

**Rethinking global empire:  
the imperial origins and legacies of British abolitionism, c.1783-1807**

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A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

June 2015

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## **Abstract**

This study contextualizes the emergence of British abolitionism within the widespread re-evaluation of empire that took place in the aftermath of the American War of Independence. It cuts across traditional historiographic divisions by exploring how abolitionism built on critiques and calls for reform that were circulating in relation to other imperial concerns, most notably the governance of British India. Advocates of both antislavery and Indian reform deployed similar arguments and paradigms in articulating their ideas about how to best administer the nation's increasingly multiethnic empire. In both contexts, they raised questions about the moral obligations of imperial rule, who constituted a British "subject," and the role of metropolitan institutions in safeguarding the welfare of non-Europeans. By investigating how early antislavery intersected with other imperial discourses, the dissertation shows how opposition to the slave trade grew largely out of the fear that Britain itself could no longer remain immune to the abuses and mismanagement that had come to characterize its overseas pursuits. Seen from this perspective, abolitionism was not only the product of expanding humanitarian sensibilities, but was also a response to anxieties about the domestic effects of empire, both moral and material. In arguing against the slave trade, abolitionists simultaneously outlined a vision of empire that was more paternalistic, centralized, and Anglicizing than that which had come before. Early antislavery was therefore pivotal in catalyzing a pro-imperial ideology that helped underpin the British Empire of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

## **Précis**

Cette étude explore le contexte impérial du mouvement pour l'abolition de la traite négrière dans l'Empire britannique après la révolution américaine. Elle s'éloigne des divisions traditionnelles établies dans l'historiographie en explorant comment les abolitionnistes échafaudèrent leurs critiques et leurs propositions de réformes en relation avec les autres préoccupations impériales, notamment la gouvernance de l'Inde britannique. Dans les débats sur l'esclavage et la puissance britannique en Asie, les réformateurs britanniques ont soulevé des questions sur les obligations morales de la domination impériale, quant à savoir ce qui définissait un «sujet» britannique, et quel devait être le rôle des institutions métropolitaines en ce qui concernait la sauvegarde du bien-être des non-Européens. En examinant la relation entre l'abolitionnisme et les autres tentatives de réformes impériales, cette thèse démontre que le mouvement contre la traite négrière était en grande partie une réponse aux inquiétudes des conséquences domestiques de la puissance impériale. Cette enquête montre aussi comment les abolitionnistes, en plus de leurs efforts contre la traite négrière, ont également mis sur pied d'autres idées pour proposer une nouvelle vision de l'Empire britannique. Le mouvement pour l'abolition était donc au centre de la transformation de l'idéologie impériale en Grande-Bretagne à laquelle on assiste à la fin du XVIIIe siècle et au début du XIXe siècle.

### **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

BFBS	British and Foreign Bible Society
EIC	East India Company
PBMS	Particular Baptist Missionary Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen
SEAST	Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade
SPG	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts
SWIMP	Society of West Indian Merchants and Planters

### **Archival Abbreviations**

Beinecke	Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (New Haven, CT)
BL	The British Library (London)
GRO	Gloucestershire Record Office (Gloucester, UK)
HEH	Henry E. Huntington Library (San Marino, CA)
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library (London)
LSF	Library of the Society of Friends (London)
LWL	Lewis Walpole Library (Farmington, CT)
RHO	Rhodes House Library (Oxford)
SHL	Senate House Library (London)
TNA	The National Archives (UK)
WCL	William Clements Library (Ann Arbor, MI)

## Acknowledgements

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This dissertation would not have been possible without the help and support of numerous people. I want to first thank my advisors, Brian Cowan and Elizabeth Elbourne, for their guidance both in this project and in navigating the world of academia more broadly. It's been a privilege to learn from each of them over the years as a graduate student and as assistant editor for the *Journal of British Studies*. (Elizabeth deserves special thanks for allowing me to occasionally split infinitives). At McGill, I would also like to thank Catherine Desbarats, Brian Lewis, Lorenz Luthi, and Jason Opal for advice and encouragement at various points along the way.

One of the most rewarding aspects of studying the British Empire is the chance to visit so many superb archives. I thank staff at the British Library, National Archives (at Kew), Lambeth Palace Library, Friends House Library, Rhodes House Library (Oxford), Senate House (University of London), Henry E. Huntington Library, William Clements Library (University of Michigan), and Lewis Walpole and Bienecke Libraries (Yale University). Particular thanks go to Maggie Powell of the Walpole Library and Brian Dunnigan of the Clements Library, and to Alison DeSimone for her hospitality in Ann Arbor. The ability to cast such a wide research net was made possible by travel fellowships from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), McGill Faculty of Arts, McGill Department of History, Walpole Library, Clements Library, Huntington Library, and the London Goodenough Association of Canada (LGAC). I wish to thank all these bodies, and to extend particular thanks to the LGAC for the opportunity to spend a full year in central London in such a stimulating environment. At a time when funding for the humanities is being cut across the board, I am extremely grateful for three years of generous funding from SSHRC and for a dissertation writing fellowship from the McGill Faculty of Arts in 2013-14.

As with conducting research for this project, the ongoing processes of refining and reworking ideas has benefited from the input of many people. I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to share large chunks of my work with audiences as an invited speaker at four different venues. For their comments and suggestions, I thank audiences at the Montreal British History Group, the Institute of Historical Research, Leeds University, and Skidmore College. I also benefitted from conversations with many scholars who took time out of their busy schedules to share their expertise. Christopher Brown has been a generous sounding board for ideas since this project first began, and his insights into antislavery and imperial culture continue to make me think deeper about my own approaches to these topics. Tillman Nechtman and I met at a conference in autumn 2013, and his belief in the importance of my research ever since has provided a significant boost during the latter phases of this project. Brent Sirota read a draft of chapter five, and his comments sharpened my thinking about missions and evangelicalism. Conversations with Andrea Major and Richard Allen helped flesh out the India angle of the dissertation; I am particularly excited to pursue avenues of inquiry they raised as I transform the dissertation into a monograph. I also want to thank Jacob Levy, Jason Opal, and Anthony Page for being such judicious thesis examiners and offering helpful suggestions for moving forward. Fellow graduate students who generously put

their own projects on hold to comment on parts of mine include Caitlin Aber, François Gauthier, Justin Irwin, Nicole Longpré, Richard Spiegel, and Gretchen Bakke and members of the 2013-14 Faculty of Arts dissertation writing group. Caroline Spence, a fellow doctoral candidate at Harvard University studying British abolitionism, read drafts of four chapters. She has been one of my most insightful critics, and pushed me to sharpen my arguments in countless places.

My greatest debts are, of course, personal. Numerous friends, family, colleagues, and teammates provided camaraderie throughout this journey. My inability to list them in this short space in no way diminishes my appreciation. I first got to know Rammy Saini in the summer of 2013 and she very quickly became the most important part of my life in Montreal. I only hope to be able to provide her with a fraction of the support she's given me as she embarks on the final stages of her doctoral work. Nate and Tim have long put up with an older brother keen to assume the role of "Matthew parent." They each deserve thanks and admiration for keeping me grounded, and for making trips home my favourite times of the year. Lastly, my parents, Kathryn Wyman and Tom McCarthy, instilled in me a love of learning and sense of inquisitiveness that have ultimately led to this dissertation. For their unwavering love and encouragement, they have my lasting gratitude.



### *Introduction*

On 17 June 1783, Sir Cecil Wray, Member of Parliament for Westminster, brought the first of many Quaker petitions against the transatlantic slave trade before the House of Commons. The petitioners described the trade in captive Africans as “a subject loudly calling for the humane interposition of the legislature,” and reported that they were “deeply affected” by “the rapine, oppression, and bloodshed attending that traffic.” In response to the appeal, Prime Minister Lord North rose and stated that though he applauded the Quakers’ sentiments, it would “be impossible to abolish the Slave Trade” since it had “become almost necessary to every nation in Europe.” No other MP spoke on the issue, and the petition was tabled without further notice.<sup>1</sup>

Less than nine years later, on 2 April 1792, the House of Commons voted 230 to 85 to end the trade in African slaves throughout the British Empire.<sup>2</sup> Members were torn over immediate or gradual abolition. In the end, they decided to set 1796 as the terminal date of the trade. Though the measure would become stalled in the House of Lords and would not be enacted into law until 1807, by the early 1790s the slave trade had become one of the most discussed and contentious issues in British politics. It was hotly debated not only in parliament, but in newspapers, pamphlets, churches, meeting halls, coffeehouses, taverns, shops, and homes throughout the nation. The conversation was driven forward by a large and enthusiastic group of antislavery campaigners who made their opposition to the slave trade known in a plethora of ways. By 1792, every major town in the country had an abolitionist society; over 300,000 consumers were boycotting

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<sup>1</sup> Cecil Wray, 17 June 1783, in T.C. Hansard, ed., The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest

<sup>2</sup> 2 April 1792, in Hansard, ed., The Parliamentary History of England, vol. 29: 1158.

slave-grown sugar; antislavery prose and poetry were printed at a rapid rate; testimonies from those with firsthand experience in the slave trade circulated widely. In 1792 alone, 519 petitions with approximately 400,000 combined signatures were laid before the House of Commons.<sup>3</sup> Looking back years later, Williams Wordsworth would describe antislavery agitation in the early 1790s as “a whole nation crying with one voice.”<sup>4</sup> The contrast to the public and political apathy of 1783 was stark.

For the past two hundred years, historians have sought to explain why organized opposition to the slave trade first emerged in Britain when it did. Until recently, they have tended to focus on long-term causes such as growth in religiosity and the expansion of long-distance capitalism in the latter eighteenth century. To contemporaries, however, two of the most astonishing things about abolitionism were how suddenly the movement emerged and how quickly it spread. As late as May 1787, when twelve men gathered in a London printing shop to found the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST), few present would have predicted that a precipitous “increase in business” would leave them “nearly exhausted” a year and a half later.<sup>5</sup> Fewer still could have imagined that by June 1788 “the question of the slave trade” would be described as having “engrossed the attention of every part of the kingdom for above these [past] twelve months.”<sup>6</sup> “The fire is kindled,” wrote William Wilberforce in January 1788, just

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<sup>3</sup> Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso Books, 1988), 144. On popular abolitionism in general from 1788 to 1792, see especially John R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)* (London: Penguin Books, 1995, written in 1805), book X, line 214.

<sup>5</sup> Fair Minute Book, vol. 2, 8 January 1788, Add. Ms. 21255, f.26, The British Library (hereafter BL); Ibid., 7 October 1788, f.60.

<sup>6</sup> Earl of Carlisle, 25 June 1788, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 27: 644.

prior to assuming the mantle of parliamentary spokesman for the abolitionist cause, “& the flame spreads everyday wider and wider.” His coadjutor Thomas Clarkson concurred, reflecting decades later that by mid-1788 abolitionism had arrested “the attention of the nation, and it had produced a kind of flame, or enthusiasm, and this to a degree and to an extent never before witnessed.” While abolitionists celebrated the rapid growth of their movement, their opponents saw it as evidence that the cause was foolhardy at best and dangerous at worst. The Lord Chancellor, for instance, derisively described opposition to the slave trade in June 1788 as a “five days fit of philanthropy.”<sup>7</sup>

The speed with which abolitionism emerged and advanced is no less remarkable in hindsight. Britain had been transporting thousands of African slaves annually to its New World colonies since the 1640s. By the late eighteenth century, it was Europe’s foremost slave-trading nation.<sup>8</sup> Throughout this period, only a few individuals ever publicly raised concerns about the morality of the traffic. When the Quakers petitioned parliament in 1783, their entreaty at first appeared little more than another sporadic denunciation by quixotic altruists; only in hindsight could Clarkson describe it as contributing to the “storm [that] was gathering over the heads of the oppressors of the African race.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, though the petition marked the beginning of sustained and public opposition to the slave trade by the Society of Friends in Britain, it won virtually no new

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<sup>7</sup> William Wilberforce to William Eden, January 1788, Add. Ms. 34427, f.401, BL; Thomas Clarkson, The History of the Rise, Progress, & Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, by the British Parliament, vol. 1 (London: James P. Parke, 1808), 572; Lord Chancellor, 25 June 1788, in Hansard, ed., The Parliamentary History of England, vol. 27: 643.

<sup>8</sup> The most recent estimate places the number of slaves transported across the Atlantic in British vessels during the era of the slave trade at 3,259,440. By the end of 1783, the number was 2,365,464. This meant that almost 42,000 slaves were exported annually during the quarter century in which abolitionism was a political force. *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Database*, <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces> (accessed 5 January 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Clarkson, History, vol. 1: 103.

converts to the cause. Quakers would have to wait until May 1787 before sensing “a growing attention in many” to the “complicated iniquity” of the slave trade.<sup>10</sup>

What they did sense at this point, however, was the beginnings of a hitherto unprecedented national dialogue on the topic. That the slave trade debate of the late 1780s and early 1790s appeared to come out of nowhere is born out quantitatively. In 1788, over 100 pamphlets against the trade appeared, as opposed to only a handful earlier in the decade. From May 1787 to July 1788, the SEAST distributed almost 78,000 pieces of antislavery literature.<sup>11</sup> *The Times* went from publishing four articles that expressed antislavery views between January 1785 and September 1787 to publishing 210 such articles between October 1787 and January 1790.<sup>12</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine* included twenty-six items on the slave trade from 1780 to 1787, compared to ninety items from 1788 to 1792. In parliament, the slave trade was not discussed once from 1780 to 1787 aside from Lord North's response to the Quaker petition; over the following five years, it would be the topic of debate on twenty-three separate occasions.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps even more telling is that in February 1788 the London-based Society of West Indian Merchants and Planters (SWIMP) formed a subcommittee to begin pushing back against this tide with pro-slavery propaganda of their own. Though abolitionism represented an existential threat to both the economy of the West Indies and the way of life of many of its white

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<sup>10</sup> “*The EPISTLE from the YEARLY MEETING of QUAKERS held in LONDON,*” May 28- June 4, 1787, published in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, August 1787, vol. 57: 721-22.

<sup>11</sup> For the sudden increase in pamphlet literature, see Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery 1760-1807* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 107; for the SEAST figure, see Clarkson, *History*, vol. 1: 571

<sup>12</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 207.

<sup>13</sup> Statistics for *The Gentleman's Magazine* and parliamentary debates are based on my own calculations. The figure for *The Gentleman's Magazine* includes reviews of pamphlet literature on the slave trade.

inhabitants, those with a vested interest in the Atlantic slave system had never before felt threatened enough to undertake a coordinated campaign to defend it.<sup>14</sup>

By nearly all measures, abolitionism represented a watershed effort to extend rights— however limited— to individuals thousands of miles away. As Adam Hochschild has put it, the campaign “was the first time a large number of people became outraged, and stayed outraged for many years, over someone *else’s* rights.”<sup>15</sup> Yet focusing on the number and zeal of campaigners, or comparing antislavery fervour only to the longstanding tacit acceptance of the slave trade, risks overlooking other ways in which the movement was presaged and abetted. Specifically, the period from 1783 to 1793 witnessed a rethinking of the goals, organization, rectitude, and very nature of empire on multiple fronts. Within this context, the slave trade was only one of many longstanding practices to come under sustained scrutiny by both policymakers and the public, each increasingly aware of how important empire was becoming to Britain’s economy and national identity. Though the speed with which abolitionism spread was indeed remarkable, much of this growth can be attributed to the broader anxieties, challenges, and debates associated with empire that became central to British political culture during the years in which the movement flourished.

The widespread reassessment of empire of which abolitionism was a part was triggered largely by the shifting geographic contours of Britain’s imperial landscape,

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<sup>14</sup> David B. Ryden, West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807 (New York: Cambridge University Press 2009), 189-91.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Hochschild, Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 5. Emphasis in original.

itself triggered by the secession of the thirteen American colonies. From settler societies in North America, the focus of empire from 1783 gradually migrated to the slave colonies of the West Indies and then eastward. Entrepreneurs and government officials took a growing interest in exploring and establishing settlements in West Africa, and James Cook's voyages to the South Pacific in the 1770s continued to fire the imaginations of politicians, adventurers, and imperial commentators alike over the following decades. Along with expanded geographic horizons, the reorientation of empire in the wake of American independence brought a dramatic change in the racial and religious composition of the population subject to British rule overseas. Developments on the Indian subcontinent meant that by the mid-1780s the East India Company (EIC) had become the effective ruler of large swaths of Asia, with millions of Hindu and Muslim inhabitants. In mainland North America, Amerindians outnumbered those of British stock in much of the territory that remained in British hands. In Lower Canada, the population consisted almost exclusively of French Canadian Catholics. Though Ireland had gained limited legislative independence in 1782, economic and political control of the island remained largely in the hands of the British parliament. The subjugation of Ireland's large Catholic majority by the Protestant Ascendancy was a constant source of debate in Whitehall.

The multiethnic and diffuse nature of Britain's overseas possessions post-1783 presented new challenges for policy makers who faced increasing calls to reform empire in the aftermath of Britain's defeat in America. The changed composition of empire also helped created discursive arenas in which arguments that would become standard arrows

in the abolitionist quiver, such as the obligation to treat non-Europeans justly and humanely, could be articulated and fleshed out. Most significant in this regard were debates about restructuring British rule in India. The governance of India erupted as a major political issue in 1783-84, and continued to generate intense discussion throughout the trial of former Governor General of Bengal Warren Hastings from 1785 to 1795. The Hastings trial in particular revolved around many of the same questions that were also central to the contemporaneous slave trade debate: What responsibilities did Britain have to non-Europeans within its sphere of influence? Could Britons abroad be trusted to protect indigenous populations, or was regulation from London required? Would a more moral empire still be profitable? While these questions themselves were not new ones, in the 1780s and early 1790s they were being asked with greater frequency— and with greater urgency— than ever before. The rapidity with which abolitionism emerged, therefore, can be seen largely as a reaction to the increased pace of questioning and debating empire itself.

The future of Britain's empire was not only on the minds of politicians and those responsible for setting imperial policy. In the years following American independence, issues of empire were also debated by a growing reading public that was increasingly attentive to the exercise of British power abroad and its consequences at home.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> On the growing attentiveness to imperial issues in late eighteenth-century Britain, see in particular the works of Kathleen Wilson: Kathleen Wilson, *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003). See also Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Jack P. Greene, *Evaluating Empire and Confronting Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Peter J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c.1750-1783* (Oxford:

contemporaneity of efforts to reform EIC (mis)rule in India and the campaign to end the slave trade encouraged these Britons to draw parallels between what was taking place in the nation's different overseas territories. Newspapers regularly printed examples of abuses exposed during the Hastings trial alongside evidence furnished by witnesses called to testify at parliamentary inquiries into the slave trade. Such stories helped paint a picture of an empire that was globally at odds with self-ascribed national values such as liberty and compassion. Not infrequently, advocates of imperial reform highlighted similarities between the actions of Britons in the Eastern and Western reaches of empire in order to underscore the need for major change if colonial realities were to be brought in line with metropolitan ideals.

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This study explores the imperial dimensions of British abolitionism by situating the movement within the widespread re-evaluation of empire that occurred between the American War of Independence and the wars of the French Revolution. Specifically, it focuses on the ways in which abolitionism both built on and contributed to other debates about imperial reform that proliferated during this decade. The period from 1783 to 1793 was a pivotal phase in reconceiving what empire was and how it should be managed; antislavery agitation was one aspect of that reconsideration, and was interwoven with a variety of cultural, political, and intellectual currents that contributed to this end. To a greater extent than most historians, contemporaries recognized such interconnectedness,

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Oxford University Press, 2005); Peter J. Marshall, *"A Free Though Conquering People": Eighteenth-Century Britain and Its Empire* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003); Eliga Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).



and frequently brought the Atlantic slave system and activities in other parts of the empire into the same analytic frame. Opponents of the slave trade consciously interacted with other imperial discourses that they recognized as creating conditions that could help antislavery sentiment develop into a significant political movement.

By approaching abolitionism from a broad imperial perspective, this study illustrates how mobilization against the slave trade cannot be understood without reference to contemporaneous critiques and reforms being applied to other aspects of Britain's empire. Put simply, the emergence of abolitionism only makes sense when examined as *a part of*— not *apart from*— other imperial developments. At the level of national political culture, widespread dissatisfaction with the overall drift of imperial policy in the 1770s and 1780s created the space needed for antislavery to gain political traction. At an individual level, it was the governance of New World colonies, abuses in East India, interest in overseas missions, and related concerns that first led many antislavery campaigners to begin thinking about the rectitude of empire. Moreover, it was their involvement in other religious, philanthropic, civic, and political reform causes that first brought many abolitionists together and helped create nationwide antislavery networks. For most activists, opposition to the slave trade was only one part of a wider campaign to bring about moral and social improvement both at home and abroad.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The overlap between abolitionism and other reform causes has been explored by a number of historians in recent decades. One of the best accounts of the relationship between antislavery and Britain's "reform complex" remains David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860* (London: Routledge, 1991).

Unlike calls for domestic political reform, abolitionism cut across a number of class and religious divides, garnering significant support both inside and outside of parliament. As David Turley has shown, antislavery activists came from widely disparate backgrounds, ranging from Tory Anglicans who defended Britain's political *status quo* to Dissenters and political agitators who called for wholesale reform.<sup>18</sup> Yet despite the breadth of the antislavery coalition, the argument articulated by the vast majority of campaigners was strikingly similar: it centered on a plea to end the suffering of innocent slaves, and to bring British imperial policy more in line with the dictates of justice and humanity.<sup>19</sup> While abolitionism meant different things to the different groups that comprised the movement, it was precisely its malleability—the fact that it could and did represent something different for all those who participated in it—that helps explain its attraction across many traditional fissures in British society. To capture the diffuse nature of the abolitionist phalanx, as well as some of the ways in which antislavery brought together individuals with diverse social and political agendas, this study examines campaigners from a wide variety of backgrounds. It includes analyses of writings by political writers, poets, philosophers, sailors, lawyers, politicians, colonial officials, evangelicals, Dissenters, missionaries, and others representing various positions along Britain's social, political, and religious spectra.

In addition to individuals from assorted walks of life, this study also looks at a number of different types of sources produced by antislavery advocates. These include

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<sup>18</sup> Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery*, esp. chapters five and six.

<sup>19</sup> To these pillars of the antislavery case can be added the claim that outlawing the slave trade would be “sound policy.” Until 1805, however, this aspect of the appeal was never as central to antislavery rhetoric as arguing from the grounds of “justice” and “humanity,” which was done by abolitionists of almost all social and political persuasions.

private writings such as letters, diaries, and unpublished manuscripts; government documents such as testimonies from inquiries, parliamentary debates, and official correspondences; commentaries from newspapers and periodicals; and, above all, material from the voluminous pamphlet literature that abolitionists printed and circulated. This diversity of sources illuminates both the breadth of antislavery sentiment and the variety of arenas in which debates over the slave trade played out. Abolitionism was not a tightly controlled programme or campaign (despite the efforts of many leading activists), but a broad cultural phenomenon. Compartmentalizing different types of sources risks missing the ways in which poets, pamphleteers, parliamentarians, and others contributed to a shared discursive terrain. Plays about slave owners, for example, were not merely designed to entertain, but were also part of a political debate about how to regulate the behaviour of on-site agents of empire. Testimonies before the Privy Council from former slave traders revealed not only the brutality of the slaving industry, but can also be read as commentaries on late eighteenth-century British society and norms. Moreover, in order to bring out connections between the slave trade and other imperial projects and concerns, this study draws heavily on writings by abolitionists that addressed issues besides those related to slavery, as well as material in which slavery appears only marginally or primarily in relation to other topics. Implicit in this methodology is an attempt to look beyond the established canon of sources that have traditionally dominated antislavery historiography. For too long, historians have relied too heavily on the same set of texts that focus almost exclusively on slavery and the slave trade. In so doing, they have perpetuated a picture of abolitionism as removed from other currents of empire.

Just as this study shows how shifting conceptions of empire helped give rise to abolitionism, it also demonstrates how abolitionism helped give rise to a new ideology of empire. Historians have long identified two distinctive eras in Britain's imperial history, each with its own structure and organization: the period from the start of overseas expansion to the late eighteenth century, centered on colonies of settlement in the Atlantic, connected via mercantilism, and only loosely controlled from the metropole; and the period from the late eighteenth century to decolonization, demarcated by free trade, global in scope, and focused on spreading British values, religion, and institutions throughout the non-European world. In a two-volume study published in 1952 and 1964, Vincent Harlow termed these phases a First and a Second British Empire, arguing that the key moment of transition occurred in the aftermath of Britain's sweeping victories during the Seven Years' War.<sup>20</sup> Since Harlow, scholars have called this timing into question, and have situated the pivotal shift as taking place anywhere between the 1760s and the 1820s, depending on their criteria for assessing change.<sup>21</sup> In his influential book *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830*, C.A. Bayly makes the case that the title years saw a gradual yet profound enough alteration in the management of empire

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<sup>20</sup> Vincent T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763-1793: New Continents and Changing Values*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, 1964). From the same era, and emphasizing a similar demarcation between imperial epochs, see G.R. Mellor, *British Imperial Trusteeship, 1783-1850* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951).

<sup>21</sup> On the early end of the spectrum, H.V. Bowen argues that the Seven Years' War encouraged Britons to see empire as a single, world-wide unit, and that the decades following the conflict saw the emergence of a number of ideas about imperial reform that would accelerate in the aftermath of the American War of Independence. On the later end, Michael Duffy claims that it was during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars that Britain began ushering in a new form of authoritarian, centralized imperial management. H.V. Bowen, "British Conceptions of Global Empire, 1756-83," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 26, no. 3 (September 1998); Michael Duffy, "World-Wide War and British Expansion, 1793-1815," in Peter J. Marshall, ed., *Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Peter Marshall provides a good overview of this question in P.J. Marshall, "Britain Without America- A Second Empire?" in Marshall, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 2: 576-95.

to warrant collective classification as “one critical moment.”<sup>22</sup> More recently, Maya Jasanoff has argued that the significance and scope of the post-America reassessment of empire make “the 1780s stand out as the most eventful single decade in British imperial history up to the 1940s.”<sup>23</sup> Ongoing efforts by historians and political theorists to locate the origins of concepts such as liberalism and modernity continue to highlight the centrality of debates about empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the trajectory of Western imperialism and Western thought more broadly.<sup>24</sup>

This study contributes to the discussion about imperial transition by showing how many of the ideas that would come to define Britain’s nineteenth-century liberal empire were articulated and developed during the cut-and-thrust of political debate in the aftermath of American independence. The significance of this period in catalyzing a new approach to empire has been well documented by historians of British India, who have shown how a shift in imperial outlooks occurred alongside a shift in imperial geography.<sup>25</sup> Less explored, however, is how debates about the Atlantic slave system also

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<sup>22</sup> Christopher A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (New York: Longman 1989), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain, and France, c.1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Kathleen Wilson, “Introduction,” in Wilson, *A New Imperial History*; Jack P. Greene, “Introduction: Empire and Liberty,” in J.P. Greene, ed., *Exclusionary Empire: English Liberty Overseas, 1600-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Eliga Gould, “Liberty and Modernity: The American Revolution and the Making of Parliament’s Imperial History,” in Greene, ed., *Exclusionary Empire*.

<sup>25</sup> The present study is most influenced in this regard by Nicholas Dirks’ interpretation of the Hastings Trial and its imperial legacy in Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). See also Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); essays in Marshall, *“A Free Though Conquering People”*, esp. “The Moral Swing to the East: British

made moral imperialism an important and lasting political issue, and how these debates contributed to a political culture that increasingly saw empire as an extension of the nation. As outlined in the chapter précises at the end of this introduction, it was anxieties about the effects of empire at home and abroad that catalyzed abolitionism, and it was in discussions about the slave trade that many Britons began arguing the need to extend British laws, values, and institutions outward. Indeed, antislavery in the 1780s and 1790s became closely interwoven with a number of projects to nationalize imperial space, reign in the autonomy of colonial elites, and enhance political and religious ties between the center and periphery of empire. These efforts were not the inevitable outgrowth of Enlightenment philosophy or changes in the British economy. Rather, they were proposed solutions to specific concerns at a moment when Britons were looking for ways to reassure themselves about their nation's probity and future standing in the world.

### *Historiography*

Despite being of interest to historians for over two hundred years, abolitionism has rarely been studied alongside other imperial developments in a sustained, detailed, or analytic way. This omission began with the first chronicler of the movement, Thomas Clarkson, who in 1808 published his two-volume *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*. Clarkson outlined the contributions of early adherents to the cause, and provided a chronological narrative of the movement interspersed with his own reflections. Though

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Humanitarianism, India and the West Indies"; Andrew Sartori, "The British Empire and Its Liberal Mission," *The Journal of Modern History* 78, no. 3 (Sept. 2006): 623-42; Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*; Durba Gosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

replete with details on the campaign, the *History* was almost completely devoid of analysis: Clarkson attributed antislavery mobilization “to Christianity alone,” which makes individuals capable of “going beyond the bounds of individual usefulness to each other.”<sup>26</sup> The passage of the Slave Trade Act of 1807 was, in Clarkson’s view, an act of providence. As such, it was to be celebrated rather than scrutinized. The grassroots struggle for abolition— “one of the most glorious contests... of any ever carried on in any age or country”— was likewise described as a source of national pride. Not only did it establish “a Magna Charta for Africa in Britain,” but it also affirmed the natural benevolence and religiosity of the British people.<sup>27</sup>

Clarkson’s *History* inaugurated a whig interpretation of both abolition and abolitionism that remained dominant for over a century. Following Clarkson’s lead, historians in this tradition stressed the religious and altruistic motives of antislavery leaders. According to an 1838 biography by his sons Robert and Isaac Wilberforce, William Wilberforce’s commitment to abolition was “the fruit of his religious change” towards a more activist and evangelical form of Christianity. That his crusade met with significant public support was a testament to “the moral feelings of the nation.”<sup>28</sup> For Sir Reginald Coupland, writing during the centenary of slave emancipation in the British Empire in 1933, Wilberforce’s “indomitable perseverance” and Clarkson’s “courage” and “exhaustive” labours were inspirational.<sup>29</sup> Like other early antislavery leaders,

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<sup>26</sup> Clarkson, *History*, vol. 1: 8.

<sup>27</sup> Clarkson, *History*, vol. 2: 580.

<sup>28</sup> Robert I. and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, 1838), vol. 1: 140, 183.

<sup>29</sup> Reginald Coupland, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd., 1933), 110, 86, 94.

Wilberforce and Clarkson were portrayed as motivated solely by altruistic impulses, and as having together helped awaken the nation's latent humanitarian instincts. No one better encapsulated this celebratory view of abolition than William Lecky in his 1869 *History of European Morals*: "the unwearied, unostentatious, and inglorious crusade of England against slavery," wrote Lecky, echoing Clarkson, "may probably be regarded as among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages in the history of nations."<sup>30</sup>

To be sure, most whig narratives did highlight how abolitionism developed in tandem with other imperial discourses and reforms. From the perspectives of the historians who wrote these accounts, however, abolitionism and other calls for humanitarian imperial reform were shaped neither by anxieties about the domestic effects of empire nor in response to challenges posed by empire. Instead, they were manifestations of a noble desire to extend British virtue beyond Britain's shores. For Robert and Isaac Wilberforce, their father's interest in sending missionaries to India stemmed from the same altruistic impulses that had motivated his contemporaneous opposition to the slave trade. For William Lecky, abolitionism fit into a longer narrative of the growth and spread of European values. In his 1926 book *The Anti-slavery Movement in England: A Case Study*, Frank J. Klingberg described the attack on the Atlantic slave system and the Hastings trial as two of the most "dramatic expressions" of a "new spirit of inquiry and striving for justice" that emerged in the late eighteenth century. "Reformers did not devote themselves solely to one cause," Klingberg noted: "the man who was interested in the destruction of the slave trade was generally interested

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<sup>30</sup> William Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1869), 153.



also in better government for India, or the founding of missionary societies...”<sup>31</sup> While Klingberg was right to point out a correlation between supporters of abolition and other reform causes, like most of his contemporaries he celebrated rather than probed the connections between these movements. Consequently, he too reached the narrow conclusion that “the anti-slavery crusade was an outgrowth of this humanitarianism.”<sup>32</sup> As with other whig historians over the previous century, Klingberg believed that the British Empire was an honourable undertaking, and that highlighting its virtuous past could help justify Britain’s continued rule over non-European peoples. Whereas early abolitionists helped transform antislavery from an idea into an ideology, scholars in succeeding generations helped transform antislavery from an ideology into a centerpiece of the nation’s imperial identity.

This self-congratulatory story would not survive the global upheavals of the mid-twentieth century. As discourses of national liberation led empire itself to be scrutinized as never before, traditional narratives of empire likewise came to be questioned. The decisive blow to triumphalist accounts of antislavery came in 1944 when the Marxist historian Eric Williams published his groundbreaking study *Capitalism and Slavery*. Williams accused previous generations of anglophilic historians of having “sacrificed scholarship to sentimentality,” and directly refuted nearly all the central tenets of their work.<sup>33</sup> Echoing the criticisms of nineteenth-century radicals such as William Cobbett, Williams challenged the altruistic motives of abolitionist leaders, highlighting the many

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<sup>31</sup> Frank J. Klingberg, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in England: A Study in English Humanitarianism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926), 25.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 178.

ways in which evangelicals in particular congratulated themselves on their virtuosity in fighting slavery while ignoring social injustices closer to home. Wilberforce, according to Williams, “was familiar with everything that went on in the hold of a slave ship, but ignored what went on at the bottom of a mine shaft.” Williams loathed the “certain smugness” he detected in Wilberforce’s piety.<sup>34</sup>

In place of the humanitarian narrative he sought so passionately demolished, Williams argued that abolition and emancipation were the result of economic changes in both slave societies and the British Isles. The entire Atlantic slave system, he contended, began declining in profitability following the American War. Moreover, industrialization in Britain meant that the country was now less reliant than before on profits from the sugar and slave trades. In this evolving economic landscape, antislavery was not an example of selfless philanthropy. Rather, it was a means of advancing the commercial interests of merchant capitalists, who were becoming an increasingly powerful force in British society. The humanitarian principles upon which those who attacked the slave trade acted, Williams maintained, simply disguised their economic agenda.<sup>35</sup>

The claim that slavery and the plantation complex began declining in profitability in the late eighteenth century has garnered a great deal of scrutiny ever since it was first posited. With some exceptions, most scholars have concluded that Williams’ calculations

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 182. The personal animus that Williams felt toward Wilberforce is palpable, and is particularly evident in his chapter derisively titled “The ‘Saints’ and Slavery.” “His [Wilberforce’s] effeminate face appears small in stature,” Williams wrote. “As a leader, he was inept, addicted to moderation, compromise and delay.” Thomas Clarkson, whose progressive politics were more akin to Williams’ own than Wilberforce’s social conservatism was, came off better. Ibid., 181.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., esp. 126-77.

were incorrect, and that the British slave economy during the age of abolition was actually expanding rather than contracting.<sup>36</sup> No one has argued this position more consistently than Seymour Drescher, most notably in *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (1977) and *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (1987).<sup>37</sup> Instead of settling the debate on the connection between economic change and abolition, however, the research of Drescher and others led to what remains one of the most intractable and fascinating questions in antislavery scholarship: namely, why did Britain kill off a flourishing branch of its economy? To borrow Drescher's term, why did it commit "econocide"? Though to even ask this question was to reject Williams' thesis, in answering it historians simultaneously accepted Williams' premise that there existed a causal connection between the concomitant expansion of capitalism, industrialization, and abolitionism in the late eighteenth century. For decades, attempts to understand the nature of this relationship dominated antislavery scholarship, leaving little space for questions about how abolitionism fit into a changing political culture or broader debates about empire.

The first major effort to explain the connection between economic change and antislavery that avoided Williams' reductive materialism was undertaken by David Brion Davis. In his acclaimed 1975 book *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*, Davis accepted part of Williams' thesis by agreeing that an antislavery

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<sup>36</sup> A recent exception to this consensus is David Beck Ryden, who has used different economic data to revive many of Williams' arguments. Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition*.

<sup>37</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1977); Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery*. See also David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) for a formidable refutation of Williams' decline thesis.

ideology— which valued free labour over coerced labour and was generally favourable to free markets— served the interests of an emerging class of capitalists. He avoided Williams' cynicism about motives, however, by invoking the notion of self-deception: though many abolitionists (such as Quaker merchants) were advancing their socio-economic interests by opposing slavery, they themselves were unaware of the fact.<sup>38</sup> This position struck a balance between the whig thesis and the Williams thesis by rescuing the benevolent motives of abolitionists while at the same time attributing these motives to something more material than an outpouring of virtue. It also served as the launching point for a debate that played out in the pages of the *American Historical Review* a decade later about the precise relationship between economic change and moral perception. Against Davis' argument about class interests, Thomas Haskell wrote a two-part essay arguing that it was actually the increasing frequency of overseas trade that led Britons to broaden their moral horizons and develop a long-distance humanitarian ethic.<sup>39</sup> This intervention led to a further exchange between Davis, Haskell, and John Ashworth in which each historian outlined a different causal link between capitalism and attitudes toward slavery. That this conversation revolved entirely around the relationship of economic change to ideology meant that Williams had succeeded in setting the terms of the antislavery debate for nearly half a century, despite the fact that many of his initial findings had been disproven.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, first published in 1975), chapters eight and nine.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas L. Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Parts 1 and 2," *The American Historical Review* 90, nos. 2 and 3 (April and June 1985): 339-61 and 547-66.

<sup>40</sup> In recognition of the debate's importance beyond the field of antislavery, the entire exchange was collected and published as edited volume in 1992. Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

By the early 1990s, the debate over how to explain the parallel growth of capitalism, industrialization, and abolitionism had largely run its course. This enabled scholars to focus increasingly on non-economic dynamics of the movement, resulting in a number of works that shed new light on the breadth and diversity of the phalanx of Britons who campaigned against the slave trade. In his 1991 book *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860*, for instance, David Turley focused on the social ecology of abolitionism, and showed how Quakers, evangelicals, and Rational Dissenters used the cause as a way to protest political inertia among the nation's elite. While both religion and class were central to Turley's analysis, he explored these themes in order to show how they contributed to the ethos of philanthropic reform— not to praise the motives of abolitionists or to explain them through economics.<sup>41</sup> Later in the decade, other studies focused on specific constituencies within the antislavery movement, seeking to understand what abolitionism meant to them. These include detailed works on Quaker and women activists, and a pioneering study by John Oldfield on grassroots antislavery organization and the popular politics of the campaign. Collectively, this wave of scholarship suggests that it is useful to think of overlapping abolitionist movements as opposed to a single, unified movement.<sup>42</sup> Since 2000, historians have continued to decenter the field by turning their attention to the international contexts and connections that helped shape British antislavery. As we now know, activists in Britain communicated

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<sup>41</sup> Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery*.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade, 1783-1807* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997); Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery*. More recently, see Judith Jennings, "A Trio of Talented Women: Abolition, Gender, and Political Participation, 1780-91," *Slavery & Abolition* 26, no. 1 (2005): 55-70.

with sympathizers in Ireland, America, France, and further afield; to varying extents, these linkages all helped shape the character of their campaign.<sup>43</sup>

On top of these trends, historians of abolitionism have also benefitted from advances in the burgeoning field of slave studies. Innovative research agendas continue to uncover the myriad ways in which enslaved peoples worked to emancipate themselves (violently and otherwise) throughout the Americas. In the process of freeing themselves and resisting oppression, slaves drew attention to the sheer violence inherent in the slave system. Thanks largely to the paradigm of Atlantic History, which began flourishing in the 1990s and shows few signs of abating, a growing number of scholars are exploring slave resistance, revolts, and other forms of self-manumission alongside antislavery agitation in Europe. Moreover, Atlantic History has encouraged comparative research into the experience of both slavery and abolition in different New World colonies and empires. Such work is a reminder that British abolitionism is only one chapter in a much larger story about the transition from slavery to freedom for Africans and their descendants throughout the Atlantic, and that British abolitionists were only one among many groups of actors who contributed to this change.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Among other works, see Nini Rodgers, Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery: 1612-1865 (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), esp. 230-90; Maurice Jackson, Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); J.R. Oldfield, Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-Slavery, c.1787-1820 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), esp. 1-67; and Philip Morgan, "Ending the Slave Trade: A Caribbean and Atlantic Context," in Derek Paterson, ed., Abolition and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010): 101-28.

<sup>44</sup> A good synthetic account of the end of slavery in the Atlantic, which examines the actions of both slaves in the Americas and abolitionists in Europe, is Blackburn, The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery. Seymour Drescher also provides a wide-lens perspective in Drescher, Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Among the vast literature on connections between slave resistance and abolition/ism, see especially: Cassandra Pybus, Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and their Global Quest for Liberty (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006); Simon Schama, Rough Crossings: The Slaves, the British, and the American Revolution (New

Along with expanding the geographic scope of antislavery studies, scholars in recent decades have also undertaken close examinations of specific themes within abolitionism and its literature. There has, for instance, been growing attention to the language and rhetoric that permeated abolitionist propaganda. The way in which antislavery poetry and fiction contributed to British Romanticism, for instance, has been of particular interest to historians and literary scholars alike.<sup>45</sup> Researchers have also explored topics such as the intersection of abolitionism and changing conceptions of race, and the impact of abolitionist discourse on national identity.<sup>46</sup> In one of the most innovative studies of recent years, Seymour Drescher has traced the intrusion of scientific and social scientific language into debates over the slave trade and slave emancipation. While some scholars still seek to revive or refute aspects of Williams' decline thesis, it is

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York: Ecco, 2006); Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Seymour Drescher, Pieter C. Emmer, and João Pedro Marques, eds., *Who Abolished Slavery? Slave Revolts and Abolitionism* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010). One of the best surveys of slavery in the British Empire, which covers the slave trade, slaveholding, resistance, and antislavery, remains James Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (London: Harper Collins, 1992).

<sup>45</sup> See especially Brycchan Carey, Markman Ellis, and Sara Salih, eds., *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition: Britain and Its Colonies, 1760-1838* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility*. Interest in this topic has been fostered by a number of recent anthologies of antislavery fiction, including: Peter Kitson and Debbie Lee, eds., *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, 8 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999); Marcus Wood, ed., *The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology, 1764-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and James G. Basker, *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems About Slavery, 1660-1810* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> Peter J. Kitson, "Candid Reflections: The Idea of Race in the Debate over the Slave Trade and Slavery in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century," in *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition*, ed. Ellis, Salih, and Carey; Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); George Bouloukos, *The Grateful Slave: The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). On the second point, see in particular Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009). Also note Nicholas Hudson, "'Britons Never Will Be Slaves': National Myth, Conservatism, and the Beginnings of British Antislavery," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 559-76.

an indication of how much the field has evolved that they now do so within the context of larger arguments about changes in British imperial culture.<sup>47</sup>

Of the various studies of British antislavery over the past quarter century, none has offered a more thoroughgoing reassessment of the origins of the movement than Christopher Leslie Brown's 2006 book *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*. According to Brown, it was the American War of Independence that created the conditions that enabled a longstanding antipathy toward the slave trade to coalesce into an organized movement to end it. Put another way, the timing of abolitionism can be explained by the fact that Britain in the 1780s was forced to come to grips with the loss of thirteen of its American colonies. As Brown argues, the American War led growing numbers of Britons to question the morality of slavery by making them recognize their own nation's hypocrisy in condemning American slave owners while actively promoting the institution in the British West Indies. Equally as significant, the conflict generated a litany of questions about the very purpose of empire that did not stop when fighting ended. In the aftermath of the war, therefore, there existed in Britain the political and cultural conditions necessary for an imperial reform movement like antislavery to emerge. Within this milieu, Brown shows how individuals pursuing a variety of different agendas found in abolitionism a way to further their respective causes, ranging from Evangelicals' efforts to make piety fashionable, to Quakers' attempts to solidify a denominational identity. While most abolitionists were clearly motivated by humanitarian and religious sensibilities— and consequently pursued antislavery as a

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<sup>47</sup> Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). On the latter point, I have in mind in particular Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition*.



desirable end in and of itself– moral mobilization also had various types of utility value for almost all its early adherents.<sup>48</sup>

While Brown is not the first historian to draw attention to the catalytic impact of the American War on British antislavery, he has illustrated the centrality of the conflict to the movement’s origins more fully than anyone else.<sup>49</sup> In so doing, he has highlighted the importance of situating abolitionism in a wide imperial context, as well as the insights to be gained by exploring the views and agendas of abolitionists that at first appear unconnected to their opposition to the slave trade. Throughout *Moral Capital*, however, the imperial context Brown presents is limited to that of Britain’s Atlantic empire; the imperial horizons of the individuals he explores come across as largely contained within the Atlantic World. Indeed, *Moral Capital* is a study about how events in the Americas shaped British attitudes toward slavery, and how transatlantic politics shifted in the 1780s in a way that enabled antislavery to become politically significant. Absent from the analysis is the way in which developments in other parts of Britain’s empire helped create the “distinct and distinctive moment in British imperial history” in which abolitionism emerged.<sup>50</sup> *Moral Capital*, therefore, should be read not only as an intervention in an existing debate, but also as a call to pursue new avenues of inquiry. In this case, if Brown is correct that Britons came to abolitionism through rethinking imperial purpose, then the totality of ways in which they rethought empire needs to be examined. A transatlantic

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<sup>48</sup> Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Most notably, Williams’ thesis revolved around the both the long- and short-term impact of the American War on the British economy and the sugar economy of the West Indies. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*.

<sup>50</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 2.

context alone does not explain how Britain's existential imperial crisis played out, nor how it gave rise to mobilization against the slave trade.

Despite the decentering of antislavery studies that has taken place in the past two decades, scholars have been reluctant to take up the challenge of situating the movement within broader narratives of imperial change. To some extent, this reflects the fragmentation that has characterized imperial studies more broadly ever since sweeping, metropole-driven histories of empire fell into disrepute during the era of decolonization. The increased specialization of academic training has further discouraged scholars from bringing developments in different parts of the empire into the same analytic frame. Few historians of the rise and fall of the Atlantic slave system, for instance, note the ways in which practices in the Indian Ocean World shaped contemporary attitudes towards coerced labour. Likewise, historians of late-eighteenth-century British India have failed to explore how changing attitudes toward New World slavery affected government policies concerning the EIC.<sup>51</sup> Even in narratives that attempt to “put Humpty-Dumpty back together” by studying empire *in toto*, abolitionism rarely features prominently.<sup>52</sup> For

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<sup>51</sup> For example, abolitionism remains almost completely absent from recent scholarship on the Hastings Trial and reforming British rule in India in the aftermath of the American War. See in particular Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire* and Travers, *Ideology and Empire*. Peter Marshall has called for greater research into the connections between antislavery and Indian reform in publications throughout his career, but he too has never explored such connections in a sustained way. He comes closest in Peter J. Marshall, “Empire and Authority in the Later Eighteenth Century,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 15, no. 2 (1987): 105-22. See also Peter J. Marshall, “The Moral Swing to the East: British Humanitarianism, India and the West Indies,” in *A Free Though Conquering People* and other essays in this collection.

<sup>52</sup> Analogy borrowed from David Fieldhouse, “Can Humpty Dumpty Be Put Together Again? Imperial History in the 1980s,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth Studies* 12, no. 2 (1984): 9-23. Recent works on Britain's late eighteenth-century empire to have overlooked or significantly downplayed antislavery include Bayly, *Imperial Meridian* and Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires*. Vincent Harlow advanced the notion of a “swing to the east” following the American Revolution, which led him to likewise virtually ignore antislavery mobilization; the topic is mentioned in only four of 1449 pages. Vincent T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire: Discovery and Revolution*, vol. 1, (London: Longmans, 1952). *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, published in 1998, devotes more

all the innovative work and methodological advances generated by Atlantic History, it too has perpetuated an historiographic bifurcation between scholarship on the Eastern and Western reaches of Britain's empire.<sup>53</sup>

Despite this division, there are some indications that scholarship on slavery and antislavery in the British Empire is poised to break oceanic confines. Two senior scholars have recently published books focusing on the late eighteenth century as a distinct period of empire, stressing the connections rather than fissures between different imperial regions.<sup>54</sup> A growing interest in networks of trade and communication is revealing the deep interconnectedness of Britain's empire in the decades straddling the turn of the nineteenth century; research in this vein continues to underscore how policy makers rarely considered spheres of empire in isolation when making decisions.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, increased research on slavery in the Indian Ocean World is yielding potentially fruitful

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space to antislavery mobilization, but here too the movement is unalloyed with changing domestic views of British India. Marshall, ed., The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume II: The Eighteenth Century.

<sup>53</sup> Ironically, Atlantic History itself emerged as part of an effort to break down scholarly barriers and specialization. I agree with Peter Coclanis' statement on the restrictions inherent in an Atlantic-centered paradigm: "Simply put, the levels of explanatory power and analytic acuity possible via the Atlantic history stratagem are beguiling but ultimately confining because the stratagem artificially limits the field of vision of its devotees, often blinding them to processes, developments, and conditions of central importance to understanding their figurative little corner of the world. Or to put it another way, Bobby Darin's way, we need to move 'beyond the sea.'" Peter A. Coclanis, "Atlantic World or Atlantic/World?," The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series 63, no. 4 (Oct. 2006): 726.

<sup>54</sup> Peter J. Marshall, Remaking the British Atlantic: The United States and the British Empire after American Independence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. chapter ten entitled "Empires of Righteousness: Native Americans, Enslaved Africans, and Indians"; Greene, Evaluating Empire. See also "Introduction: Britain's Oceanic Empire," in H.V. Bowan, Elizabeth Mancke, and John G. Reid, eds., Britain's Oceanic Empire: Atlantic and Indian Ocean Worlds, C.1550-1850 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For a call to end an oceanic bifurcation in scholarship on an earlier period of British imperialism, see Philip J. Stern, "British Asia and British Atlantic: Comparisons and Connections," The William and Mary Quarterly 63, no. 4 (Oct. 2006): 693-712.

