Case of Joseph Knight, a slave living in Scotland, goes before courts in Perth and Edinburgh

**1783**

The Society of Friends petitions parliament for the abolition of the slave trade

**1787**

First society for the abolition of the slave trade established in London

**1788-1792**

Mass campaign for the abolition of the slave trade, involving petitions and other activities from individuals, groups and institutions across Scotland

**1807**

Parliament abolishes the slave trade

**1823**

Start of renewed campaign to abolish slavery in the British Empire

**1830-1832**

Mass meetings, petitions and press comment across Scotland in support of emancipation

**1833**

Parliament abolishes slavery in the British Empire with an apprenticeship system to run until 1838