<sup>55</sup> For example, David Lambert and Alan Lester, eds., Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and David Lambert and Alan Lester, "Geographies of Colonial Philanthropy," Progress in Human Geography 28, no. 3 (June 2004): 320-41. The value of studying global imperial networks is well outlined in Alison Games, "Beyond the Atlantic: English Globetrotters and Transoceanic Connections," The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series 63, no. 4 (Oct. 2006): 675-92.

opportunities for comparative study. Recent works by Richard Allen and Andrea Major, for instance, have begun unraveling how Britons both participated in and conceived of slave labour systems in the region. In different ways, both Allen and Major have traced how abolitionist arguments and language that circulated in Britain came to be used by EIC officials in India for a variety of ends— especially political ones.<sup>56</sup> By uncovering how a metropolitan discourse of slavery and abolition played out in India, Allen and Major raise an important question about the extent to which such influences were reciprocal: did examples of slavery and abolition in South Asia help shape British antislavery? While the present study does not aim to answer this question directly, it does suggest that debates about British India influenced abolitionism to a greater extent than historians have hitherto acknowledged, and thereby outlines avenues for future inquiry.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps even more promising in terms of integrating abolitionism with other currents of empire is continued interest in the “new imperial history.” Over the past two decades, this approach has led scholars to examine Britain and its imperial peripheries as constitutive parts of the same political entity. As historians such as Kathleen Wilson, Catherine Hall, and Antoinette Burton have shown, understanding empire means studying how national culture both shaped and responded to developments overseas. Above all, these and other historians have demonstrated how on-the-ground realities frequently

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1850* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014); Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772-1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012). For an overview of slavery and the slave trade in the Indian Ocean World, see Gwyn Campbell, *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2004).

<sup>57</sup> This is a topic I plan to explore in more detail while transforming my dissertation into a manuscript. I am grateful to both Andrea Major and Richard Allen for their advice about ways to go about uncovering where debates about slavery in India might have impacted antislavery agitation in Britain.

destabilized metropolitan narratives of power.<sup>58</sup> The present study builds on the new imperial history by showing how the slave trade and colonial slavery generated a variety of misgivings about Britain's national identity and standing in the world. However, though the new imperial history has successfully highlighted anxieties that attended overseas expansion, it has generally been less successful in showing how these anxieties influenced imperial reform movements such as abolitionism. The research agenda, in sum, has focused more on the challenges posed by empire than responses to them.<sup>59</sup>

### *Scope of Study*

The time therefore appears ripe for a study that situates abolitionism in a wider imperial context— one that examines both how empire shaped abolitionism and how abolitionism shaped empire. This dissertation aims to do just that. As will become clear, it makes no attempt to compare on-the-ground conditions of empire in the Americas, Africa, India, and elsewhere. The local contexts in which the British sought to exert influence were numerous and diverse, and such an agenda lies beyond the capabilities of a single scholar. Rather, the research that follows concentrates on how empire was described, assessed, and made sense of by those Britons who commented on it and championed its reformation. It is as much a study of the opinions Britons had of

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<sup>58</sup> Wilson, *The Island Race*; Wilson, *A New Imperial History*; Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (London: Polity, 2002); Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire: a Reader: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Antoinette Burton, *Empire in Question: Reading, Writing, and Teaching British Imperialism* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Antoinette Burton, *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>59</sup> The best overview of the new imperial history is offered in Wilson, "Introduction: histories, empires, modernities," in *A New Imperial History*. For a good assessment of the promises and pitfalls of this agenda, see Richard Price, "One Big Thing: Britain, Its Empire, and Their Imperial Culture," *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 3 (July 2006): 602-27.

themselves and of their nation's mission as it is of their evolving thoughts about Africans, East Indians, and other non-European subjects of empire.

The chronological focus of the study ranges from the end of the American War of Independence in 1783 to the onset of the wars with revolutionary France in 1793, though at times it explores discussions about slavery during the American War and analyzes recollections of antislavery campaigners penned in the early nineteenth century. As such, it is concerned primarily with abolitionism as a widespread cultural and political movement that peaked in the early 1790s, and less with the decision by parliament to abolish the slave trade in 1807. As Roger Anstey showed long ago, the Slave Trade Act of 1807 was passed at a specific juncture in the Napoleonic Wars when abrogating the traffic served immediate strategic goals. The story of the bill's successful passage is one of parliamentary manoeuvring and the creative application of maritime law, not of responsiveness to decades-long public pressure.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, both grassroots abolitionism and receptiveness to antislavery among Britain's political elite declined precipitously once war with France broke out in January 1793. Like most reform movements of the era, abolitionism over the following decade was unable to shake the taint of French radicalism. By the mid-1790s, abolitionist societies throughout the country had folded, the flood of antislavery literature produced in the preceding years had slowed to a trickle, and Wilberforce's near annual motions in parliament for immediate abolition were meeting with little support. 1796, the year the House of Commons had set in 1792 to end

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<sup>60</sup> Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975), esp. 321-402. See also Stephen Farrell, "Contrary to the Principles of Justice, Humanity, and Sound Policy: The Slave Trade, Parliamentary Politics, and the Abolition Act, 1807," in Stephen Farrell, Melanie Unwin, and James Walvin, eds., *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament, and People* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 141-202.

the slave trade by, came and went with little notice. Though support for antislavery somewhat revived in the early 1800s once fears of a French-style revolution in Britain had passed, it did so under very different circumstances than decades earlier. While the conclusion of this study takes the story of abolitionism up to 1807, my focus on the decade from 1783 to 1793 underscores that in studies of abolition<sup>*ism*</sup> in particular it is misleading to treat the period from 1783 to 1807 as a single unit.

The overall structure of this dissertation is designed to bring out the ways in which anxieties about empire catalyzed debates about the slave trade, and how these debates in turn helped generate a pro-imperial ideology that would come to Britain's later liberal empire. Specifically, the first two chapters focus on problems associated with the slave trade and empire, and the final three chapters look at solutions proposed by abolitionists and other reformers. Many of these solutions, as we will see, helped presage Britain's shift towards a new type of imperialism that emerged more fully in the first decades of the nineteenth century. A number of the individuals explored in the latter three chapters were prominent Anglican reformers who have captured the interest of generations of historians, but whose views on the slave trade have rarely been contextualized within their evolving analyses of empire more broadly. As such, this study not only examines original sources and overlooked aspects of the antislavery campaign, but also looks at important abolitionist leaders from new perspectives.

Chapter one begins the dissertation by providing a panoramic look at various critiques of empire that emerged from multiple quarters beginning in the aftermath of the

Seven Years' War. Part of the chapter highlights how the American War made slavery and the slave trade politically salient issues in ways they had not been prior to the conflict. The majority of it, though, concentrates on postwar denunciations of the lack of morality that many contemporaries saw as characterizing the exercise of British power overseas. As a case study of works by the Liverpool-based poet Hugh Mulligan illustrates, those individuals who called for humanitarian imperial reform often drew parallels between the actions of Britons in the West Indies, West Africa, and India (and to a lesser extent Ireland as well). Most significantly, critics such as Mulligan saw violence and abuse abroad as resulting from the fact that metropolitan ideals were not being realized or enforced in imperial peripheries. This perceived discrepancy between domestic expectations and overseas realities— and the efforts of reformers to highlight and end such incongruities— is a theme that runs throughout this study.

Whereas chapter one examines criticism of the way in which Britain was conducting empire in general, chapter two hones in on specific anxieties raised by the behaviour and habits of slave traders and slave owners. Like EIC officials, Britons involved in the slave industry were frequently accused of reprehensible conduct overseas. Because of their alleged depravity, they raised uncomfortable questions about the extent to which the supposedly humane British character could degenerate on the edges of empire. They also blurred the moral hierarchies and categories of difference on which imperial rule was constructed. Slave owners and slave traders were further similar to EIC employees in that their resettlement in the British Isles following sojourns abroad reminded metropolitans that empire could not easily be kept beyond Britain's shores.



Many Britons feared that imperial returnees imported with them not only avarice, a penchant for violence, and other unsavoury traits acquired abroad, but also foreign wealth. This, they feared, could be both economically and politically destabilizing. Studying perceptions of slave traders and slave owners reveals that a number of abolitionists were motivated not only by humanitarian concerns, but also by a desire to protect Britain from the negative consequences of imperial expansion.

At this point in the dissertation, the focus shifts from qualms about the slave trade and empire to ways in which reformers sought to address imperial challenges. Chapter three revisits the activism of two high-profile critics of empire: Edmund Burke, the lead prosecutor of Warren Hastings and a staunch advocate of Indian reform, and Granville Sharp, Britain's foremost critic of slavery prior to the 1780s. The chapter provides new insight into these well studied figures by showing how both men were largely motivated by fears that imperial iniquities would soon corrupt national virtue and institutions. Like Hugh Mulligan, Burke and Sharp each saw imperial problems as stemming from a bifurcation between the legal and moral standards applied at home and those applied abroad. Though the two men followed different intellectual trajectories, by the postwar era they each came to espouse a similar argument: that the only way to maintain national prosperity was to ensure that the exercise of British power abroad conformed to the laws of the mother country. This case for "recolonizing" sites of empire implied that British controlled territory overseas should be seen as an extension of Britain itself. In making it, Burke, Sharp, and the reformers they influenced helped lay the ideological groundwork for future efforts to extend British laws and values into the non-European world.

Chapter four turns to the way in which debates over slavery and the slave trade intersected with debates about the locus of sovereignty in the British Atlantic. It argues that efforts to reform and end slavery should each be understood as part of a larger contest between advocates of metropolitan sovereignty on the one hand and supporters of colonial rights on the other. For a number of abolitionists and government officials, the regulation of slavery and the suppression of the slave trade were seen as means of exerting parliamentary sovereignty over intransigent West Indian colonists. Circumscribing the power of colonials was a popular goal after the American War, as most Britons had come to believe that allowing Americans too much autonomy in the 1770s had precipitated the conflict in the first place. Further, many Britons assumed that planters' ability to act as "mini despots" on their estates— which historically had been largely beyond the reach of metropolitan law— carried over into their political attitudes. Influential abolitionists such as James Ramsay, Beilby Porteus, and James Stephen, therefore, claimed that restraining planter autonomy would help remedy the recalcitrance of West Indian assemblies in their dealings with London. Like many other activists, these individuals cast slavery reform and abolition as ways of advancing the twin goals of morally cleansing the empire and restricting colonial autonomy.

The final chapter builds on themes explored in the previous four chapters by showing how ideas about the rectitude of empire, the attenuation of British values overseas, and the need for metropolitan oversight of Britons abroad circulated among

evangelical Christians.<sup>61</sup> It begins with case studies of two prominent Evangelical abolitionists: the poet William Cowper, and the slave trader turned clergyman John Newton. Though the antislavery activism of both men has been well documented, no scholar has yet explored the views of either Cowper or Newton on Britain's growing empire in the East. The second half of chapter five then takes up connections between evangelical abolitionism and what scholars have dubbed Britain's "missionary awakening" in the late eighteenth-century. By focusing on the activism and networks of Newton in particular, this section illustrates significant overlaps in the personnel, objectives, paradigms, and vocabularies of the two fledgling causes. Similar to many abolitionists, the goal of early proponents of missions was not only to spread British values overseas, but also to reform on-site agents of empire whose perceived irreligiosity bespoke a cultural and moral detachment from the mother country.

Collectively, these chapters demonstrate how abolitionism emerged at a unique moment in Britain's imperial history. Like the British Empire itself, the moment was characterized by entanglements: those Britons who worked to end the slave trade, and those policymakers who voted on it, simultaneously commented on and were concerned about a myriad of other imperial issues. Examining these entanglements involves complicating the story of antislavery, but also seeing empire the way contemporaries did: namely, as an interconnected political entity, marked by both differences and similarities between its constituent parts. Moreover, understanding the imperial context in which abolitionism emerged makes it easier to recognize the ways in which antislavery

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<sup>61</sup> As per the accepted academic convention, I refer to evangelicals with a capital 'E' only when denoting evangelicals within the Church of England.

activists transformed fears about empire into a pro-imperial ideology. Though abolitionism began in a climate of uncertainty about Britain's future place in the world, the movement helped Britons overcome this anxiety, and enabled them to self-consciously and self-confidently embark on a project of global empire building.

## Chapter One

### *Geographies of Vice: Critiques of Global Empire, c.1763-1793*

On 29 July 1784, the Unitarian scholar and clergyman Gilbert Wakefield delivered a sermon in Richmond in Surrey on the day set aside to give thanks for the recent peace with America. Wakefield's sermon followed the same format as most Thanksgiving Day sermons. He began by lamenting the "Bloodshed and Destruction, that have unhappily distinguished these Times and this Country," and then proceeded to rejoice that "the Storm that threatened to pour down it's [sic] Rage upon us, is happily blown over." In both these turns of events, Wakefield saw the hand of God: whereas the prolonged conflict was God's way of punishing Britain for its sins, the cessation of hostilities and Britain's very survival against the powers allied against it were evidence of continued divine favour. However, though the immediate storm had "happily blown over," Wakefield warned his audience that God's wrath would be felt much more forcefully if Britons did not mend their iniquitous ways. The list of national sins he cited was a familiar one; it included profligacy among the rich, lack of sobriety among the poor, and "Inattention to religious Duties... Injustice, Intemperance, and Unruliness" among people of all classes. Wakefield's greatest vitriol, though, was reserved for the sins of empire. "Have we navigated and conquered to save, to civilize, and to instruct," he asked,

or to oppress, to plunder, and to destroy? Let INDIA and AFRICA give the Answer to these Questions. The one we have exhausted of her Wealth and her Inhabitants, by Violence, by Famine, and every Species of Tyranny and Murder. The other we daily carry off from the Land of their Nativity, like *Sheep for the Slaughter*.

Wakefield concluded his sermon by declaring that this “unrelenting Spirit of Barbarity” would surely result in further divine vengeance if allowed to continue.<sup>1</sup>

While still an Anglican curate in the late 1770s, Wakefield had drawn the ire of many members of his Liverpool congregation for forcefully condemning the slave trade from the pulpit. Following his conversion to Unitarianism in 1780, he continued to speak out against slavery as a guest preacher. By the end of the decade, he was lobbying members of parliament to support abolition and was publically boycotting slave-grown sugar.<sup>2</sup> His sermon draws attention to an often-overlooked fact about antislavery agitation in Britain during the late eighteenth century: namely, that abolitionists frequently denounced the slave trade alongside other imperial abuses. For many antislavery campaigners, the slave trade was only one example—albeit the most poignant example—of the injustice and violence that they saw as characterizing Britain’s presence abroad. The inventory of the nation’s overseas crimes was global in scope but, as Wakefield’s sermon indicates, it was rapacity in East India to which contemporaries most frequently compared the slave trade. In both the Atlantic and East Indies, avaricious Britons sought to extract wealth—measured in currency, material goods, labour, or human capital—as quickly and profitably as possible. In the process of satiating their greed, slave traders and East India Company servants committed a litany of further atrocities, including theft, kidnapping, and murder. Such violence smacked of hypocrisy since, according to Wakefield, both groups “engaged in the Profession of Christianity, but disregard[ed] the

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Wakefield, *A Sermon Preached at Richmond in Surry on July 29th 1784, the Day Appointed for a General Thanksgiving on Account of the Peace* (London: J. Johnson, 1784), 4, 11, 15, 16, and 17. Capitalization and italics in original.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Wakefield, *Memoirs of the Life of Gilbert Wakefield, BA. Late Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge*, vol. 1 (London: E. Hodson, 1792): 313-16.

practice.”<sup>3</sup> As with many other critics of empire, Wakefield saw a significant discrepancy between British ideals and British actions overseas, and believed that only a major overhaul of how empire was managed could bring the two into alignment.

As empire itself came to intrude more and more into British politics, culture, and the economy during the final third of the eighteenth century, the ethics of Britain’s conduct abroad simultaneously came under increased scrutiny. To be sure, not all Britons who participated in debates about imperial issues agreed with Wakefield on the need for major change. Many policy makers and commentators defended the imperial *status quo*, arguing that reorganizing empire would jeopardize its profitability or infringe on individual or corporate rights. Others gave lip service to implementing policies to protect non-Europeans, but did so mainly to staunch the tide of calls for more sweeping reforms. Those with financial interests in the Atlantic slave system, for instance, pointed to “humane” laws for the treatment of slaves passed by colonial assemblies in the 1780s as evidence that London need not regulate slavery or the slave trade. Though some within the EIC urged that more attention be paid to the welfare (material and spiritual) of the native population, most directors wanted to pursue the Company’s commercial mission with as little government interference as possible. In the final decades of the eighteenth century, both the East India and West India lobbies remained powerful forces against fundamentally altering the structure, mission, or sites of power within the Empire.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Wakefield, *A Sermon*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> On the political influence of the West India interest in London in the late eighteenth century, see David Beck Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolitionism, 1783-1807* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. chapters three and eight. On the East India Company in this period, see Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History* (New York: Longman, 1993), 103-43.

Yet despite arguments from established interests, debates about how to cleanse empire of its worst excesses grew in intensity and frequency, particularly in the aftermath of Britain's defeat during the American War of Independence. Policy makers and government officials asked questions not only about how to make empire more efficient and lucrative, but also if and how it could be made more moral. Within the context of a growing press and an expanding reading public, such concerns were not limited to those charged with administering the empire: the rectitude of British conduct overseas was also debated by poets, preachers, writers, and thinkers of an array of political and religious stripes. For many of these concerned citizens, comparing violence and exploitation in different regions underscored the veracity and weight of their critiques. The parallels they drew painted a picture of an empire that was globally at odds with self-ascribed national values such as liberty and justice. Moreover, the scope of the iniquity they described proved the need for comprehensive reform if realities abroad were to be made to conform to metropolitan ideals. Though critiquing empire on a global scale was only one strategy used to promote imperial reform, it was an important one in helping frame more specific abuses such as slavery and the slave trade. Examining how some abolitionists brought events in different parts of the empire into the same analytic field therefore not only helps reveal individual motivations, but also helps contextualize how contemporaries would have understood debates about the Atlantic slave system.

This chapter has two main objectives: to illustrate ways in which humanitarian critics of empire in the 1780s and early 1790s drew parallels between abuses in different parts of the world, and to explain how this strand of discourse emerged. The first section



addresses the first goal by exploring a series of four eclogues published in 1788 by the Liverpool-based, Irish poet Hugh Mulligan. Focusing on British rapacity in the Americas, Africa, India, and Ireland, Mulligan's poems show how various injustices abroad could be cast as manifestations of the same underlying problems with the way in which Britain was conducting empire. They also shed light on the shared language and arguments employed by advocates of reform. The following three sections then go backwards in time to explore the evolution of this discourse that was critical of empire on a global scale, seeking to understand how such a cohesive and comprehensive critique such as Mulligan's became possible. One section delineates calls for moral imperium from the Seven Years' War to the American War; another looks at how the American War transformed qualms about the morality of empire into politically salient issues; and a third section explores the imperial debates of the 1780s in which Mulligan was intervening. The final part of this chapter then returns to Mulligan's works, and analyzes the relationship between violence and gender in his imperial eclogues. It does so in order to show the ways in which reformers drew comparisons between different spheres of empire, as well as to illustrate how poems and other media both built on and contributed to critiques of empire that were circulating in the 1780s.

### ***Hugh Mulligan and the Humanitarian Critique of Empire***

Penned between 1783 and 1788, Hugh Mulligan's four eclogues on the effects of empire on four different continents collectively constitute one of the most poignant and wide-ranging attacks on British imperialism of the 1780s. Yet, perhaps owing to the fact that Mulligan left few archival traces, both the poet and his works have almost entirely

escaped the attention of historians. Based on internal evidence from his poems, we know that Mulligan was born in Ireland and by the 1780s had immigrated to Liverpool where he worked as a poet, painter, and engraver. Evidence from his poems also suggests that during his early years in the city he experienced a series of romantic disappointments. Nini Rodgers, the only recent scholar to explore Mulligan in any detail, describes him as “a gentlemanly Irishman living in Liverpool” yet also as “a none too successful emigrant in the burgeoning port of Liverpool.”<sup>5</sup> This latter description is substantiated by a reference in Edward Rushton’s 1806 poetic tribute *On the Death of Hugh Mulligan* to “the clouds that had sadden’d his days.”<sup>6</sup> Rodgers also claims that Mulligan was Protestant, though cites no specific evidence for this assertion.<sup>7</sup>

In Liverpool, Mulligan became involved with an informal group of literati and liberal reformers centered on the poet William Roscoe. Both the political and humanitarian concerns of the predominantly Unitarian circle were wide-ranging, and Mulligan’s affiliation with it exposed him to the progressive opinions of a number of Liverpool’s leading Rational Dissenters, including Gilbert Wakefield.<sup>8</sup> Politically,

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<sup>5</sup> Nini Rodgers, *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery: 1612-1865* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 230-38, on 232.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Rushton, *On the Death of Hugh Mulligan* (1806) at <http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?&textsid=39117> (accessed on 18 May 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Rodgers, *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery*, 232, 233. Mulligan’s religious affiliation is not apparent from any of his published poetry. While “Mulligan” was originally a Catholic name, by the eighteenth century it was shared by Protestants and Catholics alike. Mulligan’s likely collaboration with the Anglican cleric George Gregory is the only evidence I can find for Rodgers’ assertion that he was Protestant. See page 47 of this dissertation.

<sup>8</sup> James G. Basker, *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems About Slavery, 1660-1810* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 313. For Roscoe’s circle and its opposition to the slave trade, see F.E. Sanderson, “The Liverpool Abolitionists,” in Roger Anstey and P.E.H. Hair, eds., *Liverpool, the African Slave Trade, and Abolition* (Liverpool: Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 1976), 196-238 and Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery*, 159-67. Anthony Page briefly covers the Liverpool abolitionists in his article on the contributions of Rational Dissenters to abolitionism, highlighting the broader religious and political milieu in which Unitarians and other Rational Dissenters who opposed the slave trade functioned.

members were united by an opposition to Liverpool's exclusively Tory civic government and to continued religious disabilities such as the Test and Corporation Acts. As David Turley has demonstrated, the coterie was typical of the type of group that emerged in many industrializing cities throughout Britain in the 1780s that was progressive in its politics and that saw philanthropy and political reform as going hand-in-hand.

Collectively, Turley argues, these organizations constituted an "intellectual-literary-reformist complex."<sup>9</sup> As with the leaders of many other organizations that combined opposition to slavery with a commitment to humanitarianism and reform, Roscoe and his associates became best known at a local level for what their opponents deemed political radicalism. While their agitation was generally tolerated in the 1780s, in the 1790s many members of the group run afoul of authorities who increasingly sought to suppress public opposition to the government. Wakefield, for instance, was imprisoned in 1799-1800 on charges of sedition.<sup>10</sup> While Mulligan was never a core part of Roscoe's circle, his interactions with activists who represented the more liberal flank of the abolitionist movement influenced his views on both slavery and British imperialism more generally.<sup>11</sup>

Mulligan's Irish background also shaped his outlook on empire. As an eyewitness to the consequences of Anglo-imperialism, the poet had a uniquely personal perspective through which to assess the nature of British conduct overseas. Though Mulligan's works provide no indication as to his birthplace or childhood, the content of his Irish eclogue

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Anthony Page, "Rational Dissent, Enlightenment, and Abolition of the British Slave Trade," *The Historical Journal* 54, no. 3 (September 2011): esp. 753-54.

<sup>9</sup> Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery*, 85.

<sup>10</sup> Sanderson, "The Liverpool Abolitionists," 206.

<sup>11</sup> F.E. Sanderson only mentions Mulligan briefly in a footnote, and David Turley does not mention Mulligan at all in his expose of the Liverpool abolitionists in *The Culture of English Antislavery*. It is largely based on these omissions that I conclude that Mulligan was not a central figure in the group.

shows that he shared many of the common grievances of Ireland's peasantry, including absentee landlordism, resource depletion, and the need for land reforms to stem emigration. Though these ills of empire were longstanding, and lacked the immediate violence of the Atlantic slave trade or British aggression in India, Mulligan saw them as similar in kind to the effects of British imperialism elsewhere. As a resident of Liverpool, Mulligan was also part of an Irish diasporic community of approximately five thousand people, constituting roughly six percent of the city's population. The Irish in Liverpool were almost universally poor and employed in labour intensive industries such as dock work, factory work, and textile production.<sup>12</sup> Both his liberal politics and his Irish background meant that Mulligan had little chance of achieving political influence through conventional means. This outsider status might help explain why he took to poetry to express his disapprobation with the course of British imperialism.

Of the many humanitarian causes that members of Roscoe's coterie patronized, few elicited more commitment than opposition to the slave trade. Gilbert Wakefield, as we have seen, was an early and vocal opponent of the institution. In 1783, the Quaker merchant William Rathbone began raising funds for the recently formed Quaker anti-slavery committee in London; four years later, he was procuring ships' muster roles to help Thomas Clarkson prove the high mortality rate of seamen engaged in the African trade.<sup>13</sup> The poet and philanthropist Edward Rushton had become repulsed by the slave trade after serving as second-mate on a slaving voyage in 1773 during which he

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<sup>12</sup> MacRaild, Donald M. *The Irish Diaspora in Britain, 1750-1939*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 41.

<sup>13</sup> Donald A. Macnaughton, "Roscoe, William," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/24084?docPos=1> (Accessed 15 May 2014).

contracted ophthalmia while tending to slaves below deck. The only eyewitness to slavery in Roscoe's circle, Rushton in 1787 wrote a series of five eclogues on the horrors of plantation life in Jamaica.<sup>14</sup> Even more influential than Rushton's published works were those of Roscoe, especially his two-part poem *The Wrongs of Africa*. This piece was commissioned by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 and was widely distributed by the organization over the following years. In both *The Wrongs of Africa* and subsequent writings, Roscoe stressed collective responsibility for the trade by arguing that though only some individuals are directly employed in the slaving industry, the "criminality of it" belongs to the whole "nation which has long silently acquiesced under it."<sup>15</sup> Rathbone described Roscoe as "one of the most able and consistent advocates for Liberty that I am acquainted with," and both men's names appear on the SEAST's earliest published list of subscribers.<sup>16</sup>

The antislavery credentials of Roscoe and his circle are particularly impressive considering their surroundings. In the 1780s, Liverpool was the largest slaving port in the Atlantic World. By 1800, it alone was responsible for outfitting three-quarters of all slaving voyages from England.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the prospect of abolishing the slave trade

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Royden, "Edward Rushton," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/article.jsp?articleid=24286&back=> (accessed 10 May 2014); Edward Rushton, *West-Indian Eclogues* (London: J. Philips, 1787).

<sup>15</sup> William Roscoe, *The Wrongs of Africa, a Poem. Part the First*. (London: R. Faulder, 1787); William Roscoe, *The Wrongs of Africa, a Poem. Part the Second*. (London: R. Faulder, 1787). Citation from William Roscoe, *A General View of the African Slave-Trade, Demonstrating Its Injustice and Impolicy: With Hints toward a Bill for Its Abolition* (London: R. Faulder, 1788), 10.

<sup>16</sup> William Rathbone to William Smith, Liverpool, 3 July 1793, in The Papers of William Smith, Box 1, f.1, *Abolition and Emancipation* [microfilm], Part 6, Reel 92, Adam Matthews. For early subscribers to the SEAST, see *A List of the Society Instituted in 1787, For the Purpose of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London: [s.n.], 1787).

<sup>17</sup> David Fleming, "Liverpool: European Capital of the Transatlantic Slave Trade," presented at the annual conference of the International Association of City Museums, Amsterdam, 2005, at [http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/resources/amsterdam\\_conference.aspx](http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/resources/amsterdam_conference.aspx).

posed a serious— some argued an existential— threat to the city’s economy. According to Rushton, abolitionism was so unpopular in Liverpool that “at that time [the 1780s], to speak irreverently of the king, or even to deny the existence of a God, were... venial offences, when compared with the atrocity of condemning the sale and purchase of human flesh.”<sup>18</sup> One Liverpoolian businessman who offered information to a government official investigating the trade asked that his letter be transcribed before being passed on to others for fear that his penmanship would be recognized. “I am a Merchant of Liverpool,” he wrote, “& it might be attended with irreparable prejudice to some branches of business in which I am engaged, that I stood forth with any opinion that could favour the abolition of the Slave Trade.”<sup>19</sup> Confronted by this hostile environment, it is unsurprising that a number of Liverpoolian antislavery poets elected to first publish their works anonymously.

While Mulligan was typical in not putting his name to his first published antislavery pieces, he nonetheless deserves credit for taking up opposition to the slave trade well before the floodgates of abolitionist literature opened in the late 1780s. Indeed, Mulligan wrote his poems against the Atlantic slave system before any other member of Roscoe’s circle had publically committed to the cause. In December 1783, Mulligan’s first anonymous work appeared in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* under the heading “An American Eclogue. Eclogue I. Morning; or The Complaint.” The poem is a 160-line

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<sup>18</sup> William Shepherd, “A Sketch of the Life of the Author,” in Edward Rushton and William Shepherd, *Poems and Other Writings by the Late Edward Rushton* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1824), xiv-xv.

<sup>19</sup> Edgar Currie to Lord Hawkesbury, Carlisle, 24 February 1788, Add. Ms. 38416, ff.35-36, BL. Because Liverpool appeared to be such a bastion of support for the slave trade, Thomas Clarkson was particularly heartened when the SEAST received antislavery poems and tracts from Liverpoolians. Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, & Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, by the British Parliament*, vol. 1 (London: James P. Parke, 1808), 372-73.

lamentation on the hardships of slavery told from the perspective of a male slave named Adala. Along with reflecting on the suffering and cruelty that pervade plantation life, Adala contrasts his present situation with his “blissful” existence of “self-approving joys” prior to being taken captive in Whydah— a major slave-trading region in the Bight of Benin.<sup>20</sup> Though set in Virginia, Adala reminisces about the grief and misery experienced at each stage of his journey: enslavement in Africa, the Middle Passage, and arrival in America. While Mulligan’s choice of setting was a clear denunciation of the new American republic’s sanctioning of slavery, he makes clear in his references that slaves in Jamaica and Barbados are treated no better than those in Virginia. Three months later, Mulligan published another poem in the *Gentlemen’s Magazine* entitled *The Lovers, an African Eclogue*, signing this piece “H.M., Liverpool.” The inscription was meant to assert firsthand knowledge of the slave trade based on the author’s city of residence as much as it was intended to conceal his identity. Set in Guinea, the poem consists of a dialogue between two enslaved Africans who jump overboard just before the ship in which they were being held catches fire, the result of a successful shipboard uprising. As the two lovers swim to shore, they reflect upon their “Once happy land! where all were free and blest,” and share stories about being captured and the melancholy it induced.<sup>21</sup>

For a poet of virtually no note, having two pieces appear in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* marked a considerable achievement. In the introduction to his published collection years later, Mulligan wrote that these eclogues “furnished the hint to some

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<sup>20</sup> “An American Eclogue. Eclogue I. Morning; or The Complaint,” in *The Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, vol. 53, December 1783, ed. Syvanus Urban, (London), 1043-44. Citation on 1043.

<sup>21</sup> “The Lovers. An African Eclogue,” in *The Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, Vol. 54, March 1784, ed. Syvanus Urban, (London), 199-200, citation on 199.

publications which have since appeared.”<sup>22</sup> Based on his personal connection to Roscoe and Rushton, as well as similarities between the content and tone of his poems and theirs, it is likely that Mulligan was referring to Roscoe’s *Wrongs of Africa* and Rushton’s series of eclogues on slavery in the West Indies. Even more apparent than in these works, though, is Mulligan’s influence on a poem printed in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in January 1784 entitled “American Eclogues. Eclogue II. Evening; or, The Fugitive.” This poem was signed by Rev. George Gregory, a fellow Irish émigré and Anglican clergyman based in Liverpool until relocating to London in 1782.<sup>23</sup> As the title of Gregory’s poem clearly indicates, it was meant as a companion piece to “An American Eclogue. Eclogue I,” which Mulligan had published anonymously the previous month. Both poems revolve around the suffering of escaped slaves, and the abundant stylistic similarities indicate that Mulligan and Gregory almost certainly collaborated on the two pieces. Though it is difficult to trace Mulligan’s precise influence on the development of an antislavery poetical cannon, the fact that he was involved in publishing three works in a major periodical by the beginning of 1784 places him alongside only a handful of other British poets such as Thomas Day and Thomas Chatterton who denounced the slave trade prior to the emergence of an organized abolitionist movement.

In 1788, Mulligan used the opportunity afforded by the burgeoning popularity of antislavery literature to print updated versions of his American and African eclogues. He did so in his only published anthology, aptly entitled *Poems, Chiefly on Slavery and*

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<sup>22</sup> Hugh Mulligan, *Poems Chiefly on Slavery and Oppression, with Notes and Illustrations* (London: W. Lowndes, 1788), 81.

<sup>23</sup> Rev. Mr. Gregory, “American Eclogues. Eclogue II. Evening; or, The Fugitive,” in *The Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, vol. 54, January 1784, ed. Syvanus Urban, (London), 45-46.



*Oppression*. Included in this collection, dedicated to William Wilberforce, were two other poetical case studies on the evils of British imperialism: one called *The Virgins, an Asiatic Eclogue*, and the other *The Herdsmen, an European Eclogue*.<sup>24</sup> The former poem features a conversation between an Indian princess, whose father and brother were kidnapped and killed by the British, and the daughter of an Indian Brahmin, whose traditional prayers are ineffectual against the invasion of her people's territory. Like the narrators in the slavery eclogues, the Indian princess describes the British as lying in ambush to capture her father, and recalls him being "dragg'd in servile chains" and made "a slave" prior to being murdered.<sup>25</sup> The princess herself barely escaped the attack and now must seek shelter with her friend. Written at the height of public interest in the Hastings trial, the poem touches on many themes that featured centrally in the proceedings. These include the greed of Company employees, the indiscriminateness of the violence they inflicted, and their lack of regard for Indian traditions and customs.

Mulligan's final eclogue, *The Herdsmen, an European Eclogue*, is set in Ireland, and features an elderly shepherd telling his son about the "ills of poverty"—resource depletion, emaciated livestock, emigration, and others—that engulfed the island when English landlords forced Irish peasants off their land. From a "daisy'd green" island of "rural ease," the "imperious chiefs" transformed "fair Hibernia" into a place where "Desolation silent stalk'd around."<sup>26</sup> Though the poem resembles its non-European

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<sup>24</sup> Hugh Mulligan, *Poems, Chiefly on Slavery and Oppression*. The collection contains twenty-two poems in total, though most are only a few pages in length. The longest poems, by a significant margin, are the imperial eclogues. Along with notes, they comprise forty-seven pages of the one-hundred page publication. Of the other poems in the collection, a number contain passages critical of the slave trade and the actions of Britons in India, including *Epistle to Varro*, *Ode to Fancy*, and *Epistle to Mr. E--- R---*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 18, 19.

counterparts in focusing on the suffering of the native population and the deterioration of their land, the context for this poem is different than the others. The adverse effects of a foreign presence in Ireland are not new, but had been developing over generations of colonial rule. The tone of the poem is therefore much less urgent than the others in which the narrators are in immediate danger. Moreover, by even placing Ireland alongside other sites of empire, Mulligan was doing something relatively rare among imperial critics in the 1780s: while many reformers drew parallels between East India, West Africa, and the West Indies, very few included Ireland in their analyses.<sup>27</sup> The fact that Mulligan did so underscores that though his eclogues as a whole can be seen as largely representative of contemporaneous critiques of empire, they were also motivated by personal encounters with imperialism.

What makes Mulligan's poems illuminating and deserving of attention is that they constitute more than simply a series of isolated critiques of specific imperial abuses. Mulligan's goal of establishing an overarching cohesion between the eclogues is most evident in his strategic choice of settings. By locating his poems on four different continents corresponding to the four cardinal directions, and by having them each take

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<sup>27</sup> Most historians agree that longstanding grievances of a humanitarian nature—such as absentee landlordism, placemen and pensions, and Catholic rights— took a back seat to other considerations when British politicians considered Anglo-Irish relations in the 1780s and 1790s. As Linda Colley writes, Britain's policies toward Ireland during these years are best understood as part of “a series of imperial reforms designed to clarify and strengthen London's control,” not as part of the nation's growing “benevolence” towards the outside world. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 145. See also James Kelly, *Prelude to Union: Anglo-Irish Politics in the 1780s* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1992). The relative lack of attention paid to Ireland by humanitarian reformers is underscored by the fact that few leading abolitionists spoke out on Irish issues. Not until 1803 did Wilberforce, for instance, cite Britain's failure to “convert, civilize, instruct, and attach them [Irish Catholics]” as “most disgraceful to the character of this country.” Throughout the early nineteenth century, Wilberforce remained less disturbed by Britain's political and economic subjugation of the native Irish than by the lack of moral and religious instruction provided to them. William Wilberforce to Capt. ----, Sandleford, 31 August 1803, in William Wilberforce, *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, ed. Robert I. and Samuel Wilberforce, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1840): 280.

place at a different time of day, Mulligan was not-so-subtly implying that British imperialism was a uniformly immoral enterprise.<sup>28</sup> Though the actual texts of his American and African eclogues differ only slightly from the versions printed in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1783 and 1784 respectively, the new context in which the poems were presented alters their meaning. Specifically, whereas the earlier poems together linked plantation slavery in the Americas to violence in West Africa, the 1788 editions link the entire Atlantic slave system to British depredations throughout the world. While slavery and the slave trade remain evils in-and-of themselves, they are now framed as symptoms of a more widespread lack of morality in empire. Placed alongside each other in his 1788 anthology, Mulligan's imperial eclogues suggest that British actions and policies were causing devastation on a truly global scale.

The unity of Mulligan's eclogues is reinforced by a series of recurring themes and tropes designed to underscore the consistency of British ruthlessness abroad. In each poem, for instance, Britons are initially motivated to venture overseas by a desire to extract as much wealth as possible. In West Africa, slave traders' "AV'RICE swell[s] with undiminish'd rage," and financial greed leads them to carry off the continent's human capital.<sup>29</sup> This same cupidity induces planters across the Atlantic to get maximum labour out of their slaves while disregarding their physical wellbeing. In Asia, almost all EIC operations are geared toward extracting resources from the subcontinent as efficiently as possible; forced labour, theft, speculation, war-making, and other immoral

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<sup>28</sup> Mulligan's time-of-day settings were likely inspired by Alexander Pope's use of the four seasons as the backdrop for a quartet of pastoral eclogues he penned in 1709. Pope's poems can be found at <http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/AuthorRecord.php?&method=GET&recordid=32967> (accessed 1 June 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Mulligan, *Slavery and Oppression*, 7.

actions all stem from the ignoble desire of Company employees to obtain riches quickly. Mulligan highlights the centrality of avarice to colonial rule throughout the *Asiatic Eclogue*, beginning with the opening line: “When proud oppression British banners bore,/... avarice followed to that peaceful shore.” The rest of the poem repeatedly references Britons “thirst[ing] for wealth” and being a people “whose sordid god is gold.” In robbing India of its “treasures,” EIC officials resemble absentee English landowners in Ireland who, “rapacious, grasp the hard-earned pay,/ And Western gales waft our wealth away.”<sup>30</sup>

Because of their shared motives, Britons on all four continents are described in similar (sometimes identical) terms. In his eclogues on the slave trade and on India, Mulligan calls them “monsters” and “ruffians.” At points in all four eclogues, they are referred to as “tyrants”—a favourite appellation among abolitionists to describe slave traders and slave owners. With a poet’s touch, Mulligan also labels Britons overseas “curs’d destroyers,” “ruthless strangers,” “cringing minions,” “ferocious tigers,” “lions eager for their prey,” “pallid foes,” “sons of rapine,” and “scoffing clowns.”<sup>31</sup> Collectively, the four eclogues suggest that Britons abroad are everywhere animated by a spirit of greed that transforms them into plunderers and oppressors. Not only have their morals been corrupted in their quest to accrete wealth, but their seemingly boundless avarice has led them to become active agents in perpetuating violence wherever they go. As discussed in chapter two, anxieties generated by the actions of on-site agents of empire provided one of the major impetuses for both antislavery and Indian reform.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 8, 9, 10, 14, and 19.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 2, 25, 28, 9, 29, and 19.

Largely because Britons who ventured to Africa, the Americas, India, and Ireland shared similar motives, the impact of British conduct in all four locations is likewise comparable. This symmetry is reinforced by the fact that each poem follows the same narrative structure. It begins with victims sharing memories of simpler though happier times in their homelands, variously described as places “where all were free and blest,” where “cares and wants were few,” where “green vales with living wealth abound,” and “Where the tir’d traveller [who] op’d the friendly door,/ Was kindly urg’d to share thy grandsire’s store.”<sup>32</sup> These halcyon days were then brought to an abrupt end when the British arrived, creating “fierce alarms” and “civil strife,” committing acts that would “stain the annals of the human race.” The contrast to earlier years is stark: “How chang’d the scene,” exclaims the elderly narrator in Mulligan’s Irish eclogue, “Kingdoms as well as common customs change.”<sup>33</sup> Though all Mulligan’s narrators take some solace in the divine vengeance they predict will be wreaked upon those responsible for their misery, any small consolation this provides is overshadowed by the grief they experience as a result of their communities’ decay.

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By presenting his critique of empire in a series of eclogues, Mulligan was participating in a well-established poetic tradition. Beginning with Virgil in the first century BCE, the eclogue had been used to draw attention to pastoral settings, which in many cases became sullied or despoiled by injustices committed by foreigners. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a number of poets began situating eclogues in far-flung

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 25, 3, 1, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 4, 14, 17.

lands in order to contrast the tranquility that existed prior to European incursions with the havoc that ensued thereafter.<sup>34</sup> In 1770, for instance, Thomas Chatterton wrote a series of three African eclogues conforming to this template. The final one, entitled *Heccar and Gaira: An African Eclogue*, had particularly strong antislavery overtones. In it, two African warriors discuss how to exact vengeance on British traders (described as “pallid,” “languid,” and “bloody Sons of Mischief”) who had enslaved their loved ones.<sup>35</sup> First published in 1778, the poem’s language and themes are strikingly similar to those found in Mulligan’s *The Lovers, An African Eclogue* that appeared five years later. In addition to his poems on slavery, Mulligan’s *Asiatic Eclogue* also borrowed ideas and tropes from earlier poets. Though most eclogues set in Asia in the first half eighteenth century focused on celebrating Eastern culture, by the final decades of the century many more highlighted the deleterious effects of European colonization on the continent. In one of John Scott’s 1782 *Oriental Eclogues*, for instance, EIC servants do nothing but “enslave,” “plunder,” and “snatch... crops away” from the native population. Like the virgins in Mulligan’s *Asiatic Eclogue*, the narrator of Scott’s poem wonders “What right” the British have “to plague our peaceful land?”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Though situated overseas, the scenery and topography used to describe these regions reflect European imaginations of them. The best work on European conceptions and constructions of Africa remains Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964). For the most part, Curtin confirms Wylie Sypher’s earlier claim that Europeans pictured African peoples as “pseudo-African[s] in a pseudo-Africa.” Wylie Sypher, *Guinea’s Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 9. Mulligan’s slavery eclogues fit this description. For a recent account of the interplay between abolitionism and stereotypes of the African environment, see Deirdre Coleman, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Chatterton, *A Supplement to the Miscellanies of Thomas Chatterton* (London: T. Becket, 1784), 56.

<sup>36</sup> John Scott, *The Poetical Works of John Scott Esq* (London: J. Buckland, 1782), 140.

It was not just the authors of earlier eclogues from whom Mulligan borrowed material and inspiration. While Mulligan stated that his poems in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1783/84 “furnished the hint” toward future antislavery works by members of his own literary circle, the 1788 version of his *American Eclogue* borrowed verses directly from Roscoe about Britons’ “quenchless thirst of gold” and from Rushton about the physical plight of slaves.<sup>37</sup> This exchange, reiteration, and reworking of both tropes and specific phrases was not limited to the Liverpoolian poets. As Moira Ferguson notes, by the late 1780s a repertoire of motifs had developed that would appear in antislavery poetry throughout the remainder of the abolitionist campaign. These include “split families, atrocities, un-Christian traders, [and] the demeaning of Britain’s ‘name.’”<sup>38</sup> Mulligan’s antislavery eclogues contributed to this broader discursive terrain, and in so doing helped furnish both concepts and a vocabulary that contemporaries could tap into in order to express disapprobation with Britain’s involvement in the Atlantic slave system.

Among poets who condemned the worst excesses of British imperialism in the decade between the American War and the wars of the French Revolution, Mulligan was not alone in analyzing far-away scenes of rapacity— especially West Africa, New World slave societies, and East India— alongside each other. Though none provided as comprehensive a critique of empire as Mulligan did, Thomas Day, William Cowper, Anna Barbauld, Mary Birkett Card, and the physician-philosopher Erasmus Darwin (who

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<sup>37</sup> “furnished the hint” in Mulligan, *Poems Chiefly on Slavery and Oppression*, 81; “quenchless thirst” in William Roscoe, “The Wrongs of Africa: Part I,” in Basker, *Amazing Grace*, 59; Rushton, *West-Indian Eclogues*.

<sup>38</sup> Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 150.

also dabbled in poetry) all highlighted the adverse effects of British activity in both the East and West Indies.<sup>39</sup> “We extend our grasping hands from east to west, from pole to pole,” wrote Barbauld, committing “enormities” against “*darker-coloured* children of the same family.” Darwin concurred, and pled with British lawmakers, “whom either Ind obeys,” to in both hemispheres “right the injured, and reward the brave.”<sup>40</sup> Like Mulligan, these and other poets created sentimental appeals designed to emotionally resonate with a British public that by the late eighteenth century increasingly judged the ability to empathize with the downtrodden as a signifier of moral advancement.<sup>41</sup> Each of the above mentioned poets were also critical of the monopoly on political power enjoyed by British landholders, and made the case that British oppressions abroad were interwoven with the oppressiveness of Britain’s political class at home. Along with groups such as the Liverpool abolitionists, they constituted the more liberal wing of the antislavery movement.

In many ways, it should not be surprising that poets made connections between abuses in different parts of the empire more frequently than other imperial commentators. Concerned with capturing and conveying “the spirit of the times,” many were closely attune to international events and debates. Moreover, they were naturally attracted to

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<sup>39</sup> For more on Thomas Day, see pages 70 and 83. For more on William Cowper, see pages 295-302. For Birkett, see: M.[ary] Birket[t], A Poem on the African Slave Trade. Addressed to Her Own Sex by M. Birket (Dublin: J. Jones, 1792).

<sup>40</sup> Italics in original. This citation comes from Anna Barbauld, Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation; or, a Discourse for the Fast, Appointed on April 19, 1793 (London: J. Johnson, 1793), 23. She expresses the same idea in her 1791 Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. in Anna Barbauld, Poems by Anna Laetitia Barbauld (London: Joseph Johnson, 1792), 145-52. See page 154-55; Erasmus Darwin, Canto III of “The Loves of the Plants” (1789) in Basker, Amazing Grace, 385.

<sup>41</sup> For the role of sentiment and the appeal to pathos of antislavery poetry, see Brycchan Carey, British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery 1760-1807 (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 73-106.



human stories, especially those of individuals with minimal political voice. Yet the fact that Mulligan may have been predisposed to empathize with the victims of empire does not itself explain how he was able to provide such a thorough (and thoroughly negative) appraisal of empire. Indeed, though Mulligan drew ideas and inspiration from fellow poets, he also borrowed material from a variety of other sources that were critical of British imperial activity. Many of these are quoted at length in eighteen pages of notes published at the end of his 1788 anthology. While the works cited range from travellers' accounts to trade treatises, Mulligan relied on three sources more than all others combined: the multi-authored *Historie philosophique et politique des établissements des Européens dans les Deux Indes* (1771), accredited to the French *philosophe* Abbé Raynal; *Thoughts on Slavery* by the Methodist leader John Wesley (1774); and *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* by the Anglican theologian William Paley. The first of these treatises described how Portugal, Spain, France, and Britain had despoiled other continents in their quests for riches, and in so doing brought cases of European rapacity throughout the world into the same analytic field. The latter two took direct aim at Atlantic slavery by highlighting its incompatibility with Christian teachings. All three works circulated widely in late eighteenth-century Britain. Raynal's *Histoire*, for instance, went through over a dozen translated editions in England alone before 1794, and was frequently quoted by opponents of the slave trade during this period. Paley's *Principles* was published at least fifteen different times before his death in 1805.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> D.D. Irvine, "The Abbe Raynal and British Humanitarianism," *The Journal of Modern History* 3, no. 4 (Dec. 1931), 574-75. For examples of Raynal cited by Britons in their own opposition to the slave trade, see *Gentleman's Magazine*, March 1781, vol. 51: 122-23 (where "A.Z." calls Raynal a "great champion of the unfortunate") and *Gentleman's Magazine*, August 1781, vol. 51: 354 (where an anonymous contributor quotes Raynal as writing "He who supports the system of slavery is the enemy of the whole human race"). Paley figure based on my own research.

That Mulligan grounded his eclogues in what he considered authoritative sources (Raynal, he writes, “has never been contradicted”) is significant because it shows that he intended his poems to contribute not just to a poetical canon that was critical of empire. Namely, he was also aiming to participate in a broader political debate about Britain’s imperial future.<sup>43</sup> Mulligan’s reliance on such sources also suggests that a sweeping condemnation of empire, such as the one he provided, could not have occurred without existing strands of anti-imperial discourse from which to draw. Understanding what made Mulligan’s eclogues possible therefore requires looking at the misgivings that an increasing number of Britons expressed about empire throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century. The following three sections of this chapter delineate this trajectory of growing concern about global empire, and show how worries about imperial immorality became difficult for policy makers to ignore in the years after the American War. Collectively, the sections elucidate the intellectual and political currents that enabled Mulligan to produce his eclogues, as well as explain why his poems would have resonated with readers in the 1780s in a way they would not have in previous decades. The goal is not to provide a comprehensive account of critiques of empire during these years, but rather to sketch some of the problems and challenges that Britons faced as they worked to come to grips with their nation’s imperial status.

### ***Questioning Empire from the Seven Years’ War to the American War***

Though questioning imperial rectitude accelerated in the aftermath of the loss of America, Jack Greene has shown how assessing empire based on criteria such as the

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<sup>43</sup> Mulligan, *Slavery and Oppression*, 82.

treatment of non-Europeans began to steadily increase following Britain's sweeping victories during the Seven Years' War. This shift was paralleled, as others have shown, by a growing tendency to speak of the nation's possessions throughout the world as constituent parts of *the* British Empire— a single political entity.<sup>44</sup> Though humanitarian considerations consistently remained subordinate to those of national interest, from 1763 onward a growing number of Britons publically wondered whether possession of vast territories with foreign populations was compatible with an empire of liberty and virtue.<sup>45</sup> Reflecting a mixture of confidence at unparalleled power, yet apprehension over the possible consequences of that power, were comparisons between the British Empire and that of ancient Rome. In 1759, William Pitt the Elder remarked in the House of Commons that Britain "had overrun more world" in the previous few years than Rome had "conquered in a century." Four years later, Horace Walpole wrote to Horace Mann "Is it not magnificent? A senate regulating the eastern and western worlds at once! The Romans were triflers to us."<sup>46</sup> While such statements spoke to Britain's imperial grandeur, they also hinted that troubles could lie ahead: if Britain was not able to properly manage its enhanced imperium, it like Rome could collapse under the weight of its own success. Comparisons with the Roman Empire persisted throughout the next quarter

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<sup>44</sup> Jack P. Greene, Evaluating Empire and Confronting Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). On the second point, see Stephen Conway, War, State, and Society in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. 227-52 and H.V. Bowen, "British Conceptions of Global Empire, 1756-83," The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 26, no. 3 (Sept. 1998): 1-27.

<sup>45</sup> David Armitage has argued that many Britons began asking these questions post-Seven Years' War because following the conflict it became abundantly apparent that the British Empire could no longer be understood as "Protestant, maritime, commercial, and free." This imperial ideal, Armitage contends, had developed over centuries, and reached its zenith in the 1730s and 1740s. David Armitage, The Ideological Origins of the British Empire (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> First citation from John Brooke, ed., Horace Walpole, Memoirs of King George II, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985): 80; Second citation from Vincent T. Harlow, The Founding of the Second British Empire: Vol. I: Discovery and Revolution (London: Longmans, 1952), 146.

century, and served as warnings of both the dangers of overextension and of how power and decadence could corrupt national virtue.<sup>47</sup>

In the twelve years between the end of the Seven Years' War and the outbreak of fighting in America, a number of actions and policies appeared to confirm the notion that Britain's empire was becoming increasingly unjust. In 1765, the EIC won the right to collect taxes from the northeastern provinces of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, thereby assuming *de facto* administrative responsibility for tens of millions of South Asians. Two years later, EIC proprietors agreed to give parliament an annual subsidy of £400,000 in exchange for official recognition of this new, non-commercial role. To many imperial analysts, the bargain was a Faustian one. When accounts of famine in Bengal began to reach Britain in 1770, triggering accusations that onerous revenue demands from Company officials had exacerbated food shortages, the EIC's limited administrative abilities became obvious. Previewing an argument he would make throughout the 1780s, Edmund Burke claimed that ignoring Company misrule in favour of a slice of its enhanced revenues proved that parliament "meant nothing but plunder" in India. Many MPs, he went on, looked upon Company servants "not with resentment, but with Envy... and instead of punishing their delinquency they imitated their conduct."<sup>48</sup> Others expressed similar sentiments.<sup>49</sup> The debate about the EIC's administrative role brought the sustained attention of policy makers to South Asia for the first time, and

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<sup>47</sup> For the classic account of the connection between political power and national virtue, as well as how imperial and republican ideologies underpinned both British and colonial identities during the age of revolutions, see J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

<sup>48</sup> Edmund Burke, December 18, 1772, cited in Paul Langford, ed., *Party, Parliament, and the American Crisis, 1766-1774* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 378.

<sup>49</sup> Peter J. Marshall, *Problems of Empire: Britain and India, 1757-1813* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968).

simultaneously raised public consciousness about both the alleged criminality of Britons overseas and the government's complicity in their immoral conduct.

As stories of British oppression in the East circulated with increased frequency, so too did examples of violence and injustice in the western reaches of the empire. From 1769 to 1773, colonists and British forces fought against the Caribs of St. Vincent in an effort to obtain territory set aside by treaty for the indigenous population. The Carib-controlled windward side of St. Vincent contained some of the island's most fertile soil, and the conflict was essentially a land grab by white settlers eager to expand their plantations. Similar to what occurred during the American War, the longer the military quagmire in St. Vincent persisted the more the morality and aims of the conflict were called into question. In a debate in parliament at the end of 1772, opposition MP Thomas Townshend upbraided the government for encouraging "the rapacity of the planters in St. Vincent" instead of protecting the innocent Caribs. His colleague Richard Whitworth followed suit, lamenting the plight of "the miserable natives" who were being "cruelly dispossessed of their habitations, and driven from their families and friends."<sup>50</sup> The language used to describe the noble but oppressed Caribs on one hand, and the avaricious planters on the other, helped perpetuate discursive tropes that antislavery advocates such as Mulligan would later employ in describing and condemning the Atlantic slave system.

Though opposition to the mistreatment of East Indians and Caribs were only two manifestations of the growing concern that Britons overseas had lost their moral compass, both cases usefully illustrate the expanded grounds on which empire was

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<sup>50</sup> Citations from Greene, *Evaluating Empire*, 8.

coming to be assessed. To be sure, despite the fact that similar arguments and rhetoric were applied to British actions in different regions, few commentators transformed their concerns into a systematic interrogation of imperial principals in the way Mulligan would. As Greene points out, the critical appraisal of empire that developed following the Seven Years' War was "a loose bundle of separate critiques by quite different and often unrelated groups arising out of attempts to diagnose, understand, and resolve specific problems associated with particular areas of overseas empire."<sup>51</sup> Yet the isolated and sporadic nature of most condemnations of empire does not mean that direct comparisons between different imperial regions did not exist. On occasion, an advocate of reforming a specific part of the empire would buttress his case by referencing British actions in another imperial sphere. In his 1773 poem *The Nabob: Or, Asiatic Plunderers*, for instance, Richard Clarke condemned EIC servants for "their pride, their pomp, and feast of luxury," and contrasted their situation with that of "the oppressed subjects of *India*." In a footnote near the end, he underscored his message by asking his readers "What idea of christianity [sic] must Indians conceive from our traders? What notions must the Africans entertain of our humanity in purchasing slaves of such who never injured us? What religion... is seen in *Madras*, and particularly in *Bengal*, or in the *West-Indian* Islands?"<sup>52</sup>

While Clarke referenced Atlantic slavery in order to emphasize the need to correct British rule in India, other commentators adopted the opposite approach. In a 1772 tract, the former colonial agent for Massachusetts William Bollan made the case for the

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<sup>51</sup> Greene, *Evaluating Empire*, xi. Though Greene himself downplays connections that contemporaries made between British actions in different regions, his own research suggests that some of his subjects reassessed empire more holistically than he himself acknowledges.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Clarke, *The nabob: Or, Asiatic Plunderers. A Satyrical Poem, in a Dialogue between a Friend and the Author* (London: J. Townsend 1773), 38 and i.

proscription of slavery on English soil. In the final ten pages, he departed from this theme to reflect on the ethics of British imperialism more broadly. Along with denouncing the slave trade, Bollan wrote that it was to the nation's shame that the empire's "new subjects in *India*" were being "reduced to a state of misery." Also reprehensible was the "injustice, oppression, murder, rapine, and devastation" that Britons inflicted on indigenous peoples in North America. To "destroy" and "distress... in *America*," or "to starve and distress twelve millions in *Asia*," Bollan wrote, "is not the way to promote the dignity, strength, and safety of empire." Rather, "depriving so many of their fellow creatures of life, or the common blessings of the earth," would "secure their [Britons'] disgrace among all good men as long as that shall endure."<sup>53</sup> In the preface to the 1775 edition of his poem *The Dying Negro*, Thomas Day likewise placed the horrors of the slave trade alongside British delinquency in Asia. While Day characterized his countrymen in India as "a band of insatiable wretches, spreading unprovoked desolation over its most beautiful regions," in Africa they were guilty of "annually reducing millions to a state of misery more dreadful than death itself."<sup>54</sup>

In the context of the longer pieces of which they were a part, direct comparisons of imperial iniquities occupy relatively little space. As exemplified by Richard Clarke's poem, in which parallels between the slave trade and oppression in India are relegated to a footnote, such comments often come across as minor asides. Yet in many ways, it is the digressive nature of these comparisons that make them even more revealing than a systematically comparative treatise such as Raynal's *Histoire*. On one level, they indicate

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<sup>53</sup> William Bollan, *Britannia Libera, or a Defence of the Free State of Man in England* (London: J. Almon, 1772), 43, 41, 40.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Day, *The Dying Negro, a Poem*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: [s.n.], 1775).

that behind an author's advocacy for a specific reform lay a more widespread anxiety about the consequences of empire. Though most writers took up only one cause at a time, comparative and generalizing statements suggest that reformers who sympathized with one group of oppressed subjects were likely to sympathize with other mistreated populations as well. On another level, parallels made in passing, especially between Atlantic slavery and injustices in India, reveal that authors believed their readers would also recognize a consistency between issues. Advocates of reform, to some extent, saw highlighting similarities as a way to tap into other reformist constituencies to broaden support for their cause.

Nowhere is the assumption behind this strategy better expressed than in a 1772 letter from the Pennsylvania abolitionist Anthony Benezet to his English counterpart Granville Sharp. Prior to this year, antislavery activists had made few attempts to (and enjoyed even fewer successes in) putting slavery on Britain's political agenda. Benezet was hopeful, however, that an upcoming parliamentary inquiry into the behaviour of EIC officials would have "the good effect" of directing attention to imperial injustices more broadly. Accounts of "the oppression exercised over the poor natives" of India, Benezet predicted, would force Britons to confront the discrepancy between national ideals and overseas realities that existed throughout the nation's imperial remit. Questions about crimes against "the blood of so many thousands and tens of thousands, may I not say hundreds of thousands, of our fellow man" in the East, he informed Sharp, were likely to do more to awaken public consciousness to the sufferings of slaves than any previous



opposition to slavery itself had achieved.<sup>55</sup> Though Benezet did not draw concrete parallels between the types of oppression practiced in different zones of empire, he did discern that those who were disquieted by British behaviour in one part of the world were also likely to be disturbed by British behaviour elsewhere. Along with other advocates of humanitarian imperial reform noted in this chapter, Benezet believed that Britons intuitively made connections between the effects of empire across geographic divides.

It is possible to draw a direct line from Benezet to Mulligan: Benezet's writings on slavery were the principal source for John Wesley's 1774 tract *Thoughts on Slavery*, and Wesley's *Thoughts* in turn was referenced at length by Mulligan in the notes to his slavery eclogues.<sup>56</sup> This straightforward connection, however, misses the more nuanced ways in which critiques of empire from the Seven Years' War to the American War helped lay the groundwork for Mulligan's poems. As Hew Bowen has shown, those who drew comparisons between British actions in different parts of the empire in these years both reflected and perpetuated a growing inclination to view the nation's overseas territories as belonging to the same political entity.<sup>57</sup> Recognition of this interconnectedness enabled those Britons who were concerned about a specific issue to see in that issue evidence of a broader pattern of imperial immorality. Though this disquiet with British conduct abroad remained largely subsumed by a countervailing narrative of the

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<sup>55</sup> Benezet to Sharp, 14 May 1772, in Prince Hoare, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp* (London: H. Colburn, 1820), 99. Benezet's letter reveals the quixotic faith of many early abolitionists who believed that all that was needed to galvanize public opinion against the slave trade was for its attendant abuses to be made known. After the struggle for abolition was over, for instance, Thomas Clarkson reflected that "I was sure that it was only necessary for the inhabitants of this favoured island to know it [the slave trade], to feel a just indignation against it." Clarkson, *History*, vol. 1: 321.

<sup>56</sup> Granville Sharp was an intermediary between Benezet and Wesley, and initially provided Wesley with a number of Benezet's works. Sharp to Benezet, London, 7 January 1774, D3549, 13/1/B19, GRO; Benezet to Sharp, Philadelphia, 18 November 1774, D3549, 13/1/B19, GRO.

<sup>57</sup> Bowen, "British Conceptions of Global Empire, 1756-83."

benefits of empire, it nonetheless began developing into a strand of discourse that future critics could use to highlight the ubiquity of British aggression overseas. When Britons such as Mulligan challenged the ways in which empire was being conducted in the 1780s, they were able to draw upon arguments, ideas, and rhetoric that had been circulating with growing frequency over the past two decades.

### *Questioning Empire during the American War*

The outbreak of the American War of Independence in 1775 multiplied both the scale and intensity of concerns about empire that had been escalating since the end of the Seven Years' War. When France allied with rebellious colonists in 1778, and when Spain and the United Provinces followed suit in the following years, what had begun as a colonial revolt transformed into a global war that threatened the security and prosperity of Britain itself. Domestically, the conflict had had a deep and multifaceted impact. With over 300,000 Britons serving in the army or navy, many people knew young men sent into combat.<sup>58</sup> Prosecuting the war cost the government over £80 million pounds, ballooning the national debt to £250 million pounds. This concern was made all the more pressing by a simultaneous decline in trade. "The sums we spent on Losing America," predicted the pro-American MP Henry Conway in a letter to his brother, "are a blow we shall never recover from."<sup>59</sup> Financial worries and military defeats led to political instability and renewed calls for parliamentary reform. More immediately, many coastal

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<sup>58</sup> The most comprehensive account of the number of men under arms is found in Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 25-29. Conway's best estimate is that approximately 323,000 soldiers or sailors served in the British forces at some point between 1775 and 1783. He also estimates that another 170,000 British and Irish militiamen and volunteers were mobilized to guard the "home" fronts.

<sup>59</sup> Henry Conway to brother, Park Place, 21 July 1784, Mss. vol. 84, f.61, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University (hereafter LWL).

towns spent the summer months between 1778 and 1781 preparing for a possible French invasion, and worries that France would use Ireland as a backdoor into Britain triggered a process that would force Westminster to devolve authority to the Irish Parliament. For many Britons, these and other close-to-home consequences of the war were proof that Britain itself could not remain immune to what transpired in its empire, and that the welfare of the nation and its overseas possessions were inextricably linked.<sup>60</sup>

Internationally, Britain's situation by 1778/79 also gave cause for alarm. Its power was challenged in South Asia, West Africa, the Caribbean, North America, Europe, and the Mediterranean. Based on his study of the British press from 1775 to 1783, Troy Bickham writes that by the midpoint of the conflict it is remarkable "how un-American the war that would be remembered as the American Revolution had become."<sup>61</sup> In many of the war's theaters, including each of the eventual settings of Mulligan's four eclogues, strategic concerns forced politicians to reflect more deeply on British policy to that point. This process often brought to the fore questions about the prosecution of the conflict and how empire should be maintained once hostilities ceased. In mainland America, Britain's reliance on indigenous allies, escaped slaves, and Irish and Hessian troops to engage the enemy led colonists to argue that the administration was disregarding the standards of civilized combat. Though some in Britain saw the necessity of these wartime alliances, many colonial sympathizers questioned whether preserving empire was worth having to employ such a motley crew against settlers of English

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<sup>60</sup> For the overall impact of the American War of Independence on Britain, see Conway, *The British Isles*.

<sup>61</sup> Troy O. Bickham, *Making Headlines: The American Revolution as Seen through the British Press* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 159.

stock.<sup>62</sup> In the West Indies, the seizure of a number of small islands by the French, and the fear that Jamaica would also fall, led to a series of naval redeployments from the mid-Atlantic colonies. Though Jamaica was preserved, Britain's successes in the Caribbean were tarnished by the actions of Admiral George Rodney and his men who illegally plundered St. Eustatius and stole from its inhabitants upon capturing the island from the Dutch in February 1781. The treatment of the islanders caused an uproar in Britain's governing circles, and was a further example of Britons overseas sully the national image.<sup>63</sup>

In both direct and indirect ways, strategic concerns during wartime led politicians and the public to raise questions about a range of other imperial issues. Now that most American colonies were closed to convict transportation, where could the ever-growing number of prisoners held in Newgate or on ships in the Thames be sent?<sup>64</sup> How should the North American colonies that remained loyal to Britain be governed, so as to prevent them from being enticed by American republicanism? Was acceding to the demands of West Indian planters to loosen the Navigation Acts necessary in order to secure their allegiance? Overlapping with these questions about the organization of empire were

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<sup>62</sup> However, Britain's use of indigenous allies in North America did have a precedent from the Seven Years' War. On military alliances with Amerindians and perceptions of Amerindians in the British Empire in the latter eighteenth century, see respectively Peter Silver, Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008) and Troy Bickham, Savages within the Empire: Representations of American Indians in Eighteenth-Century Britain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>63</sup> Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 213-37. Edmund Burke led calls for an inquiry into Rodney's actions, and in the process foreshadowed a number of arguments about imperial morality that he popularized during the Hastings Trial.

<sup>64</sup> As Emma Christopher has shown, almost all proposed solutions to this problem were fraught with difficulties. Only after unsuccessful efforts to continue sending convicts to America, followed by assorted attempts to ship many of them to West Africa, did the First Fleet set sail for Botany Bay. Emma Christopher, A Merciless Place: The Fate of Britain's Convicts after the American Revolution (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

questions about what was owed to those who took up arms to defend the empire. Even before fighting ended, white loyalists were making pleas for financial compensation from the British government for lost property resulting from their fidelity to the crown. Foreshadowing a debate that would continue to play out for decades to come, indigenous allies such as the Mohawks and the Creeks argued that their military service entitled them to favourable policies— none of which was more important than the protection of their lands against further encroachment by European settlers.

Because of their centrality to postwar debates about empire and reform, two issues deserve special consideration. Developments during the course of fighting made EIC rule in India and slavery in the Americas particularly important considerations to those coordinating the war effort, and imbued each of them with a salience and immediacy lacking in the pre-war era. This sustained attention in turn generated increased concerns about the morality of empire in both regions that lasted long after combat ceased. In India, local rulers led a series of uprisings between 1778 and 1783 that threatened almost all the Company's territorial possessions (and by extension its financial interests). In many cases, rebels allied with the French who were looking to take advantage of Britain's overstretched forces to increase their sphere of influence in the subcontinent. Particularly alarming were challenges from the Maratha Confederacy in western India and from Haidar Ali of Mysore and his son Tipu Sultan in the south. Combined, these and other revolts cast doubt on whether the EIC was capable of effectively ruling over such a large and foreign population. They also lent weight to concerns that had been mooted since the Seven Years' War that unregulated global

expansion could be detrimental to both the national interest and the welfare of non-Europeans.<sup>65</sup>

Increased anxiety about the security of British interests in India led parliament in 1781 to appoint a Select Committee to examine the EIC's administrative and judicial apparatuses. The investigations of the Select Committee took place alongside those of a government controlled Secret Committee on East India Affairs that likewise sat from 1781 to 1783. Combined, the committees' reports detailed all sorts of improprieties committed by Company officials, including speculation, illegal private trading, bribery, violating treaties, and abuses of power. The highly publicized indictments proved the ineffectualness of earlier EIC reforms and laid the groundwork for recalling the Governor-General of Bengal Warren Hastings and initiating legal proceedings against the former Governor of Madras Thomas Rumbold.<sup>66</sup> More broadly, the committee reports catalyzed discussion inside and outside of Whitehall about how much discretionary power should be permitted to officials in India, and whether the same moral and judicial standards should apply to Britons in India as to Britons at home. Though the passage of William Pitt's India Act in 1784 addressed some of the more pressing concerns about EIC rule by providing for greater government oversight, many questions remained about

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<sup>65</sup> H. V. Bowen, "British India, 1765-1813: The Metropolitan Context," in Peter Marshall, ed., Oxford History of the British Empire, vol. 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>66</sup> The two committees were highly partisan. Opposition MPs, for example, used the Select Committee to attempt to embarrass the administration for not doing enough to prevent the misconduct of officials in the East. Yet the fact that both the Select and Secret Committees continued to sit through the ministerial changes of 1782 reveals that there was a widespread consensus on the need to bring the EIC under greater government oversight. Parties diverged on the reforms needed, but not the need for reform. On the activities of the two committees, see Marshall, Problems of Empire, 55-58. On the prosecution of Thomas Rumbold— and how it foreshadowed many elements of the Hastings Trial later in the decade— see Jim Phillips, "Parliament and Southern India, 1781-1783: The Secret Committee of Inquiry and the Prosecution of Sir Thomas Rumbold," Parliamentary History 7, no. 1 (May 1988): 81-97.

the rectitude of British policy and actions in Asia. From 1785 to 1795, the tenacious prosecution of Warren Hastings by Edmund Burke and opposition Whigs kept such questions at the fore of political debate and made the management of Britain's Eastern empire one of the decade's most charged political issues.<sup>67</sup>

Similar to how the American War generated increased scrutiny of how British possessions in India were being managed, the need to secure footholds against French encroachment in West Africa during the conflict also led to an investigation and then debate about how to best safeguard the nation's interests in that region. Since its founding in 1752, the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa had received £7,000 annually from the government to maintain forts along the coast in order to protect and facilitate the British slave trade. In 1777, the Company petitioned parliament for an additional £13,000 to cover debts accrued by its employees and to upgrade its defences in preparation for possible attacks by the French. The request led opposition MPs to demand an inquiry into the Company's financial dealings and the behaviour of its employees. The ensuing investigation exposed many of the same types of corruption as were uncovered by examinations into EIC affairs, especially the rampant use of Company resources for private gain. Though the debate sparked by these revelations touched on how to most effectively manage the African side of the slave trade, it generated relatively little discussion about the morality of the traffick itself.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, it did force a handful of

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<sup>67</sup> Tillman W. Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17-18; Peter J. Marshall, *Remaking the British Atlantic: The United States and the British Empire after American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 123-26; Peter J. Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

<sup>68</sup> P.T. Underdown, "Edmund Burke, the Commissary of His Bristol Constituents, 1774-1780," *English Historical Review* 73, no. 287 (April 1958): 259-61; Christopher L. Brown, "The British Government and the Slave Trade: Early Parliamentary Enquiries, 1713-1783," in Melanie Unwin and James Walvin, eds.,

statesmen to think about how slaves were supplied to Britain's slave colonies— a subject few had seriously considered prior to the American War. And at least one MP used the debate about reforming the Company of Merchants to speak more broadly about the Atlantic slave system: David Hartley “went upon the cruelties of slavery,” and brought a pair of handcuffs into the House of Commons to emphasize the severity of the trade.<sup>69</sup>

To a greater extent than the supply of African slaves, wartime considerations helped reframe the discussion about slavery itself on the other side of the Atlantic. On 7 November 1775, Virginia Governor Lord Dunmore issued a proclamation promising freedom for “all indented Servants, Negroes or others... willing to bear Arms” against rebellious colonists.<sup>70</sup> Dunmore's decree initiated a mass exodus of slaves from southern plantations: over the next eight years, tens of thousands of escaped slaves fled to behind British lines to assist the war effort.<sup>71</sup> To be sure, the British government was not keen on the optics of using slaves to fight its own colonists. As one government apologist made clear when news of Dunmore's proclamation reached Britain, the measure was only justified “on the ground of necessity,” since in Virginia “it was impossible to raise men

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The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2007), 40-41.

<sup>69</sup> David Hartley, 5 June 1777, in T. C. Hansard, ed., The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803, vol. 19: 315-16.

<sup>70</sup> Lord Dunmore, 7 November 1775, at

[http://www.virginiamemory.com/online\\_classroom/shaping\\_the\\_constitution/doc/dunmores\\_proclamation](http://www.virginiamemory.com/online_classroom/shaping_the_constitution/doc/dunmores_proclamation).

See also Maya Jasanoff, Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2011), 46-52.

<sup>71</sup> Estimates of the number of escaped slaves during the American War (and of escaped slaves who served the British armed forces) vary. I use the numbers arrived at by Simon Schama in Rough Crossings: The Slaves, the British, and the American Revolution (New York: Ecco, 2007), 78, 133. Maya Jasanoff states that twenty thousand slaves escaped during the fighting, and that British forces assisted in the evacuation of at least 15,000 at the war's end. Even these more specific figures, however, are rough estimates at best. Maya Jasanoff, Liberty's Exiles, 6, 8.



otherwise to recover our rights.”<sup>72</sup> Over time, however, as the bitterness of hostilities intensified and escaped slaves proved their merit, attitudes in Britain and within the armed forces began to shift. One indication of this shift is that in the final stages of the conflict British generals such as Charles Cornwallis, Guy Carleton, and Alexander Leslie decided to help evacuate thousands of ex-slaves from British enclaves, thereby fulfilling Dunmore’s original promise. As Cassandra Pybus writes, aiding the flight of runaway slaves was a recognition by British officials in America that “these black refugees had a special claim on British justice,” and that their own “actions could serve as a kind of moral redemption from the ignominy of defeat.” In the years ahead, many other Britons would come to see supporting the emancipation of slaves as a way to reclaim the mantle of liberty from the newly formed United States of America, where slaveholding remained legal until 1863.<sup>73</sup>

That Britons felt a need to reaffirm liberty as a national value stemmed largely from the nature of political rhetoric that infused the conflict. In the lead up to and during fighting, colonists conscientiously framed their cause as a crusade for freedom against attempts by parliament and the crown to keep them in political servitude. In response to these accusations, pro-British writers frequently linked the political metaphor of slavery

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<sup>72</sup> The Stamford Mercury, 12 February 1778, quoted in Bickham, Making Headlines, 213.

<sup>73</sup> Cassandra Pybus, Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 104. Pybus provides an excellent account of why British generals decided to aid escaped slaves at the war’s end in her chapter “Fleeing the Founding Fathers,” 57-72. See also Jasanoff, Liberty’s Exiles, 69-91. A good example of how assuming responsibility for escaped slaves during the war led to a sense of obligation towards them afterward can be seen in the evolving opinions of Henry Clinton. In May 1780, Clinton had written to Cornwallis that he was actively trying to “make such arrangements as will discourage their [escaped slaves] joining us.” By 1791, he was expressing concern that black veterans who had resettled in Nova Scotia “seem to be the only Loyalists that have been neglected.” First citation from Clinton to Cornwallis, Charleston, 20 May 1780, Clinton Papers, Vol. 99, ff.47, William Clements Library, University of Michigan (hereafter WCL); second citation quoted in Christopher L. Brown, Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 311.

to its more literal meaning by pointing out the hypocrisy of colonists who demanded liberty while owning slaves. “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps of liberty among the drivers of negroes?” Samuel Johnson famously asked in 1775.<sup>74</sup> In a similar vein, Thomas Day wrote that same year that “If there be an object truly ridiculous in nature, it is a[n] American patriot, signing resolutions of independency with one hand, and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves.”<sup>75</sup> While some American opponents of slavery recognized this inconsistency, and attempted to parlay libertarian rhetoric into support for a fledgling antislavery campaign, most patriots felt that accusations of hypocrisy from Britain rang hollow.<sup>76</sup> Many found proof of British duplicity in the fact that the crown had repeatedly overruled colonial legislatures that had voted to ban slave imports into their territories. In his original version of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson even cited the King’s refusal of “every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce” as a grounds for separation.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Samuel Johnson, Taxation no Tyranny: An Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress (London: T. Cadell, 1775), 89.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Day, Fragment of an Original Letter on the Slavery of the Negroes (London: John Stockdale, 1775), 33; James Stephen, The Memoirs of James Stephen: Written by Himself for the Use of His Children (London: Hogarth Press, 1954), 259. For other examples of the language of hypocrisy in British attacks on American slaveholders, see Greene, Evaluating Empire, 176-97, 204-05.

<sup>76</sup> In the American colonies, Pennsylvanian Quakers took the lead in reflecting on the literal implications of independentist rhetoric. One member of the Society of Friends pointed out the dishonesty inherent in “complain[ing] at this moment, that the Parliament of Britain wishes to enslave us, and to impose upon us the yoke of subjects, without leaving us the rights of citizens; while, for this century past, we have been calmly acting the part of tyrants, by keeping in bonds of the hardest slavery men.” According to another Pennsylvanian Quaker, Benjamin Rush, “it would be useless for us to denounce the servitude to which the *Parliament of Great Britain* wishes to reduce us, while we continue to keep our fellow creatures in slavery just because their color is different.” Citations quoted in Niel Douglas, Thoughts on Modern Politics (London: Button, 1793), 92 and David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, first published in 1975), 274.

<sup>77</sup> Jefferson cited in Blackburn, The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776-1848 (London: Verso Books, 1988), 103. Jefferson’s indignation can be read as hypocritical, since he himself owned hundreds of slaves. Of the extensive body of scholarship on Jefferson’s relationship with slavery and antislavery, a good starting point is David Brion Davis, Was Thomas Jefferson an Authentic Enemy of Slavery? (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). For some of the uses of slavery as metaphor in the revolutionary era more broadly, see Blackburn, The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 89-93 and Anthony Page, “‘A Species of Slavery’: Richard Price’s Rational Dissent and Antislavery,” Slavery & Abolition 32, no. 1 (2011): 56-59.

The rhetorical battle between Britain and America, with each side claiming to champion liberty, did not end with the cessation of hostilities. Instead, accusations of hypocrisy would continue to fly across the Atlantic well beyond 1783, forcing patriots in both countries to confront the ideological inconsistency of their own nations' stances on slaveholding.<sup>78</sup> In this context, Mulligan's decision to set his American Eclogue in Virginia was not just a denunciation of the "petty tyrants" in America who owned slaves: it was also a challenge to fellow Britons to speak out against their own government's complicity in the trade that enabled New World slavery to exist.<sup>79</sup> During the war itself, however, reports by pro-British propagandists on the cruelty of American slaveholders served to raise domestic awareness of the severity of the institution. In the process of attempting to delegitimize the political claims of colonists by highlighting their ownership of slaves, these writers also implicitly made the case that slaveholding was both amoral and un-British. Though few at the time pursued the antislavery implications of such rhetoric, the ubiquity of this language nonetheless suggested that reforming Britain's positions on slavery could serve as a way to reclaim liberty as a demarcating tenet of national and imperial identity.<sup>80</sup>

Of those few Britons who did publically express opposition to colonial slavery during the war, only a handful did so alongside denunciations of other British abuses

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<sup>78</sup> This theme is taken up on pages 201-08, which focus on how the nature of political rhetoric during the conflict led many Britons to rethink the scope of Lord Mansfield's verdict in the 1772 *Somerset Case*.

<sup>79</sup> Mulligan, *Slavery and Oppression*, 1.

<sup>80</sup> This argument is made most thoroughly in Brown, *Moral Capital*, 105-53. For other variations, see Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 89-93; Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 94; Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 129-55; Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*, 59-77.

overseas. For the most part, such criticisms came from opponents of the government who sought to emphasize the wrong direction in which the country was headed by linking British involvement in the Atlantic slave system to the suppression of colonial rights in America and violence in India. An anonymous pamphleteer in 1778, for instance, asserted that “to rule over slaves is the spirit and ambition of Satan,” and accused his countrymen of “stretching our depredations and massacres, not only to the Eastern, but [to the] Western world” as well. Such actions, he wrote, were “now crying aloud for vengeance on the head of Great Britain.”<sup>81</sup> The following year, another anonymous author lamented how “melancholy” it was “that in the East and in the West, in Asia and in America, the name of an Englishman is become reproach.”<sup>82</sup> Thomas Day, who over the past decade had grown increasingly disillusioned with British claims to moral superiority, expressed a similar sentiment: “When we contemplate the different regions of the globe,” he wrote in the final months of the war, “we shall find they have almost all in turn become the victims of avarice and ambition. Asia has been the seat of immemorial tyranny; Africa sees all its coasts depopulated to satisfy the demand of Christian luxury for slaves.”<sup>83</sup>

More common than all-encompassing moral judgements were statements that brought different imperial spheres together by referencing the chaos that appeared to be engulfing the entire empire. Summarizing the views of many, Lord Lyttleton told the

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<sup>81</sup> Anonymous, *The case stated on Philosophical Ground, between Great Britain and her Colonies...* (Edinburgh: G. Kearsly, 1778), 91, 89. The author included nothing on the American slaveholders whose revolutionary politics he sought to defend.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Greene, *Evaluating Empire*, 228.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas Day, *Reflections Upon the Present State of England, and the Independance of America*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: J. Stockdale, 1783), 102.

House of Lords in March 1778 that in addition to Britain's "weak and defenceless state" in Ireland, "our affairs in the West indies were truly deplorable, and in the East equally precarious, if not more so." Nathaniel Wraxall echoed Lyttleton's fears three years later by informing the Commons that "to whatever part of the empire he directed his view... only scenes of calamity, distress, and civil commotion presented themselves under a thousand various and accumulating forms."<sup>84</sup> In a fictional dialogue published in the *London Evening Post* in 1778, in which the subject was imperial disorder, one interlocutor responded to confusion between North America and West Indies by stating that "it[']s all the same thing:- *North America, Bingal, Virginny, Jemaiky*, is all in the *Indies*, only the sea folks that loves to box the compass, calls things North and East and West... and that makes it so puzzling to understand and to remember the name, and to know where all these *outlandish Colonies* are."<sup>85</sup>

Though the hyperbole of the above comment was intended for satirical effect, it did hint at the real fear that Britain's empire had become overgrown and unmanageable, and was now in the process of collapsing under its own weight. As "Cassandra" put it in a letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine* in May 1780, "the dissipation of a vast, scattered, unwieldy Empire, and the oeconomy of a moderate, compact State, cannot be made to unite together. Surely we ought to have known long ago that these things are incompatible."<sup>86</sup> Others resurrected comparisons between the British and Roman

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<sup>84</sup> Lord Lyttleton, 23 March 1778, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 19: 398. Nathaniel Wraxall, 12 February 1781, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 21: 1205.

<sup>85</sup> *The West India Merchant. Being a Series of Papers Originally Printed under that Signature in the London Evening Post* (London: [s.n.], 1778), 15-17.

<sup>86</sup> "Cassandra," *The Gentleman's Magazine*, May 1780, vol. 50: 222.

empires, arguing that Britain's accretion of territory and taste for luxury were corroding civic virtue, and that the nation was following Rome's path to inevitable moral, political, and military decline. "The affinity between the Roman government and its decline, and the present condition of the British empire," wrote "Caius" in the September 1780 issue of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, "must be obvious to every political observer."<sup>87</sup> The popularity of the first volume of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) did much to encourage Britons to see parallels between the current state of their empire and the imperial overreach that doomed ancient Rome.<sup>88</sup>

### *Questioning Empire after America*

Though predictions of imperial demise permeated political discourse during the American War, how reflective such statements were of general attitudes toward empire in the immediate aftermath of the conflict is debatable. On balance, most recent historians have concluded that defeat in America did relatively little to dampen enthusiasm for empire. They point out that calls to cleanse empire of its worst excesses were generally not calls to retreat from imperial activity itself, and that policy makers had to consistently balance humanitarian concerns with other political and economic considerations.<sup>89</sup> The

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<sup>87</sup> "Caius," *The Gentleman's Magazine*, September 1780, vol. 50: 406. Volumes two and three of Gibbons' study were published in 1781; the final three volumes were not published until 1788-89. A number of other Enlightenment figures, including luminaries such as Adam Ferguson and David Hume, also saw the Roman Empire as a model that eighteenth-century Britain was in danger of emulating.

<sup>88</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Volume One*. (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776).

<sup>89</sup> This is the consensus—though by no means unanimous—scholarly position. Taking a different view, C.A. Bayly asserts that by 1783 "many Britons felt that their great days were over... the First British Empire of American settlement and oriental trade seemed to have foundered into ruin." Christopher A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (New York: Longman 1989), 2. Of scholars who argue that the American debacle did little to alter long-standing assumptions about the benefits of empire, see especially: Eliga Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Eliga Gould, "Liberty and Modernity: The American Revolution and the Making of Parliament's Imperial History," in

continued support for empire in the postwar period can be largely attributed to how events unfolded in the waning years of the American conflict. Although Britain's situation in many corners of the world looked dire in 1780, a series of victories from that year onward served to secure many of the nation's most important overseas possessions. Aside from the thirteen colonies, Britain's only losses of note were Minorca, the two Floridas, and Tobago: India, Canada, the most valuable of its sugar islands, Ireland, and Britain itself were preserved. And, crucially, Britain still ruled the waves in the Atlantic and Indian oceans. Lord Shelburne's bleak prediction of 1778, that the war would leave Britain without "a single foot of land beyond the limits of this island," had not materialized.<sup>90</sup> When Gilbert Wakefield expressed his concerns about empire in the 1784 sermon that opened this chapter, he did so while celebrating that "the Storm that threatened to pour down it's [sic] Rage upon us, is happily blown over."<sup>91</sup> Though losing the American colonies was a blow to national pride, Britain had indeed weathered the storm better than most had forecasted only a few years earlier.

Yet while most analysts either maintained or quickly recovered confidence in the resiliency of Britain's empire, almost all agreed that significant reforms were needed to prevent future imperial debacles. The loss of America made India increasingly

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Jack P. Greene, ed., *Exclusionary Empire: English Liberty Overseas, 1600-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 112-31; Colley, *Britons*; Bickham, *Making Headlines*; Peter J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c.1750-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Peter J. Marshall, "The Moral Swing to the East: British Humanitarianism, India and the West Indies," in *"A Free Though Conquering People": Eighteenth-Century Britain and Its Empire* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003). Among historians of British antislavery, Seymour Drescher has most consistently argued that the period from 1783 to 1792 was one of national confidence, and that abolitionism must be understood within the context of widespread optimism about the nation's imperial future. Of his many works that make this point, see especially Seymour Drescher, "The Shocking Birth of British Abolitionism," *Slavery & Abolition* 33, no. 4 (2012): 571-93.

<sup>90</sup> Lord Shelburne, 8 April 1788, Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 19: 1035.

<sup>91</sup> Wakefield, *A Sermon*, 11.

significant, and this in turn made apparent what some observers had long acknowledged: that the British Empire was no longer based primarily on trade with settlers of British ancestry across the Atlantic. Instead, it was rapidly becoming a territorial empire responsible for governing non-white populations. Recognition of this changed landscape meant that Britons now had to confront questions about imperial management that had been raised since the Seven Years' War but never comprehensively addressed: What measures were needed to secure the loyalty of Britons overseas, and those over whom they ruled? How could parliament implement its will abroad without being perceived as infringing on individual liberties or corporate charters? To what extent should British "rights" be extended to Irish Catholics and non-Europeans? In pursuing answers to these questions, many policy makers and commentators also stressed the importance of making a reconstituted British Empire a more moral undertaking. To varying degrees, the majority of Wakefield's contemporaries shared his view that war was a form of divine retribution for national sins. Moreover, even if not all Britons saw clear parallels between the British and Roman empires, many observers by 1783 had nonetheless concluded that unrestrained overseas expansion was undermining the values of liberty and justice to which the nation was supposedly committed.

In the years following the war, then, more Britons than ever began demanding significant reforms to the way in which empire was organized and managed. In her recent book on the American loyalist diaspora, Maya Jasanoff terms this widespread imperial reassessment the "spirit of 1783." The "spirit of 1783" impelled efforts to compensate for the loss of America by expanding British influence in other corners of the globe while



simultaneously centralizing authority in metropolitan institutions. Above all, it also involved “a clarified commitment to liberty and humanitarian ideals... an imperial guarantee to include all subjects, no matter what their ethnicity or faith, in a fold of British rights.” This dedication to making imperial realities conform more closely to metropolitan ideals continued throughout the 1780s, and Jasanoff cites the prosecution of Warren Hastings and the emergence of abolitionism as two of its clearest manifestations. “The loss of the colonies injected them [the Hastings trial and abolitionism] with fresh relevance and ethical force,” she writes, and the two campaigns count among the most significant “events of these years [that] cemented an enduring framework for the principles and practices of British rule.”<sup>92</sup>

In emphasizing the pervasiveness of calls for imperial reform, Jasanoff perhaps overstates the degree of consensus among Britons when it came to the scale and pace of change. It is an exaggeration, for example, to assert that “Suddenly, after the war, it was as if thousands of Britons looked up together, reconciled, and spoke out at once” against the slave trade.<sup>93</sup> Though demands for change were stronger and more widespread than at any other point in the eighteenth century, entrenched interests worked hard to limit reforms, or to channel the reforming ethos to their own ends. The West India lobby used its money and connections to slow the legislative momentum of abolitionism, and EIC proprietors highlighted the dangerous precedent of government encroachment on its

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<sup>92</sup> See the first chapter, “The Spirit of 1783,” and pp139-45 in Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*. Quotations on 12, 139, and 11. In content if not tone, this argument resembles the much older interpretation of the 1780s advanced by Frank Klingberg in 1926 when he described abolitionism and the Hastings Trial as two of the most “dramatic expressions” of a “new spirit of inquiry and striving for justice.” Frank J. Klingberg, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in England: A Study in English Humanitarianism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926), 25.

<sup>93</sup> Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*, 139.

charter rights. Moreover, though reformers generally agreed on broad principles, they were often split on specific policies. Many socially conservative and upper-class abolitionists, for instance, disapproved of the grassroots movement to boycott slave-grown sugar. (John Newton, for one, opposed the campaign because it “has its beginning, as we say, at the wrong end”). Intense debate over Fox and Pitt’s competing India Acts in 1783 is a reminder that partisan politics were often intertwined with calls for imperial reform, and that humanitarian causes were never seen through a strictly apolitical lens.<sup>94</sup> When Mulligan wrote and published his eclogues, therefore, he was not only giving expression to a growing desire for change, but was also participating in an on-going and public debate about the type of imperial reorganization that was needed.

In calls for imperial reform that proliferated in the aftermath of the American War, parallels between exploitation in different parts of the British Empire appeared more frequently than in similar calls during previous decades.<sup>95</sup> In a published letter in 1792 outlining his opposition to the slave trade, the writer Percival Stockdale told readers that Britons “carry commerce, and rapacity, with us, whithersoever we go;- to the East; to the West; and to the South... We rob remote nations of their territories, and their wealth; but with a more fatal hostility, we rob them of the simplicity of their manners; of the

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<sup>94</sup> Newton to Wilberforce, London, 13 December 1794, in Wilberforce, The Correspondence of William Wilberforce, vol. 1: 112-17.

<sup>95</sup> As Peter Marshall has put it, “Linking their treatment of the peoples of the Americas, Asia, and Africa into an indictment of the inhumanity of modern European empires was by the 1780s common practice.” Marshall, Remaking the British Atlantic, 193. Marshall goes on to write that the notion that “Europeans had inflicted great damage on other peoples and were continuing to do so was accepted by most strands of opinion that could be considered as enlightened in Britain and America as well as in Europe, by Christian activists, and also by a wider public.” Ibid.

tranquil enjoyment of their lives.”<sup>96</sup> The following year, the radical agitator James Callender published a comprehensive and damning treatise on imperial abuses entitled *The Political Progress of Britain: Or, an Impartial History of the Abuse of the Government of the British Empire in Europe, Asia, and America*. Along with denouncing “the conduct of Britain in the East and West Indies,” Callender wrote that “the tribes of the Pacific ocean are polluted by the most loathsome of diseases; our brandy has brutalized or extirpated the Indians of the western continent; and we have hired by thousands the wretched survivors to the task of bloodshed. On the shores of Africa, we bribe whole nations by drunkenness, to robbery and murder.” “What quarter of the globe,” he asked rhetorically, “has not been convulsed by our ambition, our avarice, and our baseness?”<sup>97</sup> As with other government critics, such as the Liverpool abolitionists who congregated around William Roscoe, Callender saw imperial rapacity as a reflection on the corrupt nature of Britain’s unreformed political system. He therefore used his exposition of violence throughout the empire to advance a domestic political agenda—namely, reform of the electoral system. The imperial violence and mismanagement over which the ruling class presided, Callender argued, proved the need to expand the franchise and inject new blood into parliament.

As in the pre-war era, many commentators post-1783 assumed that those who supported humanitarian reforms in one sphere of empire were likely to support changes

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<sup>96</sup> Percival Stockdale, *A Letter from Percival Stockdale to Granville Sharp, Esq., Suggested to the Author by the Present Insurrection of the Negroes in the Island of St. Domingue* (London: L. Pennington, 1791), 4-5.

<sup>97</sup> James Thomson Callender, *The Political Progress of Britain: Or, an Impartial History of the Abuse of the Government of the British Empire in Europe, Asia, and America* (Edinburgh: Robertson and Berry, 1792), 12, 13.

along similar lines in others. Now, however, this perceived symbiosis could be tested by calling on reformers from one campaign to lend their voices to other hotly debated imperial issues. Like Mulligan, who in his preface urged Wilberforce to defend the “oppressed in every quarter of the globe,” the pamphleteer John Prinsep asked Wilberforce to intervene on behalf of oppressed Indians by first reminding him of “the zeal and ability you have exerted in a similar cause.” “I hope... [that] in the dauntless champion of the sooty natives of Africa,” he continued, “my clients will also have the happiness of finding a patron and protector.”<sup>98</sup> The Reverend Randolph Francis adopted the same strategy when appealing to Pitt to more proactively promote abolition by first applauding the Prime Minister’s “late noble Conduct on the Impeachment of Mr. Hastings.” If Pitt refused to marshal his political clout to push for an immediate end to the slave trade, though, Randolph warned that “[y]ou will be charged with pursuing a Conduct in the West Indies, that you so strongly reprobated in the East.”<sup>99</sup> Coming from the opposite direction, Mary Leadbeater in a 1789 poem implored “Great Burke” to continue denouncing slavery so that “either India” would “echo back thy name.” Two years earlier, the ex-slave Ottobah Cugoano expressed the same hope when he sent Burke his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Mulligan, *Slavery and Oppression*, iii; John Prinsep, *Strictures and Observations on the Mcurrery System of Landed Property in Bengal* (London: Debrette, 1794), 122-23.

<sup>99</sup> Randolph Francis, *A Letter to the Right Honourable William Pitt, Chancellor of the Exchequer, &C., on the Proposed Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (London: T. Cadell, 1788), 3, 53.

<sup>100</sup> Mary Leadbeater, *Poems, by Mary Leadbeater* (Dublin: Martine-Keene, 1808), 87, 92. The poem was written in 1789. Paul Edwards, “Introduction,” in Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffick of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, ed. Paul Edwards (London: Dawsons, 1969), xx-xxi. For Burke and his impact on British antislavery, see pages 171-85 of this dissertation.

Among those who set imperial policy, it is difficult to assess the extent to which support for the prosecution of Hastings (a fairly good litmus test for support of instituting major reforms to the EIC) can be used as a predictor of support for abolition. Echoing activists outside of parliament, some MPs expressed expectations of consistency between those who voted on the two issues. According to James Martin, member for Tewkesbury, voting against the slave trade would prove that those who condemned Hastings “had been actuated by the pure principles of humanity, without party spirit or other unworthy motives.” For Viscount Belgrave, logic dictated that while his fellow parliamentarians “were stretching out the strong arm of justice to punish the degraders of British honour and humanity in the East, they would with equal spirit, exert their power to dispense the blessings of their protection and liberty to the poor Africans who were serving them in the West.”<sup>101</sup> Though the India Question was generally more of a partisan issue than the fate of the slave trade was, Peter Marshall nonetheless concludes that “many of those [MPs] who voted that Hastings should stand trial also voted that the slave trade should be abolished.”<sup>102</sup> In the absence of voting records for individual members, however, it is nearly impossible to verify this claim. Also likely though difficult to prove with certainty is Marshall’s assertion that Wilberforce “played a most important part in the proceedings” against Hastings by convincing Pitt to allow impeachment charges to proceed from the House of Commons to the House of Lords. A number of other scholars

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<sup>101</sup> James Martin, 18 April 1791, in Hansard, ed., *Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 29: 283-84; Viscount Belgrave, 17 June 1788, in Hansard, ed., *Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 27: 598.

<sup>102</sup> P.J. Marshall, “Introduction,” in Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Peter J. Marshall and J. Wilson, vol. VII, *India: The Hastings Trial, 1788-1795* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3-4.

also allude to Wilberforce being an important behind the scenes figure in the Hastings trial, though few provide documentary evidence.<sup>103</sup>

Without concrete proof that MPs who voted to impeach Hastings were more likely than their colleagues to support abolition, it would be wrong to posit a causal connection between opposition to EIC conduct in India and opposition to the slave trade. Indeed, while it is probable that many of those who voted to end the slave trade became increasingly attuned to (and disturbed by) imperial abuses during proceedings against Hastings in the mid-1780s, exactly how many abolitionists followed this trajectory is unknown. A more nuanced understanding of the interplay between antislavery and calls to prosecute Hastings and reform the EIC, therefore, recognizes that discussion about each of these issues fed into a growing propensity in the decade after the American War to reflect on the moral character of empire as a whole. In particular, regular and contemporaneous reports on British abuses in India and the Atlantic encouraged individuals to draw comparisons between different zones of empire, and to see overseas

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<sup>103</sup> Peter J. Marshall, The Impeachment of Warren Hastings (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), xvii. Robin Blackburn writes that “After consultations with Wilberforce, Pitt supported impeachment proceedings against Warren Hastings.” John Brooke likewise asserts that “Probably it was Wilberforce’s conviction that there was a case to answer against Hastings which determined Pitt to vote for impeachment.” In his biography of Wilberforce, John Pollock describes an occasion on which Pitt called Wilberforce behind the Speaker’s chair during a debate on the Hastings trial to ask for his advice. None of these scholars provide any citations for this information. Blackburn, The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 134-35; John Brooke and Lewis B. Namier, The House of Commons, 1754-1790: Introductory Survey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 171; J.C. Pollock, Wilberforce (London: Constable, 1977), 40. In his biography of Charles Fox, Leslie Mitchell cites Nathaniel Wraxall’s journal as providing evidence that Pitt felt he had to support impeaching Hastings or risk losing Wilberforce’s support. The pages Mitchell references, though, contain nothing on this topic. Leslie Mitchell, Charles James Fox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 78. The only contemporary source I have found that testifies to Wilberforce’s involvement in Hastings’s prosecution are letters from Daniel Pulteney to his patron, the Duke of Rutland, in which he writes that Wilberforce and fellow MP Henry Banks helped guide Pitt’s actions on the Hastings file. See, for instance, Daniel Pulteney to the Duke of Rutland, 8 February 1787, in The manuscripts of His Grace the Duke of Rutland: preserved at Belvoir Castle, vol. 3 (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1888): 369-70.

iniquities as manifestations of the same fundamental problems of avarice and imperial mismanagement. For many advocates of reform, painting a picture of global injustice was a useful strategy as they entered into to the national dialogue on Britain's imperial future.

### *Gender and Violence: A Case Study*

It is in this postwar context of widespread doubt and debate about the rectitude of empire that Mulligan's eclogues need to be read. Though the poems were not written to advance a specific or partisan legislative agenda, they were nonetheless highly political documents. Compared to the goals of partisan pamphlets and speeches, the purpose of Mulligan's eclogues was at once both more limited and more general: namely, to shed light on British delinquency overseas, and to show the need to make worldwide empire a more moral undertaking. Underscoring how the eclogues were intended to contribute to debate about the future course of empire are their similarities with other writings from the 1780s that likewise made the case for humanitarian reform. Indeed, while Mulligan borrowed tropes and conventions from a long lineage of anti-imperial poetry, he also employed topics, themes, and language that were current in political discourse at the time. In contrasting the era prior to British incursions so sharply with the post-contact period, for example, his poems resemble much anti-slavery and anti-EIC propaganda by attributing almost all social problems in Africa and Asia to transformations wrought by the British. By highlighting the deleterious effects of emigration and the loss of fertile farmland, his *European Eclogue* echoed grievances that Irish peasants were expressing against absentee English landlords.<sup>104</sup> In addition to being seen as a culmination of qualms about global empire that had been percolating for the past quarter-century,

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<sup>104</sup> Kelly, *Prelude to Union*.

*Poems, Chiefly on Slavery and Oppression* should also be understood as a product of the unique mixture of attitudes toward empire that existed in Britain in the decade after the American War.

One illuminating example of how Mulligan's eclogues built on and borrowed from contemporaneous imperial discourses lies in the ways in which his poems connect gender and violence. Though gender is not the principal focus of his eclogues, it is a prominent theme that runs throughout all four poems. Indeed, sensationalist accounts of violence inflicted by British men against non-European women were a feature of many critiques of empire in the late eighteenth century, as advocates of humanitarian imperial reform often used such stories to underscore the magnitude of British aggression abroad. By highlighting the gendered nature of imperial violence, Mulligan provided his readers with a recognizable signifier that underscored the need for wide-ranging changes to the way in which empire was conducted. A close analysis of the gendered language and themes in his eclogues therefore not only shows one of the ways in which reformers could draw parallels between abuses in different zones of empire, but also demonstrates how political debate about empire extended beyond parliament into the literary and cultural spheres.

While each of Mulligan's eclogues focuses on the physical and psychological suffering of its oppressed narrators, the most dramatic passages are often descriptions of the abuse and anguish experienced by non-European females. In *An African Eclogue*, for instance, graphic imagery is used to describe the process by which the female character is



captured and sold into bondage. As she recalls to her male lover afterwards, her captors “tore me, fainting, from a father’s arms”; during the raid against her village, “unheard-of crimes and tortures met my eyes.” A similar fate befell other “youthful virgins” who had guilelessly welcomed the British as potential trading partners.<sup>105</sup> In *An American Eclogue*, the language is even more explicit. Here, “affrighted maids” and “frantic dames” are taken captive, while “infants shriek, and clasp their mother’s knees.” All the while, “groans throughout the noisome bark resound.” Similar to *An African Eclogue*, the poem stresses both the unnaturalness and wantonness of indiscriminately enslaving men, women, and children alike. Inflicting abuse on even those who posed little threat of retaliating continued in the Americas, where neither “The drooping female’s tears” nor “the infant’s cries” nor “age nor sickness stays the driver’s hand.”<sup>106</sup>

In describing the needless and excessive violence inflicted on female slaves, Mulligan was contributing to an important strand of abolitionist discourse that emphasized the particular hardships experienced by African women.<sup>107</sup> This topic was not only prominent in antislavery poetry and other works of fiction. Many of the most explicit and disturbing testimonies given before parliamentary inquiries into the slave trade in the late 1780s contained stories of women being raped, separated from their partners, and forced to commit infanticide. A number of former seamen reported that ships’ crews would mentally divide the female “prey” when they were first brought

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<sup>105</sup> Mulligan, *Poems, Chiefly on Slavery and Oppression*, 26, 27, 25.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 4.

<sup>107</sup> See in particular Henrick Altink, *Representations of Slave Women in Discourses on Slavery and Abolition, 1780-1838* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

aboard their vessels.<sup>108</sup> Other witnesses described how some captains would punish mothers by torturing their children in front of them. In one interview, a seaman told of a captain who had punished a nine-month-old for refusing to eat by plunging his feet into scalding water for five consecutive days. After this and similarly cruel methods of coercion failed to get the infant to accept his food, the mother was instructed to throw her child overboard. She was beaten when she refused.<sup>109</sup> The story was recounted in parliament by the abolitionist William Smith and reproduced in many pieces of antislavery propaganda.<sup>110</sup>

Tales of violence committed by seamen against African women were paralleled by similarly widely circulated examples of plantation owners who separated families and excessively flogged their female slaves. As shocking as these actions were, audiences and readers were equally as horrified at the sadistic pleasure that planters were said to derive from inflicting such cruelty. In numerous antislavery cartoons, masters appear smiling as they apply lash after lash to the back of a female slave who would hang for hours from a tree branch or a scaffold erected for the purpose. Wounds were sometimes so deep that two or three fingers could be placed width-wise along the exposed flesh.<sup>111</sup> In poems, pamphlets, and oral testimonies, acts the violence inflicted on women slaves were also among the most sensational examples of the severity of the Atlantic slave system. Frequently, descriptions of female floggings highlighted the scantiness of the slave's

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<sup>108</sup> "prey" cited in Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 16.

<sup>109</sup> Testimony of Isaac Parker in Sheila Lambert, ed., *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1975), vol. 73: 124-29.

<sup>110</sup> William Smith, 19 April 1791, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 29: 329-31.

<sup>111</sup> Lambert, ed. *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 82: 48.

attire and the exposure of her breasts and genitalia. Hercules Ross, a former resident of Jamaica, told a parliamentary committee about the time he witnessed a naked slave woman hanging from a tree by her wrists, with her master holding a stick of fire just under her genitalia; when she relaxed her muscles and lowered her body, the flame would come into contact with her “private parts.” As Ross proceeded to note, the planter “remained with an unmoved countenance [while] applying this torture.”<sup>112</sup> Describing the punishment of pregnant women, another witness reported that a hole would be dug in the ground for the slave's stomach, thus enabling her to lay face down in order to receive lashes on her back.<sup>10</sup>

Though Mulligan's eclogues on slavery did not refer to flogging specifically, they did address a number of issues raised by flogging and related abuse, including the moral degeneracy of slave owners and the relative defencelessness of enslaved women. Mulligan was also by no means the only poet of his period to tackle these themes. As Srividhya Swaminathan notes, references to the suffering of enslaved women occur with greater frequency in antislavery fiction and poetry than in other media.<sup>113</sup> One explanation for this might lie in the number of British women who used poetry to

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 253. Flogging was not only an assertion of physical dominance. When involving female slaves, it could also be seen as an expression of sexual license over the body of the victim. Because of the assumed lasciviousness of Black women, and the frequency of rape on most plantations, descriptions of female slave floggings carried a highly sexualized undertone. As both Mary Favret and Marcus Wood have argued, antislavery propaganda played upon the sexual dynamics of flogging and other punishments to such an extent that much of it resembled late eighteenth-century pornography. While frequent allusions to sexually deviant behaviour and interracial sex attest to the prurient curiosity of the British public, such stories also served to cast the slave owner as unfeeling and ruled by his baser passions. As much as anything, flogging female slaves (and deriving a quasi-sexual pleasure from it), proved that planters did not share the virtues of humanity and compassion held by their compatriots across the Atlantic. See Mary A. Favret, “Flogging: the Anti-Slavery Movement Writes Pornography,” in Anne Janowitz, ed., *Essays and Studies 1998: Romanticism and Gender* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998): 19-43, Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688-1804* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 34-38.

<sup>113</sup> Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, 107.

challenge slavery and the slave trade. Discouraged from signing petitions and taking leadership roles in local antislavery societies in the late eighteenth century, poetry was one of the few avenues available to women to publically express their opposition to the slave trade.<sup>114</sup> As Hannah More, Ann Yearsley, and Helen Maria Williams demonstrate, many woman poets discussed the unique plight of female slaves. Each of these women, for instance, noted how the trauma of enslavement led to miscarriages, and described the pain experienced by mothers at having children, in More's words, "torn from their grasp."<sup>115</sup> Underscoring the particular resonance of such themes with a female readership, Mary Birkett Card even addressed her 1792 poem *The African Slave Trade* explicitly "to her own Sex."<sup>116</sup>

Another common antislavery theme that Mulligan alludes to is the loss of enslaved women's virginity at the hands of seamen or plantation owners. While this subject would certainly have resonated with female readers, it also challenged men in Britain's political class to assume their traditional responsibility of protecting the "weaker sex." Indeed, many antislavery poets and campaigners directly invoked stereotypes about the fragility and purity of womanhood in an effort to mobilize the

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<sup>114</sup> Historians should be careful not to read the strength of female antislavery societies in the nineteenth century back into the abolitionist struggle of the late eighteenth century. Prior to 1807, antislavery was seen mainly as a political instead of a philanthropic cause, and female participation was therefore largely circumscribed by social mores. Though some prominent women donated to the SEAST, most women's activism was behind-the-scenes, including serving as amanuenses for the male leadership. Wilberforce himself was publically against the establishment of female anti-slavery societies. His reservations about female participation in the cause are indicative of the attitude of many of his Evangelical co-agitators. See Robert I. and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, 1838), vol. 2: 278-79. For women's antislavery societies in the nineteenth century, see Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>115</sup> Hannah More, *Slavery, a Poem* (London: T. Cadell, 1788). Citation from line 110; Ann Yearsley, *A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave-Trade* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robertson, 1788); Helen Maria Williams, *A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave-Trade* (London: T. Cadell, 1788).

<sup>116</sup> Birket[t], *A Poem on the African Slave Trade. Addressed to Her Own Sex*.

patriarchal sensibilities of male parliamentarians. Mulligan himself wrote about “woman’s weakness,” for example, and Hannah More described the plaintive cries of “the shrieking babe, [and] the agonizing wife” dragged from their village “by hostile hands.”<sup>117</sup> Captain John Marjoribanks, a former resident of Jamaica who was repulsed by what he witnessed in the sugar islands, published a lengthy poem in 1792 stressing how planters “in *torturing* the fair [women] excel,” and how “female limbs lay[ed] bear” during floggings were an offence to “female delicacy.”<sup>118</sup>

Accounts of violence against enslaved women not only called out for the protection of British laws and lawmakers. In an age in which the treatment of women was seen as an indicator of moral progress, such behaviour called into question Britain’s moral ascendancy. This was the result not only of changing ideals of womanhood, but also of shifting notions of masculinity. As Kathleen Wilson and others have shown, during the latter eighteenth century qualities such as compassion and empathy came to be seen as increasingly salient components of a moral, sophisticated, and outward-looking male identity.<sup>119</sup> Unresponsiveness to the plight of African women was therefore antithetical not only to traditional chivalric constructions of manhood: it also stood in contrast to emerging conceptions of manliness that incorporated Enlightenment and Romantic-era values of sentiment and thoughtfulness. By doing nothing to stop the

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<sup>117</sup> More, *Slavery, a Poem*, lines 100 and 101.

<sup>118</sup> Mulligan, *Slavery and Oppression*, 24. Captain J. Marjoribanks, *Slavery: An Essay in Verse* (Edinburgh: J. Robertson, 1792), 17, 13.

<sup>119</sup> See Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003). A good example of this redefinition of manliness can be found in Henry Mackenzie’s 1771 sentimental novel *The Man of Feeling*. In the novel, Mackenzie provides examples of how the “man of feeling” should not behave; these include imitating the actions of EIC officials who “oppress the industry of their subjects.” Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling* (London: T. Cadell, 1771), 210. Elsewhere, Mackenzie lauded Edmund Burke for his advocacy of Indian reform and opposition to the slave trade. See page 184-85 of this dissertation.

exploitation, beating, rape, and murder of African women on both sides of the Atlantic, British men (and male parliamentarians in particular) were failing to live up to their self-ascribed responsibility as guardians of womanly virtue.

Similar to many abolitionists, advocates of correcting EIC rule in India also drew attention to the exploitation of women and the gendered nature of much of the violence caused by the British presence in the region. In his eclogue on India, Mulligan related specific examples of violence against women and the “sorrows and sufferings” that women experienced while watching their families and communities destroyed by Company agents eager to expand their spheres of influence. In addition to wars of aggression leading to the separation of mothers from infants, some critics even alleged that it was not uncommon for children to be killed during the chaos of fighting. Based on this claim, Mulligan described India, like Africa, as a place where “Lamenting mothers, prostrate on the ground,/ Beheld their dying offspring stretch’d around.”<sup>120</sup> As the poem’s full title, *The Virgins, an Asiatic Eclogue*, suggests, the sexual impropriety of EIC employees and soldiers, as well as the innocence of Indian women, were also prominent themes. At a number of points Mulligan directly references the virginity and moral purity of his interlocutors. Moreover, the caste status of the Indian princess and Brahmin’s daughter would have reinforced to class-conscious Britons that these young women were indeed “ever gentle” and “virtuous youths.” In the final line of the poem, Mulligan implies that the “recent woes” of the two virgins are in no way unique since, in all parts of India conquered by the British, “rape and murder mark’d the victor’s way.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Mulligan, *Slavery and Oppression*, 9, 14.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 15.

In many respects, the virgins in Mulligan's *Asiatic Eclogue* are intended to mirror the Indian subcontinent itself. Depicted as a feminized geographic space, India is ascribed the pronoun "her," and is portrayed using fecund imagery: the landscape is replete with "fertile vales" and "palms luxuriant." When the British invade this sub-tropical Eden, "bring[ing] destruction to an helpless land," the physical environment itself "mourns... her children slain"; "ill-fated Asia bleeds" due to "Europa's chiefs' ... martial deeds."<sup>122</sup> This feminization is redolent of much antislavery poetry that also constructs Africa as a "mother country/continent" that grieves the loss of her stolen offspring and the "raping" of her land. In his *African Eclogue*, Mulligan describes "verdant lawn" and "fertile fields" made "barren" by the slave trade, while recounting the "dreadful shrieks the vales and woodlands rend."<sup>123</sup> By describing India and Africa in gendered, anthropomorphized terms, poets such as Mulligan underscored the innocence and vulnerability of the regions, while simultaneously revealing Britain's male imperial agents as responsible for despoiling the "injur'd lands."<sup>124</sup>

By the time Mulligan published his *Asiatic Eclogue* in 1788, stories about the mistreatment of Indian women at the hands of both Britons and South Asians employed by the EIC were widely known. The trial of Warren Hastings, which had just moved from the House of Commons to the House of Lords, and was riveting the political class in

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 10, 8.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 24, 31, 1, 26. "Injur'd lands" is used both the *Asiatic* and *African* eclogues. Ibid., 9, 23.

London, featured numerous accusations of— and allusions to— sexual violence.<sup>125</sup>

Though connections between the abuse of women and the decisions of the former Governor-General were tenuous at best, trial managers used lurid sexual imagery to indirectly cast Hastings himself as a defiler of Indian womanhood. Consider Edmund Burke's description of the actions of mercenaries employed by Devi Singh, a notoriously debauched revenue collector whom Hastings had contracted to collect duties in two north-eastern districts under Company rule:

Virgins, whose fathers kept them from the sight of the sun, were dragged into the public court, that court which was the natural refuge against all wrong, against all oppression, and all iniquity. There, in the presence of day, in the public court, vainly invoking its justice, while their shrieks were mingled with the cries and groans of an indignant people, those virgins were cruelly violated by the basest and wickedest of mankind. It did not end there. The wives of the people of the country... were dragged out, naked and exposed to the public view, and scourged before all the people... In order that nature might be violated in all those circumstances where the sympathies of nature are awakened, where the remembrances of our infancy and all our tender remembrances are combined, they put the nipples of women into the sharp edges of split bamboos and tore them from their bodies. Grown from ferocity to ferocity, from cruelty to cruelty, they applied burning torches and cruel slow fires...<sup>126</sup>

Though the House of Lords ruled that Hastings could not be held accountable for these atrocities, Burke worked hard to indirectly taint the former Governor-General with responsibility in the less discriminating court of public opinion. Similar to abolitionist descriptions of slave raids, Burke stressed the indiscriminateness of the violence wrought by Hastings' decisions, which impacted "both sexes, in every age, rank, situation and

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<sup>125</sup> According to one observer writing in February of 1788, the Hastings Trial "swallows up everything- no spectacle was ever so much resorted to. The manners, at least the hours of London, are completely changed." Mr. Storer to Mr. Eden, Golden Square, 22 February 1788. On the "spectacle" of the trial, see Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 87-132.

<sup>126</sup> Burke, 18 February 1788, in E.A. Bond, ed., *Speeches of the Managers and Counsel in the Trial of Warren Hastings* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts, 1861), vol. 1: 145.



condition of life.”<sup>127</sup> Though waning interest in the trial from 1790 until its conclusion in 1795 suggests that most observers eventually tired of such hyperbole, Burke’s sensationalist rhetoric appears to have resonated with large sections of the public during the trial’s opening phases. Multiple eyewitnesses to Burke’s above speech against Devi Singh reported that it led to fainting and tears among ladies in the audience. The pro-Hastings polemicist Ralph Broom reported travelling the English countryside in 1788-89 and everywhere encountering men who “inveighed with vehemence against his [Hastings’] cruelties to the women.” Broom tried to disabuse his interlocutors by informing them that “Mr. Burke never accused Mr. Hastings of inflicting, or ordering punishment to be inflicted on the women,” but was rarely successful. Similar to many abolitionists, Burke and his team of managers imagined a virtuous British public that would be shocked to learn of the atrocities perpetuated by their countrymen in the peripheries of empire.<sup>128</sup>

Sexual exploitation and intrusion into zenanas, the private quarters reserved for a noblewoman’s female servants, were also focal points of one of the most controversial charges brought against Hastings in the House of Lords. In the Begums of Oude case, Hastings stood accused of sending EIC soldiers into the zenanas of two Begums—

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<sup>127</sup> Burke, 19 Feb. 1788, in *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>128</sup> Ralph Broome, *A[N] Elucidation of the Articles of Impeachment Preferred by the Last Parliament against Warren Hastings, Esq. Late Governor General of Bengal* (London: John Stockdale, 1790), ii. There is much evidence to suggest that Burke’s primary aim in the trial was not to secure a conviction on the basis of specific charges, but rather to win over public opinion through creating a general impression of guilt. In November 1787, he secretly told Henry Dundas that he believed it was only through “proceed[ing] under the public eye” that he had a chance of achieving “some ostensible measure of justice.” See Burke to Dundas, 1 November 1787, in Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings*, 71. During the trial itself, Burke referred to the British public as “the ultimate judges under God of all our actions.” See “Minutes of the Trial of Warren Hastings,” 20 May 1789, Add. Ms. 24230, f.147, BL. He also instructed his supporters and potential supporters that “work[ing] upon the popular sense” was the best means to obtain victory. Quoted in Conor Cruise O’Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 371.

widowed, aristocratic, and politically powerful women— in an important northern province. Violating this secluded space was considered a particularly dishonourable offense in India since many Britons believed that “women in that part of the globe [Hindus and Muslims] are immediately disgraced upon exposure.”<sup>129</sup> According to trial managers, Hastings gave this command in order to collect treasures he thought were owed the British as part of a previous agreement, as well as to punish the Begums for supporting a rebellion in a neighbouring province the previous year. As with the Devi Singh affair, the Begums of Oude charge revolved around a litany of sensational allegations about how British soldiers had degraded Indian womanhood. Members of the Begum’s zenanas were reportedly dragged from their chambers and publically stripped and flogged. Moreover, Hastings stood accused of offending nature itself by encouraging the son and grandson of the Begums to turn against his mother and grandmother.

In introducing the charge in the House of Commons, Richard Sheridan displayed his usual rhetorical excess by describing the episode as “replete with proof of criminality of the blackest die, of tyranny the most vile... of oppression the most severe and grinding.” Underscoring the paternalistic nature of his appeal for justice, Sheridan continued by warning members of parliament that they would soon hear about “cruelty the most unmanly and unparalleled.”<sup>130</sup> These stories about the humiliation of noblewomen and their ladies circulated widely in the press, and collectively provided an

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<sup>129</sup> Mr. Adam, 15 April 1788, in Bond, ed., *Speeches of the Managers and Counsel*, vol. 1: 422.

<sup>130</sup> Richard Sheridan, 7 February 1787, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 26: 279. Ever the dramatist, Sheridan concluded his invective by collapsing onto the floor of Westminster Hall. Many in the audience claimed to have been brought to tears by his impassioned and heart-wrenching speech. For the trial as a constructed, theatrical spectacle, see Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire*, 87-132. For the role of sexualized rhetoric in the trial, see Anna Clark, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 84-112.

important context in which readers would have understood Mulligan's *Asiatic Eclogue*. Though the poem sought to expose British rapacity and misrule in a broad sense, a number of readers would have seen parallels between the actions described by Mulligan and accusations made against Hastings and his subordinates. One reviewer for the *European Magazine*, for instance, went so far as describe the poem as featuring an Indian princess "flying in great distress, and Mr. Hastings pursuing her with fire and sword."<sup>131</sup> Though the poem on one level was an indictment of British imperialism in India *in toto*, it was also part of a more immediate discussion in 1788 about Hastings' behaviour in India and what politicians in Britain should do about it.

For the purposes of this chapter, the interplay between gender and violence in Mulligan's eclogues on slavery, the slave trade, and India in particular helps illustrate two main points. First, within the context of Mulligan's imperial eclogues themselves, the exploitation of women serves as a unifying theme that connects the poems to each other. Along with other recurring subjects and tropes, it underscores the central message of *Poems, Chiefly on Slavery and Oppression*: that the manifestations of British greed and immorality are everywhere both similar and similarly destructive. Second, the examples of gendered violence that Mulligan included show how his eclogues were part of a broad national debate about how empire should be regulated. This conversation took place not only in parliament, newspapers, and other traditional venues of political discussion, but also extended into cultural and literary media, drawing in a wide variety of commentators from different walks of life. Mulligan himself built on multiple sources and arguments in order to emphasize just how oppressive and unjust Britain's empire had become, and it

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<sup>131</sup> "Review of 'The Virgins, an Asiatic Eclogue,'" in *The European Magazine*, June 1788, 415.

was precisely his wide knowledge of contemporaneous imperial issues and discourse that enabled him to present such a comprehensive critique. His eclogues demonstrate that when studying political cultural and perceptions of empire in late eighteenth-century Britain, different types of sources should be studied alongside each other.

### *Conclusion*

Though Mulligan's reflections on empire were not entirely representative of national opinion as a whole, they are illustrative of an important strand of pro-reform discourse. Namely, they highlight how many humanitarian critics of empire were able to detect patterns of exploitation throughout Britain's imperial orbit. Comparisons between overseas iniquities had been surfacing since the end of the Seven Years' War, but by the 1780s were being articulated by more Britons than ever before. To a public increasingly attuned to imperial affairs, stories of violence and abuse in different corners of the empire were mutually reinforcing. Read alongside each other, they painted a disturbing picture. For historians of antislavery specifically, Mulligan and his eclogues are reminders that abolitionism cannot be understood in isolation from other currents of empire. From the Seven Years' War to the wars of the French Revolution, those Britons who denounced that Atlantic slave system were often motivated by concerns that extended beyond simply the inhumanity of slavery, the slave trade, or both.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that highlighting the destructive effects of British conduct overseas was only one component of the overall case put forward by advocates of imperial reform. Though placing the Atlantic slave system in the context of

British abuses on a global scale underscored the depth and extent of immorality in the empire, for many Britons imperial iniquities such as the slave trade remained abstract issues. Even those who saw practices overseas as unethical could still believe that they brought no direct harm to Britain itself. To convince their countrymen of the need for abolition, therefore, antislavery campaigners, like other advocates of humanitarian imperial reform, had to make the case that the effects of injustices overseas were not delimited within the periphery of empire. The way in which they connected national prosperity to the actions of Britons abroad and the management of empire is the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter Two

### *Agents of Iniquity: Perceptions of Slave Owners and Slave Traders*

Writing under the pseudonym Timothy Touchstone, an anonymous poet in 1792 published a two-canto poem entitled *Tea and Sugar, or the Nabob and the Creole*. The first canto described and denounced “*British Nabob’s* [sic]”—former East India Company employees who carried out violence and plunder in Asia, and then gaudily displayed their ill-gotten wealth upon returning to Britain. Along with condemning the “greatly vile... [and] horrid crimes” committed by nabobs in India, Touchstone drew attention to the vices that the “unprincipled, savage band” introduced into Britain itself. These included importing a taste for “Eastern luxury,” engaging in political bribery, upsetting social hierarchies, and spreading immoral habits “o’er *Britain’s* famous land.” In the second canto, the poet turned his vitriol toward creole slave owners in the West Indies, collectively condemning them as “SLAVERY’S *Prime Minister*” and the “true epitome of a jaundic’d mind.” Throughout the poem, both nabobs and creoles are closely connected to the bloodstained consumer goods they produce: tea from India, and sugar from the West Indies. Touchstone concluded by urging his fellow citizens to fight against the pernicious effects of nabobs and slave owners in their midst. As he summarized in another poem published alongside *Tea or Sugar*, Britons must strive to keep colonial influence “from our shore,/No matter whence she comes, of *East*, a *West*.”<sup>1</sup>

In condemning nabobs and slave owners alongside each other, Timothy Touchstone was far from alone. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, joint

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Touchstone [pseudonym], *Tea and Sugar, or the Nabob and the Creole; a Poem in Two Cantos* (London: J. Ridgway, 1792), citations on 1, 8, 10, and 11. Timothy Touchstone [pseudonym], *Lord Mayor’s Day; or City Pagentry; a Poem* (London: James Ridgway, 1792), 20.

condemnations came from a wide variety of individuals from a myriad of backgrounds. “Our West Indian planters, and our British East India Nabobs,” wrote the Presbyterian preacher William Duff, “outstrip their countrymen at home in luxury, and in all the vices to which luxury and wealth give birth.” According to the poet George Galloway, the money obtained by many of those involved in the slave industry made them “proud as Indian Nabobs.” Lord Sheffield derisively referred to both groups as constituting “the most splendid members of the empire,” and imperial analysts occasionally spoke of the “Asiatic despotism of our planters.” Some commentators even described slave owners as “West Indian nabobs,” thereby condemning Britons in the two Indies simultaneously.<sup>2</sup> In denouncing both nabobs and planters, critics honed in on specific unsavoury characteristics. In almost every case, the imperial fortune-seeker was described as a profit-obsessed upstart of questionable origins, whose new wealth was upsetting Britain’s longstanding social, economic, and political hierarchies. Having been schooled in despotism abroad, he was unable to shed his disposition toward violence or cupidity upon relocating to Britain. That planters felt compelled to protest against their association with nabobs, reproaching Touchstone for one for having “miserably assorted his subjects,” underscores the prevalence of this discourse.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> William Duff, National Prosperity, the Consequence of National Virtue; and National Ruin, the Effect of National Wickedness: A Sermon on Ezra ix. 13 (Aberdeen: J. Chalmers and Co., 1785), 35; George Galloway, Poems on Various Subjects, Scotch and English (Edinburgh: George Galloway, 1792), 36; Earl of Sheffield, Observations on the Commerce of the American States, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: J. Debrett, 1784), 196; For “the Asiatic despotism...” see, for instance, Letter to the Editor, The Gentleman’s Magazine, vol. 58 (March 1788): 211-12. For “West Indian nabobs” and the surrounding discourse, see Srividhya Swaminathan, Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 147. Matthew Parker entitles a chapter in his recent book “West Indian ‘Nabobs’: Absenteeism, Decadence, and Decline,” but provides no contemporary source for this term. Matthew Parker, The Sugar Barons: Family, Corruption, Empire, and War in the West Indies (New York: Walker & Co., 2011), 333-44.

<sup>3</sup> Review of “Tea and Sugar; or, The Nabob and the Creole by Timothy Touchstone,” The Gentleman’s Magazine, vol. 62 (Aug. 1792): 741.

Along with highlighting parallels that contemporaries drew between nabobs and creoles, Touchstone's poem also shows how in the aftermath of the American War Britons became increasingly concerned with how the wealth, habits, and material goods of empire were impacting Britain itself. Whereas the previous chapter examined concerns about the effects of empire overseas, this chapter focuses on the dangers that imperial injustices posed to national prosperity, as well as how stories of violence and abuses abroad undermined central tenets of British national identity. The rapacity that was inherent in the maintenance of empire, many reformers argued, could not be contained beyond Britain's shores. Such fears were manifestations of underlying psychological anxieties about the multidirectional currents of imperial influence. As travellers between Britain and its empire, slave owners, slave traders, and nabobs were seen as the physical vessels through which the ills of imperialism entered into the British Isles. Their mobility made them walking refutations of the idea that Britain and its empire were two different things that could be kept separate and clearly delineated. Further, because of their greed and depravity abroad, these liminal figures raised uncomfortable questions about the extent to which the humane British character could degenerate when removed from "civilized" Europe. They therefore called into doubt core assumptions about Britishness during an era in which the geographic and conceptual boundaries between nation and empire were increasingly contested.

In examining metropolitan perceptions of Britons involved in the Atlantic slave economy, this chapter concentrates in particular on how slave owners and slave traders were portrayed, discussed, identified, and received in a nation that was more attentive



than ever to the domestic effects of imperial power. Comparisons with nabobs will be used in the final section to illuminate the ways in which Britons sought to epistemologically incorporate unsavoury agents of empire. My approach here is strongly influenced by the new imperial history that sees the lived experiences of empire as “disrupting comfortable binary oppositions about insiders and outsiders posited by eighteenth-century intellectuals... white/black, free/slave,... home/abroad.”<sup>4</sup> The new imperial history also recognizes that exercising control over non-European peoples produced a more “precarious sense of self” and unsettled “even the most confident narratives of national identity and imperial power.”<sup>5</sup> While this perspective has been adopted in recent studies of nabobs and other groups within Britain’s imperial orbit, it has yet to be applied to slave owners and traders—arguably the two occupations most antithetical to the nation’s self-ascribed commitment to liberty and humanity.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, almost all research on the West Indian plantocracy during the era of abolition has focused on the group’s declining political and economic influence within the empire: there are no cultural histories addressing planters’ waning social prestige in Britain over the same period. Likewise, there is little literature on the experiences of captains, officers, or crews

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<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Wilson, *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European Writing on India, 1600-1800* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7 and Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Among the best monographs in this vein are Tillman W. Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600-1850* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), and Troy O. Bickham, *Savages within the Empire: Representations of American Indians in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Some works on the plantocracy in the late eighteenth century touch on metropolitan perceptions, but remain focused on creoles and creole society. See, for instance, David Lambert, *White Creole Culture: Politics and Identity during the Age of Abolition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Christer Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica: Colonial Society and Culture during the Era of Abolition* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), and Michael Craton, “Reluctant Creole: The Planter’s World in the British West Indies,” in Bernard Bailyn and Philip Morgan, eds., *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991): 314-62.

of slave ships upon their return from slaving voyages.<sup>7</sup> By beginning to explore these topics, this chapter will show how much of the energy behind abolitionism grew out of anxieties embodied by Britons engaged in the Atlantic slave economy.

### *Questions of Character*

From its inception, public debate about abolition revolved not only around assumptions about Africans and the value of their labour. It also centered on perceptions of West Indian slave owners. When in 1784 the Anglican minister James Ramsay published his *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies*, the pamphlet that first ignited a national conversation about abolishing the slave trade, planters throughout the West Indies saw the tract as a direct attack on their probity.<sup>8</sup> Within months, “Some Gentlemen of St. Christopher” published an animated rebuttal accusing Ramsay of unfairly depicting slaveholders “as men divest of all just principles and affection to their mother country.”<sup>9</sup> The authors also called into question Ramsay’s own character and principles, claiming that during his nineteen years on the island he had mistreated his own slaves and failed to perform his clerical duties.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jack Greene begins to address this first lacuna in Jack P. Greene, *Evaluating Empire and Confronting Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chapter five. For a recent account of the political and economic concerns of the planter class during the era of abolitionism, see David B. Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). The experience of sailors aboard slave ships is well covered in Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007). Rediker, however, provides little information on the experiences of seamen once they returned to Britain, or on perceptions of slave traders by fellow Britons.

<sup>8</sup> James Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (London: James Phillips, 1784). This tract and its history, as well as James Ramsay’s contributions to British antislavery, are discussed in greater detail on pages 215-24.

<sup>9</sup> Some Gentlemen of St. Christopher, *An Answer to the Reverend James Ramsay's Essay* (Basseterre, St. Christopher: Edward L. Low, 1784), 5. St. Christopher is present-day St. Kitts.

<sup>10</sup> As Ramsay elaborated in a subsequent tract, “They accuse the author of not being a Christian; of having been a Presbyterian; a harsh surgeon; a violent politician; a cruel master; a grasping avaricious man; a bad neighbour; he preached his people out of church; he mocked at God’s judgments; he was a corrupt

It is hard to overstate the vitriol that animated this tract, and that extended even to Ramsay's style of argumentation: "His vague and desultory manner tires, confuses, and disgusts the reader... his awkward, uncouth, unmeaning stile [sic] shews as fully the stream to be shallow, as the bottom [is] filthy and detestable."<sup>11</sup> The following year saw another tract that systematically refuted Ramsay's allegations, this one from the pro-slavery apologist James Tobin who signed the piece "a Friend to the West Indian Colonies, and their inhabitants."<sup>12</sup> Tobin especially resented Ramsay's assertions about the immense wealth enjoyed by plantation owners. "For one planter who lives at his ease in Great Britain," Tobin argued, "there are fifty toiling under a load of debt in the islands." In a telling aside, he added that "the Nabobs of the East... enjoy a very material advantage" over planters in their ability to acquire and accumulate riches. Like the "Gentlemen of St. Christopher," Tobin also took issue with Ramsay's portrayal of the plantocracy. "With what appearance of decency, or propriety," he asked, "does he [Ramsay] presume to paint the West Indians, as a band of inhuman unprincipled tyrants while abroad, and a set of useless, unthinking, dissipated spendthrifts when at home[?]"<sup>13</sup>

In the years prior to the formation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and before the West Indian lobby turned its energies towards defending slavery, Ramsay and Tobin became the public faces of London's anti-slavery and pro-slavery interests respectively. From 1784 to 1788, the two engaged in a bitter dispute that

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magistrate..." James Ramsay, A Reply to the Personal Invectives and Objections Contained in Two Answers, Published by Certain Anonymous Persons, to an Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves, in the British Colonies (London: James Phillips, 1785), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher, An Answer to the Reverend James Ramsay's Essay, 24.

<sup>12</sup> James Tobin, Cursory Remarks Upon the Reverend Mr. Ramsay's Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the Sugar Colonies (London: G. and T. Wilkie, 1785).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, 34-35.

generated half a dozen pamphlets replete with accusations and counter accusations. As foreshadowed by the initial reception of Ramsay's *Essay*, the polemical battle was characterized more by personal attacks than reasoned argument. In one tract, Ramsay included a lengthy chapter entitled "The Author's Infamous Character as a Man," in which he defended his conduct while living in St. Christopher.<sup>14</sup> Though Tobin claimed to seek to rise above Ramsay's "sarcastic sneers, oblique hints, mysterious innuendo's [sic], obscure allusions, and unfeeling suggestions," he rarely succeeded. At one point, Tobin went so far as to describe Ramsay's arguments as "more like the impotent railing of an enraged old woman, than the manly resentment of a liberal mind."<sup>15</sup> On occasion, the personal animus directed towards Ramsay transcended the confines of the written page, as in 1788 when his enemies in St. Christopher sent him a parcel of rocks in an attempt to bankrupt him.<sup>16</sup> When Ramsay died in 1789, his friends acknowledged that the relentless defamations against his character "accelerated if not occasioned his death."<sup>17</sup>

The exchanges between Ramsay and Tobin were liberally covered by the periodical press, and their conflict drew in a handful of other participants who wrote to

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<sup>14</sup> Ramsay, *A Reply to the Personal Invectives and Objections*, 13-45.

<sup>15</sup> James Tobin, *A Short Rejoinder to the Rev. Mr. Ramsay's Reply* (London: G. and T. Wilkie, 1787), 94-95. James Tobin, *A Farewell Address to the Reverend Mr. James Ramsay* (London: G. and T. Wilkie, 1788), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Prior to the 1830s, postage was paid by the receiver, not the sender. On receiving rocks from St. Christopher, see Ramsay to Lyttelton, date unknown, Mss. Brit. Emp.s.2, f.86b, Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House, Oxford (henceforth RHO).

<sup>17</sup> Citation from the journal of Beilby Porteus, MSS 2100, f.9, Lambeth Palace Library (hereafter LPL). For a similar comment from his nephew to Wilberforce, see James Walker to William Wilberforce, Edinburgh, 14 April 1795, in *Slavery and Emancipation Microfilm Series*, Adam Mathews, d.14 (325-26). This perceived cause of death was celebrated by the MP Crisp Molyneux, who owned a plantation in St. Christopher, when he wrote triumphantly to his son "Ramsay is dead- I have killed him." Quoted in Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 162.

newspapers and magazines to corroborate the accusations of one side or the other.<sup>18</sup> For many Britons, the controversy marked their first sustained exposure to debate about colonial slavery. Because of the personal nature of the attacks levelled both at and by Ramsay and Tobin, Britons were encouraged to imagine the issue through the lens of clearly identifiable heroes and, more commonly, villains. Complex problems were distilled into questions about which spokesman should be trusted. By debating the rectitude of slavery through the figure of the creole slave owner, Ramsay, Tobin, and other polemicists established the character of the planter as a major axis of dispute in the years preceding parliamentary inquiries into the slave trade. From the abolitionist perspective, this framing ensured that the moral standards of creoles would garner close scrutiny and would be intrinsically connected to broader questions about the fate of the Atlantic slave system. Indeed, many of the earliest petitions for abolition in 1787-88 cited planter cruelty as a major reason why the slave trade ought to be terminated.<sup>19</sup> For planters and their allies, by contrast, negative depictions of slave owners fed into a narrative of growing metropolitan hostility towards West Indians and their culture. Already by 1787, James Tobin was complaining that “it seems to be the universal aim of every author who has occasion to mention a West India planter, to render that name synonymous with a cruel and relentless task master.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For a retrospective account on this controversy from one of its participants, see Thomas Clarkson, The History of the Rise, Progress, & Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, by the British Parliament, vol. 1 (London: James P. Parke, 1808): xiv-xxii, xxv.

<sup>19</sup> By 1792, Lord Carhampton went so far as to state that he believed that if petitions read “‘Whereas the White inhabitants of the West India islands are a lazy set of people, and compel the blackmoors to work for them, they ought to be turned out of the said islands, etc...,’ more signatures would have been procured.” Lord Carhampton, 27 April 1792, in T. C. Hansard, ed., The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803 (London: T.C. Hansard), vol. 29: 1285.

<sup>20</sup> Tobin, A Short Rejoinder to the Rev. Mr. Ramsay's Reply, 26.

It was in this context of mutual animosity that the SEAST first began campaigning against the slave trade. In its printed materials and in testimonies from witnesses it brought before parliament, the Society and its associates employed a common set of themes and vocabulary to describe slave owners. As exemplified by Mulligan's eclogues, planters were frequently referred to as "tyrants" and "oppressors." They were also depicted as quick to anger, eager to separate slave families, and motivated solely by their financial bottom-line. Through their failure to provide sufficient food, shelter, and time-off for slaves— not to mention demanding backbreaking labour— they were shown to be culpable for the health problems and high mortality rates that existed on almost all plantations. Even more consistently than planter negligence, abolitionists highlighted how slave owners were prone to meting out severe punishments for minor transgressions. Antislavery campaigners produced countless tales of planters who murdered their slaves with impunity, and stressed the malicious creativity that was put into devising new methods of torture and punishment. Accusing slave owners of "Most nicely calculate[ing] the toil and pain," one abolitionist who had spent time in the West Indies reported that creoles' "ingenuity we must confess,/In finding various methods to distress."<sup>21</sup> Equally as shocking as the severity of slave discipline was the sadistic pleasure that planters were said to derive from inflicting such cruelty. As much as actually committing acts of violence, it was this perverse gratification that proved that slave owners did not share the virtues of humanity and compassion held by their compatriots across the Atlantic.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Captain J. Marjoribanks, *Slavery: An Essay in Verse* (Edinburgh: J. Robertson, 1792), 14-15.

<sup>22</sup> Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the flogging of female slaves. See pages 89-90.

In the majority of antislavery material produced in the 1780s and 1790s, especially in pieces intended for a popular audience, authors made few if any distinctions between slave owners resident in the West Indies and those who lived in Britain. Though it is difficult to determine the precise rate of absenteeism for a given island at a given point in time, scholars agree that the increasing consolidation of estates in the late eighteenth century made profit margins larger, enabling more slave owners than ever before to live comfortably in Britain on the wealth generated by their property overseas.<sup>23</sup> These elite slave owning families typically hired an attorney or overseer to manage the day-to-day operations of their plantations. Small scale and middling planters, however, did not have such a luxury. When abolitionists attacked slave owners as a group, they often implicitly elided planters with hired attorneys and overseers. Predictably, slave owners in Britain in particular protested this conflation. In their view, they were far removed from the onsite work of managing slaves, and should therefore not be subject to the same unjust stereotypes applied to their brethren across the ocean. Such pleas fell largely on deaf ears though, as antislavery campaigners worked hard to portray both resident and absentee slave owners as responsible for the violence and hardships of slavery. Indeed, the indiscriminate nature of anti-planter rhetoric fit into the broader abolitionist argument that geographic distance from the West Indies in no way lessened moral responsibility for what took place there.

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 3-33; David Watts, *The West Indies: Patterns of Development, Cultural and Environmental Change since 1492* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 345-56. Because of high rates of absenteeism, West Indian planters on the whole were wealthier and better politically connected than their North American counterparts. Christer Petley, "Rethinking the fall of the planter class," *Atlantic Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 2012), 2.

Exposés of planter cruelty were important to abolitionists not just for their propaganda value. During the years in which an anti-slave trade bill failed to pass the House of Commons, the villainy of their opponents provided activists with both an explanation for their lack of success and a further legitimization of their cause. When a campaign by the West India lobby helped lead to the defeat of Wilberforce's bill of 1791, the SEAST recorded in its minutes that members considered the decision "a delay rather than a defeat" since they had all along anticipated "the opposition they should have to sustain from Persons trained to a familiarity with the rapine and desolation necessarily attendant on the Slave Trade."<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the depravity of planters afforded ample opportunities for juxtaposition with abolitionists' own probity. Writing to an activist in Manchester, James Phillips boasted that the SEAST had "the happiness to number among our friends men of every religious and political description (excepting the bad ones)."<sup>25</sup> Upon meeting with defeat in 1791, Granville Sharp took solace in the fact that "we number amongst our Friends in Parliament many of the most distinguished Characters in this Kingdom."<sup>26</sup> Such statements cultivated a narrative of moral superiority and common-cause, as well as solidified the idea that slave owners and their champions personified all that was wicked about the slave system.

For their part, slave owners vehemently protested how their "characters had been blackened" and how their "conduct had been greatly calumniated."<sup>27</sup> Absentee planters

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<sup>24</sup> Letter from Granville Sharp, 26 April 1791, "Fair Minute Book, vol. III," Add. Ms. 21254, f.19, BL. Emphasis in original.

<sup>25</sup> James Phillips to James Walker, London, 6 September 1787, Add. Ms. 88955, ff.324-25, BL. While this statement speaks to Phillips' pride in the breadth and quality of support that abolitionism garnered, it also shows how many activists worried about their cause being associated with "religious enthusiasm."

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Granville Sharp, 26 April 1791, "Fair Minute Book, Vol. III," Add. Ms. 21254, f.30, BL

<sup>27</sup> Lord Penrhyn, 9 May 1788, in Hansard, ed., The Parliamentary History of England, vol. 27: 501.



often attributed excesses on their estates to the failure of overseers to implement their humane instructions, thereby attempting to exculpate themselves from the violence of plantation life. Resident planters claimed that they were loyal British subjects who would never tarnish national virtue by presiding over abuses. Indeed, self-identifying as Britons was important for creoles, as most held out hope of one day returning to what they saw their parent country. By sending their children to schools in Britain and by maintaining social, familial, and business contacts in the metropole, even those who remained in the West Indies cast themselves as participants in— not appendages of— British society. Moreover, they conscientiously modeled civic life in the sugar islands after that in Britain, and claimed to embody the manners and mores of their ancestral homeland.<sup>28</sup> From their perspective, character attacks from abolitionists were unfounded, unjust, and inflammatory. As David Lambert has summarized, accusations of moral depravity lent credence to the growing sense among creoles in the latter eighteenth century that both their wealth and way of life under siege.<sup>29</sup>

Many slave owners, resident and absentee, responded to abolitionist propaganda by following Tobin's lead in leveling counter attacks against the supposed uprightness of their opponents. In so doing, they tacitly acknowledged that the slavery debate largely revolved around the reputations of its participants. The most common charge employed against abolitionists was that their humanitarian rhetoric masked hidden motives— that altruistic language was simply a "*boasted* pretext," concealing a desire to ruin the British

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<sup>28</sup> Christer Petley, "Gluttony, excess, and the fall of the planter class in the British Caribbean," *Atlantic Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 2012): 85-106.

<sup>29</sup> Lambert, *White Creole Culture*, see introduction especially.

economy.<sup>30</sup> As a type of fifth column, antislavery advocates were among “the most base of mankind” and “licentious of this country;” they were “ignorant, prejudiced, and inflamed with the spirit of party.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, their arguments were based on emotion, not reason. In contrast to the reputable witnesses testifying in favour of the slave trade at parliamentary hearings— including admirals, prosperous businessmen, and owners of property in the West Indies— antislavery organizers were accused of paying unemployed residents of Liverpool and Bristol to pose as former slave traders and to testify against the traffic.<sup>32</sup> The not-so-subtle goal of slavery apologists in making this suggestion was to cast doubt on the credibility of many abolitionists based on their class background. Much like the SEAST, the West India lobby denigrated the social pedigree of their opponents, and used their opponents’ alleged malfeasance to explain setbacks in their cause, foster group cohesion, and build commitment in the struggle against a foe whose mendacity knew no bounds.

### *The West Indian Other*

The battle over character that James Ramsay sparked, and that remained a central feature of the slave trade debate over the following decade, both built on and reinforced a broader discourse surrounding British West Indians. Namely, slave-owning creoles were frequently portrayed as fundamentally different from metropolitan Britons. As historians have long recognized, encounters with non-European peoples created multiple “others”

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<sup>30</sup> Captain Macarty, *An Appeal to the Candour and Justice of the People of England, in Behalf of the West India Merchants and Planters* (London: J. Debrett, 1792), iv.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58; Marjoribanks, *Slavery: An Essay in Verse*, 4, 3.

<sup>32</sup> The SEAST was very sensitive to this charge, and often reiterated to its agents that it was only able to provide funds for transportation to and from London. The pro-slavery lobby cast this as bribery in disguise. For typical SEAST instructions, see, for example, Samuel Hoare to Thomas Clarkson, 7 July 1787, “Fair Minute Book, vol. I,” Add. Ms. 21254, BL.

against which civilized, white, Christian, and humane Britons defined themselves. Yet the exercise of imperial power also produced a less stable category of other in those individuals of British stock who served the empire overseas. As unease about the violence of imperialism grew in the final decades of the eighteenth century, “othering” onsite agents of empire allowed metropolitans to distance themselves from the most extreme abuses of colonial rule. As Jack Greene has shown, establishing difference involved applying a “language of alterity” to planters, nabobs, and others whose behaviour deviated from metropolitan norms.<sup>33</sup> This discourse emphasized not only the moral gulf that separated Britons at home from those abroad, but also the social and cultural chasm that existed between the center and periphery of empire.

To be sure, othering creoles was not unique to the era of abolitionism. Since their founding, Britain’s New World colonies had been a destination for many of society’s undesirable characters, including criminals, debtors, the poor, and religious deviates. As chapter three explores in greater detail, the colonies had also long been governed by a different set of laws and moral standards than Britain itself. These factors made it easy for most Britons to see slavery as a “colonial severity,” presided over by people whose social pedigree marked them out for such unsavoury employment.<sup>34</sup> In this context, slaveholding reaffirmed existing stereotypes about the character of the colonist, as well as provided further evidence of the vast expanses that separated upright Britons from those engaged in the day-to-day dirty work of running the empire.

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<sup>33</sup> Greene, *Evaluating Empire*, 84-119.

<sup>34</sup> Quotation from Africanus [Rev. William Leigh], *Remarks on the Slave Trade, and the Slavery of the Negroes. In a Series of Letters* (London: J. Phillips, 1788), 59.

Abolitionists tapped into a discourse of otherness in many ways. One subset of the language of alterity they employed, for instance, involved terms signifying deterioration. The laws that permitted slaveholding, like the moral standards of those who held slaves, were described as having “regressed,” “degenerated,” and “reverted” from metropolitan norms; they were “corroded” and “degraded” imitations of the customs and values that existed in Britain. Granville Sharp, for one, claimed that Britons would “insensibly *degenerate* to the same degree of baseness” as West Indian creoles if slavery were permitted on British soil.<sup>35</sup> While such language underscored the various distances between metropole and colony, when used by abolitionists it also reinforced the idea that slavery as an institution belonged to an earlier, less civilized era. Whereas slavery and serfdom had effectively ceased to exist in England since the fourteenth century, their persistence in places such as Russia, Africa, and the New World proved that these regions had not progressed as far along the path of civilizational development as Britain had. Imbedded within descriptions of the geographic gulf that separated slaveholding colonies from the British Isles, therefore, was an implied chronological gulf as well: white societies in the sugar islands had not existed long enough to mature to an advanced state, and it was to be assumed that people and institutions would deteriorate when surrounded by comparatively primitive conditions. As we will soon see, abolitionists argued that slavery was as much a cause as it was a consequence of this corrosion.

Another oft-articulated explanation for the degeneration that characterized West Indians and their communities was climate. By the late eighteenth century, climatological

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<sup>35</sup> Granville Sharp, *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery; or of Admitting the Least Claim of Private Property in the Persons of Men, in England* (London: Benjamin White, 1769), 134. Italics added.

anthropology had attained a quasi-scientific status, as many of Europe's foremost intellectuals (often influenced by the humoral theory of medicine) agreed that tropical heat kept both individuals and whole societies in primitive conditions.<sup>36</sup> They asserted as fact that hot environments produced a "bias to pleasure, and an alienation from serious thought and deep reflection."<sup>37</sup> In myriad ways, temperature was shown to be the root cause of a variety of negative characteristics embodied by residents of the torrid zones. These included laziness and licentiousness, which could quickly give way to anger and violence. Above all, the tropical climate led individuals to privilege the passions over reason.<sup>38</sup> While some commentators noted that being born in the tropics produced these characteristics from a young age, others emphasized the rapidity with which such traits could take hold in adult Europeans near the equator. J.B. Moreton, upon returning to Britain after five years in Jamaica, expressed amazement at how quickly "men from other countries... get inured to the West Indies, how imperceptibly, like wax softened by heat, they melt into their manners and customs." Before long, Moreton claimed that transplanted Europeans became indistinguishable from "children of the sun [Africans]," who enjoy the "revels of Bacchus and Venus, [and] luxuriously and voluptuously spend their days and nights in dissipations." Moreton's evidence that Britons in the West Indies had come to adopt "African manners and customs" underscored how the tropical sun could blur social and cultural distinctions between Europeans and slaves.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 75-87.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Mosely, *A Treatise on Tropical Diseases; and on the Climate of the West Indies* (London: T. Cadell, 1787), 65.

<sup>38</sup> Felicity Nausbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> J.B. Moreton, *West India Customs and Manners: Containing Strictures on the Soil, Cultivation, Produce, Trade, Officers, and Inhabitants: With the Method of Establishing, and Conducting a Sugar Plantation* (London: J. Parsons, 1793), 78. Moreton also argued that the severity with which planters treated their

Both the stock image of the creole and the role of climate in shaping his character are nowhere better illustrated than in Richard Cumberland's 1772 play *The West Indian*. As a piece of fiction and a comedy, the play made no pretense to engage with contemporaneous pseudo-scientific debates about how environment influenced human temperament. Yet the play's value as a source lies precisely in the fact that it was explicitly non-scientific and intended for a popular audience: namely, *The West Indian* shows how axiomatic the association between a warm climate and dissipation was in late eighteenth-century Britain. The play revolves around the misadventures of the young planter Belcour who travels to Britain to reunite with his long-lost father. As a sentimental piece, it portrays Belcour as a comic bumbler instead of a vicious slave owner. His profligacy, haughtiness, materialism, and single-minded pursuit of the first woman he lays eyes on in London are all endearing foibles to be excused on the grounds of his creole origins. As his father explains to his friends, Belcour's "manners, passions and opinions are not as yet assimilated to this climate; he comes amongst you as a new character, an inhabitant of a new world." That Belcour is "wild... as the manner of his country" and "as hot as the soil, the clime, that gave him birth" are forgivable precisely because he recognizes these flaws. "My passions are my masters," he sheepishly admits, "they take me where they will." Later in the play, when he is caught stealing jewels and giving them to the object of his desire, Belcour repents by stating that "I am an idle, dissipated, unthinking fellow, not worth your notice: in short, I am a West-Indian." "You must try me," he pleads, "according to the character of my colony."<sup>40</sup>

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slaves made them equally as "savage," writing that under the tropical sun creoles became "barbarous as hottentots, with savage souls." Ibid., 88.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Cumberland, *The West Indian: A Comedy* (London: R. Bell, 1772), citations on 74, 6, 3, 7, 47.

Belcour is a non-threatening character because as the play progresses his impulsive behaviour gives way to reveal a chivalrous and good-natured young man striving for self-improvement. Once in Britain, old vices are gradually overcome. Belcour's slave-owning past is never mentioned. *The West Indian*, written before colonial slavery became a prominent political issue, is a feel-good story about a man of British stock rediscovering his inner virtues when transplanted to the morally salubrious British Isles. Yet the reverse process—the perceived character deterioration that occurred when Britons went out into the empire—was no laughing matter. Indeed, the effects of the tropical environment on transplanted Britons were a source of much greater anxiety than they were satire. Under the tropical sun, surrounded by men of low moral standards, both the temptations and the opportunities to channel passions toward destructive ends were far greater than when surrounded by the trappings of British society. Even an upright Briton, instructed in British and Christian values since birth, could succumb to his baser desires when removed to a less civilized environment.

This anxiety applied to sojourners in both the West and East Indies. The following advice in a letter from none other than the abolitionist stalwart Granville Sharp to a young lieutenant recently posted to Bengal aptly encapsulates metropolitan concerns. After noting in broad terms that the British presence in India “on the score of morality is surely at a miserable low ebb!,” Sharp proceeds to tell his correspondent that

tho' I have the best opinion of your good sense; and am thoroughly satisfied (from the excellent moral character you bore, before you left England) that your conduct continues to be every way suitable to it, yet the frequent communication you must necessarily have with persons of very opposite principles, as also the general prevalences of corrupt fashions amongst the European Settlers, & the frequent temptations in which the lawless customs of the East will of course involve you,

are altogether such natural means of gradually, & insensibly, perverting good dispositions, & undermining virtue, that the danger of them is sufficiently obvious to justify my anxiety for your welfare

Along with the “general bad example of his brethren,” Sharp cited the environmental conditions of Bengal as a major inducement to vice and an underlying cause of a host of evils. “The Intemperance of the Climate” heightened the sexual desires, for example, leading Britons to “Fornication... [with] young & innocent Female Indians... [who] are subjected to the absolute will of any lascivious, distempered wretch that can afford the purchase money.” Sharp was incredulous that men who committed such acts in India “still call themselves Christians” since they, not unlike West Indian slaveholders, daily violated many of the most basic tenets of the faith.<sup>41</sup>

While Sharp feared that relocation to tropical climes could make Britons abroad cease to be Christian, others questioned whether life on the frontiers of empire could erase their “Britishness” altogether. Could “regression” occur to such an extent that colonials and imperial sojourners would lose the essential elements that made them British? Did this make these individuals *racially* different from metropolitan Britons? In his essay *Of National Characters*, David Hume had claimed that “the same set of manners will follow a nation, and adhere to them over the whole globe.”<sup>42</sup> Certain agents of empire called this into doubt. Further, as Kathleen Wilson has noted, the very notion of race itself was in flux in the final decades of the eighteenth century, as older more fluid understandings of race as a product of culture and bloodlines intersected with newer ideas

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<sup>41</sup> Granville Sharp to Lieutenant Alcock, Bengal, 28 August 1782, in Box 3810, D3549, 13/1/A5, Gloucester Records Office (hereafter GRO). Emphases in original.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in Wilson, The Island Race, 13.



about race as “fixed, inherent difference, articulated through and signified primarily by physical appearance.”<sup>43</sup> In both these understandings of race, colonials were difficult to categorize. Attempts to place them within an increasingly racialized framework of nationhood therefore only highlighted the instability and contingency of Britishness as a category of identity.<sup>44</sup>

Humanitarian critics of empire were among those who took the lead in describing colonials as on the path toward becoming inherently different from other Britons. For those who understood race in terms of shared culture and behaviours, it was avarice more than anything that made onsite agents of empire un-British. As one imperial analyst said of nabobs serving in the East, “every day produces strong indication of great alterations in their manners. The vast fortunes made... have introduced a new species of people.” Another stated that the EIC “brings home every year a sufficient number of a new sort of gentlemen, with new customs, manners, and *principles*.”<sup>45</sup> In the West Indies, it was similarly argued that the single-minded pursuit of wealth “transform[ed] our species” into “beasts of prey... a race degraded,” and that slave owners had become “white creatures in the shape of men.”<sup>46</sup> Surveying Jamaican society, J.B. Moreton reported that “when

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<sup>43</sup> Wilson, *The Island Race*, 11. On the fluidity of race as it related to abolitionism, see also Judith Jennings, “A Trio of Talented Women: Abolition, Gender, and Political Participation, 1780-91,” *Slavery & Abolition* 26, no. 1 (2005), notes 32 and 33.

<sup>44</sup> In the context of slavery and antislavery, I use “Britishness” instead of “Englishness” or “Scottishness.” While English and Scottish commentators most often identified as either English or Scottish, the arguments about race, identity, and national values that permeated abolitionist discourse differed little in England and Scotland. I therefore use “Britishness” to signal a common strand of argument, even though the term would be inappropriate in other studies about ethnicity and identity in this period.

<sup>45</sup> William Guthrie, *A New Geographical, Historical, and Commercial Grammar; and Present State of the Several Kingdoms of the World* (London: J. Knox, 1770), 119; Chim-Quon-Se, “Remarks on the Commutation Act,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 57 (Sept. 1786): 750-51. Emphasis in original.

<sup>46</sup> Niel Douglas, *Thoughts on Modern Politics* (London: Button, 1793), 37; “Junius,” “An Expostulatory Address to the People of England on the late memorable Decision against the Abolition of the Slave trade,” in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 61 (June 1791): 537-38.

deprived of the advantage of an European education,” creoles become “negroefied, aukward, ignorant guegaws.” Moreton’s use of the term “negroefied” in this context is telling, as it suggests that “British” West Indians frequently transgressed what should have been clear categories of difference between free whites and enslaved blacks. According to Moreton, these daily cultural transgressions led to a gradual yet steady physical deterioration among the white population, the end result of which was a community of individuals “of a sickly, pale, yellowish complexion, meager, weak, and emaciated.”<sup>47</sup> While this skin pigmentation was the opposite of that implied by the term “negroefied,” the overall emphasis on physical degeneration was the same.

To be sure, questions of race were more central to slavery debates in the mid-to-late nineteenth century when scientific racism enjoyed significant cultural prominence. However, the use of explicitly racial language by metropolitans to describe slave-owning creoles as early as the 1780s indicates that the concept of biological regression was a part of discussions about slavery even in this period, despite the fact that the actual “science” of race was only starting to develop.<sup>48</sup> From a strictly biological perspective, the most obvious source of racial decline in the West Indies was miscegenation. Already by the 1770s, the absentee planter Edward Long was warning of the dangers that interracial sexual relationships posed to white society in the sugar islands. During the famous Somersett Case of 1772, Granville Sharp used Long’s writings against him, arguing that

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<sup>47</sup> Moreton, *West India Customs and Manners*, 104.

<sup>48</sup> In his excellent book *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), Seymour Drescher shows how the rising cultural prestige of science intersected with slavery debates from the 1790s to the 1850s. My discussion here is influenced by Drescher’s work in finding antecedents to the hard scientific racism of the latter nineteenth century in the era of abolition.

allowing slave owners to bring their slaves into Britain could lead to a dilution of racial purity. Many metropolitans joined Sharp in looking down on what he described in the margins of one of Long's tracts as widespread "contamination among Creoles."<sup>49</sup>

According to others, physical deterioration could also occur simply through the process of leaving Europe and entering into the unwholesome frontiers of empire. In suggesting this possibility, some theorists drew on the works of Enlightenment thinkers who saw in plants and animals evidence of ideal versions of species in some regions and poor imitations in others. Accounting for variation in the natural world was a major preoccupation of the age, and the idea that environmental conditions could trigger deterioration or amelioration offered a useful way to explain both the differences and similarities among members of the same species. Applied to humans, this theory suggested that the biological composition of individuals could be corrupted or improved as they moved throughout the world. "Buffon says that European animals degenerate across the Atlantic," wrote Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, "perhaps its migrating inhabitants may be in the same predicament."<sup>50</sup> Buffon's theories provided a corollary to Raynal's claim that Europeans seeking riches in the Americas transmuted into "domestic tigers, again let loose in the woods... seized with the thirst of blood."<sup>51</sup> In turn, Raynal's writings about how Europeans morally regressed to a primitive state when abroad

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<sup>49</sup> Citation part of Sharp's marginalia in Edward Long, Candid Reflections Upon the Judgement Lately Awarded by the Court of King's Bench, in Westminster-Hall, on What Is Commonly Called the Negroe-Cause (London: T. Lowndes, 1772), 49, located in the Beinecke Library (hereafter Beinecke), Yale University, Ntg45 G5 772L. For more on this document, see page 196.

<sup>50</sup> Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, Berkeley Square, 13 May 1780, in Horace Walpole, The Correspondence of Horace Walpole, ed. W.S. Lewis, vol. 25 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-1983): 47-49.

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Ralph Heathcote, Sylva; or, the Wood: Being a Collection of Anecdotes, Dissertations, Characters,... And Other Little Things (London: T. Payne, 1786), 135-45.

influenced a number of British commentators and, as we saw in the previous chapter, provided a powerful countercurrent to ideologies of imperial expansion. In a 1786 tract, the cleric Ralph Heathcote specifically cited Raynal in arguing that when “an Englishman, a Dutchman, a Frenchman, a Spaniard, or a Portuguese, sets out to the Indies, in order to make a fortune... When he hath crossed the Line, or perhaps before, he ceases to be any of these, or indeed of any country: in short, he ceases to be human.”<sup>52</sup>

The extent to which suggestions of racial degeneration reflected deeply held convictions or were simply used as a rhetorical strategy to underscore difference is unclear. What is clear, however, is the willingness of many metropolitans to employ such an extreme version of the language of alterity to describe individuals of British ancestry living overseas. As with attitudes toward slaveholding and empire more generally, the American War was a catalyst on this front, causing the majority of Britons to see colonists across the Atlantic as foreigners as opposed to fellow nationals.<sup>53</sup> Whereas colonists invoked race as a category of belonging in order to buttress their claims to inclusion within the British nation, many of their opponents in Britain rejected their requests for political participation based on consanguinity. By “the practice of calling themselves *Englishmen*, and us *brethren*,” complained the pro-government pamphleteer Alan Ramsay, at the outbreak of fighting, “they [American colonists] have artfully persuaded the people of England that they are their fellow-citizens, and Englishmen like

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 124-25.

<sup>53</sup> See Stephen Conway, “From Fellow-Nationals to Foreigners: British Perspectives on the Americans, Circa 1739-1783,” *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 59, no. 1 (Jan. 2002): 65-100 and Dror Wahrman, “The English Problem of Identity in the American Revolution,” *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 4 (Oct. 2001): 1236-62. Jack Greene notes that “othering” colonists was also a defining feature of antagonist rhetoric in the lead up the American War. See Jack. P. Greene, “Empire and Identity from the Glorious Revolution to the American Revolution,” in Peter Marshall, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 224-25.

themselves.”<sup>54</sup> This discourse remained prominent in the years immediately following American independence, and helped reinforce both the differentiation and vilification of West Indian slave owners that was becoming increasingly common as opposition to the slave trade mandated.

For their part, West Indians vehemently protested insinuations that they were anything but fully British. The vast majority held out hope of one day being able to remove to Britain as an absentee estate owner, and therefore worked to maintain strong business and social ties with the mother country. During debates over the slave trade, the racial “othering” of creoles by some abolitionists was cited as proof that opponents of slavery were motivated by a malicious desire to destroy the planter class. Based on his reading of abolitionist rhetoric, one defender of the plantocracy asked “Would not a foreigner, unacquainted with our country, conclude that those WEST INDIA MERCHANTS and PLANTERS are a distinct race of being, who had assumed the British character only to disgrace it?” He went on to argue that the “virulent persecution” of slave owners was unjust since they were “brothers of our blood. Do we not, in the face of each of them, discern kindred features? Are they not BRITONS, or the descendants of BRITONS?”<sup>55</sup> For planters, being recognized as British was also important because of the political rights the status brought with it. As one pro-slavery MP told the House of Commons, West Indians were “our brethren” and “SONS OF BRITONS,” and therefore deserved the same rights as British subjects everywhere. Crucially, these included the freedom to buy and sell property. To deny them this basic right of the freeborn Briton

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<sup>54</sup> Cited in Wahrman, “The English Problem of Identity in the American Revolution,” 1255.

<sup>55</sup> Macarty, *An Appeal to the Candour and Justice*, v-vi.

would be a “breach of the compact that ties colonies to the Mother Country,” and would be met in the West Indies “with universal resistance.”<sup>56</sup>

### ***Slaveholding: The Root of Difference and Degeneracy***

As chapter four will explore in greater detail, threats such as the one above echoed the warnings of American colonists in the lead up to the revolutionary war. For Britons in the late 1780s and early 1790s, talk of “universal resistance” would have served as a powerful reminder of the possible consequences of alienating the West Indian elite and of “othering” them to too great an extent. Threats of confrontation also underscored the most significant problem with casting planters as un-British degenerates: namely, such portrayals risked isolating precisely the population whose cooperation was needed to keep the sugar islands loyal to Britain and to ameliorate the condition of those already enslaved. Indeed, while a number of antislavery campaigners vilified creoles, many also demonstrated nuance in their critiques, careful not to paint all slave owners with the same brush. This was particularly true of those abolitionists who sat in parliament, and those who in other ways were involved in setting imperial policy. Whereas many of the individuals cited thus far in this chapter wrote for a popular audience, including Touchstone, Cumberland, and Moreton, others such as Wilberforce and his coterie aimed primarily at influencing policy makers. For these more politically influential figures, it was important not to overtly undermine efforts to cast abolition as a potentially co-operative endeavour between metropole and colonies that served the economic interests of both.

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<sup>56</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 36-38.

To accomplish the goal of reforming slavery without alienating the West Indian plantocracy, prominent abolitionists had to do two things simultaneously. First, they had to explain the perceived degeneracy of West Indians to a domestic audience. This involved accepting (and in many ways building upon) the caricature of the depraved slave owner that popular writers propounded. Indeed, it is revealing that almost all strands of metropolitan abolitionism accepted to some degree the premise of creole immorality. Second, they had to offer West Indians a way to change the growing perception that both they and their societies were fundamentally different from metropolitans and metropolitan society. If West Indians had regressed vis-à-vis domestic Britons, abolitionists who sought cooperation over confrontation needed to offer slave owners a path to reformation and redemption. This path would have to be independent of climatic and biological factors, and would have to offer creoles reasonable hope of being widely recognized as equal participants in Britain's political community.

Many antislavery activists worked to achieve these twin objectives by identifying slavery itself as the biggest single cause of creole depravity and degeneration. In their view, slaveholding did not accentuate existing differences between metropole and colony. Instead, it explained them. Though often drawing on ancillary concepts such as environmental determinism and racial transmutation, most abolitionists singled-out the owning of slaves as the chief determinant of the creole character. It was not an innate greed, harshness, or penchant for violence that led West Indians into slaveholding, but rather their status as slaveholders that led to their greed, harshness, and penchant for violence. On the one hand, this logic produced a direct, causal association between West

Indian identity and slaveholding. Thanks largely to abolitionist discourse, in the final decades of the eighteenth century the caricature of the prodigal creole started giving way to that of the violent slave owner; a play such as Cumberland's *The West Indian* (1771), in which slavery was conspicuously absent, could not have been written fifteen years later. On the other hand, pinpointing slavery as *the* reason for debasement— for the countless ways in which creoles and their communities failed to live up to metropolitan standards— offered a clear and simple way to remedy the situation: for the moral and cultural standards of the West Indies to improve, the Atlantic slave system would have to be eliminated. By arguing that the very nature of slavery corrupted both the enslaved and the enslaver, abolitionists deliberately cast ending slavery as an act of liberation for master and slave alike.

The ways in which slavery was held responsible for creole immorality can be seen clearly in the writings of James Ramsay. Ramsay's close friendship with Wilberforce and other influential abolitionists, combined with his own experiences over nearly two decades in the West Indies, made him acutely aware of the imperial politics at play in debates about slavery and the slave trade. For all his vitriol against the planter class, Ramsay maintained both publicly and privately that "it is the circumstances of their being masters, and being possessed of unrefined power" that led initially "respectable" men to treat their slaves cruelly. "Whatever there is generally amiss in the conduct of masters to their slaves," he wrote in his 1784 *Essay*, "arises not so much from any particular depravity in them as men, as from the arbitrary unnatural relation that exists between them and their wretched dependents; the effects of which, neither sentiment nor morality



can at all times prevent.”<sup>57</sup> In future writings, Ramsay stated even more clearly that the slave owner himself was not only a victimizer, but also a victim of an inherently dehumanizing relationship. As the possessor of “arbitrary, or undefined power” over the life, labour, and body of other persons, the master was daily tempted by his carnal and often violent passions. Without forceful restraints or consequences for his actions, it was a constant battle to deny giving into these “dangerous” instincts.<sup>58</sup> As Ramsay saw it, the chances were slim that the slaveholder could avoid being ruled by the baser aspects of his nature, which civilized European society helped other men combat. Years of bearing witness to slavery firsthand led Ramsay to conclude that the near limitless power of masters on their plantations “ever has been, and ever will be abused, and with as much hurt to the tyrant, as of suffering to the slave. Human nature was not originally intended to support either the one, or the other character.”<sup>59</sup>

In making this statement, Ramsay was arguing from the longstanding premise that, as he put it, “undefined power has charms too alluring to be resigned by any, who

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<sup>57</sup> Ramsay to The Monthly Review, 20 February 1786 in Add. Ms. 27621, f.183, BL; Ramsay, An Essay, 69.

<sup>58</sup> Ramsay cited in John Samuel Smith, A Letter from Captain J.S. Smith to the Reverend Mr. Hill on the State of the Negroe Slaves (London: J. Phillips, 1786), 25.

<sup>59</sup> The idea that slavery degrades the master as well as the slave has a long history in Western thought. In his Poetics, Aristotle pointed out that a master cannot exist without being recognized by a slave, and that the essence of his power and position were therefore dependent. A master, by definition, was not an autonomous human being. Hegel made a similar claim two millennia later. Like Ramsay, Thomas Clarkson combined this existential argument with more current arguments about planter brutality by writing in his *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* that “if the unhappy slave is in an unfortunate situation, so is the tyrant who holds him. Action and Reaction are equal to each other, as well in the moral as in the natural world. You cannot exercise an improper dominion over a fellow-creature, but by a wise ordering of Providence you must necessarily injure yourself.” Later in the *History*, Clarkson again echoed Ramsay’s *Essay* by asserting that “slavery is bad for the master, because he has an unlimited power over his slaves, and insensibly forgets all moral virtues, and becomes cruel, fierce, and voluptuous.” Clarkson, History, vol. 1: 21 and 144.

find themselves in possession of it.”<sup>60</sup> Since ancient times, philosophers had contended that it was human nature to want to acquire and then exercise authority over other human beings. This belief persisted well into the eighteenth century. As recently as 1776, Adam Smith had written in the *Wealth of Nations* that “the pride of man makes him love to domineer.”<sup>61</sup> This assumed inclination helped account not only for the severity of the Atlantic slave system, but also for a whole host of other imperial abuses. “It was natural,” Edmund Burke averred in a speech denouncing British conduct in India, “for men in power to feel an inclination to exercise that power tyrannically, and even to the enslaving of those subordinate to their authority.” Without the restraining influence of metropolitan laws, Burke feared that “those in power might carry into execution whatever plans of slavery they chose upon the poor unfortunate natives with impunity.”<sup>62</sup> In the minds of abolitionists like Ramsay, a “love of power” made it extremely likely that “tyranny” would ensue in any situation “where man was delivered over to man.”<sup>63</sup> That both legal requirements and social pressure to treat slaves humanely were weak in the West Indies made abuses even more probable.

As an Anglican minister drawn to evangelical Christianity, Ramsay was also influenced by growing theological opposition to the seemingly unbounded power of slave owners. Like other Anglican Evangelicals such as Wilberforce, Hannah More, and other members of the Clapham Sect, Ramsay celebrated social hierarchies as part of the moral

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<sup>60</sup> Ramsay, *An Essay*, 8.

<sup>61</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776), book III, ch. ii.

<sup>62</sup> Burke, 19 March 1787, cited in *The India Courier*, (1787), 226-27. In this context, Burke was referring to a metaphorical type of slavery in which British nabobs exploited the labour and wealth of East Indians.

<sup>63</sup> “love of power” is Ramsay’s phrase in Ramsay, *An Essay*, 3. Other citations in Samuel Whitbread, 2 April 1792, Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 29: 1101.

order of the universe. “There is a natural inequality... which prevails among men,” ran the opening line of the *Essay*, “that fits them for society, enables them to... [unite] into a firm bond of union.” Yet, as Ramsay proceeded to write in broaching the topic of slavery, the “situation for which nature intended” for individuals was “prescribed by the Author of nature: for he is the only rightful legislator; and human regulations are in a moral sense binding, only when they can be traced... to this pure origin.”<sup>64</sup> For an increasing number of evangelicals in the late eighteenth century, it was becoming difficult to trace slavery to a divine provenance. In contrast to divinely sanctioned, natural hierarchies—lord/labourer, man/woman, parent/child, and others—chattel slavery was void of all reciprocal bonds of attachment: the master had no social or moral obligation to promote the welfare of his slaves. This absence of a sense of responsibility meant that slave owners had few internal checks to prevent them from inflicting brutal suffering on those whom they regarded only as their property. In short, the planter’s power on his plantation was divorced from nearly all mechanisms of social and psychological control. As Ramsay later put it, “Planters as men are respectable. It is the circumstance of their being masters, and being possessed of undefined power, which one sees is not quite safe.”<sup>65</sup>

Most abolitionists believed that the inclination to beat and abuse slaves increased in proportion to the length of time an individual was exposed to plantation life. While it might have been an inborn “love of power” that led those engaged in slavery to initially treat slaves with severity, it was daily participation in the institution that perpetuated such cruelty. “The habitual exercise of that arbitrary dominion which the master possesses

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<sup>64</sup> Ramsay, *An Essay*, 1, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Ramsay to *The Monthly Review*, 20 February 1786, in Add. Ms. 27621, f.184, BL.

over the slave,” wrote the Quaker publisher James Phillips, “communicates an involuntary bias, even to well disposed minds, against the claims of humanity.” Thomas Clarkson agreed, stating that “where men are habituated to a system of severity, they become *wantonly cruel*.”<sup>66</sup> One striking feature of this discourse, which highlights the depth of the internal transformation wrought by slavery, is the frequent invocation of metaphors of the heart. While Phillips wrote abstractly about how slavery “corrupts the human heart,” others wrote more directly about how slavery “changes the hearts of those concerned in it,” how “in time their hearts became callous,” and how overseeing slaves steadily “hardened their hearts.”<sup>67</sup> Each of these authors shared the view that the routinized violence inherent in slaveholding was self-perpetuating, and that even previously upright men could quickly become inured to the brutality of the slave system.

By attributing cruelty to both habit and an immoral environment, abolitionists offered a cogent explanation for the wanton behaviour of Britons abroad. Though stopping short of fully exculpating slave owners, they also provided a paradigm for condemning creole depravity without treating it as a permanent condition. West Indians were among the “most amiable, worthy, and benevolent” members of the empire, claimed Granville Sharp. “Had they not been prejudiced by Education, long usage, and custom [that had “perverted” their views on slavery],” he was sure they would support

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<sup>66</sup> Phillips preface in Stephen Fuller, Notes on the Two Reports from the Committee of the Honourable House of Assembly in Jamaica, Appointed to Examine into, and to Report to the House, the Allegations and Charges Contained in the Several Petitions Which Have Been Presented to the British House of Commons, on the Subject of the Slave Trade, and the Treatment of the Negroes (London: J. Phillips, 1789), i; Thomas Clarkson, An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, (London: J. Phillips, 1786), 97.

<sup>67</sup> Phillips preface in Fuller, Notes on Reports from Jamaica, ii; P.W. Hall, Thoughts and Inquiry on the Principles and Tenor of the Revealed and Supreme Law, Shewing the Utter Inconsistency and Injustice of Our Penal Statutes, and the Illicit Traffic... Of Modern Slavery... With Some Grounds of a Plan for Abolishing the Same (London: J. Ridgway, 1792), 179; Moreton, West India Customs and Manners, 81.

abolition.<sup>68</sup> An editor of *The Critical Review* encapsulated the dual portrayal of “our West-Indian planters” even more laconically by describing them as once upright Britons “in whom the spark of humanity is not completely extinguished.”<sup>69</sup> Though some took a black-and-white approach to condemning the planter class of the West Indies, most abolitionists recognized that success required offering both explanations and solutions for anxieties about national character that were raised by slaveholders. The narrative of reformability they presented to planters and metropolitans alike offered just that.

### ***Slave Traders: The Abusers and Abused***

If many abolitionists hedged their critiques of West Indians who owned slaves, they generally did not show the same restraint in condemning individuals involved in the purchase and transportation of Africans across the Atlantic. Unlike creole slaveholders, slave traders as a group lacked political clout; while some captains and officers came from well-connected merchant families, the vast majority belonged to what John Newton termed “the refuse and dregs of the Nation.”<sup>70</sup> They included, among others, drunkards, debtors, runaways, the destitute, and those on the lam. Due to the severity of the “African trade” and its high mortality, service aboard a Guineaman was most often a last resort for seamen or aspiring seaman who had few other options. Estimating that the average officer or skilled worker made three voyages, and that the average sailor made one and a half voyages throughout his slaving career, Marcus Rediker calculates that almost a

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<sup>68</sup> Sharp, “An Address to the Colonial Assemblies of the several West India Islands but more particularly to that of Jamaica,” 8 March 1797, in box 3826, 13/3/55, GRO.

<sup>69</sup> Anonymous, *The Critical Review* 64 (1787): 149.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 164.

quarter of a million Britons would have worked in the slave trade prior to 1807.<sup>71</sup>

Collectively, these men—arguably the quintessential imperial citizens, because of the frequency and breadth of their travels—made Britain the world’s foremost slave trading nation by the latter eighteenth century. To abolitionists, they also provided clear evidence of the destructive effects of slavery on the enslaved and enslavers alike.

Portrayals of slave traders were more unambiguously negative than those of planters not just because of the low social standing of the majority of those engaged in the traffic. Plying the waters of the Atlantic and the African coast, slave dealers were more mobile—and therefore more liminal figures—than most slave owners. They could not by definition be “absentee” as the wealthiest of planters were, and the slave ship was even more removed from European society and institutions than West Indian estates. According to many abolitionists, this isolation made the violence that took place aboard the slave ship more severe than that which occurred on the plantation. In addition to the repertoire of torture instruments used by planters, slave traders employed devices such as thumbscrews and the *speculum oris*—the latter used to force-feed uncooperative slaves at mealtimes. Whereas a simple rope or cane was most frequently used to flog slaves on land, at sea the infamous cat o’ nine tails was the tool of choice.<sup>72</sup> The conditions aboard ships during the Middle Passage were similarly appalling, with hundreds of slaves chained together below deck and the stench of feces, vomit, and death hanging in the stagnant air. The threat of a slave insurrection was a daily fear. Indeed, it is not hard to see why contemporaries viewed those responsible for overseeing this operation as

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., chapter five.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Clarkson carried these and other instruments for punishing slaves in a chest as he travelled Britain on the assumption that simply seeing the items would help galvanize opposition to the trade.

engaged in the most sordid and cruel component of the entire slave system.

Despite the fact that slave trading was regarded as even more base than slave owning, abolitionists employed many of the same tropes and arguments in their portrayals of each profession. As with planters, sailors aboard slave vessels were depicted as culturally and morally degenerating in proportion to their distance from Europe. While this regression applied to all those who plied the seas (sea culture in the eighteenth century not being known for its wholesomeness), it was especially true of those engaged in the slave trade, where lengthy voyages removed seamen from the restraints of civil society for longer than in most other trades. Recalling his own experience working aboard a slave ship as a youth, the actor and author James Field Stanfield emphasized how “the savage hand” and “rapacious av’rice” that characterized the “floating dungeon” only existed “far from fair freedom’s blissful regions.”<sup>73</sup> When the vessel was still near the British Isles, and when there was still a possibility of returning to port due to ill weather, Stanfield noted that

the Captain and officers appears [sic] like that which is the *continual* practice in every other employ. But as soon as they are fairly out at sea, and there is no moral possibility of desertion, or application for justice, then the scene is shift. Their ration of provisions is shortened to the very verge of famine; their allowance of water lessened to the extreme of existence; nothing but incessant labour, a burning climate, unremitting cruelty, and every species of oppression is before them.<sup>74</sup>

The moral deterioration continued apace the further the ship sailed from Britain, and Stanfield reported that “the moment a Guinea captain comes in sight of this shore [the

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<sup>73</sup> James Field Stanfield, *The Guinea Voyage. A Poem* (London: James Phillips, 1789), 13, 26, 10.

<sup>74</sup> James Field Stanfield, *Observations on a Guinea Voyage* (London: James Phillips, 1788), 10.

African coast], the Demon cruelty seems to fix his residence within him.”<sup>75</sup> Even more so than the plantation owner, the slave captain ran his dominion like a petty tyrant, “without fear of being answerable for the abuse of authority.”<sup>76</sup> Stanfield’s memoirs were only one of many testimonials about how captains in particular were not “the same thing sea a shore [sic].”<sup>77</sup> Like similar eyewitness accounts, Stanfields’ suggested to a domestic audience not only that the slave voyage was a transformative experience (not for the better), but that a completely different set of laws and social mores governed Britons abroad than Britons at home.

Like slave owners, slave traders were believed to start becoming inured to the violence and ruthlessness of the slave industry upon their first exposure to it. As William Jones, a mate on three slaving voyages, explained to the House of Commons committee investigating the trade, “the captains of the guineamen are tolerable on their first sailing; their cruelty begins to show itself on their arrival upon the coast, but after they have been there a little time it has no bounds.”<sup>78</sup> The reformer Percival Stockdale, whose knowledge of the slave trade came to him secondhand, echoed Jones’ comments by writing that the slave trade “shows how astonishingly (were it not usual) the human mind may be corrupted, and stupefied, by selfishness; by habit, and prejudice; and by power.”<sup>79</sup> In his influential tract *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, John Newton expounded upon

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 23

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 23-24. As John Newton put it in a letter to his wife during his first voyage as captain, “I am absolute in my small dominions... as any potentate in Europe.” John Newton, *Letters to a Wife* (London: J. Johnson, 1793), 110

<sup>77</sup> Quotation from the sailors Silas Todd and William Butterworth in Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 202.

<sup>78</sup> Testimony of William Jones in Sheila Lambert, ed., *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, vol. 69 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1975): 138.

<sup>79</sup> Percival Stockdale, *A Letter from Percival Stockdale to Granville Sharp, Esq., Suggested to the Author by the Present Insurrection of the Negroes in the Island of St. Domingue* (London: L. Pennington, 1791), 4.



this theme at length. As a slave-ship captain turned Evangelical clergyman, Newton was deeply concerned with “the dreadful effects of this trade, upon the minds of those who are engaged in it.” Participation in the slave trade, he argued, had a “direct tendency to efface the moral sense . . . to rob the heart of every gentle and humane disposition.” This attenuation of empathy was “interwoven together” with the abuse of slaves, since it was only by having “imbibe[d] a spirit of ferociousness, and savage insensibility” that seamen were able to commit acts “of which human nature, . . . is not, ordinarily, capable.” The slave trade, in short, perpetuated a cycle of cruelty: it inured slave traders to suffering and violence, which in turn increased the likelihood of them inflicting suffering and violence on others. Underscoring how a constant proximity to abuse could alter one’s moral compass, Newton added that such inhumane acts were committed by “men, who, once, were no more destitute of the milk of humane kindness, than ourselves.”<sup>80</sup>

The acts of violence to which Newton was referring were diverse, but they were all brutal and could all be inflicted capriciously by the captain, officers, or, in certain situations, the crews of slave ships. In addition to the more quotidian, systemic forms of violence against slaves—such as being chained below deck, served meager rations, and kept in unsanitary conditions—physical torture was employed as a punishment for disobedience, real or perceived. Along with the cat o’ nine tails, thumbscrews were used to extract confessions from slaves when insurrectionary plans were suspected. Stories of captains devising maliciously creative means of inflicting pain on their cargo were a staple of abolitionist testimonies before parliament. Often the same accounts would

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<sup>80</sup> John Newton, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* (London: J. Buckland, 1788), 8, 13, 14, 17–18, 19.

appear in antislavery tracts a few months later. Like reports from the West Indies, descriptions of the abuse of slave women and “the wanton lust and unrestrained licentiousness of the crew” of slave ships were especially shocking.<sup>81</sup> Not only was the flogging of female slaves viewed as lecherous and immoral, but it was widely reported that the captain and officers would mentally divide up the “prey” (a term also used by Mulligan) when women first came aboard. Sexual license, according to Newton, was “only reserved until opportunity offers.”<sup>82</sup> Recalling an incident “too atrocious and bloody to be passed over in silence,” Stanfield told his readers about the rape of “an unfortunate female slave” by his former captain. Chillingly, Stanfield estimated that the victim was “of the age of eight or nine.”<sup>83</sup>

Testimonials by those with firsthand knowledge of slave ships, such as the ones provided by Newton and Stanfield, confirmed what most Britons suspected and what abolitionists knew for certain: as Thomas Clarkson put it, that the African trade “was, in short, one mass of iniquity from the beginning to the end.”<sup>84</sup> By relating their personal experiences, former participants in the trade leant both legitimacy and poignancy to this claim. In so doing, they also drew attention to how far the British character could degenerate on the edges of empire. Interestingly, both Newton and Stanfield underscored this regression by contrasting the morality of British slave dealers with that of their captives, as well as by inverting stereotypes applied to each. In *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, for instance, Newton used the term “white Savages” to describe

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<sup>81</sup> Africanus, *Remarks on the Slave Trade*, 46.

<sup>82</sup> “prey” cited in Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 16. “only reserved” cited in Newton, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, 20.

<sup>83</sup> Stanfield, *Observations*, 33.

<sup>84</sup> Clarkson, *The History*, vol. 1: 326.

slave traders.<sup>85</sup> For most eighteenth-century Britons, the concept of a “white savage” would have been disorientating: “savagery” was a characteristic long associated with underdeveloped and non-Christian peoples. Further, Newton emphasized that instead of spreading civilized values, British traders “had rather a bad than a good influence upon their [Africans’] morals,” and that the peoples they encountered “are generally worse in their conduct in proportion to their acquaintance with us.”<sup>86</sup> By referring to slave traders and their impact in this way, Newton inverted the idealized image of the virtuous Briton with the heathen, uncivilized African. The reversal called into question both British moral superiority and the categories of difference between Britons and indigenous peoples that were used to justify imperial expansion.

James Field Stanfield likewise contrasted metropolitan ideals with the reality of the slave trade by implying that slave traders were more unethical than their captives and the indigenous slave collectors with whom they dealt. In his experience, it was Britons, not Africans, who displayed a “savage mind” and “savage hand.”<sup>87</sup> Stanfield used colour analogies and descriptors to turn stereotypes further on their head: the “tyrant-whites” and “trech’rous *Whites*” had a “black design” and were filled with “the dark power of

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<sup>85</sup> Newton, Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade, 20. Others also used the term “white savage” to describe seamen engaged in the slave trade. See Swaminathan, Debating the Slave Trade, 106.

<sup>86</sup> The theme of Africans being more moral than Europeans runs throughout Newton’s advocacy against the slave trade. He expressed this inversion perhaps most clearly (and repeatedly) in his testimony before the House of Commons committee in May 1790. See Newton’s testimony in Lambert, ed., House of Commons Sessional Papers, vol. 73: 137-49.

<sup>87</sup> Stanfield, The Guinea Voyage, 16, 13. This inversion is also highlighted by Percival Stockdale, who wrote that “by our very feeling, and reflecting countrymen, they [Africans] are termed savages... But they are the savages, who, precipitated by rapacity, destroy, and tear to pieces, their fellow-creatures.” “*We* are (to speak properly) the savages; the Africans act like *men*.” Stockdale, A Letter from Percival Stockdale to Granville Sharp, x, 22.

savage rigour.”<sup>88</sup> In describing British seamen this way, Stanfield was employing a common abolitionist trope of characterizing slave traders as more “morally black” than the darker-skinned Africans they purchased and transported. As one anonymous poet put it, slaves were abused by “their blacker foes”; they, by contrast, were of the “purest white.” In the words of another poet, “black crimes in this vile trade” were committed by “beast of prey, with fair complexion’s hue.”<sup>89</sup> Ending the slave trade, abolitionists pointed out, would end this blurring of racial boundaries.

The abolitionist strategy of inversion rested not only on assumptions about European depravity abroad. It also drew on the notion that Africans were peaceable, simple peoples who were uncorrupted by contact with outsiders— in the expression of the time, that they were “noble savages.” Such ideas are evident in a wide variety of abolitionist literature, including Mulligan’s slavery eclogues, and lay bare the ethnocentrism of the majority of antislavery advocates. Nonetheless, they were much more favourable towards slaves and targets of enslavement than depictions advanced by slavery apologists. Africans, according to John Wesley, were “far from being the stupid, senseless, brutish, lazy barbarians, the fierce cruel, perfidious Savages they have been described.” Instead, he claimed that “Whites, not Blacks, are without natural affection.”<sup>90</sup> The idea that non-Europeans were more estimable than Britons engaged in the onsite work of empire was also a theme of Burke’s prosecution of Hastings, as the former

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<sup>88</sup> Stanfield, *The Guinea Voyage*, 28, 29, 6, 10.

<sup>89</sup> Anonymous, *The Slave Trade; a Poem* (London: J. Desmond, 1793), 19; Douglas, *Thoughts on Modern Politics*, 24.

<sup>90</sup> John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (London: R. Hawes, 1774), 16-20. Wesley proceeded to suggest that Europeans should “leave *England* and *France* to seek genuine honesty in *Benin*, *Congo*, or *Angola*.” Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, 17.

maintained throughout the proceedings that Indians' "morality is equal to ours," if not superior. It was Hastings and his associates, Charles Fox claimed, whose moral standards represented an "inversion of European reasonings."<sup>91</sup>

In addition to race and morality, the slave ship was a site of many other types of inversions that raised doubts about dichotomous metropolitan ideals: Were class distinctions between officers and sailors tightened or loosened at sea? Did British law or maritime custom govern captains' behaviour? Were favoured slaves treated better than out-of-favour seamen?<sup>92</sup> This final question in particular was a source of much debate. Far from projecting British superiority and power abroad, the violence, deprivations, and harsh discipline that captains directed towards their own crews suggested that ordinary sailors were of no more value than the slaves they kept captive. Though the ill treatment of seamen was widely known throughout the slave trade era, this theme only emerged as a major component of the abolitionist case in summer 1788 with the publication of Clarkson's *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade*. Based on hundreds of interviews with former sailors in Liverpool, Bristol, and London, Clarkson provided detailed accounts of the hardships experienced by seamen and the inhumane and unhealthy conditions in which they lived. Considering this environment, he remarked that "it would be almost a miracle, if they, who were thus employed in it [the slave trade],

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<sup>91</sup> First citation in James Conniff, "Burke and India: The Failure of the Theory of Trusteeship," *Political Research Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (June 1993): 302; second citation in Fox, 9 June 1790, in E.A. Bond, ed., *Speeches of the Managers and Counsel in the Trial of Warren Hastings* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts, 1861), vol. 2: 422.

<sup>92</sup> For historians, another interesting question is where did homosocial relations end and homosexual relations begin among the all male crew? Kathleen Wilson explores this topic in "Thinking back: gender and misrecognition aboard the Cook voyages," in Wilson, *A New Imperial History*, 345-62.

were not rather to become monsters, than to continue to be men.”<sup>93</sup> During his trip, Clarkson also undertook an extensive examination of ship muster rolls in order to prove that mortality rates in the slave trade were higher than in other branches of maritime commerce. The meticulousness of his research made his findings irrefutable: one-quarter of seamen sailing from Bristol perished in the trade; one-fifth from Liverpool died; the mortality rate for those from London lay between these ratios. In 1786 alone, 1125 seamen perished either in transit or on the African coast, and 1470 were discharged or deserted in the West Indies once their services were no longer needed. Overall, Clarkson calculated that the slave trade was more than twice as deadly to Britons as any other oceanic commerce. Far from being the “nursery of seamen,” as the pro-slavery lobby claimed, the slave ship was actually their “graveyard.”<sup>94</sup>

The stories and mortality rates reported by Clarkson corresponded to those recounted by slave traders who the SEAST arranged to appear before parliamentary committees. As witness after witness testified, the severities inflicted on common sailors differed little from those inflicted on slaves. Punishments, for instance, included being placed in irons or chains, being flogged (often followed by having salt rubbed in the wounds), being tortured with thumbscrews, or of being chained to a mast.<sup>95</sup> The objective of these highly visible reprimands was to deter future rule breaking and insubordination.

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<sup>93</sup> Clarkson, *The History*, vol. 1: 396.

<sup>94</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (London: J. Phillips, 1788), 50-56. The “graveyard of seamen” argument was one of the few new arguments brought forward by abolitionists between 1787 and 1792. Granville Sharp had attempted to calculate British mortality in the slave trade years earlier but was unable to obtain sufficient evidence. Prince Hoare, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp* (London: H. Colburn, 1820), 168. The assistance of the Evangelical Comptroller of the Navy Charles Middleton in securing muster rolls was instrumental in Clarkson’s success in 1788.

<sup>95</sup> As Stanfield put it, “*Pallid or black- the free or fetter’d band,/Fall undistinguish’d by his [the captain’s] ruffian hand.*” Stanfield, *The Guinea Voyage*, 19.

On a more quotidian basis, crew suffered from constant exposure to the elements (the space below deck reserved for the slaves, officers, and cargo), meager rations, and strenuous physical labour that often began before dawn and ended after dusk. Like the cruelty meted out by planters, the hardships experienced by seamen were not attributed primarily to the dispositions of individual captains, but rather to “the general cruelty of the system.”<sup>96</sup> Reflecting this emphasis on the physical and moral environment of the slave ship, almost all sailors brought before the House of Commons committee were asked if they were “as well treated as the nature of the trade appears to admit.”<sup>97</sup>

According to many seamen, being “treated with brutal severity” made their situation worse than that of the slaves with whom they interacted on a daily basis.<sup>98</sup> Since a healthy slave carried significant economic value, disgruntled sailors complained that captives received better food and medical care than they themselves. Though such claims were self-serving and largely hyperbolic, they nonetheless highlighted an important and discomfiting truth about how the slave trade functioned: namely, that the lived realities of the system blurred race-based distinctions between slaves and enslavers— between the victims and agents of empire. Reports that seamen were sometimes “obliged to beg victuals of the slaves” or that a captain had a black slave whip a disobedient British sailor suggested that many Britons were less respected and less secure than enslaved Africans.<sup>99</sup>

A Briton’s power, metropolitans were told, was not based on his status as a freeborn

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<sup>96</sup> Africanus, *Remarks on the Slave Trade*, 48.

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Lambert, ed., *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, vol. 72: 273.

<sup>98</sup> Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (London: James Phillips, 1788), 48.

<sup>99</sup> First citation quoted in Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 261. Whipping incident from testimony of Mr. Towne in Lambert, ed., *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, vol. 82: 30. The treatment of sailors aboard slave ships is well covered in Emma Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Briton. Rather, it was dependent on his standing aboard the ship and the whims of his superiors.

The treatment of seamen aboard slave ships was only one of many ways in which the slave trade elided the conceptual barriers between black and white, civilized and uncivilized, on which both the slave industry and British imperialism more broadly rested. That the crews of slave vessels were often a motley mix of sailors from throughout the world refuted the idea that the British trade was uniquely British. That seamen were regularly captured and taken prisoner along the African coast (a place where John Newton, himself a virtual captive for fifteen months in Guinea in 1747-48, noted that “a white man is grown black” after only a few months residency) showed that British power in the region was tenuous and dependent on the whims of local rulers. That slave ships on occasion carried convicts sometimes dubbed “White English Slaves” to West Africa suggested that captivity flowed along multidirectional as opposed to unidirectional lines.<sup>100</sup> Combined with the moral and material inversions that characterized life aboard a slave ship, these realities of the slave industry showed that the hierarchies and distinctions that helped ideologically justify slavery were ungrounded. They also helped prove that empire itself was a place where, as Kathleen Wilson has put it, “under the pressure of contact and exchange, boundaries deemed crucial to national identity... were blurred, dissolved or rendered impossible to uphold.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> This phrase was used by a number of people. For an example, see Granville Sharp to Marquis of Lansdown, Old Jewry, 3 February 1785, in Box 3813, 13/1/L4, GRO. Interestingly, Sharp here refers to the transportation of “White English Slaves” as “a retaliation, in kind, for the African Slave Trade” (emphasis in original). Convict transportation to West Africa, and the challenges this posed for slave traders on the coast, is well covered in Emma Christopher, A Merciless Place: The Fate of Britain's Convicts after the American Revolution (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>101</sup> Wilson, The Island Race, 17.



Stories about the horrors of both the slave ship and plantation life encouraged the British public to reflect on a number of important questions: Was their nation's central role in the Atlantic slave system a source of pride or shame? Did it manifest or weaken British power abroad? Was it reinforcing or undermining key components of "Britishness"? By focusing on the actions, character, and treatment of those employed in the slave industry, abolitionists simplified these and other questions in a way that they believed made answers self-evident. As part of their strategy to win domestic support, they presented abolition not only as an act of benevolence towards Africa and Africans, but also as a solution to anxieties about the cultural and moral regression of Britons abroad. Only by ending the slave trade, campaigners argued, could the British character be preserved and secured.

### ***The Imperial Returnee and Metropolitan Decay***

By concentrating on individuals involved in maintaining the Atlantic slave system, abolitionists were able to highlight more than simply the transgression of British values and identity abroad. Since many slave owners and almost all slave traders spent the majority of their lives in Britain, focusing on people enabled abolitionists to demonstrate a direct, causal connection between imperial vices and domestic concerns. Slave owners and traders, they argued, were the physical vessels through which overseas iniquities entered into the British Isles. Because of their inability to shed their despotic and avaricious disposessions upon arrival in Britain, imperial returnees threatened the welfare of the nation itself. On a conceptual level, the presence of these global citizens in

the imperial metropolis proved that Britain and its empire were not two separate things; the immorality, degeneracy, and anxieties they embodied revealed beyond doubt that the boundaries between the center and peripheries of empire were porous, and that currents of empire flowed reciprocally.

As the following chapter shows in greater detail, the failure of nabobs to discard their “oriental” temperaments and proclivities was a major theme of the Hastings trial. Nabobs “not only bring with them the wealth that they have,” declared Burke, “but they bring with them into our country the vices by which it was acquired.” The playwright Samuel Foote put the matter even more laconically: “with the wealth of the East, we have imported the worst of its vices.”<sup>102</sup> When the slave trade hearings began in parliament, abolitionists and their allies were eager to expose how the same pattern occurred with Britons involved in the slave industry. As one former slave ship captain reported of his crew, “it was expected on their approach to this coast [Africa], that they should divest themselves of even the appearance of humanity.” “How far they would have the power to resume it, at a certain latitude on their return,” he added, “and to get rid of their cargoes and barbarities together, is a matter that would bear dispute.”<sup>103</sup>

Even for abolitionists without direct experience in the slave system, personal encounters with slave owners and slave traders often provided proof that manners acquired abroad could not be easily unlearned in Britain. While attending boarding

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<sup>102</sup> Speech by Edmund Burke, 7 May 1789, in Bond, ed., *Speeches of the Managers and Counsel*, vol. 2: 208-09; Samuel Foote, *The Nabob; a Comedy, in Three Acts* (London: T. Sherlock, 1778), 13.

<sup>103</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The substance of the evidence of sundry persons on the slave-trade, collected in the course of a tour made in the autumn of the year 1788* (London: J. Phillips, 1789), 105.

school as a young boy, Henry Thornton was struck by how “very vicious” his West Indian classmates were.<sup>104</sup> For Granville Sharp, it was a series of hostile confrontations with the slave owner David Lisle as much as it was compassion for destitute Africans in London that led to his initial opposition to slavery in the 1760s. Lisle was misanthropic, arbitrary, and prone to violence— the latter trait on display when he challenged Sharp to a duel over Sharp’s willingness to represent escaped slaves in court. After accusing Captain John Kimber in April 1792 of murdering a slave girl who refused to exercise above deck, Wilberforce became the target of Kimber’s intense animus. The disgruntled Kimber was seen loitering outside Wilberforce’s house on multiple occasions. His death threats were taken seriously enough that a friend felt it necessary to accompany Wilberforce on his trip to Yorkshire that summer.<sup>105</sup> According to Wilberforce, Kimber’s menacing was proof that the “African medium”— a lens through which slave dealers became blind to the suffering of others and partial to malice— did not dissipate on British soil.<sup>106</sup>

Along with low morals and a predilection for violence, Britons involved in the slave industry also imported fantastic amounts of wealth. As historians have recognized, fortunes obtained from plantations were generally assimilated more easily into the British economy and psyche than riches from the East.<sup>107</sup> Many absentee landowners

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<sup>104</sup> E.M. Forester, Marianne Thornton, ed. Evelyne Hanquart-Turner (Cambridge: Andre Deutsch, 2000), 23.

<sup>105</sup> Robert I. and Samuel Wilberforce, The Life of William Wilberforce, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1838): 135-37.

<sup>106</sup> Wilberforce, 18 April 1791, in Hansard, ed., The Parliamentary History of England, vol. 28: 256-57.

<sup>107</sup> There are a number of explanations for why plantation wealth was viewed with less disdain than wealth coming from the East. The most significant is that creoles obtained their fortunes from land—even though it was slaves who actually worked it. Nabobs, by contrast, were understood to have received the majority of their riches from bribes and other more nefarious means. As Tillman Nechtman summarizes, landed estates “were a traditionally British measure of wealth, power, and prestige... West Indian planters made sense to the domestic aristocracy. Indian money, on the other hand, had obscure origins.” Nechtman, Nabobs, 156-

successfully integrated into Britain's landed classes, and the cultural links between the sugar islands and mother country were reinforced each generation when creole children were sent to English schools for their education.<sup>108</sup> Yet the fact that the lucre of the slave owner made him less of a social pariah than the nabob should not blind us to the fact that he too was a member of the colonial *nouveau riche* who was often scrutinized and caricatured accordingly. As we have seen, the creole in Britain was often portrayed as a dissipated spendthrift attracted to ostentatious displays of wealth. Cumberland's description of Belcour as a "returned prodigal" was paralleled by his fellow playwright Samuel Foote's characterization of the West Indian in his play *The Patron* as "of an overgrown fortune" and constantly dreaming of women "sweet as sugar cane."<sup>109</sup> The drinking, gaming, and womanizing in which many West Indians allegedly indulged while in Britain was cited as evidence that creole debauchery knew no geographic bounds. That only the most well-off planters could afford to reside, frequently visit, or send their offspring to school in Britain further contributed to the stereotype of West Indian affluence.<sup>110</sup>

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57. On West Indian wealth as less threatening than East Indian wealth, also see James Raven, *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1750-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 221-22 and David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999 [first published in 1975]), 453.

<sup>108</sup> The number of absentee slave owners living in Britain cannot be calculated precisely. For rough figures and for the cultural linkages between Britain and the West Indies, see O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided*, chapter one. In the late eighteenth century, roughly three-quarters of the children of plantation owners were sent to England to be educated. Wylie Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 504.

<sup>109</sup> Samuel Foote, *The Patron. A Comedy in Three Acts* (London: G. Kearsly, 1764), 5, 13. In his *Sanford and Merton* stories, Foote likewise described the young West Indian Tommy Merton as "spoiled by indulgence." Samuel Foote, *The History of Sanford and Merton* (United States: The Booksellers, 1792), 12.

<sup>110</sup> The captains and officers of slave ships could make a good living from their employment but never achieved levels of wealth anywhere near that of slave owners. The crews of slave ships were known as "Lords of six weeks" upon returning home, as many spent liberally in ports until their wages ran out. Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 137.

An influx of overseas wealth could be destabilizing in multiple ways. Contemporaries complained that both nabobs and planters built gaudy mansions, drove up local inflation, and generated emulative and conspicuous consumption among their neighbours. Highlighting their low social origins as much as their lofty social pretensions, nabobs were often referred to as “mushrooms”—an appellation that J.B. Moreton used to identify planters as well.<sup>111</sup> Though imperial returnees held Africans in physical slavery and East Indians in what was ambiguously dubbed “political slavery,” in Britain it was they themselves who were often described as being enslaved by their own avarice and decadence. According to the poet William Cowper, British slave traders were “slaves of gold.” Nabobs, likewise, were described by another poet as mired in “slavish Vice, with all her train,” imprisoned by their enchantment with “Asiatic luxury.”<sup>112</sup> The name of the nabob in Timothy Touchstone’s poem, *Snare*, was certainly a reference to his own mental entrapment and sleepless nights caused by the inability to banish “murder’d Indians” from his mind, even long after having returned to Britain.<sup>113</sup> As each of these poets suggested, imperial *arrivistas* imported a metaphorical type of slavery into Britain as they were simultaneously spreading other forms of slavery abroad. Such reciprocity jeopardized the moral hierarchies used to legitimize empire in the first place.

A major fear among many critics of empire was that the dissipation that characterized returned creoles and nabobs would spread to enough of the population to

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<sup>111</sup> Moreton, *West India Customs and Manners*, 99. This caricature of nabobs in particular as social climbers is also evident in satirical cartoons and iconography. See Christina Smylitopoulos, “Rewritten and Reused: Imaging the Nabob through ‘Upstart Iconography’,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 39-59.

<sup>112</sup> Cowper, “The Negro’s Complaint,” final stanza. “slavish vice” in “Ode to Liberty,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 57, Supplement (1787): 1117-18. This poet goes on to bid “... dull Slavery, away,/ To Eastern climes, where tyrants sway.”

<sup>113</sup> Touchstone, *Tea and Sugar*, 7.

enfeeble the nation as a whole. In essence, they believed that the individual degeneration wrought by foreign wealth could be paralleled on a macro scale. The luxuries flaunted by the *nouveau riche*, it was argued, would tempt people away from sober industry, the key to long-term national wealth and prosperity. As one fast-day preacher in 1782 summarized, those possessed with a “criminal spirit of adventure, [who] make haste to be rich” import “spoils of oppression” that “excite the spirit of avarice and dissipation in others, [so] that they may not be outstripped by these successful ravagers.”<sup>114</sup> Though commercial wealth itself was desirable, the unchecked and rapidly acquired fortunes of creoles and nabobs were believed to produce moral enervation and sap martial vigour. “Extended empire [was] like expanded gold,” Samuel Johnson warned, each “exchanged solid strength for feeble splendor.”<sup>115</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, the collapse of the Roman Empire was held out as an example of the debilitating and dangerous effects of foreign wealth. Connecting overseas luxuries to the imperial sojourners who had imported them, Adam Ferguson wrote that Romans serving abroad had brought back “a profusion of wealth ill acquired, and the habit of arbitrary and uncountrouled [sic] command... They became the agents of corruption to disseminate idleness, and the love of ruinous amusements, in the minds of the people.”<sup>116</sup> Like Hume, Gibbon, and other scholars of antiquity, Ferguson saw peril not only in the rapid accretion of imperial riches, but also in the individuals who imported them into Britain.

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<sup>114</sup> Anonymous, *A Faithful Picture of the Times: Being a Fast Sermon for the Year 1782* (London: S. Bladon, 1782), 19. Indeed, denunciations of all types of indulgence were a common feature of fast day sermons in the late eighteenth century, especially during the American War. That many religious groups such as Quakers and evangelicals saw virtue in austerity is not an insignificant factor in explaining their opposition to slavery.

<sup>115</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Beauties of Johnson*, 3rd ed. (London: G. Kearsley, 1781), 59.

<sup>116</sup> Cited in Peter J. Marshall, “Empire and Authority in the Later Eighteenth Century,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 15, no. 2 (1987), 107.

Along with economic and social pretensions, the political aspirations of creoles and nabobs were also viewed with suspicion. In an effort to integrate into the landed classes, members of both groups purchased large estates and, with them, control over seats in parliament. Others bribed their way into representing rotten boroughs, such as the fictional Matthew Mite in Samuel Foote's play *The Nabob*. Having purchased his victory in the borough of Bribe'em, Mite was "happy to find, notwithstanding all that has been said, that the union still subsists between Bengal and the ancient corporation."<sup>117</sup> Here too, it needs to be noted that the East Indian interest in parliament was the source of much greater anxiety than the West India interest, despite the fact that no more than a couple of dozen EIC employees or retirees ever served concurrently.<sup>118</sup> Edmund Burke's oft-repeated warnings about how "to-morrow the delinquents of India may be the Commons of Great Britain" and how "we know and feel in our elections the force of money" were expressed by many during the Hastings trial in particular.<sup>119</sup> Though there were more MPs connected to the West India than East India interest at any given point in the 1780s, it was nonetheless easy for critics to lump the political influence of the two groups together. Horace Walpole had done this as early as 1761 when he bemoaned in his diary that "West Indians, conquerors, nabobs, and admirals" were attacking parliamentary boroughs throughout the nation.<sup>120</sup> While the actual political clout of both creoles and

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<sup>117</sup> Foote, *The Nabob; a Comedy, in Three Acts*, 47.

<sup>118</sup> Nechtman, *Nabobs*, 14.

<sup>119</sup> Burke, 7 May 1789, in Bond, ed., *Speeches of the Managers and Counsel*, vol. 2: 208-09. In 1783, during the heat of debate over the Fox-North India Bill, Wilberforce also expressed his wish to see "the Government of Great Britain set up in India, instead of that of India in Great Britain." Cited in Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 23.

<sup>120</sup> Cited in Raven, *Judging New Wealth*, 12. This figure largely derives from Stephen Fuller, the agent for Jamaica, who in 1781 listed forty-eight MPs with West Indian ties. O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided*, 17. An exact figure depends on the criteria used to assess whether a member belonged to the "West India interest." James Brooke concludes that there were only thirteen actual West Indians in the House of Commons from 1780-1784, and nine from 1784-1790. David Beck Ryan estimates the number of

nabobs was minimal (not only because of their small numbers, but also because of the diversity of opinions and interests within each group), the perception that they threatened to upend Britain's traditional political hierarchy was widespread. To many, their presence in parliament was evidence of an attempt to replace landed wealth with a new type of oligarchy. It was a further example of the insidiousness of foreign wealth and how riches from abroad were striking at the heart of metropolitan society.

Similar to how political power was obtained, the uses to which it could be put worried those who saw in empire threats to domestic prosperity. Many commentators argued that, like consumption habits and a fondness for violence, an inclination toward despotism acquired abroad could not be easily unlearned. Upon re-entry into British society, the colonial had no one over whom to exercise his imperiousness other than lower-class Britons; it was therefore feared that he would use his political ascendancy to suppress the liberties of freeborn British citizens. "It is well known that Europeans born and educated in the West Indies," wrote the novelist James White

acquire such habits of domestic domination, as must insensibly extend themselves to publick concerns, and should be carefully discouraged under a free constitution. The young Creole, from his tenderest years, is taught to play the tyrant: the imperious infant is often entertained by torturing the little Negroes. Is this a fit person to be entrusted, at a future day, with the care of our liberties in a British House of Commons?<sup>121</sup>

The same concern was raised about nabobs. Samuel Foote, for instance, wrote that having "acquired immoderate wealth, and uncontrolled power abroad, [nabobs] find it difficult to

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Commoners connected to the West India interest in the 1780s to be between twenty-five and thirty— a conservative estimate compared to Fuller's contemporaneous assessment. John Brooke and Lewis B. Namier, *The House of Commons, 1754-1790: Introductory Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 231; Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition*, 40-82.

<sup>121</sup> James White, *Hints of a Specific Plan for an Abolition of the Slave Trade, and for Relief of the Negroes in the British West Indies* (London: J. Debrett, 1788), 14-15.



descend from their dignity, and admit of any equal at home.”<sup>122</sup> Instead of Britain projecting political power and values outward into its overseas possessions, White, Foote, and others worried that the opposite process was taking place: that the metropole was being colonized by colonials bringing arbitrary government, suppressing rights, and subverting the British constitution.<sup>123</sup>

No single work more directly condemned and explained how imperial outlooks entered British politics than Vicesimus Knox’s 1795 treatise *The Spirit of Despotism*. Knox was an essayist and Anglican minister who took an active interest in a plethora of reform causes. His tract represents one of the decade’s most wide-ranging critiques of social inequality and repressive government legislation. Indeed, his attack on imperial returnees was only one part of his overall anti-Pittite political agenda.<sup>124</sup> In his first chapter, clumsily yet aptly entitled *Oriental Manners, and the Ideas imbibed in Youth, Both in the West and East Indies, favourable to the Spirit of Despotism*, Knox described how the “ungenial climates” of Britain had produced “a hardy race” that possessed “sentiments of manly virtue, and spurned the baseness of slavery.” “But,” he proceeded, “from the intercourse of England with the East and West Indies, it is to be feared that something of a more servile spirit has been derived.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Foote, *The Nabob; a Comedy, in Three Acts*, 17-18.

<sup>123</sup> Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 274-75.

<sup>124</sup> For an overall analysis of this tract and its context, see John Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). A similar argument about the relationship between slavery and anti-reformism is expressed in an essay by Niel [sic] Douglas, in which the author concludes that “we can scarce suppose that the spirit which patronises [sic] Slavery abroad, can be very friendly to reform at home, or those who abet its cause.” Douglas, *Thoughts on Modern Politics*, 7.

<sup>125</sup> Vicesimus Knox, *The Spirit of Despotism* (London: [s.n.], 1795), 13, 14.

The mechanisms for conveying this “servile spirit” were planters and nabobs, who “spend their most susceptible age, in those countries, where despotic manners remarkably prevail.” Abroad, these fortune-seekers are treated “with an idolatrous degree of reverence . . . [that] teaches them to expect a similar submission to their will, on their return to their own country.” As a result, they “look down on their inferiors in *property*, with supreme contempt, as slaves of their will, and ministers of their luxury.” In the West Indies, for example, youth were “cradled in despotism” from a young age, and were taught that only authoritarianism and the threat of violence could protect them from their slaves. Upon moving to Britain for their education and/or retirement, they transferred this attitude onto their social inferiors, believing that their own security depended on “keeping the vulgar in a state of depression.” Though nabobs were not accustomed to luxury and dominance from birth, Knox nonetheless emphasized their youth at the time of acquiring fortunes in order to highlight the unnaturalness of both their wealth and social pretensions. “Enriched at an early age,” he wrote, “the adventurer returns to England. He aims at rivaling or exceeding all the old nobility . . . in every unmanly indulgence, which an empty vanity can covet.” As with slave owners and their offspring, nabobs’ long familiarity with ascendancy and domination led them to wish that “the saucy vulgar may be kept at a due distance.” As Knox summarized, empire brought commercial wealth at a heavy price: “we do indeed import gorgeous silks and luscious sweets from the Indies, but we import, at the same time, the spirit of despotism, which adds deformity to the purple robe, and bitterness to the honied [sic] beverage.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Citations from Knox, *The Spirit of Despotism*, 13-17. J.B. Moreton applied similar reasoning in assessing returned planters: “. . . these new gentlemen, who from the caprice of Fortune, and a strange chain of events, have acquired immoderate wealth, and uncontrolled power abroad, find it difficult to descend from their dignity, and admit of any equal at home.” Moreton, *West India Customs and Manners*, 17-18.

### *Conclusion: The Vessels and Vectors of Disease*

In warning his readers to “beware of emulating either the oriental or occidental upstart,” it is telling that Knox described the riches acquired by each as a kind of “morbid tumour,” capable of spreading throughout British society.<sup>127</sup> Such metaphors involving illness and disease were commonly used in the final decades of the eighteenth century to describe the negative impacts of empire on the metropole. According to John Newton, the slave trade “diffuses its malignity into every branch” of the nation. For James Ramsay, it was a “disease” that “will prove a canker to eat into our prosperity and importance.”<sup>128</sup> Others referred to the slave system as a “contagion,” “disorder,” “sickness,” or “infection”—all of which were “contaminating” British manners and morals. Fearful of the influence of creoles in parliament, Nathaniel Wraxall warned that behind the grandeur of empire “lurked a thousand seeds of political death.” Burke denounced the influence of Eastern wealth in British politics as “the Indian malady.” According to the pamphleteer John King, “Asiatic offenders not only escape justice, but add infection to our corrupted Boroughs... [when], with their hands yet reeking with Indian blood, [they] take their seats among representatives of the nation.”<sup>129</sup> Sometimes, commentators used the language of disease to bring the two Indies into the same analytic frame, as Anna Barbauld did in her 1792 poem *Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq.* Here, Barbauld referred to the slave trade as a “disease” that was “infecting” and “contaminating” Britain. In the poem’s penultimate verse, she added that

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<sup>127</sup> Knox, *The Spirit of Despotism*, 19, 13.

<sup>128</sup> Newton, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, 25; Ramsay to Mr. Jolliffe, Teston, 16 January 1785, in Ramsay MS, ff. 1, RHO; Ramsay, *A Reply to the Personal Invektives and Objections*, 25.

<sup>129</sup> Nathaniel Wraxall, 12 February 1781, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 21: 1205; Burke to Henry Addington, Beconsfield, 8 January 1795, in Lucy Sutherland, ed., *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960): 110-12; John King, *Thoughts on the Difficulties and Distresses in Which the Peace of 1783, Has Involved the People of England* (London: J. Fielding, 1783), 23.

Nor less from the gay East, on essenc'd wings,  
 Breathing unnam'd perfums, Contagion springs . . .  
 The spreading leprosy taints ev'ry part,  
 Infects each limb, and sickens at the heart.

Since imperium in both the Atlantic and Asia combined to bring “sickly langours” upon Britain’s “nerveless frame,” Barbauld concluded that “By foreign wealth are British morals chang’d,/And Afric’s sons, and India’s smile aveng’d.”<sup>130</sup>

The use of illness imagery and vocabulary in these contexts was very different from the way in which such language was employed by critics of empire explored in chapter one. In that chapter, metaphors of disease were used to describe the vices that imperial agents carried from Britain into the periphery of empire, as well as the general effects of British imperialism abroad. Hugh Mulligan, for instance, wrote about the “pest’lence,” “plagues,” and “infected air” that Britons brought to India. He also reflected on the physical and moral “diseases” suffered by slaves, and of how Ireland had been transformed from “fertile plains” to a “sickly place.”<sup>131</sup> Mulligan’s mentor William Roscoe described the British slave ship as bearing “unseen contagion on its wings,” and denounced “the foul plague, that, brought from Europe, spread/O’er Afric’s peaceful shores.”<sup>132</sup> For these and other advocates of humanitarian imperial reform, disease language helped emphasize the corrosive, insidious, and totalizing impact of British avarice on non-European peoples and societies.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Anna Barbauld, *Poems by Anna Laetitia Barbauld* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1792), 145-52.

<sup>131</sup> Hugh Mulligan, *Poems Chiefly on Slavery and Oppression, with Notes and Illustrations* (London: W. Lowndes, 1788), 28, 14, 4, 21, and 22.

<sup>132</sup> William Roscoe, *The Wrongs of Africa, a Poem. Part the First* (London: R. Faulder, 1787), 12.

<sup>133</sup> Clarkson also used disease metaphors in his *History* to describe how Britons spread moral corruption abroad. The successful passage of abolition in 1807, he wrote, should be celebrated because the nation was now “delivered from the contagion of the most barbarous opinions.” This was a form of salvation, since Clarkson feared that “The misery of the oppressed is... not contagious like the crime of the oppressor...”

That illness metaphors and vocabulary were used to describe both the foreign and domestic effects of empire underscores the central argument of this chapter: in the decade after the American War, more and more Britons recognized imperial influences as cutting both ways. Indeed, the language of disease drew attention to how the effects of empire could not be contained within the periphery of empire. Though germ theory did not emerge for another half century, those living in the late eighteenth century understood that diseases could be transmitted over long distances. Importantly, they also recognized that individuals themselves could act as carriers— vehicles of transoceanic transmission. By using the language of sickness, commentators emphasized that the boundaries between Britain and its empire were porous, and that the nation itself was not immune to the consequences of British actions abroad. The only way to ensure Britain's continued health and vitality, therefore, was to abolish practices that were responsible for generating moral and material contagions in the first place. Only this, reformers argued, could cure Britain of the ills of empire.

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[since] the torments of the oppressor are but temporary; whereas the immortal part of us, when once corrupted, may carry its pollutions with it into another world." Thomas Clarkson, *History*, vol. 2: 583, 585.

### Chapter Three

#### ***Edmund Burke and Granville Sharp: Morality, Law, and the Boundaries of the Nation***

In 1782, a little-known London lawyer by the name of Thomas Parker published a nearly three hundred-page denunciation of the policies of the East India Company since assuming effective sovereignty over large parts of the Indian subcontinent during the Seven Years' War. Entitled *Evidence of Our Transactions in the East Indies*, the tract criticized the avarice of EIC officials and the failure of government to condemn their actions. Appended to the treatise was another essay authored by Parker called *An Inquiry into our National Conduct to Other Countries*. Though only thirty-five pages, *An Inquiry* represents one of the decade's most wide-ranging indictments of British imperialism and foreign relations. According to Parker, British rapacity was most pronounced in India, where three million "unfortunate inhabitants" had perished over the past two decades as a result of EIC policies. It was further manifested in the "miserable oppression" of a growing number of African slaves and in a series of broken treaties with indigenous peoples of the Americas. In the recently ceded French colony of Saint Vincent, Britons committed the "flagrant injustice" of starting wars with the "peaceable" Caribs who never had "any desire to intrude, in the least degree, on the rights of others." Closer to home, the government had reneged on supporting Corsicans in their fight to remain independent from France, and had idly stood by while Russia invaded Turkey and partitioned Poland. The overarching theme of Parker's reproofs was Britain's failure to channel its increasingly global power towards just ends. The pending loss of America, he urged,

should be used as an opportunity for collective reflection on the nation's international conduct.<sup>1</sup>

There is no indication that Parker's tract caused any kind of stir, or that he himself wielded notable political influence.<sup>2</sup> This did not stop him, however, from continuing to condemn injustices overseas and to begin sharing what he thought were effective principles for reform. In 1784, Parker wrote a short tract urging parliament to revoke the EIC's monopoly on trade to the East and to assume direct administrative control over Company territory. In presenting his arguments, he consistently referred to Indians as "subjects" of the British crown; as such, they had "an unalienable title" to the same legal protections as Britons. According to Parker, only "the application of the laws of Great Britain among all the people who are subject to Her Government in India" could justify British rule, since only legal consistency could ensure that Indians received "all the advantages which are so generally ascribed to our form of Government." Though the essay did not circulate widely, a copy did end up in the hands of Granville Sharp. Sharp's extensive annotations on passages about the rights of Indians "to be governed in the same manner" as Britons reveals his enthusiastic engagements with the text.<sup>3</sup> In 1788, Parker

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Parker, Evidence of Our Transactions in the East Indies, with an Enquiry into the National Conduct of Great Britain to Other Countries, from the Peace of Paris, in 1763 (London: Charles Dilly, 1782). For citations, see An Enquiry into our National Conduct, 12, 15, 17, 18.

<sup>2</sup> The only detailed analysis of Parker's tract can be found in Greene, Evaluating Empire and Confronting Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 343-51. Greene, however, provides no biographical information on Parker himself— a reflection on the fact that Parker left almost no archival trail. More problematically, Greene fails to note any of Parker's other writings. While I agree with Greene that the *Inquiry* constitutes one of "the fullest, most penetrating, most damning critique of the effects of British imperial activities published up to that time," there is no evidence to support his assertion that it was "the single most important contemporary assessment of the range and depth of metropolitan disillusionment with and misgivings about the effects of what later generations would come to term *colonialism*" (343).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Parker, Thoughts on Opening the Trade to the East-Indies, Addressed to the Merchants of Great-Britain and Ireland (London: T. Evans, 1784), citations on 4. I conclude that Parker's tract was not widely

cast his critical gaze toward the Atlantic, and employed nearly identical arguments in denouncing slavery and the slave trade in an anonymously published pamphlet entitled *Considerations on the Continuance of the Slave Trade, and of The Use of Slaves in the British Colonies*. Parker's decision to submit the tract to the consideration of the SEAST in April of that year initiated a series of letters between him and the Society.<sup>4</sup>

Like many of the individuals encountered in the previous two chapters, Thomas Parker helps illustrate both the breadth and depth of metropolitan misgivings about the exercise of British power abroad. He also highlights how contemporaries often brought a range of overseas iniquities—especially the Atlantic slave trade and abuses in British India—into the same analytic frame. Parker, however, is representative not only in the critique of empire that he offered. In the reforms he proposed, Parker was likewise giving voice to proliferating arguments about the status of non-Europeans within Britain's imperial orbit and the applicability of British laws to British controlled territory overseas. Indeed, it is noteworthy that he consistently referred to non-Europeans as “subjects” of the British crown, and vehemently denounced legal incongruities between the metropole

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distributed based on its non-inclusion in Gale's Eighteenth-Century Collections On-line, as well as my own inability to locate another extant copy. The copy I refer to here can be found in Granville Sharp's private papers, 13/2/48, GRO.

<sup>4</sup> [Thomas Parker], *Considerations on the Continuance of the Slave Trade, and of the Use of Slaves in the British Colonies* (London: J. Rivington, 1788). Parker claimed authorship in Thomas Parker to SEAST, Beverly, 8 April 1788, in “Fair Minute Book, Vol. II,” f.10, Add. Ms. 21254, BL. Substantiation for his claim is found in Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, & Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, by the British Parliament*, vol. 1, (London: James P. Parke, 1808): 460-61. Parker's letter to the SEAST was sent from Beverly (near York), and throughout the following year the SEAST remained in correspondence with “Thomas Parker of Beverly.” It is therefore possible that this Thomas Parker is not the same as the author of *An Inquiry into our National Conduct to Other Countries and Thoughts on Opening the Trade to the East-Indies*. There is a slim chance, for instance, that Parker was actually the York Methodist by the same name who in the 1780s worked alongside Thomas Coke to establish missions in the West Indies. Considering the overwhelming substantive and stylistic similarities between the three tracts, however, it is much more likely that the same Thomas Parker authored all three pieces. Perhaps because it went so far as to call for the emancipation of all existing slaves in the West Indies, *Considerations on the Continuance of the Slave Trade* was not officially distributed by the SEAST.



and periphery of empire. Throughout the 1780s, both these concepts were emerging as central points of debate in discussions about Indian reform. As abolitionism emerged as a national cause, antislavery activists came to apply each of them to debates over slavery and the slave trade as well.

This chapter will briefly look at expanding notions of subjecthood and calls to provide non-Europeans within the Empire with at least some of the same rights as native Britons. Its primary focus, however, will be on the argument that the same set of legal and moral standards should apply to Britons abroad as to Britons at home. This claim was expressed perhaps most consistently during the 1780s by Edmund Burke and Granville Sharp, the nation's chief proponent of Indian reform and one of its most prominent abolitionists respectively. Burke and Sharp each articulated growing concerns about imperial morality from the 1760s onward, and played major roles in shaping discussions about Britain's imperial future. They also provide windows into the motivations and thinking of a number of advocates of their respective causes. While much scholarship exists on the nature of their arguments about the moral obligation to treat non-Europeans humanely (especially the arguments expounded by Burke), this chapter aims to show how Burke and Sharp were spurred to action not only by humanitarian considerations, but also by a fear that Britain itself could no longer remain immune to the consequences of imperial rapacity. Like many of the individuals examined in the previous chapter, Burke and Sharp were especially worried about the corrosive impact of imperial returnees on metropolitan society. For Burke, nabobs were using foreign wealth to buy political influence, thereby subverting the constitution. For Sharp, slave owners threatened to

import both their slaves and their laws that permitted slavery into England, thereby undermining English common law.

It was in direct response to these and other concerns about empire that Burke and Sharp developed their theories of imperial morality. Though the two followed very different intellectual trajectories in the 1770s and early 1780s, in the years following the American War they each came to see imperial abuses and imperial dangers as resulting from the same basic fact: namely, that standards of justice overseas were more lenient than domestic standards. In their view, national prosperity could only be maintained if the exercise of British power on the frontiers of empire conformed to the laws and values of the mother country. This argument for the nationalization of imperial space—a proposed “solution” to the “problems” of empire explored in the previous two chapters—implied that British territory abroad should be seen as an extension of Britain itself. In making it, Burke, Sharp, and the reformers they influenced sought to erase longstanding legal and conceptual distinctions between nation and empire.

### ***Edmund Burke, Subjecthood, and Geographic Morality***

Throughout his adult life, Edmund Burke took an active interest in questions of empire and imperial morality. In 1757, at twenty-eight years old, he co-authored with his cousin William Burke *An Account of the European Settlements in America*.<sup>5</sup> The piece was a compendium of existing knowledge of the New World meant for a popular

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<sup>5</sup> William Burke and Edmund Burke, *An Account of the European Settlements in America*, 2 vols. (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1757). Though Edmund Burke refers to William as his “cousin,” he was likely a more distant relation. The *Account* has never been fully accepted as part of Burke’s cannon, despite the fact that Burke undoubtedly helped author it. On this point, see F.P. Lock, *Edmund Burke*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 127-30.

audience hungry for information on America following the outbreak of the Seven Years' War. Interspersed with encyclopaedic information, however, were reflections on the causes, course, and consequences of European influence in the New World. In many of these asides, the Burkes called for colonized peoples to be treated more humanely than they had hitherto been. They also denounced the brutality of slavery in the British West Indies, noting that "The negroes in our colonies endure a slavery more compleat [sic], and attended with far worse circumstance, than what any people in their condition suffer in any other part of the world."<sup>6</sup> The Burkes subsequently urged reduced dependence on slave labour, though stopped short of calling for outright abolition. Upon his election to parliament in 1765 as a member of the Rockingham faction of the Whig Party, Edmund continued to reflect and speak out on imperial issues. Like Thomas Parker, he denounced the "massacring" of Caribs by British forces during the First Caribe War from 1769-1772, which occurred "without the least Policy or provocation."<sup>7</sup> Combined with championing the rights of Irish Catholics, Burke's opposition to the Caribe War contributed to his growing reputation as an advocate for the oppressed throughout the British World. This reputation was further enhanced by his steadfast defence of the rights of American colonists in the lead-up to and upon the outbreak of armed conflict. From the mid-1770s onward, Burke served as one of the nation's leading critics of the war.

The American War not only directed Burke's attention to the problems of empire in the Atlantic. Recognizing that the alliance between the French and the Americans transformed the colonial rebellion into a global conflict, Burke during the hostilities

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<sup>6</sup> Burke, *An Account*, vol. 2: 120.

<sup>7</sup> Burke to Lord Rockingham, Beaconsfield, 29 October 1772, in Lucy Sutherland, ed., *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960): 353-57.

became increasingly concerned with Britain's financial and territorial vulnerabilities in India. His growing stature in parliament and knowledge of EIC operations earned him the chairmanship in 1780 of the House of Commons Select Committee on East India Affairs. For the next three years, Burke used this position to not only push for reforms to the EIC, but also to begin articulating broader ideas about the justice owed by Britons to Indians. Though as an opposition MP one of Burke's primary goals was to expose the government's inadequate oversight over the EIC, the political and humanitarian motives behind his involvement in Indian affairs were not mutually exclusive. Even more than his defence of the rights of American colonists, Burke's advocacy on behalf of East Indians solidified his reputation as a champion of imperial justice and reform. It was to this cause more than any other that Burke would devote the final two decades of his life.

The investigations and activities of the Rockingham dominated Select Committee were paralleled by those of a government controlled Secret Committee on East India Affairs that sat from 1781 to 1783. Though initially charged with investigating mismanagement within the EIC, both the Secret and Select Committees quickly exceeded their original remits. Under Burke's leadership, the Select Committee broadened its mandate in late 1781 to include "how the British possessions in India may be governed to the greatest Security and Advantage to this country, and by what Means the Happiness of the Natives may be Promoted." By its sixth report in July 1782, it defined the welfare of "the Natives of *India*, who mediately or immediately are subject to the British Government," as its principal object of enquiry.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the eighteen lengthy reports

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<sup>8</sup> House of Commons, "Third Report from the Select Committee, Appointed to Take into Consideration the State of the Administration of Justice in the Provinces of Bengal, Bahar, and Orissa," 12 June 1782, in

produced between the two committees over the duration of their sittings reveal a progressively increasing focus on the material welfare of East Indians. Deliberations over these reports therefore helped generate discussions both inside and outside of parliament about the rights and legal status of non-Britons within the British Empire, as well as the applicability of British laws in the imperial periphery.<sup>9</sup>

As Burke probed further into the actions of the EIC and the moral obligations of imperial rule, he also became increasingly preoccupied with the domestic consequences of Britain's expanding dominion in the East. Above all, Burke worried about the economic and political influence of nabobs, whom he viewed as the vehicles through which "the Indian malady" entered into Britain.<sup>10</sup> "They marry into your families; they enter into your senate; they ease your estates by loans," Burke told the House of Commons; "there is scarcely a house in the kingdom that does not feel some concern and interest that makes all your reform of our Eastern government appear officious and disgusting."<sup>11</sup> Burke's deep-seated angst about the impact of India on Britain continued after the dissolution of the Select Committee, as he made the domestic consequences of imperial expansion a central theme in his prosecution of Warren Hastings from 1785-95.

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*Reports from Committees of the House of Commons: Vol. 5: East Indies- 1781, 1782*, (London: House of Commons, 1804), 633; House of Commons, "Sixth Report from the Select Committee, Appointed to Take into Consideration the State of the Administration of Justice in the Provinces of Bengal, Bahar, and Orissa," 11 July 1782, in *Reports from Committees of the House of Commons: Vol. 5: East Indies- 1781, 1782*, 841.

<sup>9</sup> For moralistic and other reasons for greater government involvement and oversight in India, see Peter J. Marshall, *Problems of Empire: Britain and India, 1757-1813* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), 21-51. For a succinct overview of the background to the two committees, as well as conflicting ideas during the early 1780s of how to reform the EIC, see Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 122-25.

<sup>10</sup> Burke to Henry Addington, Beaconsfield, 8 January 1795, in Sutherland, ed., *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 8: 110-12.

<sup>11</sup> Burke, "Speech on Fox's India Bill," 1 December 1783, cited in Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 80.

Though nominally the trial of a single individual for specific crimes, Burke cast the proceedings as a line-in-the-sand defence against metropolitan transformations wrought by imperial ambitions. In his words, it was nothing less than “a great censorial prosecution, for the purpose of preserving the manners, characters, and virtues, that characterize the people of England.” Against the nabobs who “pour in upon us every day... [who] not only bring with them the wealth that they have, but bring with them into our country the vices by which it was acquired,” parliamentarians were urged to stand for “the character of England, that character, which... has made us a great nation.” If Hastings were acquitted, Burke warned, this “character will be lost and gone.”<sup>12</sup>

Of the myriad fears that Burke harboured about what he saw as the growing influence of India in Britain, the use of Indian wealth to purchase seats in the House of Commons was most troubling. The most corrupt of all nabobs in this respect was Paul Benfield. In 1780, Benfield had used money supplied by the Nawab of Arcot to secure the rotten borough of Crickdale for himself, as well as to fund the successful electoral campaigns of eight other EIC employees or retirees. The *raison d’etre* of the “Arcot interest,” which Burke described as “managed upon Indian principles, and for an Indian interest,” was to advance the nawab’s political agenda.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, it threatened the very independence of parliament. That EIC returnees won a record thirty-six seats in the 1784 general election further proved, in Burke’s mind, that “money furnished by the oppression and devastation of India” was being used “for subverting, not only the

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<sup>12</sup> Burke, 7 May 1789, in E.A. Bond, ed., *Speeches of the Managers and Counsel in the Trial of Warren Hastings* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts, 1861), vol. 2: 208-09.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire*, 57.

Liberties of this Country, but all steady and orderly Government in it.”<sup>14</sup> “To-day the Commons of Great Britain prosecute the delinquents of India,” Burke stated years later during proceedings against Hastings. “To-morrow the delinquents of India may be the Commons of Great Britain.”<sup>15</sup>

Historians have long debated whether humanitarianism, partisanship, or national interest was Burke’s primary motive in prosecuting Hastings and advocating reform.<sup>16</sup> For our purposes, though, equally as significant as questions of motivation are the ways in which Burke framed the problems of British India and the solutions he proposed. Recognizing both the injustices committed against Indians and that the consequences of these injustices could not be limited to the subcontinent, Burke sought to cut off imperial iniquities at their source. To do this, he advanced two separate but related arguments. First, Burke consistently maintained that both Hindus and Muslims should be considered “subjects” of the British crown. As British “subjects” they were entitled to at least some of the same legal protections as domestic Britons, and politicians in Britain had a moral obligation to consider their wellbeing when setting imperial policy.<sup>17</sup> Geographic distance neither negated nor diminished these imperatives. Second, Burke argued that the inverse obligation existed as well: just as legal protections should be extended to non-

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<sup>14</sup> Burke to Sir William Lee, 27 March 1784, in Sutherland, ed., The Correspondence of Edmund Burke, vol. 5: 135-36.

<sup>15</sup> Burke, 7 May 1789, in Bond, ed., Speeches of the Managers and Counsel, vol. 2: 208-09.

<sup>16</sup> For the view that Burke was motivated primarily by concern for “saving” Britain, see Dirks, The Scandal of Empire. For a more balanced approach, see Tillman W. Nechtman, Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and the various writings of Peter Marshall.

<sup>17</sup> While the legal rights inherent in the status of “subject” were always contested, there was general agreement that subjects of the crown had a legitimate claim on many of the same rights and freedoms as freeborn Britons. For contested subjecthood in the latter eighteenth-century Empire, see Hannah Weiss-Muller, “An Empire of Subjects: Unities and Disunities in the British Empire, 1760-1790,” Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Princeton University, 2010.

British “subjects” in India, so too should greater legal restrictions be applied to Britons serving in the East. While Burke’s first proposition elevated the status of the colonized, his second proposition limited the abilities of EIC functionaries to exploit them. In both cases, Burke’s goal was to reduce the legal double standards that had hitherto existed between Britain and British India.

For the most part, historians and political theorists have focused on the part of Burke’s theory that called attention to the subjecthood of Indians and the corresponding moral obligation on statesmen to promote their welfare. Burke expressed this tenet most famously during a speech in the House of Commons on 1 December 1783 in support of Fox’s East India Bill— a proposal that he himself helped author. Here, Burke told his fellow MPs that “all political power which is set over men... ought to be in some way or other exercised for their benefit.” “Political dominion,” he continued, “is in the strictest sense a *trust*.”<sup>18</sup> The notion that imperial legislators have a responsibility to govern in the interest of *all* the inhabitants of territories under their control has come to be known as “imperial trusteeship.” In the hands of future generations, this philosophy would help produce a series of paternalistic policies intended to bring the blessings of European civilization to “backwards,” non-white subjects of empire. However, though Burke helped provide the ideological foundation for greater intervention in Indian society, it would be unfair to ascribe attempts to Anglicize India to Burke himself.<sup>19</sup> British imperial

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<sup>18</sup> Burke, 1 December 1783, in T.C. Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, vol. 23: 1317. Emphasis in original.

<sup>19</sup> The transition to the nineteenth-century “liberal empire,” underpinned by universalist values and a faith in European superiority, is discussed in Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,



self-confidence was not yet at its zenith in the 1780s, and Burke like most of his contemporaries recognized that imposing British values on Indian subjects was unfeasible, perhaps even undesirable. Indeed, despite believing in broad terms in British cultural superiority, Burke had deep respect for many longstanding Hindu customs and traditions. He therefore accepted the widespread view that laws should be adapted to the history, environment, and characteristics of the people to which they apply.<sup>20</sup>

Burke was able to reconcile his universal moral standards with toleration for different forms of government through recourse to the concept of natural law. Drawing selectively from a long tradition of legal philosophy, Burke came to articulate an idea of natural law as a supranational code of justice that established parameters for morally acceptable policies and behaviour. Natural law, by its very nature, superseded the positive laws of individual political jurisdictions. Indeed, its universality and independence from territorially based systems of common law were its defining features. “There is but one law for all,” Burke stated, “which governs all law, the law of our Creator, the law of humanity, justice, equity: – the law of nature and of nations.”<sup>21</sup> For Burke, a government’s responsibility to govern in the interest of all its subjects was

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2005). For the role of Burke and his thought in this shift, see Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, 59-100 and Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire*.

<sup>20</sup> The idea that “the way in which a society was ruled should be adapted to its physical environment and to the customs and traditions of its people” was most famously articulated by the French *philosophe* Montesquieu in *De l’esprit des lois* (1748). As Marshall notes, almost all late eighteenth-century political theorists accepted some “vulgarized version” of this principle. See Peter J. Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 181. For how Burke’s veneration of traditional Hindu society fit into his broader political philosophy, see Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 217-23 and Regina Janes, “At Home Abroad: Edmund Burke in India,” *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 82 (1979): 160-74.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Mithi Mukherjee, “Justice, War, and the Imperium: India and Britain in Edmund Burke’s Prosecutorial Speeches in the Impeachment Trial of Warren Hastings,” *Law and History Review* 23, no.3 (2005): 610.

precisely the type of overarching dictum that natural law yielded. Though Burke envisioned natural law as broad enough to allow for a significant degree of cultural variation and different modes of governance, it was simultaneously an Archimedean point—the bedrock of his theory of deterritorialized justice.<sup>22</sup> More than anything, it was this understanding of natural law that allowed Burke to counter arguments that questionable actions by Britons abroad were morally permissible because they conformed to local customs and traditions. Natural law yielded a higher standard: “I hope and trust that there will be no rule, formed upon municipal maxims,” Burke told the House of Lords on the opening day of Hastings’ trial in that chamber, “which will prevent the imperial justice which you owe to the people that call to you from all parts of a great, disjointed, empire.”<sup>23</sup> That Burke frequently employed such universalist language made his theories all the more accessible to abolitionists as they began formulating their own discourse of imperial justice.

Warren Hastings’ defense of his actions ran directly counter to the most fundamental precepts of Burke’s theory of imperial morality. The former Governor-General refuted charges of bribery, war making, and despotism by explaining that these practices were indispensable tools through which all successful sovereigns had maintained authority in the East. His *real-politick* argument rested on long-held European assumptions that Indians responded only to forceful and arbitrary forms of government. According to Burke, this reasoning was nothing more than a feeble excuse for failing to

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<sup>22</sup> For Burke and natural law, see Mukherjee, “Justice, War, and the Imperium,” especially 613-15, and James Conniff, “Burke and India: The Failure of the Theory of Trusteeship,” *Political Research Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1993), 302.

<sup>23</sup> Burke, 15 February 1788, in Bond, ed., *Speeches of the Managers and Counsel*, vol. 1: 9.

conform to universal dictates of morality. In one of his most impassioned flourishes of the trial, Burke took direct aim at Hastings's geographically based double standards:

[H]e [Hastings] has told your Lordships in his Defence, that actions in Asia do not bear the same moral qualities as the same actions would bear in Europe. My Lords, we positively deny that principle... by saying that the same actions have not the same qualities in Asia and in Europe, we are to let your Lordships know that these gentlemen have formed a plan of *geographic morality*, by which the duties of men in public and in private situations are not governed by their relations to men, but by climates, degrees of longitude and latitude, parallels not of life but of latitudes; as if, when you have crossed the equinoctial line, all the virtues die... as if there were a type of baptism,... by which they unbaptise themselves of all that they learned in Europe, and commence a new order and system of things.

This *geographic morality* we do protest against... the laws of morality are the same everywhere, and that there is no action which would pass for an action of extortion, peculation, of bribery and of oppression, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and all the world over.<sup>24</sup>

Representing the crux of Burke's argument, this invective exemplifies how the Hastings trial was, at its core, a contest between two very different visions of the British Empire.

Though Burke ultimately failed to impeach Hastings in the House of Lords, which acquitted the former Governor-General of all charges in 1795, he did succeed in his broader objective of making justice and morality central to discussions of British rule in India. In 1783, he had complained of "the total silence" of politicians "concerning the interest and wellbeing of the people of India."<sup>25</sup> A decade later, such a claim would have been untenable. One measure of how pervasive Burke's views about imperial morality

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<sup>24</sup> Burke, 16 February 1788, in Bond, ed., *Speeches of the Managers and Counsel*, vol.1: 76. My emphasis. A number of eyewitnesses cited this part of Burke's speech as one of the most stirring performances of the trial. Though a supporter of Hastings, the diarist Fanny Burney recorded that Burke's invective against "geographic morality" affected her deeply. See Jeremy Bernstein, *Dawning of the Raj: The Life and Trials of Warren Hastings* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 238.

<sup>25</sup> Burke, 1 December 1783, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 23: 1317.

had become over the 1780s is the extent to which (and the rapidity with which) his political opponents began espousing similar arguments and rhetoric. Only months after defeating the reforms proposed by Burke in Fox's India Bill (1783), Pitt announced that "the Happiness of the Natives" was to be a major criterion of his own India legislation. William Grenville, one of Pitt's staunchest allies, wrote that "the ease and happiness of their subjects" should be "that first duty of those who govern," and called the EIC's hitherto disregard for the interests of the millions of Indians entrusted to its care "a disgrace to our national character."<sup>26</sup> Like notions of imperial trusteeship, Burke's views on geographic morality also struck a chord. Though the allegation of practicing geographic morality did not lend itself to a precise legal charge, its repetition in the press and by fellow parliamentarians did make it an effective overarching indictment—a way of framing the litany of accusations brought against Hastings. During the early years of his decade-long trial, Hastings' appeal to moral and political relativism led his opponents to frequently pillory him as hiding behind an "Oriental shield."<sup>27</sup>

### *Edmund Burke and Antislavery*

From the early 1780s to the mid-1790s, Burke's dogged pursuit of justice for Indians did more than just change the terms of debate surrounding British imperialism in the East. By rooting his case in supranational moral principles, and by speaking about "enlarg[ing] the circle of national justice to the necessities of empire we have obtained,"

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<sup>26</sup> William Pitt, 14 January 1784, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 24: 321; William Wyndham Grenville, *Thoughts on the Present East India Bill: Passed into a Law, August 1784*, (London: John Stockdale, 1784), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Anonymous, *The Battle of Hastings: An Heroic Poem* (London: G. Kearsley, 1787), 16.

Burke was giving voice to a wider set of demands for imperial reform.<sup>28</sup> The dissemination of his speeches via newspapers, periodicals, and pamphlets ensured that a growing reading public was exposed to high-level debate about the rectitude of empire. As Mithi Mukherjee has written, the Hastings trial was “the first major discursive event of its kind in England, in which the colonial ambitions and practices of European powers in the east stood exposed to a close and comprehensive critique... the legal and moral legitimacy of colonialism itself was thrown into question.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, throughout the decade during which antislavery opinion coalesced into a national movement, Burke kept questions about how to justly manage Britain’s evolving empire in the political spotlight. Collectively, his arguments provided a moral and political vocabulary for evaluating British conduct overseas.

In addition to the critiques that Burke advanced against British rapacity in India, the templates for change that he provided could also be adapted and extended to other spheres of empire. Specifically, the concepts he outlined for assessing imperium in the East— such as natural law, trusteeship, deterritorialized justice, and legal uniformity— furnished influential paradigms through which his fellow Britons were able to assess their nation’s expanding global influence. On the one hand, these ideas directly influenced many abolitionists who saw the slave trade as antithetical to the proper ends of empire. As Thomas Parker illustrates, individuals could easily borrow concepts from one debate and apply them to others. Parker’s claims that slavery would lead Britons to “sink under... their returns of their own conduct to others” and suffer “the consequence of their

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<sup>28</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Vol. VII, *India: The Hastings Trial, 1788-1795*, ed. Peter Marshall and J. Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 609.

<sup>29</sup> Mukherjee, “Justice, War, and the Imperium,” 589.

crimes,” were nearly identical to both his and Burke’s warnings against continued abuses in India.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, Burkean rhetoric helped create fertile ground for appeals to treat Africans as British subjects entitled to at least some of the same rights as native Britons. When Thomas Clarkson wrote in his 1785 *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* that “government is a *contract*... [and] the grand object of the *contract*, is the *happiness* of the people,” politically informed readers would have readily called to mind Burke’s claim that political power was “a trust” to be administered for the “happiness” of all subjects.<sup>31</sup>

We can see clearly how Burkean arguments could be used to advance abolition by looking at a 1792 tract entitled *Thoughts and inquiry on the principles and tenor of the revealed and supreme law, shewing the utter inconsistency and injustice of our penal statutes, and the illicit traffic and practice of modern slavery*. The author, P.W. Hall, is an obscure figure who appears to have published no other writings. The tract itself is desultory and consists largely of a series of diatribes on religious themes such as the apostasy of the times and the veracity of scripture. Emerging clearly throughout the over 300-page treatise, however, is Hall’s deep antipathy towards the slave trade, the “most abominable” of “all the most abandoned and villa[i]nous pursuits of men.” Like many of the individuals examined in the previous chapter, Hall worried that “those evil troopers,

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<sup>30</sup> Parker, *Considerations on the Slave Trade*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African, Translated from a Latin Dissertation, Which Was Honoured with First Prize in the University of Cambridge, for the Year 1785, with Additions* (London: J. Phillips, 1786), 68. Political philosophers see important differences between the idea of society as a contract and as a trust. In the English tradition, the latter notion can be traced at least as far back as Hobbes and Locke. On the whole, Lockean contract theory is less paternalistic than Burke’s idea of trusteeship. In the arena of late eighteenth-century public opinion, though, these distinctions mattered less than the overall thrust of the argument propounded by Burke and many abolitionists: that government had a responsibility to rule in a way that fostered the wellbeing of all those under its authority.

the frogs, the dogs of iniquity, who have trafficked in the human species” would bring the “pestilence” of slavery back to Britain upon their return. In this respect, Hall noted that slave traders resembled “nabobs of the east.”<sup>32</sup> The slave trade, he went on to state, “has not washed its feet nor bathed off the baseness of its pollution in passing over the ocean: it has brought back the shame of its deeds, and the pollution of its crimes, to the place from whence it came [i.e. Britain].” Elsewhere, Hall referred to the traffic as a “corroding menstruum . . . [that] has speckled the inhabitants with brutish barbarity... and with tyranny, cruelty, treachery, and covetousness.” Neither pollution nor menses respected geographic boundaries, and such terms implied that the corrupting influences of slavery could not be contained within the frontiers of empire.

Ominously, Hall prophesized that retribution for sanctioning slavery “in the remote isles and places abroad” would occur “at home.”<sup>33</sup> In making this warning, he followed the lead of many religiously inspired commentators (including, as we will soon see, Granville Sharp) who predicted that divine vengeance for imperial sins would manifest itself domestically. Distance from the scene of iniquity, Hall argued, would in no way safeguard the welfare of the nation. Moreover, Hall like others also claimed—at least rhetorically—that reprisals would occur in kind. The evils of the slave trade would therefore be

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<sup>32</sup> P.W. Hall, Thoughts and Inquiry on the Principles and Tenor of the Revealed and Supreme Law, Shewing the Utter Inconsistency and Injustice of Our Penal Statutes, and the Illicit Traffic... Of Modern Slavery... With Some Grounds of a Plan for Abolishing the Same (London: J. Ridgway, 1792): 224, 24, 225, 181, and 36. Further similar to many of those individuals previously studied, Hall described the trade as having “changed the hearts of those concerned in it, into that of a most brutish, barbarous, and savage nature,” and spoke of slave dealers as having been “long inured to savage, inhospitable, domineering scenes of slavery.” He also claimed that the “spawn and poison of their iniquity and injustice” had spread to parliament itself, which was likely a reference to the recent passing of Dundas’ gradual abolition bill instead of Wilberforce’s bill for immediate abrogation. *Ibid.*, 179, 202.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 182, 26.

meet with retaliations in their [Britons'] streets, and... the cries and groans of oppressions in every corner of their land. They need not be surprised to hear of villains climbing at their windows, breaking open their doors and bars, attacking them with violence on the public roads, and robbing them in the streets and avenues of their dwellings... violently and forcibly to bind them in chains, carry them captive, and take away from [them] all things dear and valuable.<sup>34</sup>

Such graphic rhetoric about the potential domestic consequences of imperial iniquities were markedly different in tone than the warnings offered by Burke. But the paradigm through which Hall attacked the slave system, and the principal means through which he proposed ending it, were nearly identical to Burke's arguments about British India. Like Burke, Hall maintained that "the universal laws of justice are the same in all the lands." On this basis, he denounced the fact that slave owners and slave traders were permitted to commit acts overseas that in Britain would be criminal.<sup>35</sup> Drawing primarily on scripture, Hall used the concept of "Divine Law" (which he also referred to as "Supreme Law" and "God's Law") in the same way as Burke used "natural law": namely, the concept served as a universal standard of morality that Britons abroad were failing to meet. As with many amateur legal scholars, including Granville Sharp, Hall believed that the English constitution in its purest form both reflected and enshrined divine law. "Diametrically opposite" to English law, however, were the "laws of iniquity," established by planters and slave dealers. Because the government permitted "heterogeneous laws" within the Empire, Hall accused it of being "hypocritical."<sup>36</sup> Only through ending such incongruity, he claimed, could national virtue be restored. In addition to the universal remit of divine law, Hall also argued that all those under British rule were entitled to basic legal rights; this too provided grounds for legal uniformity

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., ix-x.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 26-27, 79.



between metropole and periphery. Echoing Burke, Hall summarized his argument by stating that “each of those men who are imputed as slaves, are British subjects as much as their masters; *And as there is but one law for the home-born and the stranger, that law of justice should be administered in their behalf.*”<sup>37</sup>

Hall’s appeal to extend British laws overseas helps illustrate how early British antislavery was deeply entwined with questions of how forcefully the central government could and should impose its will in its colonies.<sup>38</sup> Since slavery was banned on British soil, Hall saw the very existence of the institution in the West Indies as a direct challenge to metropolitan sovereignty. “To say that slavery and the most heinous encroachments on the rights and liberties of men are allowable in the islands and remote places, but not at home,” he wrote, “is saying in other words, that those islands and remote places do not belong to the empire.”<sup>39</sup> Here too, it is likely that Hall’s thinking was influenced by the on-going debate about the extent to which the British government could direct EIC policy. In the name of both morality and the preservation of empire, Burke claimed that the government had a right to interfere in nearly all Company affairs. On the same grounds, Hall argued that laws forbidding slavery should be applied in the West Indies despite the protestations of colonial legislators who claimed that only they could set laws regulating the internal affairs of their islands. “If the British government has any right or claim for the dominion in the East or West Indies,” Hall wrote,

and to govern over its own territory, should not the same universal laws of liberty and justice, and the rights of man, be administered there, as that which they profess to do in the center [sic] of the empire, for the protection of the inhabitants,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>38</sup> This theme is the focus of chapter four.

<sup>39</sup> Hall, *Thoughts and Inquiry*, 246-47.

and for supporting them in their equal rights, privileges, and immunities? And because the laws of humanity, liberty, and justice, are not local but universal, the right administration cannot be different in one place to that of another, and that which is just and good cannot be too far extended, for the happiness of the people and the safety of the empire, which must otherwise fall to pieces, and be broken, as being heterogeneous and mixed with dross...

As if to pre-empt the types of objections raised against government intervention by the EIC, Hall added that “no law or government can be too much authoritative and despotic in being just, because it protects the injured, and suppresses the wringers [sic] of others, which is the end of all good society and right government.”<sup>40</sup>

As Hall’s *Thoughts* demonstrates, Burkean arguments about morality and reform in India were conceptually broad enough to be applied to other questions of empire. Though few abolitionists directly cited Burke’s Indian advocacy in explaining their opposition to the slave trade, the application of the same reasoning to two different spheres of empire highlights how the campaigns for abolition and correcting British rule in India were mutually reinforcing. The Hastings trial therefore was not a direct cause of organized antislavery, but rather helped produce a political milieu that throughout the 1780s became increasingly receptive to arguments for humanitarian imperial reform. Put another way, the proceedings contributed to an environment in which questions about the morality of empire could become politically salient.

Considering Burke’s own concerns with the negative effects of empire on Britons and non-Europeans alike, it is perhaps unsurprising that he publically denounced the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 71-72.

slave trade once a national debate on the issue began.<sup>41</sup> On 9 May 1788, the day the topic was first debated in the House of Commons, Burke declared that the “state of slavery” was “so improper, so degrading, and so ruinous to the feelings and capacity of human nature, that it ought not to be suffered to exist.” Over the next four years he would speak against the slave trade in parliament on five more occasions. When Wilberforce brought forth his inaugural bill to abolish the traffic in May 1789, Burke commended his colleague for presenting “principles so admirable, laid down with so much order and force, [that they] were equal to anything he had ever heard in modern oratory.”<sup>42</sup> This support of abolitionism was clearly influenced by his view that the “happiness” of the governed was a criterion of moral rule, as Burke consistently decried the slave trade as contrary to the dictates of both justice and humanity. Curiously, however, he employed few of the same arguments against the slave trade as he had used in his opposition to misrule in India. Though many abolitionists highlighted the incongruity of permitting slavery abroad while forbidding it at home, Burke never spoke of the Atlantic slave system as an example of “geographic morality.” Nor did he lay out a case for considering slaves British “subjects” in a legal or political sense. Compared to the “India Question,” Burke devoted far less time, energy, and intellectual rigour to the issue of the slave trade,

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<sup>41</sup> There is curiously little scholarship on Burke’s views on slavery or the slave trade. The best work on the subject is Margaret Kohn and Daniel I. O’Neill, “A Tale of Two Indias: Burke and Mill on Empire and Slavery in the West Indies and America,” *Political Theory* 34, no. 2 (2006): 192-228. See also: Robert W. Smith, “Edmund Burke’s Negro Code,” *History Today* 26, no. 11 (1976): 715-24; P.T. Underdown, “Edmund Burke, the Commissary of His Bristol Constituents, 1774-1780,” *English Historical Review* 73, no. 287 (April 1958): 252-69; Conniff, “Burke and India.” Two works in French also address Burke’s relationship with slavery and abolition, though neither account contextualizes this theme within Burke’s overall political philosophy. See Michel Fuchs, “Edmund Burke et l’esclavage”, *Reseau: revue interdisciplinaire de morale et politique*, 1972, and Norbert Coll, “Edmund Burke et le *Sketch of a Negro Code*,” *Les Cahiers du CEIMA*, at [http://www.univ-brest.fr/digitalAssets/11/11565\\_cc5\\_Col.pdf](http://www.univ-brest.fr/digitalAssets/11/11565_cc5_Col.pdf) (accessed 12 January 2014).

<sup>42</sup> Burke, 9 May 1788, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 27: 501-02; Burke, 12 May 1789, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 28: 68.

which can only be seen as evidence that the slave trade did not agitate him to nearly the same degree.

This conclusion, however, does not mean that revealing consistencies between Burke's opposition to the slave trade and advocacy of Indian reform do not exist. In debates on both issues, for instance, Burke steadfastly insisted that parliament dictate imperial policy. In his mind, only metropolitan politicians— not the EIC or colonial assemblies— could regulate the behaviour of Britons overseas. When pro-slavery forces attempted to delay the progress of Wilberforce's bill by first soliciting the views of slave owners, Burke bluntly asserted that "the House need not send to the West Indies to know the opinions of the planters on the subject." A year later, he declared his opposition to providing financial compensation to planters should abolition come to pass.<sup>43</sup> This antipathy towards slaveholders was longstanding, as even while defending the rights of American colonists in the 1760s he argued against allowing the owners of slaves to sit in the British parliament. "Common sense," Burke declared, "forbid[s], that those, who allow themselves an unlimited right over the liberties and lives of others, should have any share in making laws for those, who have long renounced such unjust [sic] and cruel distinctions."<sup>44</sup> As with East Indian nabobs, Burke maintained a deep distrust of slave owners throughout his life, claiming that impartial and truly moral laws could only originate in the center of empire.

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<sup>43</sup> Burke, 9 May 1788, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 27: 502; Burke, 21 May 1789, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 28: 96-98.

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 92.

Despite impressive rhetoric about the slave trade being “the most shameful trade, that ever the hardened heart of man could bear,” Burke’s legacy on the issue is a mixed one.<sup>45</sup> As MP for Bristol from 1774 to 1780, at the time Britain’s third largest slaving port, Burke kept his disapproval of the Atlantic slave system to himself. His silence during this period may have also been influenced by the fact that his brother Richard at the time owned nine slaves in Grenada. When parliament launched an investigation into mismanagement within the Royal African Company in 1777, Burke defended the rights of the Company, even working to ensure that the government continue to subsidize its activities. Throughout this inquiry, the contrast between Burke’s personal qualms about slavery and his desire to represent the will of his constituents was on full display: while pointing out that “Africa, time out of mind, had been in a state of slavery, therefore the inhabitants only changed one species of slavery for another,” he also added that he “was sorry to say, that in changing from African to European slavery, they generally changed much for the worse.” “Certainly,” Burke went on to aver, this “was a matter of reproach somewhere, and deserved serious consideration.” Reporting on the investigation, the *London Evening Post* wrote that Burke, “as an advocate for liberty, appeared somewhat awkward in the fetters which he actually put on, as well as in the defence of the use of them.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Burke, May 1789, cited in David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 402.

<sup>46</sup> Burke, 7 June 1777, in Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. VII, *India: The Hastings Trial, 1788-1795* ed. Peter Marshall, 341; *The London Post*, 7 June 1777. On this issue, Burke did not follow his own precept that MPs owed their constituents not only their labour but also their judgment.

Upon defeat in the general election of 1780, Burke himself would give the slave trade the “serious consideration” he claimed it deserved. No longer responsible for representing the citizens of Bristol, Burke drew up a seventy-four point plan for bringing about a gradual end to the slave trade and emancipating existing slaves within the Empire. The document was titled “Sketch of a Negro Code,” and represented the first time a British statesman committed to writing a vision for an empire without slaves.<sup>47</sup> To first reduce the volume of slaves being shipped to the Americas, Burke proposed that inspectors be placed at ports along the African coast. These inspectors would ensure that no slaves captured in war or who were unregistered would be transported, and would enforce a strict ratio of one slave for every 1.5 units of a ship’s tonnage (a more stringent requirement than the ratio of one slave per ton that was passed by parliament in 1788). The objective of these and other measures was to progressively restrict the supply of slaves sent to the Americas, thereby compelling planters to ease onerous labour practices that led to injuries, illnesses, and early death. Anticipating eventual emancipation, Burke proffered a list of forty-two recommendations for how to ameliorate the conditions of slaves already on plantations, which he believed would help “prepare” them for eventual freedom.

Tellingly, the plurality of clauses in the Negro Code focused on placing slaves under the guardianship of government officials. Perhaps with the example of the

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<sup>47</sup> The manuscript version of the Negro Code can be found in Add. Ms. 37890, BL. All citations are taken from <http://www.econlib.org/library/LFBooks/Burke/brkSWv4c7.html> (accessed 14 November 2013). The document is explored in Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 228-30, 235-36; Coll, “Edmund Burke et le *Sketch of a Negro Code*”; Smith, “Edmund Burke's Negro Code”; and Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, 401-06. It has otherwise escaped sustained scholarly attention.

Spanish *síndico procurador* in mind, Burke proposed that the attorney general of each of Britain's sugar islands also assume a position called "Protector of Negroes."<sup>48</sup> These Protectors were to make regular tours of their islands in order to hear the grievances of slaves and to ensure that government officials— not slave owners— were the ones administering punishments to delinquent slaves. They were also to be charged with composing an annual report on "the state of the Negros in their districts," which would first be sent to the island's governor and then to "one of His Majesty's Principal Secretaries of State." That the reports were to end up with government officials in London was important, as Burke believed the "humanitarian" regulations passed by colonial assemblies were nothing but "arrant trifling... totally destitute of the *executory* principle."<sup>49</sup> In each island, the Protector of Negroes would be assisted by Anglican clergyman who would provide religious instruction to slaves, keep a register of births and deaths, and regularly report to the Bishop of London on the progress of religion among black and white inhabitants alike. Similar to calling for a Protector of Negroes, Burke's proposal to use clergy to oversee both slaves and slave owners reminds us that the political, humanitarian, and religious aims of many abolitionists were closely intertwined.

Though many of its clauses were extremely quixotic (did Burke really envision all slave children attending school, with the brightest pupils being sent to public schools in England?), the Negro Code on the whole is remarkable for its originality, detail, and

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<sup>48</sup> In the 1760s, the Spanish equivalents of attorneys general were given the role of *síndico procurador* and charged with protecting the rights and welfare of slaves. The French also had a position called *procureur general* with similar responsibilities. That the "Protector of Negroes" was so central to Burke's Negro Code suggests that British abolitionists may have been influenced by one or both of these examples at an earlier date than historians have generally recognized.

<sup>49</sup> A distrust of West Indian slave owners is an important consistency between Burke's earlier writings and his Negro Code. As early as 1768, for instance, he had shared his disapprobation of "the head-long Violence of the Creolians." Cited in Greene, *Evaluating Empire*, 177.

scope. Yet for unknown reasons, Burke kept the plan secret for over a decade.<sup>50</sup> It was not until April 1792, a week after Henry Dundas had put forward his motion in favour of gradual abolition at a future date, that Burke sent a copy to the then Home Secretary. With the growing radicalism of the French Revolution exerting a greater and greater influence on his thinking, Burke in his cover letter stressed the incrementalism of his proposals, downplaying his previous support of immediate abolition. “I am fully convinced,” he now wrote to Dundas, “that the cause of humanity would be far more benefit[t]ed by the continuance of the trade and servitude, regulated and reformed, than by the total destruction of both or either.” Concern for the welfare of Catholic priests fleeing revolutionary mobs even led him to suggest to that they relocate to America where, “with the help of a few slaves,” they could eventually live in ease. It is difficult to imagine Burke of 1788 or 1789 making such a statement.<sup>51</sup>

In supporting immediate abolition in the late 1780s and then backing away from this stance by 1792, Burke was representative of the main current of British public opinion in this period. During his latter years and posthumously, his reputation would continue to fluctuate. Three months before his death in 1797, the pro-slavery lobby cited the gradualism of the Negro Code as an argument in favour of asking colonial assemblies to pass ameliorationist policies instead of having parliament impose abolition on them.<sup>52</sup>

By the 1820s, however, an incremental approach to slave emancipation was in favour,

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<sup>50</sup> In 1806, Wilberforce wrote to a friend that he had seen the Negro Code “one day in Downing Street” just prior to the onset of the parliamentary campaign for abolition. However, no other evidence corroborates this claim, and Burke recorded in his letter to Dundas that he had hitherto not shown the plan to anyone. It is therefore likely that Wilberforce was misremembering. See Wilberforce to Tomline, 15 May 1806, in Stanhope Ms. 731, BL.

<sup>51</sup> Burke to Richard Burke Jr., Bath, 2 November 1792, in Sutherland, ed., *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 7: 280-83.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, “Edmund Burke’s Negro Code,” 721-22.



and Burke's antislavery credentials were duly rehabilitated. Wilberforce now admitted that Burke's plan was an asset instead of a liability to the cause, admitting that he himself had not given it "all the credit it deserved."<sup>53</sup> When emancipation finally passed the House of Lords in 1833, the Colonial Secretary Lord Stanley felt it fitting to quote the preamble to the Negro Code in its entirety. In a lengthy peon written sometime in the late 1820s, the novelist Henry Mackenzie compared Burke's opposition to the slave trade to his opposition to geographic morality in Asia. Among other virtues, Mackenzie applauded Burke's consistency in maintaining that "the eternal principles of universal humanity are as applicable to the torrid as to the temperate zone, & that none but the most reckless oppressors could consider as allowable in the one what in the other is felony." Emphasizing how Burke's "attention had even been turned to the abolition of the gigantic abominations of the Slave Trade," Mackenzie surmised that "had his public life been prolonged, his name would receive a brighter glory than any it even now possesses, by being associated with that of Wilberforce."<sup>54</sup>

The assumption behind Mackenzie's comparison was that Burke would have once again warmed to abolition once the threats from revolutionary France and of uprisings within Britain had passed. Burke's vocal opposition to the slave trade in the late 1780s provides strong evidence for this prediction; Mackenzie's tribute reminded his readers of Burke's support for abolition during the years in which the topic was most hotly debated.

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<sup>53</sup> Cited in Smith, "Edmund Burke's Negro Code," 722. Near the end of his life, Wilberforce also reflected that "sufficient use has never been made of Burke's authority— he, the advocate for the rights of the colonies, proposed a detailed plan of Internal Regulations. I have often regretted our not adopting several of his suggestions." Wilberforce to William Smith, Highwood Hill, 24 July 1829, in Abolition and Emancipation, Part 6, Reel 92: William Smith Letters, Box 1, f.7.

<sup>54</sup> Henry Mackenzie, The Political Character of Burke, [Early 1800s], Osborne fd1, Beinecke.

Yet revealingly, Mackenzie also drew attention to what was probably Burke's more significant—albeit indirect—contribution to antislavery during his lifetime. By condemning the “ruthless oppressors” who “consider as allowable” actions abroad that would be criminal in Britain, Burke both exposed and denounced the legal and moral double standards of empire.<sup>55</sup> Throughout his lengthy prosecution of Hastings, he kept the injustice of this incongruity at the fore of debates about the nature, structure, and rectitude of Britain's evolving imperial ambitions. Moreover, it was Burke more than any other politician of his era who argued that the only way to end abuses overseas was to nationalize imperial space through the extension of domestic laws. In both the critique he provided and the solutions he proposed to the problems of British rule in India, Burke indirectly help shape the emergence of abolitionism.

### *Granville Sharp and the Incongruities of Slavery*

As exemplified by Thomas Parker and P.W. Hall, a number of reformers applied Burkean arguments about moral rule in India to questions about the ethics of the Atlantic slave system. Similarities between the principles through which Burke attacked injustices in the East and the way in which many abolitionists framed their case, however, are perhaps most discernable in the evolving thought and activism of Granville Sharp. Born the ninth and final son to a clerical family in the North of England in 1735, Sharp spent his formative years as an apprentice in the London linen industry before accepting a position as clerk in the Ordinance office in 1757. Throughout his peripatetic youth and early adulthood, the inquisitive Sharp spent much of his free time engaged in self-directed study of Hebrew, Greek, and the Bible. These scriptural researches helped

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

convince him of the immorality and illegality of human bondage. From the mid-1760s until the onset of the American War, Sharp stood virtually alone in attempting to put slavery on Britain's political agenda. As Christopher Brown observes, Sharp's writings, which combined High Church theology with a strong libertarian streak, reflect a hybridized worldview that precludes easy categorization. Indeed, while his calls for parliamentary reform and greater political equality put him at odds with many establishment Anglicans, his preoccupation with Old Testament law and scriptural orthodoxy likewise made him an outlier among more liberal reformers.<sup>56</sup>

There is no archival evidence to suggest that Burke and Sharp ever met or corresponded. The fact that Sharp's antislavery enthusiasm was temporarily waning just as Burke began to take up the India Question in earnest would make it further misleading to suggest that their writings directly influenced each other. Yet it is noteworthy that the two men followed similar trajectories in coming first to question and then to denounce what they saw as an absence of morality in empire. In the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, both began expressing long-held fears that Britain's rapid accretion of overseas territory was incompatible with possessing an empire that was prosperous, free, and just. Their suspicions were confirmed in 1772 when stories reached home of the wanton killing of Caribs by British soldiers—behaviour that Sharp decried as violating “the

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<sup>56</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 171-72. For the most comprehensive analysis of Sharp and his thought, see Brown, *Moral Capital*, 155-206. For Sharp as reformer, see Betty Fladeland, *Abolitionists and Working-Class Problems in the Age of Industrialization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 1-16. For Sharp an argument that Sharp should be seen as representative of conservative Anglicanism, see Nicholas Hudson, "'Britons Never Will Be Slaves': National Myth, Conservatism, and the Beginnings of British Antislavery," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 559-76. For insight into Sharp's relationship with American abolitionists, virtually his only coadjutors prior to the American War, see John Woods, "The Correspondence of Benjamin Rush and Granville Sharp," *Journal of American Studies* 1, no. 1 (1967): 1-18.

unalterable principles of natural justice.”<sup>57</sup> When American colonists began complaining that parliament was overreaching its authority by meddling in their internal affairs, both men believed that such grievances against heavy-handed restrictions on colonial liberty were justified. For Sharp, the common thread linking the massacre of Caribs, the coercion of colonists, and a litany of other injustices between the Seven Years’ War and the American War was Britain’s failure use imperial power as a force for good. As the government’s tendency toward despotism became increasingly apparent during the interwar years, Sharp began seeing examples of injustice overseas as mutually reinforcing.

The series of events that singled out slavery as particularly troubling occurred during the latter 1760s. In 1765, Sharp and his brother James discovered the Barbadian slave Jonathon Strong severely beaten, pistol-whipped, and left for dead on the streets of London. Two years later, after Sharp had helped restore him to health and found him gainful employment, Strong was kidnapped by his former master David Lisle. Lisle then sold Strong to a West Indian planter named James Kerr. Before Kerr departed with Strong, Sharp was able to bring Strong’s case before the courts and succeeded in getting the judge to rule in favour of Strong’s freedom. The issue was not fully settled, however, as shortly thereafter Lisle and Kerr initiated a lengthy lawsuit against Sharp for having confiscated Lisle’s “property” two years earlier. In order to defend his actions, Sharp

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<sup>57</sup> Sharp to Lord Dartmouth, Old Jewry, 10 October 1772, 13/1/D4, GRO; Recall Burke’s description of the massacring of Caribs as occurring “without the least Policy or provocation.” See page 162.

scoured English common law to find proof that slavery was illegal on English soil. If he could furnish such evidence, Kerr and Lisle would have no case against him.<sup>58</sup>

The more Sharp researched, the more certain he became that there was indeed no legal precedent for tolerating slavery within the British Isles. Further, his extensive investigations convinced him that English common law both reflected and protected what he referred to in a 1776 tract as the “the law of liberty.”<sup>59</sup> The “law of liberty”— which was enshrined in the English common law, though itself transcended positive law— was a moral dictum that stipulated the rights and conduct owed to fellow human beings.<sup>60</sup> It was premised on the “*natural Equity*” of all people; Sharp would maintain throughout the rest of his life that the “doctrine of Human Equality” was “absolutely necessary to a right knowledge of English Jurisprudence.”<sup>61</sup> As a self-fashioned biblical scholar, Sharp was also convinced that scripture revealed the divine origins of the law of liberty. Violating the law of liberty was therefore both illegal and unchristian.<sup>62</sup>

Much like Burke’s natural law, Sharp’s law of liberty provided a normative, supranational standard of justice that both governments and individuals were morally

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<sup>58</sup> For Sharp’s involvement in the Strong case, see Edward C.P. Lascelles, Granville Sharp and the Freedom of Slaves in England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), 16-24. From 1767 to 1772, Sharp worked to legally manumit at least ten former slaves. A good overview of Sharp’s activism on behalf of Blacks in Britain during this period can be found in Simon Schama, Rough Crossings: The Slaves, the British, and the American Revolution (New York: Ecco, 2007), 43-63.

<sup>59</sup> Granville Sharp, The Law of Liberty, or, Royal Law, by Which All Mankind Will Certainly Be Judged! Earnestly Recommended to the Serious Consideration of All Slaveholders and Slavedealers (London: B. White, 1776).

<sup>60</sup> Elsewhere in his writings, Sharp used a variety of terms synonymously, including “God’s Law,” “The Royal Law of Liberty,” “divine law,” and “the law of justice.”

<sup>61</sup> “*natural Equity*” cited in Brown, Moral Capital, 64. Other citations from Granville Sharp, A Short Sketch of Temporary Regulations (until Better Shall Be Proposed) for the Intended Settlement on the Grain Coast of Africa near Sierra Leona, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: H. Baldwin, 1788), xxxiii.

<sup>62</sup> Sharp made this argument most directly in The Law of Liberty, or, Royal Law, by which all Mankind will Certainly be Judged.

bound to follow. And, much like Burke a decade later, Sharp in the late 1760s and early 1770s expressed his greatest concern over the fact that the laws of England— laws that embodied the law of liberty— were not being applied abroad. This legal incongruity, which both produced and resulted from a perceived moral incongruity between the imperial center and imperial periphery, was a problem throughout “the remotest parts of the *British Empire*.” In “the several nations of the East or West Indies,” for instance, Sharp found it lamentable and distressing that ““*the influence, benefit, and protection of the King’s laws and courts of justice*’ should not be extended ‘*to all his Majesty’s subjects*.’”<sup>63</sup> Of the many injustices taking place in Britain’s imperial orbit, Sharp’s encounters with Lisle and other slave owners convinced him that it was slavery that represented the most direct negation of the law of liberty. He decried as unnatural the “absolute authority” of slave owners over “their fellow men,” and asserted that such a gross power imbalance resulted in slaves being denied “the common and natural rights of mankind.”<sup>64</sup> Holding fellow humans in bondage, Sharp would later write, entailed the “enormity of setting up *the dominion of WILL above law*.” It was an “utter subversion” of legal and divine commandments.<sup>65</sup>

While Burke’s understanding of natural law stipulated that legislators have a moral responsibility to govern in the best interests of all their subjects, Sharp’s researches persuaded him that English law went even further. According to the title of a treatise he

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<sup>63</sup> Granville Sharp, *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery; or of Admitting the Least Claim of Private Property in the Persons of Men, in England* (London: Benjamin White, 1769), 51.

<sup>64</sup> Sharp, *A Representation of the Injustice*, 13

<sup>65</sup> Granville Sharp, *Serious Reflections on the Slave Trade and Slavery* (London: W. Calvert, 1805), 32, 34. Sharp wrote this tract in 1797, though it was not published until 1805.

wrote in 1774, Sharp came to believe that it was a “Fundamental Principle of the British Constitution” that all British subjects possess a “Natural Right to a Share in the Legislature.”<sup>66</sup> In interpreting English law this way, Sharp was promoting the democratic principle that parliaments and other legislative assemblies were ethically bound to reflect the will of the people over whom they governed. This judgement motivated his stance in favour of expanding the franchise domestically, as well as influenced his assessment of where imperial sovereignty lay. Specifically, in the lead up to the American War, Sharp became a vocal defender of the rights of colonial legislators. As representatives of the will of the colonists, these elected assemblies were constitutionally entitled to pass laws without interference from Westminster. From the early 1770s to the conclusion of the American War, Burke consistently articulated the same argument.

To have full moral legitimacy, Sharp believed that all legislative bodies had to meet two criteria. First, they had to be selected by, and serve the interests of, even their most lowly subjects. In EIC territory, therefore, Sharp wanted to “instruct the Sooders and lower casts [sic] of Indian tribes, concerning their natural rights to a share in the government of those countries they inhabit.” Among other benefits, this tutelage would help protect them from “the detestable rule of the Brahmins” as well as the avarice of “European wolves and tigers.”<sup>67</sup> Second, legislators should only pass laws that conformed with the law of liberty and, by extension, the dictates of the English

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<sup>66</sup> Granville Sharp, *A Declaration of the People's Natural Right to a Share in the Legislature; Which Is the Fundamental Principles of the British Constitution of State* (London: B. White, 1774). Sharp sent two hundred copies of this tract in support of colonial rights to Benjamin Franklin for distribution in America. See Sharp to Samuel Allinson, Old Jewry, 28 July 1774, D3549, 13/1/A7, GRO.

<sup>67</sup> Lascelles, *Granville Sharp*, 105. Also see Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 630.

constitution. Essentially, Sharp's imperial vision was one of significant autonomy for American, Irish, and other colonial legislatures, yet with the colonies "nevertheless firmly united by the circle of the British Diadem, so as to form one *vast Empire*... the laws of natural Equity, Justice, and Liberty, to be strictly observed." When drawing up a legal code for the Sierra Leone colony in 1788, Sharp made clear that laws were to supplement, not replace, "the general protection of our [English] Common Law." Indeed, throughout his writings on the themes of sovereignty and governance, Sharp articulated an idea of empire as multiple political jurisdictions united by a shared set of interests, principles, and legal heritage.<sup>68</sup> Contemporaries would have recognized this vision of empire as resembling Burke's notion that "Empire is the aggregate of many States, under one common head."<sup>69</sup>

Prior to the American War, then, Sharp's writings reveal a clear tension between his abhorrence of slavery and his support for colonial rights. In the American colonies, Sharp was convinced that slaveholding, as a contravention of the law of liberty, significantly undermined the legitimacy of colonists' claims to political autonomy. As he wrote to a Quaker friend in New Jersey, he was acutely aware of "the Great Impediment which the Toleration of Domestik slavery must necessarily occasion to the Arguments of those who are desirous to vindicate the Natural Rights of the American Subjects."<sup>70</sup> In the end, however, Sharp's antislavery convictions were not strong enough to outweigh his

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<sup>68</sup> Sharp, A Declaration of the People's Natural Right, 27. Sharp, A Short Sketch of Temporary Regulations, xxxvii.

<sup>69</sup> Edmund Burke, Speech of Edmund Burke, Esq. On Moving His Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies, March 22, 1775, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: J. Dodsley, 1775), 49.

<sup>70</sup> Sharp to Samuel Allinson, Old Jewry, 28 July 1774, D3549, 13/1/A7, GRO. Emphasis in original (N.B.: Sharp had a penchant for underlining words when writing longhand. All underlining in citations from Sharp in this chapter are from the original). Here, Sharp is paraphrasing a passage he wrote in A Declaration Concerning a People's Natural Right, 28.



belief that Westminster had no right to impose its will in matters of internal colonial governance. Because “the pernicious practice of Slave holding [is] tolerated by distinct Laws of their own,” Sharp told Prime Minister Lord North in 1772, it “cannot, with propriety, fall under the Consideration of the British Parliament: for I am well aware that no Parliament can have a just right to enact Laws for places it does not represent.”<sup>71</sup>

Yet though neither the British parliament nor British courts had any right to end slavery in the colonies, it was within their jurisdiction to abolish the practice in Britain itself. For Sharp, abrogating slavery at home was not simply a moral and legal imperative: it also had a significant bearing on the nation’s prosperity and security. Having witnessed firsthand the brutality that masters were capable of inflicting on their slaves, Sharp frequently cautioned that allowing slaveholding in Britain “may in time prove even dangerous to the community” by “strengthening the power of rich and overgrown subjects.”<sup>72</sup> This would both embolden potential oligarchs and habituate ordinary Britons to the exercise of arbitrary power at home. The combination of these factors, Sharp feared, could subvert the constitutional balance and trample on liberties of British subjects everywhere. Sharp expressed this fear particularly poignantly in his 1769 essay *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery; or of admitting the Least Claim of Private Property in the persons of Men in England*:

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<sup>71</sup> Sharp to Lord North, 18 February 1772, cited in Hoare, Memoirs of Granville Sharp, 79. Sharp reiterates this statement almost verbatim in Sharp to Benezet, 14 May 1772, in Hoare, Memoirs of Granville Sharp, 99. For more on Sharp’s dilemma between opposing slavery and supporting the political rights of colonists, see Brown, Moral Capital, 161-71.

<sup>72</sup> Sharp, A Representation of the Injustice, 51, 99. Sharp had a number of encounters with slave owners in Britain that left very negative impressions. Collectively, these helped convince him of the destructive effects of unchecked power. In his biography of Sharp, Edward Lascelles portrays Sharp’s opposition to slaveholding as largely stemming from a personal animus towards slave owners, including Lisle and Kerr. The former of these men had initially challenged Sharp to a duel in 1772 to settle the Somersett affair. See Lascelles, Granville Sharp, 88.

if such practices are permitted much longer with impunity, the evil will take root; precedent and customs will soon be pleaded in its behalf... the least toleration of Slavery, or the allowing of private property in the persons of men, will be liable in time, to introduce such a general bondage of common people.<sup>73</sup>

In worrying about the political repercussions of slaveholding, Sharp joined Edmund Burke and a growing number of Britons in the decade after the Seven Years' War in voicing concern over the potentially corrupting effects of imperial power. However, though Burke and Sharp's warnings about the domestic impact of empire were similar *in kind*, the two men's initial responses to such worries were diametrically opposite. Whereas Burke protested "geographic morality," and sought to erase the legal bifurcation between Britain and her overseas possessions, Sharp worked hard to establish a more formal and durable separation between the two. For Burke, Britain could only be saved from foreign ills by cutting them off at their source. For Sharp, Britain could only be saved through isolation. To be sure, these disparate positions largely resulted from the different circumstances of imperial rule in the East and West Indies: Burke was attacking a company of merchants whose *raison d'être* was profit-making; Sharp was defending the rights of elected assemblies. Yet the theories developed by each man were in response to the same set of underlying questions: What are the moral obligations of empire? Could they be enforced by a central government? How could Britain safeguard itself against harmful consequences of imperial expansion? Though Burke and Sharp's solutions differed, they each saw these problems through the same paradigm: that of an incongruity between the moral and legal standards applied in the metropole, and those in effect in the rest of the empire.

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<sup>73</sup> Sharp, *A Representation of the Injustice*, 92, 99.

Nowhere is Sharp's initial goal of erecting barriers between colonial and metropolitan laws more apparent than in his involvement in the 1772 trial of the ex-slave James Somersett. In 1769, Somersett was brought from Massachusetts to England by his owner Charles Stewert. He escaped Stewert's custody in 1771, but was soon caught, re-enslaved, and placed aboard a ship bound for Jamaica. For Sharp and other opponents of slavery, Somersett's situation provided an ideal opportunity to test the common law principle that slavery on English soil was illegal in all its forms. From February to May 1772, Chief Justice Mansfield heard arguments for and against Somersett's freedom. In June, he delivered his highly anticipated ruling. Slavery, Mansfield decreed, was "so odious" and "of such a nature" that only a statute explicitly permitting it in England could render it lawful.<sup>74</sup> Since no such legislation existed, Mansfield's decision effectively made slavery illegal on English soil. The verdict, though somewhat ambiguous, was celebrated as evidence of Britain's commitment to freedom. To many observers, it reinforced the defence of liberty as a demarcating tenet of British national identity.<sup>75</sup>

Historians have tended to portray the Somersett Case as a landmark event in the rise of both British antislavery and British humanitarianism more generally. This celebratory interpretation, however, has obscured the fact that the primary motive of Sharp and others in securing Somersett's freedom (like that of Jonathon Strong years earlier) was to prevent colonial vices such as slaveholding from entering into Britain

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<sup>74</sup> Cited in David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 473.

<sup>75</sup> Srividhya Swaminathan shows how those who wanted to keep slavery out of Britain interpreted Mansfield's ambiguous ruling through "the logos of liberty." She also traces how they were subsequently able to amplify the decision into a national principle. See Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 86-100.

itself.<sup>76</sup> “I am far from having any particular Esteem for the Negroes,” Sharp wrote to a friend shortly after the trial, “but our West India[n] Slave holders are incurably obstinate... If they carry their point this Nation will inevitably become as base, wicked, and tyrannical as our colonies.” The rest of Somersett’s legal team shared this anxiety. The young lawyer John Alleyne argued that “The horrid cruelties, scarce credible in recital perpetuated in America, might by allowance of slaves among us, be introduced here.” Francis Hargrave, whose lengthy legal career began with the Somersett case, adamantly denied that parliament’s “*implied* authoriz[ation]... of slavery *there* [in the Americas], includes permission of slavery *here*.” Like Alleyne, he warned that if slavery were tolerated in England its “horrid train of evils” could also be “lawfully imported into this country.” Tapping into nationalistic prejudices, Hargrave further wrote that Somersett’s defeat would open the door to immigration of slaves not only from the British West Indies, but also from “other European nations... from Poland, Russia, Spain, and Turkey, from the coast of Barbary, from the Western and Eastern coasts of Africa.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Prince Hoare’s biography of Sharp provides a series of primary sources that collectively illuminate this and other aspects of Sharp’s thinking in the lead up to and during the Somersett case (Hoare, Memoirs of Granville Sharp, 69-94). The goal of keeping slavery “beyond the line” is well covered in the works of Seymour Drescher, including: Seymour Drescher, Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 25-49; Seymour Drescher, Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 66-87; and Seymour Drescher, The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 19-20, 75-76. A recent interpretation of the Somersett case as strengthening divisions between metropolitan and colonial law is presented in Srividhya Swaminathan, Debating the Slave Trade, 86-100.

<sup>77</sup> Sharp to Jacob Bryant, Old Jewry, 19 October 1772, found in D3549, 13/1/B40, GRO; “The horrid cruelties...” cited in Schama, Rough Crossings, 58; Francis Hargrave, An Argument in the Case of James Sommersett a Negro, Lately Determined by the Court of King's Bench: Wherein It Is Attempted to Demonstrate the Present Unlawfulness of Domestic Slavery in England (London: 1772), 67, 11. These comments are similar to those of Wilberforce two decades later: if abolition were not enacted, he told the House of Commons, “arbitrary power could be bought there by any one, who could buy a slave.” Wilberforce, 2 April 1791, quoted in Clarkson, History, vol. 2: 355.

While Sharp's principal fear was that the presence of slavery in Britain would advance oligarchy and undermine the constitution, his writings during the 1770s also contain a significant xenophobic undertone. As he sometimes suggested in private correspondence, Sharp feared that the arrival of large numbers of slaves accompanying their masters into Britain would lead to miscegenation and a dilution of racial purity. A telling indication of Sharp's views on these issues can be found in his extensive marginalia on a 1772 tract by Edward Long. Long was a prominent absentee slave owner who believed in polygenesis and the biological inferiority of Africans and their creole descendants. Supposing that a victory for Somerset would lead to the mass immigration of freedom-seeking blacks into Britain, Long worried about the potential sexual partners who would now be available for "the lower class of women in *England*, [who] are remarkably fond of the blacks for reasons too brutal to mention." Since these women "generally have a numerous brood,... in the course of a few generations... this alloy may spread extensively, as to reach the middle, and then the higher orders of people, till the whole nation resembles the *Portuguese* and *Moriscos* in complexion of skin and baseness of mind."<sup>78</sup> Instead of rejecting Long's premise, Sharp agreed with the imbedded assumption of white superiority, writing that "the Contamination among the Creoles is not unlike what the Author here describes." "Therefore," he proceeded, "as a West India planter, he [Long] has no right to taunt our English Women for loving the Blacks."<sup>79</sup> Essentially, Sharp co-opted Long's racial prejudices to advance his own argument about preventing slave owners from being allowed to bring their slaves with them across the

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<sup>78</sup> Edward Long, *Candid Reflections Upon the Judgement Lately Awarded by the Court of King's Bench, in Westminster-Hall, on What Is Commonly Called the Negroe-Cause* (London: T. Lowndes, 1772), citations on 48 and 49. The copy containing Sharp's annotations is located in the Beinecke Library, Yale University, Ntg45 G5 772L.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

Atlantic. Opposite positions on the freedom of blacks in Britain, in this case, stemmed at least partly from the same motive of maintaining racial purity. Among other things, this confluence speaks to the pervasiveness of fears of racial “contamination” well prior to the rise of scientific racism in the mid-1800s.<sup>80</sup>

By interpreting Mansfield’s decision as a *carte-blanche* prohibition on slaveholding in England, Sharp and his allies reinforced a moral and legal separation between the nation and its colonies. In their view, the verdict kept Britain an island of liberty in an ocean of slavery. Their reading of Mansfield’s judgment was in keeping with longstanding assumptions about colonial degeneracy and difference. As Seymour Drescher has shown, New World slave societies had since their inception been “‘peculiar’ institutions in relation to the metropolitan societies from which they sprung... economically, politically, and socially anomalous.” Even in the late eighteenth century, “slavery remained far more a geographically than racially conceived system.”<sup>81</sup> From this *longue duree* perspective, it was West Indian planters who were acting as innovators by trying to obtain legal permission to bring their slaves into England; Sharp and his colleagues, in their own self-assessment, were simply defending the *status quo*. Further, they went to great lengths to assure colonists that a favourable ruling would be delimited

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<sup>80</sup> Much research remains to be done on the persistence of xenophobia within the antislavery movement following the Somerset Case. An interesting place to start would be with a 1803 manuscript by James Duncan[?] entitled “Heads of a plan for effectually clearing this Country of Blacks, &ca., and for the Prohibition of their importation in the future.” Duncan, a supporter of abolition, proposed deporting blacks already in Britain to Nova Scotia, as well as the levying of a tax on new immigrants that would effectively preclude resettlement. See James Duncan, “Heads of a plan for effectually clearing this Country of Blacks, &ca., and for the Prohibition of their importation in the future,” M-2276, f. 22, WCL. Preventing Africans and those of African descent from entering Britain remained a concern for Sharp as well, and he repeatedly urged Wilberforce during the 1790s to amend his Foreign Slave Bills to include a clause revoking the ability of colonial governors to sign waivers allowing masters’ to bring slaves with them into Britain (thereby creating exemptions to the Mansfield ruling).

<sup>81</sup> Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery*, 13, 16.

to blacks in Britain only. When Long suggested in his 1772 tract that the end goal of Somersett's team was to abolish slavery throughout the empire, Sharp protested vehemently in the margins against such "an unjust insinuation."<sup>82</sup>

It is somewhat paradoxical, then, that the precedent setting case that secured the manumission of blacks in Britain also served to strengthen colonial slavery. By denying slaveholding at home, Mansfield implicitly sanctioned it abroad. Both the verdict and the discourse surrounding the Somersett trial consigned slavery to the periphery of empire, thereby reassuring most Britons that slavery was a colonial rather than a national issue. Though Britain benefitted economically from the Atlantic slave system, Britons in the years following the Somersett verdict could be confident that slavery had no direct bearing on *their* moral character. More than anything, it was this sense of separateness—rooted in the physical and perspectival distance between colony and metropole—that prevented the development of a widespread antislavery movement prior to the 1780s. For Britons to recognize the slave system as a national iniquity, they first had to identify their slave colonies as extensions of the nation itself. They had to perceive the boundary between colony and metropole as porous, not stable, and needed to consider the existing legal bifurcation anomalous, not natural.

### ***Rethinking Mansfield after America***

The event that caused Granville Sharp to reassess the relationship between nation and empire, and that led him to see the Atlantic slave system as a national instead of a colonial evil, was the American War. The evolution of Sharp's thinking during the years

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<sup>82</sup> See marginalia in Long, *Candid Reflections*, 3, Ntg45 G5 772L, Beinecke.

of combat paralleled that of many other Britons, for whom the war proved that what occurred in the empire could have deep and multifaceted domestic ramifications. The deaths of soldiers, the mushrooming of the national debt, the decline in trade, the fear of French invasion, and many other factors all helped prove that Britain's own welfare and security were closely tied to the welfare and security of its empire. These and numerous other consequences of the conflict produced a psychological shift that led more Britons than ever before to begin seeing the colonies as "British space." By extension, it created a paradigm through which slavery and the slave trade could be seen as national issues, and could therefore be considered as falling under the jurisdiction of national laws.<sup>83</sup>

One important way in which the American War broke down cognitive distinctions between metropole and periphery is through how the conflict came to be seen as divine retribution for national sins. As chapter five explores in greater detail, the elastic definition of "national sins" expanded significantly during the conflict, as it came to include more and more examples of ungodly behaviour by Britons throughout the globe. Sermons delivered on national Fast Days and Days of Thanksgiving in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, such as that delivered by Gilbert Wakefield in July 1784, frequently condemned both slavery in the Atlantic and injustices in India.<sup>84</sup> For Sharp in particular, a providential interpretation of the War was a major factor behind his shift from defending the rights of colonists to own slaves in the early 1770s to denying them

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<sup>83</sup> The role of the American War in catalyzing British antislavery has long been recognized by historians, but has been most thoroughly argued in Brown, *Moral Capital*. For the alternative view, that the American War actually delayed the emergence of British abolitionism, see Drescher, *Abolition*, 109-14.

<sup>84</sup> For Wakefield, see pages 36-37. For sermons and the scope of "national sins," see Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), chapter three.



this right after the conflict. Though he had always viewed slavery as a potential source of divine vengeance, Sharp's warnings grew increasingly dire in the lead up to armed struggle. In January 1774, he wrote to his American counterpart Anthony Benezet that "we have the greatest reason to expect some dreadful Judgment on the whole Kingdom for such monstrous wickedness [slavery]." Sharp shared the same prediction with Lord Dartmouth eleven months later: "Great Britain and her Colonies seem to be preparing themselves for mutual destruction," he informed his lordship, "which alas is too apparently merited on both sides: for such monstrous oppression and national wickedness cannot escape a national punishment."<sup>85</sup> That Sharp quite literally underlined "national wickedness" and "national punishment" in his letter to Dartmouth emphasizes his heightened recognition of British complicity in—and by extension responsibility for—the Atlantic slave system.

The outbreak of hostilities in 1775 appeared to confirm Sharp's predictions about national decline and imperial ruin, as well as the culpability of the metropole in sanctioning slavery abroad. In a 1776 tract entitled *The Law of Retribution, or, A Serious Warning to Great Britain and her Colonies*, Sharp made his clearest statement to-date about slavery being not just a colonial evil. "The horrible guilt... which is incurred by Slave-dealing and Slave-holding," he wrote, is something in which "the whole BRITISH

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<sup>85</sup> Sharp to Benezet, London, 7 January 1774, in D3549, 13/1/B19, GRO and Sharp to Dartmouth, Old Jewry, 4 December 1774, in D3549, 13/1/D3, GRO. Sharp's growing providentialism was reinforced by the missives he received from Pennsylvania Quakers such as Benezet. Later in 1774, for instance, he received a letter from Benjamin Rush in which Rush described Britain's current troubles with its American colonies as a "just punishment from Almighty God for the enormous Wickednesses which are openly avowed & practiced throughout the British Empire; amongst which the pubick Encouragement given to the Slave Trade by the Legislature at Home, and the Toleration of Slavery & Oppression in the Colonies abroad, are far from being the least." Rush to Sharp, 27 July 1774, D3549, 13/1/R13, GRO.

EMPIRE is involved!”<sup>86</sup> Having witnessed God’s wrath, and having reflected upon what he saw as the dangerous consequences of tolerating slavery, Sharp abandoned his earlier defense of colonial autonomy. In the decades following the conflict, he would consistently assert that colonial assemblies that permit slaveholding “violate all the constitutional principles” and have “so notoriously corrupted” English law that they “forfeit all title to that free British Constitution.”<sup>87</sup> The completeness of Sharp’s reversal is underscored by the fact that he was the only founding member of the SEAST to push for slave emancipation, not just for the abolition of the slave trade. It is this progressive, postwar agenda that historians have tended to focus on, as opposed to Sharp’s more limited and cautious political aims in the years surrounding the Somerset trial.

Another major way in which the American War led Sharp to view slavery as a national crime—and one that led him to reassess the scope of the Mansfield ruling—has to do with the nature of political rhetoric that attended the conflict. Specifically, the metaphors of freedom and slavery that permeated Anglo-American antagonism from the early 1770s onward could not always be dissociated from their literal meanings.<sup>88</sup> In the years surrounding the outbreak of fighting, Sharp frequently pointed out the hypocrisy of

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<sup>86</sup> Granville Sharp, The Law of Retribution, or, a Serious Warning to Great Britain and Her Colonies, Founded on Unquestionable Examples of God’s Temporal Vengeance against Tyrants, Slave-Holders, and Oppressors (London: W. Richardson, 1776), 49. Emphasis in original. Interestingly, it was also in 1776 that the first motion against the slave trade was brought before parliament. David Hartley, MP for Hull, claimed that the trade was “contrary to the laws of God and the rights of man.” Hartley’s proposal got virtually no traction, and he himself was only a minor player in the abolitionist movement the following decade. Citation from James Walvin, An African’s Life: The Life and Times of Olaudah Equiano, 1745-1797 (London: Cassell, 1998), 177. For more on Hartley, see pages 210-12.

<sup>87</sup> Sharp, “An Address to the Colonial Assemblies of the several West India Islands but more particularly to that of Jamaica,” Draft, 8 March 1797, 3826, 13/3/55, GRO.

<sup>88</sup> For some of the uses of slavery as metaphor in the revolutionary era, see Robin Blackburn, The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848 (London: Verso Books, 1988), 89-93. Also see, Anthony Page, “‘A Species of Slavery’: Richard Price’s Rational Dissent and Antislavery,” Slavery & Abolition 32 no. 1 (2011): 56-59.

colonists who demanded liberty while owning slaves. As illustrated in chapter one, Sharp was not alone in highlighting this paradox.<sup>89</sup> “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps of liberty among the drivers of negroes?,” wondered Samuel Johnson on the eve of war.<sup>90</sup> According to the abolitionist James Stephen, patriot leaders were not ideological crusaders, but were instead “slave-driving champions of liberty and justice.”<sup>91</sup> Such mocking appellations were common among pro-Government polemicists in particular as they sought to discredit the American cause by eliding the distinction between political and chattel slavery.

For most patriots, accusations of hypocrisy coming from Britain rang hollow. They retorted with their own denunciations of their parent country’s double standards, seeing Britain’s free soil principle as nothing more than an attempt to mask the nation’s status as a beneficiary of the Atlantic slave economy. Celebrating the Somersett verdict simply propagated a national cognitive dissonance, and therefore deserved censure. “*Pharisaical Britain!*,” wrote Benjamin Franklin to *The London Chronicle*, as he watched the public react to the Mansfield’s ruling from the nation’s capital: “to pride thyself in setting free a *single Slave* that happens to land on thy coasts, while thy Merchants in all thy ports encouraged by thy laws to continue a commerce whereby so many *hundreds of thousands* are dragged into a slavery.”<sup>92</sup> Other Americans highlighted how the crown had ignored recent petitions from northern colonies to prohibit the future importation of

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<sup>89</sup> See pages 72-74.

<sup>90</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Taxation no Tyranny: An Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress* (London: T. Cadell, 1775), 89.

<sup>91</sup> Thomas Day, *Fragment of an Original Letter on the Slavery of the Negroes* (London: John Stockdale, 1775), 33; James Stephen, *The Memoirs of James Stephen: Written by Himself for the Use of His Children* (London: Hogarth Press, 1954), 259. For other examples of the language of hypocrisy in British attacks on American slaveholders, see Greene, *Evaluating Empire*, 176-97, 204-05.

<sup>92</sup> *The London Chronicle*, 20 June 1772. Emphasis in original.

slaves. For many conscientious Britons like Sharp, this unresponsiveness underscored how their nation was proactively involved in promoting the slave trade. Among the growing number of Britons who recognized the double-standards inherent in their government's position was Edmund Burke. In response to Dunmore's decree promising freedom to slaves if they joined British forces, Burke noted that the offer "would come rather oddly, shipped to them in an African vessel... with a cargo of three hundred Angola negroes."<sup>93</sup>

As Matthew Mason has illustrated, the competition between Britain and America over which nation was a better standard bearer for the ideals of liberty and justice continued long after fighting was over.<sup>94</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the war, however, efforts to highlight their former opponent's hypocrisy forced both Britons and Americans to confront the ideological inconsistency of their own country's position on slavery.<sup>95</sup> When the moral philosopher and political radical Richard Price wrote in late 1784 that he "can recommend to them [Americans] the example of my own country.- In *Britain*, a *Negro* becomes a *freeman* the moment he sets foot on *British* ground," his words

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<sup>93</sup> Edmund Burke, *Conciliation with the Colonies*, 88.

<sup>94</sup> Matthew Mason, "The Battle of Slaveholding Liberators: Great Britain, the United States, and Slavery in the Early Nineteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 59, no. 3 (July 2002): 665-86 and *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>95</sup> A number of pro-British tracts in the immediate aftermath of the conflict focused on the discrepancy between Americans' libertarian rhetoric and slaveholding. For a particularly illuminating piece, see John Lowe, *Liberty or Death. A tract. By which is vindicated the obvious practicability of trading to the coasts of Guinea, for its natural products...* (Manchester: J. Harrop, 1783), which employs Patrick Henry's revolutionary battle cry to promote abolition. See also David Cooper, *A Serious Address to the Rulers of America on the Inconsistency of their Conduct Respecting Slavery, forming a Contrast between the Encroachment of England on American Liberty and American Injustice in tolerating Slavery* (London: J. Phillips, 1783), a tract that Clarkson stated "... excited a more than usual attention to the case of the oppressed people." Clarkson, *History*, vol. 1: 189-90.

provoked angry counter-accusations throughout the colonies.<sup>96</sup> The response of the American statesman Henry Laurens to Price's "advice" is typical of the reaction of many colonists. "If I did not know Dr. Price to be a Man of Candour and Sincerity," Laurens wrote, "I should suppose this intended as bitter Sarcasm. Britain is the fountain from whence we have been supplied with Slaves upwards of a century. Britain passed Acts of Parliament for encouraging and establishing the Slave Trade, even for monopolizing it in her own provinces.... Shame and Disgrace to Britain in one case or the other or in both." Thomas Jefferson likely had a similar reaction when Price wrote to him in 1785 feigning surprise that "the people who have been struggling so earnestly to save *themselves* from slavery are very ready to enslave *others*."<sup>97</sup> Such accusations of hypocrisy and competitive humanitarian rhetoric closely resembled that which had infused Anglo-American antagonism in the lead up to and during the revolutionary war itself.

Despite urging Americans to adopt the principle enshrined in the Mansfield decision, Price was not blind to his own country's double standards. Citing Britain's supposed commitment to liberty, he joined Granville Sharp and a growing number of his compatriots in arguing that there was a moral imperative to make colonial realities conform more closely to metropolitan ideals. In this way, notes Anthony Page, Price "helped to turn cynicism about American drivers of slaves yelping for liberty into

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<sup>96</sup> Richard Price, Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the Means of Making It a Benefit to the World (London: T. Cadell, 1785), 84.

<sup>97</sup> Henry Laurens to Price, Charleston, S.C., 1 February 1785, in Richard Price, The Correspondence of Richard Price: February 1786-February 1791, ed. D.O. Thomas (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), vol. 2: 262; Price to Thomas Jefferson, Newington Green, 2 July 1785, in Price, The Correspondence of Richard Price vol. 2: 289-90. Emphasis in original. For the connection between Price's understanding of chattel slavery and slavery as a political metaphor, see Page, "'A Species of Slavery,'" 56-58. Though he himself had purchased hundreds of slaves over previous decades, Laurens, a South Carolinian and the Fifth President of the Continental Congress, opposed the slave trade by the cessation of hostilities in 1783.

reflection upon Britain's role in Atlantic slavery."<sup>98</sup> Post-1783, national pride also helped drive the two countries' competing claims to be the true champion of liberty. Reports of antislavery legislation in northern states regularly appeared in the British press, and such coverage led opponents of the slave trade in Britain to urge their countrymen not to be outdone by their recent foes.<sup>99</sup> William Dickson, a former British official in Barbados, voiced his support for abolition by pleading, "Let it no longer be said that Great Britain, in point of justice and humanity, is inferior to the states of America." The Dean of Middleham wrote that "to the America States it [abolition] would afford a proof, that we are no less friendly to liberty than they."<sup>100</sup>

The nationalistic rhetoric of slavery and freedom that continued to permeate Anglo-Atlantic political discourse in the aftermath of the American War tied colonial slavery to Britain itself to a previously unprecedented degree. Most significantly, American patriots no longer allowed Britons to make claims of moral superiority based on the limited scope of their free soil principle. Introspective Britons followed this lead by censuring parliament and the nation as a whole for complicity in what occurred in

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 56. Price was also acutely aware and critical of British excesses in India, writing in 1776 that "ENGLISHMEN, actuated by the love of plunder and spirit of conquest, have depopulated whole kingdoms, and ruined millions of innocent people by the most infamous oppression and rapacity." Richard Price, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Jusitic and Policy of the War with America* (Dublin: W. Kidd, 1776), 134.

<sup>99</sup> From 1783 onward, for instance, the "News from Away" section of *The Gentleman's Magazine* featured regular reports of antislavery petitions from Quakers, as well as laws to restrict slavery at the state level. Nationally, Robin Blackburn notes that British reportage focused more on the grand denunciations of slavery contained in proposed legislation than the inability of Congress to pass such measures into law. This bias further perpetuated the view that America was outpacing Britain in promoting liberty and justice. See Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 126-28.

<sup>100</sup> William Dickson, *Letters on Slavery*, by William Dickson, Formerly Private Secretary to the Late Hon. Edward Hay, Governor of Barbadoes (London: J. Phillips, 1789), 100. Robert Boucher Nickolls, *Letter to the Treasurer of the Society Instituted for the Purpose of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 4th ed. (London: J. Phillips, 1788), 28-29. On the competitive libertarianism between Britons and Americans in this period, see P.J. Marshall, *Remaking the British Atlantic: The United States and the British Empire after American Independence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 203-11.

West Africa and the British West Indies. “There is no nation whatsoever so absurdly inconsistent,” the Evangelical reformer William Thornton told his close friend Granville Sharp. “‘Every man is free upon English ground.’ These islands [the West Indies] either do or do not belong to England; if they do, no power inherent in Parliament can possibly grant to particular subjects of England a dispensation to act in perfect opposition to the established laws of the land, and it is a childish play upon words to argue on the contrary...”<sup>101</sup> On the one hand, abolitionists such as Thornton, Sharp, and Price increasingly cited the slave trade and colonial slavery as national crimes, making it more and more difficult for metropolitans to deny their implicit support of the Atlantic slave system. On the other hand, they cast ending slavery and the slave trade as sources of future national pride. In advancing both arguments, these and other antislavery advocates made the case that laws and practices overseas had a direct bearing on the moral status of the nation.

To be sure, a xenophobic desire to keep Africans out of Britain persisted into the postwar period. But instead of calls to insulate Britain from slaves and slavery, a much more dominant strand of antislavery discourse now focused on ending the discrepancy between the proscription of slavery at home and its prevalence in the nation’s sugar islands. This rhetoric about the moral obligation to end legal bifurcations between colony and metropole came from multiple and diverse source. By enslaving tens of thousands of Africans annually, the Evangelical Robert Thornton declared Britons “guilty... of a contradiction.” Henry Dundas, a tepid supporter of gradual abolition at best, admitted

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<sup>101</sup> William Thornton to Granville Sharp, Tortola, 5 May 1792, in C.M. Harris, ed., Papers of William Thornton, Volume One: 1781-1802 (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 182.

there was “something anomalous that the people of this country, who were themselves free, should carry on a slave trade with Africans.”<sup>102</sup> P.W. Hall asserted that “the same laws that rule at home ought to reign throughout all the British dominions,” and J. B. Moreton claimed that “blacks in the British colonies are British subjects, therefore British subjects should no more be slaves in her colonies than in Britain.” Casting his gaze simultaneously to the East and West Indies, the author Niel [sic] Douglas rhetorically asked “How long then shall we have two consciences, two measures, two scales; one in our own favour, one for the ruin of our neighbour, both equally false?”<sup>103</sup> The Rev. Samuel Disney put his appeal more poetically though no less directly:

O sons of freedom! equalize your laws,  
Be all consistent- plead the Negro’s cause;  
That all the nations in your code may see  
The British Negro, like the Briton, free.”<sup>104</sup>

Whether calls to eradicate legal divisions between Britain and British territories abroad represented a deeply held conviction, a rhetorical strategy, or something in-between depended on the person from whom they came. Granville Sharp, for instance, made legal uniformity a guiding principle of his antislavery activism from the mid-1770s onward. Other abolitionists readily accepted that ending the slave trade was a much more feasible and prudent goal than ending slavery itself. For them, highlighting double standards between the metropole and periphery of empire served as a useful way to draw attention to Britain’s complicity in the slave economy. It also underscored the nation’s moral failing in not having addressed either colonial slavery or the slave trade up to that

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<sup>102</sup> Robert Thornton, 25 April 1792, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 29: 1245; Henry Dundas, 2 April 1792, in *Ibid.*: 1108.

<sup>103</sup> Niel Douglas, *Thoughts on Modern Politics* (London: Button, 1793), 92.

<sup>104</sup> Hall, *Thoughts*, 188; Moreton, *West India Customs and Manners*, 164; Rev. Samuel Disney, “Epilogue to The Padlock,” in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 62 (June 1792): 557.



point. As we have seen, condemning the legal incongruity between Britain and its imperial possessions was diametrically opposite to the approach employed by Sharp and his colleagues during the *Somerset* trial in 1772. As such, it marked a major evolution in antislavery thought, goals, and strategy within a very short period of time.

### *Conclusion*

As British antislavery became increasingly focused on enslavement beyond Britain's shores in the decade after American independence, the movement's aims and arguments came to closely align with those advanced by Edmund Burke in the India context. Specifically, many abolitionists echoed (in substance if not terminology) Burke's warnings against "geographic morality," and the continued legal bifurcation between Britain and its overseas jurisdictions. In this sense, antislavery activists during the 1780s and early 1790s contributed to a growing tendency among British humanitarians to see the empire—not just the nation—as the logical remit of their reforming ambitions. This expanded field of vision stemmed largely from the rising view that non-Europeans were "subjects" of the British Empire, and that this status granted them at least a limited set of rights, while simultaneously placing certain responsibilities on imperial legislators to promote their welfare. But it also emerged, in the case of Edmund Burke, Granville Sharp, and many other reformers, from a belief that the only way to preserve British values and institutions was to stop imperial iniquities at their source. In their view, it was both immoral and dangerous to enforce a different set of laws abroad as at home.

By framing their critiques of empire in terms of legal jurisdiction, Burke and Sharp did more than simply diagnose a central problem with the way in which Britain was conducting its imperial affairs. Namely, they also offered a blueprint for reform. If the problems of empire were caused by a lack of British laws overseas, then the solution going forward would have to be a more vigorous application of British laws in British territory abroad. Achieving this goal would require expanding the power and reach of metropolitan institutions into the periphery of empire to a hitherto unprecedented degree. Burke and Sharp's efforts to end legal incongruities within Britain's imperial orbit, therefore, were intertwined with a vision of empire that was more centralized and authoritarian than most Britons prior to the American War could have imagined possible. The political implications of this imperial vision that Burke, Sharp, and other reformers advocated is the subject of the following chapter.

## Chapter Four

### *Altruism and Authority: The Imperial Politics of Slavery Reform*

On 14 November 1775, an unknown resident of London wrote an eleven-page letter to Benjamin Franklin, signing the missive simply “G.B.” The anonymous author strongly opposed slavery and supported conciliation with the American colonies. In his letter, he relayed a scheme recently proposed by Hull MP David Hartley designed to advance both causes. Hartley, also a critic of the Atlantic slave system and of Britain’s decision to take up arms against its own colonists, sought to end the two injustices with a single, straightforward proposition: if Americans agreed to grant slaves accused of crimes a trial by jury, then parliament would repeal all colonial legislation passed over the previous decade. This would be followed by Act of Oblivion to forgive and forget the recent hostilities. Hartley’s “plan of mutual concession” would benefit both parties, G.B. claimed, by eliminating underlying grievances that had soured metropole-colony relations since the end of the Seven Years’ War. For Americans, the revocation of hated statutes such as the Stamp Act (1765), Townshend Acts (1767), and “Intolerable Acts” (1774) would lead to a “restoration of their condition in 1763,” when colonial assemblies enjoyed significant *de facto* autonomy in matters of internal governance. For British statesmen, trying slaves by jury would re-affirm parliamentary supremacy, as conforming with the edict would amount to a tacit acknowledgment by colonists of Britain’s *de jure* sovereignty over them. As G.B. predicted to Franklin, Hartley’s plan would “re-establish peace and harmony with your parent state.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G.B. to Benjamin Franklin, London, 14 November 1775, in Henry Clinton Papers, vol. 12, f.7, WCL.

Hartley's proposal was simultaneously too simple and too quixotic to work. As the relationship between Britain and its colonies rapidly deteriorated in late 1775 and early 1776, such a scheme would have appeared out-dated almost immediately after it was conceived. The unlikelihood of success, however, did not deter either Hartley or G.B. from imagining the favourable results of the proposed compromise, the most significant of which were a cessation of hostilities and the creation of a bridgehead for abolition in the Americas. Indeed, both Harley and G.B. saw the introduction of trial by jury for slaves as initiating a process that would culminate in the abrogation of slavery throughout the thirteen colonies. According to G.B., it was "the first step, to correct a vice, which has spread thro' the Continent of North America." Emancipation itself would have been proposed directly, he continued, were it not for "the unavoidable length of settling such a point." Looking at the future with optimism, Hartley imagined a day when "the only contention henceforward between Great Britain and America [would] be which can exceed the other, in zeal for establishing the fundamental rights of liberty to all mankind."<sup>2</sup>

Neither Hartley's plan nor G.B.'s letter had any discernable impact on Anglo-American relations; indeed, there is no evidence that Franklin even read or received G.B.'s missive.<sup>3</sup> But both documents are significant for a different reason. Namely, they each illuminate how early British antislavery was intrinsically connected to questions

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that it took a cryptic third party to relay Hartley's plan to Franklin and to sound out American interest, since Hartley and Franklin were friends and frequently corresponded about scientific matters throughout the 1770s. While it is possible that the two discussed this plan at some point, there is no archival evidence that such a conversation took place. How G.B.'s letter ended up in the papers of Henry Clinton is also unknown.

about the political structure of empire and the locus of sovereignty in the British Atlantic World. For G.B. and Hartley, nothing would have reaffirmed parliamentary right more than colonists submitting to a law that originated in Britain for the regulation of slavery. They saw—and believed that other Britons would also see—compliance with this single act as sufficient compensation for a failure to comply with a whole host of metropolitan legislation over the past decade. As both men recognized, discussions about reforming slavery not only revolved around questions of morality or economics: they were also a part of an ongoing struggle between colonial rights on the one hand and the ability of the British parliament to regulate empire on the other. Following American independence, slavery and abolition continued to serve as flashpoints in parliament's attempt to reign in the autonomy of colonials and colonial assemblies in the West Indies. In debates about slavery reform and the fate of the slave trade, contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic understood that what was at stake was nothing less than who had the right to govern the colonies.

Historians have paid relatively little attention to the concern with colonial autonomy that permeated abolitionist discourse during the 1780s and 1790s. Instead, they have tended to emphasise what antislavery activism revealed about expanding moral horizons and changing economic and cultural attitudes within Britain itself. This chapter offers a different focus by placing abolitionism at the heart of intra-imperial political conflict in the postwar era. It illustrates how many abolitionists cast projects to reduce, ameliorate, or eliminate slavery as means of helping metropolitan officials exert greater authority over the West Indian planter class. The use of altruistic ideals to actuate claims

to sovereignty abroad was a popular strategy in postwar Britain, as most of the nation's political class believed that the recent troubles with America would not have taken place if colonists had of been treated with less leniency prior to the outbreak of fighting. Further, it was widely assumed that the lack of oversight on plantations helped account for the intransigence of planter-dominated West Indian assemblies: as chapter two illustrated, many Britons believed that creole assemblymen had become habituated to minimal restraints on their estates, and that such autonomy produced a sense of entitlement that carried over into the political arena. This perceived correlation helped explain the failure of colonists to willingly submit to Whitehall on an array of issues ranging from the prohibition on trading with foreign nations to providing the Colonial Office with accurate statistical information on slave populations. Subjecting planters to enforceable regulations concerning the treatment of slaves, therefore, offered a potential remedy for colonial recalcitrance.

To be sure, not all Britons believed that American independence proved the need to tighten parliament's grip over its remaining Atlantic colonies. Attempts to regulate colonial slaveholding would raise potentially divisive constitutional questions about parliament's legislative remit. A number of imperial commentators bristled at the authoritarian implications of such legislation. Others believed that testing the limits of parliament's ability to pass laws pertaining to the internal affairs of its remaining colonies would be imprudent in the years immediately following the American War. This cautiousness explains in part why antislavery campaigners coalesced around the goal of abolishing the slave trade rather than slavery itself. Yet despite reservations, by the latter

1780s a general consensus had emerged that ameliorating slavery would have to go hand-in-hand with a more interventionist colonial policy by the British government. While both this assumption and its anti-colonial underpinnings were widely held within the antislavery movement, the connection between slavery reform and enhanced metropolitan authority was articulated most comprehensively by those who worked to channel antipathy towards the Atlantic slave system into a specific policy agenda. On the one hand, leading abolitionists with an eye to legislation and policy readily understood that implementing slavery reform would require enhanced administrative apparatuses in the British West Indies. On the other hand, they also recognized that highlighting this connection would make their case appealing to imperial officials concerned with giving teeth to metropolitan claims of sovereignty over the islands.

To illustrate the relationship between reforming slavery and reigning in the autonomy of slave owners, this chapter examines three influential abolitionists who each argued that improving slave conditions and abrogating the slave trade would require the proactive involvement of the home government. They are James Ramsay, the Anglican bishop Beilby Porteus, and the Evangelical lawyer James Stephen. Ramsay, Porteus, and Stephen were very different from many of the grassroots antislavery supporters studied in the first two chapters, as well as from the idealistic Granville Sharp: all three were staunch Anglicans, shared evangelical leanings, were well-connected in political circles, and held conservative social ideals. In short, they were central figures in the abolitionist “establishment,” and were generally focused more on changing imperial policy than stirring up grassroots opposition to the slave system. Ramsay, as we have seen, was the

public face of the abolitionist movement from 1784 to 1789; in private, he also imparted his first-hand knowledge of slave societies to an emerging antislavery leadership. One of Ramsay's most influential correspondents during these years was Porteus, the activist Bishop of Chester who in 1788 was transferred to the diocese of London. As a member of the House of Lords, Porteus worked closely with Stephen in crafting and promoting antislavery legislation once the latter returned from eleven years in St. Christopher in 1794. Stephen, whose encounters with slavery first led him to evangelicalism, would remain one of the antislavery movement's most important legal minds right up until his death in 1832. Through exploring how Ramsay, Porteus, and Stephen each interwove their opposition to slavery with a political vision of a centralized empire, this chapter illustrates how questions of authority and autonomy were never far from the surface in debate about the future of Britain's slave economy.

### ***James Ramsay and Imperial Sovereignty***

The connection between early antislavery and attempts to centralize imperial governance is nowhere more evident than in the writings of James Ramsay. As previously discussed, it was Ramsay's public and deeply personal confrontations with West Indian planters that shaped the initial parameters of the slave trade debate.<sup>4</sup> Equally significant, however, were Ramsay's behind-the-scenes contributions to abolitionism. In 1759, while serving as a naval surgeon in the Caribbean under then Vice-Admiral Charles Middleton, Ramsay boarded a nearby slave ship on which an unknown disease was raging. Risking his own health, he entered the slave hold to diagnose the problem, eventually leaving the crew with a detailed list of instructions for the care of the slaves

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<sup>4</sup> See pages 105-08.



for the remainder of the voyage. Ramsey's courage earned him the respect and eventual patronage of Middleton, who would go on to become one of the most influential Evangelicals in government circles and, in 1805, the First Lord of the Admiralty.<sup>5</sup> When Ramsay returned from Saint Christopher in 1781 after nearly nineteen years on the island, it was Middleton and his wife who welcomed him into their home in Teston, Maidstone. Shortly thereafter, the Middletons established Ramsay as vicar in the local parish.<sup>6</sup>

With encouragement and continued financial support from Lady Middleton in particular, Ramsay used his appointment at Teston to begin discussing his thoughts on slavery with the Middletons' frequent guests. By the mid-1780s he had become a sought-after consultant for many of those whose misgivings about slavery would soon lead them to take public action. "A pilgrimage to Teston," writes Christopher Brown, "became a rite of passage for the emerging abolitionist leadership."<sup>7</sup> Antislavery luminaries who paid a visit to Teston between 1784 and 1787 include, among others, Wilberforce, Clarkson, Hannah More, and Beilby Porteus. Presumably, Ramsay shared with his interlocutors his first-hand knowledge about the hardships and violence to which slaves were daily subjected. It is also likely that he talked about the lack of laws regulating slavery and the paltry number of British officials in the West Indies: in almost all his writings on slavery

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<sup>5</sup> On Charles Middleton, see John Talbott, The Pen and Ink Sailor: Charles Middleton and the King's Navy, 1778-1813 (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Folarin O. Shyllon, James Ramsay: The Unknown Abolitionist (Edinburgh: Canongate Publishing, 1977), 3. Though hagiographic in tone, Shyllon's book is the standard academic source on Ramsay. Unfortunately, the author misses Ramsay's unpublished manuscript discussed below, and fails to recognize Ramsay as the author of the Plan of Re-union between Great Britain and her Colonies (London: J. Murray, 1778).

Ramsay's writings prior to 1784 are, however, discussed in detail in Christopher L. Brown, Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 244-53. My analysis of Ramsay below is indebted to Brown's insights.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, Moral Capital, 377. Brown discusses the "Teston Circle" and their growing commitment to antislavery in Moral Capital, 341-52 and 376-77.

up to this point, Ramsay had found it impossible to disaggregate the violence of the institution from both the legal autonomy and political aspirations of the planter class. As he saw it, slaveholding was both a cause and a manifestation of attempts by West Indians to place themselves beyond the authority of the British parliament.

Ramsay's understanding of the connection between slavery, sovereignty, and the political structure of empire is most clearly articulated in an untitled essay he wrote during the early stages of the American War.<sup>8</sup> The exact date of the manuscript treatise is unknown: present-tense references to armed conflict indicate that it was penned after the Battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775, and the anonymous publication of much of the essay in 1778 proves that it must have been completed in draft form by that year.<sup>9</sup> In the preface to the 1778 publication, however, Ramsay wrote that "the following Plan" was "extracted from a manuscript on the improvement of the sugar-colonies, which the author has had in hand these ten years."<sup>10</sup> This comment suggests that work began as early as 1768. Regardless of when he actually started writing, Ramsay by late 1777 had produced a lengthy treatise that advanced two main arguments. The first hundred pages, under the heading "Of the Powers of Government to Improve the State of its Colonies," forcefully denounced American colonists for refusing to submit to British laws and

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<sup>8</sup> Ramsay, Untitled, date unknown, Add. Ms. 27621, BL.

<sup>9</sup> Sometime in 1778, Ramsay sent large excerpts of the manuscript to Beilby Porteus. The same excerpts, copied in the same hand, were also sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury in a letter dated 18 March 1778, thus narrowing the latest possible date of the manuscript's completion to early 1778. "Memorial suggesting motives for the improvement of the sugar colonies, particularly of the slaves employed in their culture, and offering reasons for encouraging the advancement of these last in social life and their conversion to Christianity; extracted from a manuscript composed on that subject by James Ramsay, Minister in the island of St. Christopher, and Author of a 'Plan of Reunion [sic] between Great Britain and her Colonies' published by Murray No 32 Fleet Street," 1778, Fulham Papers, vol. XX, ff.79-80, LPL; Unknown to Archbishop of Canterbury, 18 March 1778, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Papers, vol. 17, ff.221-23, LPL.

<sup>10</sup> Ramsay to Porteus, "Excerpt of a Manuscript from James Ramsay," 1778, Fulham Papers, vol. XX, ff.79-80, LPL.

directives. In this section, which vigorously defended the right of parliament to unilaterally impose legislation on the colonies, Ramsay laid out a theory of imperial governance in which political power axiomatically rested with the parent country. The final sixty pages, under the heading “Powers of Government exercised in improving the conditions of Colony and Slaves,” outlined how regulating slavery would help vitalizing British authority in its New World colonies. On balance, Ramsay’s manuscript reveals more concern over colonists’ refusal to abide by metropolitan legislation than it does the existence of slaves in their midst.<sup>11</sup>

The theory of imperial sovereignty that Ramsay delineated was rooted in an implicitly Hobbesian view of both government and international affairs. Without the direction of a strong, authoritative legislative body, Ramsay believed that all polities—including empires— would inevitably devolve into recurring power struggles among constituent factions or localities. “To gain the purposes of freedom, security, and strength,” therefore, “one Sovereign power must controul [sic] all, direct all, and command the force, and property of all, to general benefit.” Ramsay claimed that “the whole stream of history is in favour of this position.” He therefore predicted that the federalist experiment in America would create a situation not unlike that which existed in “the Gothic state of Europe,” when local barons were in a constant state of war with each other.<sup>12</sup> Just as regions and regional strongmen have no rights except those granted by the

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<sup>11</sup> All citations from Ramsay’s untitled manuscript are from Add. Ms. 27621, BL.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., citations on 72, 49, 46. Like Hobbes, Ramsay also believed that how a legislative authority first acquired political power (especially in composite kingdoms and other political unions) was inconsequential: what mattered was that the indivisibility of sovereignty be maintained. “It is not necessary to enquire, how this superior influence arises, at first, among equals, nor whether it has been tacitly permitted, or regularly yielded up by the others, or only boldly claimed, and impudently maintained by superior force, or managed by private interest or intrigue. It is sufficient, if there be a necessity for its

central government, Ramsay argued that colonies have “a subordinate interest only” within empires. Whereas Burke and Sharp believed that colonies deserved some input (if not necessarily the final say) in formulating imperial policy, Ramsay considered them mere “appendages” to Great Britain. They were thus to be “considered as farms belonging to the parent state” and treated accordingly.<sup>13</sup> Directly refuting the claims of American colonists, Ramsay stated that this subordinate status meant that it was “little necessary to have a particular representative from every significant corner of the state” sit in the imperial parliament in London. Specific sections on taxes and representation rebutted the fallacy that paying the former warranted the latter— taxation being a prerogative of the controlling authority and “a necessary appendage to sovereignty.”<sup>14</sup>

Ramsay’s manuscript offered more than just a description and explanation of Britain’s ongoing troubles with its American colonies. It also provided a prescription for preventing similar unrest in the future. To avoid further overt challenges to metropolitan authority, Ramsay wrote that “we must unhinge the present method of managing the colonies, or at least give things a new turn.” Above all, this meant ending the significant legislative autonomy to which colonial assemblies had become accustomed, since “nothing has so injured, and is likely to fritter down the strength and exertion of the British Empire, as this division of it into distinct Legislatures.” Indeed, Ramsay saw the fact that the “mother country... [has] slept over the police of her colonies” as yielding

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existence, from whatever original it may spring, and if the union of the several parts of the state depends upon its existence.” [James Ramsay], *Plan of Re-Union*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ramsay, untitled, Ad. Mss. 27261, 52, 85, BL.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 52, 74.

further dangerous results if not soon corrected.<sup>15</sup> Among other things, parliament's laissez-faire approach to managing the colonies encouraged colonial bodies in the misconception that they enjoyed political rights vis-à-vis the imperial parliament in London. As Ramsay noted,

The colony assemblies have been so long permitted to regulate all on their own, and even [in] matters that affect the general good, without controul [sic], and as sovereign Legislators, with a dignity which they were all fond of assuming, that now they take every check amiss, and at every turn cry out privilege, privilege.<sup>16</sup>

To correct this situation, Ramsay proposed implementing policies that would concretely demonstrate to colonists in both North America and the West Indies Britain's "supremacy, which must be established as the basis of our reformation." "On the operation, and extension of the authority of parliament," he bluntly asserted, "depend the liberty, and welfare of the Empire."<sup>17</sup>

It was in this context of seeking ways to bolster parliamentary control over the colonies that Ramsay launched into the second part of his essay on slavery in the British Empire. This section contained long passages on themes that would soon become staples of antislavery literature, including a vindication of the natural abilities of Africans, their common origin with Europeans, and the superiority of free labour to slave labour. Arguably even more significant than these points, though, is the way in which Ramsay framed the regulation and amelioration of slavery as solutions to the problem of colonial autonomy. In place of slave codes currently on the books, which existed "without even

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 72, 71-72, 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 40, 69.

stipulating the extent of the authority” of masters over slaves, Ramsay called for new laws on issues ranging from providing slaves with basic necessities to regulating labour conditions on estates to limiting slave punishments.<sup>18</sup> Combined with an increased number of metropolitan officials in the West Indies to ensure compliance, such directives would remind slave owners that they were subject to a higher political authority across the ocean. The policies and their enforcement, Ramsay predicted, would thereby help correct the misguided sense of independence imbibed by the planter class.<sup>19</sup>

When Ramsay first published his thoughts on imperial governance in an anonymous tract entitled *Plan of Re-union between Great Britain and Her Colonies* (1778), the subject of slavery was almost completely absent.<sup>20</sup> The treatise consisted of the majority of the first section of his earlier manuscript; Ramsay likely assumed that material on slavery reform from the second section would be nugatory since the topic had hitherto received almost no public attention. The title of the essay, *Plan of Re-union between Great Britain and Her Colonies*, was misleading in two ways. First, it suggested a spirit of conciliation, implying that a dialogue between parliament and colonial assemblies would take place for their mutual benefit. In actuality, Ramsay’s agenda was to promote “extending that indiscriminating supremacy of law, which takes place in Albion alone.”<sup>21</sup> Second, though nominally about how to re-establish ties with the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>19</sup> This argument is developed and reiterated throughout the second part of Ramsay’s treatise. Ibid., 101-59.

<sup>20</sup> More specifically, the subject of reforming chattel slavery was absent. Ramsay wrote metaphorically that “America is plunging herself deep in slavery” and that supporters of separation are “forging their own chains.” He also found it “worthy of being remarked, that these men, who are contending so nobly for the natural equality of mankind, hold near half a million negroes in perpetual bondage.” Ramsay, *Plan of Re-Union*, 107, 12.

<sup>21</sup> The combative tone of the *Plan of Re-union* makes its long misattribution to Shrewsbury MP William Pulteney odd. Pulteney favoured a negotiated settlement from the beginning of the American War, and

rebellious colonies of mainland North America, the *Plan of Re-union* focused primarily on how to set the governance of the West Indies on a more secure footing. By defending the Navigation Acts and describing the role of colonies as “raising staple commodities, and furnishing raw materials to be manufactured and improved by the mother country,” Ramsay was countering appeals by West Indian planters to be allowed to lawfully sell their sugar to other nations. “Luxury and refinement are hereby, confined to the seat of government,” he proceeded to write, “while industry and application pervade the most distant provinces of the state. And it is the interest of the sovereign power, or rather its duty... to keep things in the condition.”<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, Ramsay enumerated the benefits that West Indians enjoyed through their participation in empire, including naval protection, right of resettlement in Britain, and the existence of an “absurd” sugar monopoly.<sup>23</sup> For Ramsay, the failure of West Indians to recognize these advantages amounted to inexplicable ingratitude.

In 1784, Ramsay published the majority of the second half of his manuscript treatise as *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies*. The tract took direct aim at the inhumane slave labour regimes of the West Indies, galvanizing both opposition to and defence of colonial slavery.<sup>24</sup> Though Ramsay invested considerable effort in delineating how the improved treatment of slaves would serve the economic interests of slave owners, the political agenda of his original

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even secretly went to Paris to meet with Benjamin Franklin in an attempt to lay the groundwork for peace. There is also little in Pulteney’s private papers from 1775 to 1783 to suggest he was the author of the *Plan*, making it curious that even the guide to his papers at the Huntington Library contains this error. Papers of William Pulteney, mssPU, boxes 24-27, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, CA (hereafter HEH).

<sup>22</sup> Ramsay, *Plan of Re-Union*, 187.

<sup>23</sup> See especially *Ibid.*, 18-23. Citation on 18.

<sup>24</sup> James Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (London: James Phillips, 1784). See pages 105-08.

piece lay not far below the surface. Indeed, reading the published *Essay* in light of the unpublished manuscript from which it was extracted helps make Ramsay's additional imperial objective clear. Throughout the *Essay*, Ramsay shows particular pique at the excessive power that masters possessed over slaves, describing the relationship using terms such as "artificial," "unnatural," and "arbitrary." Moreover, he connects the planters' "insolence arising from the keen sense of [their] own freedom" on plantations directly to their desire to "make themselves be heard, and obeyed from the capital a-cross the vast atlantic [sic]."<sup>25</sup> In a line that would have drawn the ire of large estate owners, Ramsay also reiterated a point that he had expounded on in detail in the *Plan*: colonies, he wrote, should "be considered as manufacturies established in convenient distant places, that draw all their utensils from, and send all their produce to, the mother country."<sup>26</sup> Despite claiming to have "suppressed" all parts of his original manuscript that "tended to introduce those political discussions... of the state of colonies, and their dependence on a mother country," Ramsay found it impossible to discuss mitigating the hardships of slavery without referencing the need to circumscribe colonial autonomy.<sup>27</sup>

To be sure, Ramsay's published writings after the American War treated slavery reform (and by the latter 1780s abolition) as a desirable end in and of itself. Ramsay detested slavery. The severities that demarcated the institution offended his sensibilities as both a Christian and a humanitarian. Yet the fact that his campaign to ameliorate slavery came to overshadow his campaign to reform imperial governance does not mean

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. "Artificial," "unnatural," and "arbitrary" appear throughout the text. "insolence arising" on 103. Emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., iv.



that Ramsay stopped worrying about colonial autonomy. Nor did he ever come to see the two causes as separate. When the MP William Jolliffe suggested bringing a bill to regulate colonial slavery before the House of Commons in January 1785, Ramsay responded that he feared that parliament's recent failure to assert its "Legislative Authority over its dependencies" meant that it had "put it out of its power to go at once to the root of the disease."<sup>28</sup> In private, he continued to advise the emerging antislavery leadership that the superintending power of the mother country would have to be enhanced if slave regulations from London were to be implemented across the Atlantic.<sup>29</sup> Once abolition emerged as a national cause in 1788, even authors who had never met Ramsay cited him in arguing that slaveholding represented a direct challenge to British sovereignty in the West Indies. James Ramsay, in short, does not simply illustrate the symbiotic relationship between reforming slavery and centralizing imperial authority. Through his published writings and his central role in fledgling antislavery networks, he helped shape it.

### *Consolidating Global Empire*

There is widespread consensus among historians that the response to American independence by Britain's political class was inherently reactionary.<sup>30</sup> In the years

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<sup>28</sup> Ramsay to Mr. Jolliffe, Teston, 16 January 1785, Mss. Brit. Emp. s.2, f.1, RHO. Ramsay used identical wording to make the same point in a letter he wrote later that day to fellow abolitionist Dean Tucker. Ramsay to Rev. Dean Tucker, 16 January 1785, Mss. Brit. Emp. s.2, f.2, RHO.

<sup>29</sup> For a representative example of Ramsay's advice, see Ramsay to Wilberforce, [c.1788], Mss. Brit. Emp. s.2, ff.25b-26, RHO.

<sup>30</sup> This is true even among scholars with vastly different interpretations of late eighteenth-century British society as a whole. See, for instance, Jonathon Clark, *English Society, 1660-1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics During the Ancien Regime*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). Also see Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Christopher A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (New

following the conflict, the nation's elite united against calls for major political reform, vigorously defending pillars of the *ancien regime* such as the Church of England, hereditary rights, and the constitutional arrangement of king-in-parliament. As C.A. Bayly has influentially argued, these efforts to strengthen authoritarian rule at home were gradually extended to the management of empire.<sup>31</sup> Above all, the oligarchs who controlled imperial governance sought ways to reinforce the doctrine of metropolitan supremacy that was as old as empire itself. The widely held assumption that the recent American ordeal had stemmed from Britain's failure to exercise requisites of power in its former colonies buttressed this agenda. It also made clarifying the constitutional balance-of-power between the center and periphery of empire a top priority. For many politicians and imperial administrators, pursuing enlightened, humanitarian ideals offered a way to realize their desire for greater influence in the day-to-day management of colonial affairs. It also served to reaffirm their right own to rule. The postwar centralizing ethos in which they operated (and which they advanced) does not mean that their motives were devoid of altruism. It does, rather, help explain the significant appeal that humanitarian imperial reforms held for Britain's generally conservative political establishment.

The dual pursuit of cleansing and consolidating empire in the aftermath of the American War focused first on East India, not the West Indies. As Peter Marshall has

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York: Longman 1989); Peter Miller, *Defining the Common Good: Empire, Religion and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Peter J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c.1750-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jack P. Greene, *Evaluating Empire and Confronting Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Eliga Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Andrew J. O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*.

shown, the story of British rule in India from 1773 to 1858 is one of the progressive intrusion of government influence into the affairs of the EIC. Within this longer narrative, however, the period from 1783 to the culmination of the Hastings trial in 1795 is particularly salient.<sup>32</sup> Despite the charged political environment both inside and outside of parliament, consensus existed across the political spectrum that preventing continued abuses against East Indians would require bringing the EIC and its functionaries under greater surveillance from London. Reigning in Company autonomy was a stated objective, for instance, of Fox and Pitt's duelling East India bills in 1783. Though heated debate erupted over with which metropolitan institution supervising power should ultimately reside (with Fox arguing in favour of parliament, and Pitt the crown), there was less dispute over the principle that the Company's prerogatives needed to be curtailed. Like other East India debates in the late eighteenth century, the dispute helps prove Marshall's assessment that "in these controversies the underlying similarities are often as obvious as the surface differences."<sup>33</sup> Though Pitt allocated slightly more discretionary power to officials in India than Fox would have, he was nonetheless guided by the view that "servants in India must obey the controlling power at home," as well as a belief that an underlying cause of British rapacity in the subcontinent was a "want of superintending and controlling power."<sup>34</sup> When Pitt's bill passed into law, it was celebrated by reformers such as the future chairman of the EIC Charles Grant as a

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Marshall has convincingly argued this point in a number of works. See in particular Peter J. Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), Peter J. Marshall, "Empire and Authority in the Later Eighteenth Century," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 15, no. 2 (1987): 105-22, and Peter J. Marshall, "The Moral Swing to the East: British Humanitarianism, India and the West Indies," in *"A Free Though Conquering People": Eighteenth-Century Britain and Its Empire* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings*, 180.

<sup>34</sup> William Pitt, 14 January 1784, in T. C. Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, vol. 24 (London: T.C. Hansard, 1812): 322-23.

measure that would “invigorate the authority of the home administration in far-flung India.”<sup>35</sup>

Pitt’s India Act, along with the discourse surrounding it, sent a message that Indian affairs would no longer be exclusively a Company prerogative. By 1785, leading players in the EIC were acknowledging in private that their ability to set policy and make appointments was now largely dependent on government approval.<sup>36</sup> In November 1787, the Foreign Secretary Lord Carmarthen sent an angry missive to the Company’s Council of Bengal, chastising members for negotiating interpretations of the Treaty of Paris with French officials without a mandate to do so. “If disputes shall at anytime hereafter occur,” Carmarthen wrote in the conclusion of the letter, “the final arrangement of them must be left to the Government at home, and no regulations upon such points shall be settled by our representatives in India.”<sup>37</sup> As a corollary to his vigorous attack on geographic morality, Burke during the Hastings trial repeatedly stressed how it was “necessary for us to keep a strict eye upon all person who go there.”<sup>38</sup> Like debate over the rival India bills in 1783 and 1784, the partisan nature of many aspects of the Hastings trial should not obscure the fact that most members of the House of Commons saw in rendering their verdict a chance to establish the precedent of parliamentary oversight in

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<sup>35</sup> Charles Grant, Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great-Britain, Particularly with Respect to Morals; and on the Means of Improving It (London: East India Company, 1797), 32.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Sir Charles Warre Malet to Sir William Pulteney, Bombay, 4 January 1785, Pulteney Papers, Box 25, PU1368, HEH.

<sup>37</sup> Lord Carmarthen to Gov. Gen. and Council of Bengal, Whitehall, 2 November 1787, Add. Ms. 34467, ff. 96-97, BL. Carmarthen’s use of the term “representatives” as opposed to “merchants” or “company employees” is indicative, as it signals how even those with a vested interest in asserting national as opposed Company power recognized that the EIC was Britain’s primary governing institution on the subcontinent.

<sup>38</sup> Burke, 15 February 1788, in E.A. Bond, ed., Speeches of the Managers and Counsel in the Trial of Warren Hastings, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts, 1861): 34.

Indian affairs.<sup>39</sup> As long as government policy was not impugned or at stake, Pitt himself supported a number of the charges against Hastings. Throughout the spring of 1787, the frequent adversaries Burke and Henry Dundas even corresponded about how to best secure a conviction on certain charges in the House of Commons.<sup>40</sup> Though Foxites and Pittites disagreed on both how and how far government control should be exercised in Indian affairs, both parties adhered to the premise that making empire more moral required simultaneously making its administration more centralized.

Postwar efforts to strengthen and consolidate imperial governance not only focused on far-flung British territories. In 1782, Whitehall had reluctantly granted limited legislative autonomy to the Irish parliament in order to maintain the allegiance of Ireland's Protestant elite, some of whom were threatening to follow the lead of rebellious Americans. By the mid-1780s, the Declaratory Act came to be seen in Britain as a necessary but regrettable wartime measure, and one that should be reversed or rendered ineffectual as soon as possible. Reflecting a conservative though by no means extreme position, Ramsay described Ireland in 1785 as belonging "to thousands of individuals in Great Britain, and to the [British] public at large."<sup>41</sup> As opposed to employing policies of a humanitarian nature, in Ireland economic levers were used to pressure the creole elite to move more neatly into line with the wishes of London.<sup>42</sup> As James Kelly has shown, the

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<sup>39</sup> Marshall makes this point in Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings*, 62-63.

<sup>40</sup> Jeremy Bernstein, *Dawning of the Raj: The Life and Trials of Warren Hastings* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 209. See relevant letters between the two in 1787 in Lucy Sutherland, ed., *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960). Also see Burke to Dundas, Bath, 8 October 1792, in Sutherland, ed., *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 7: 246-48 and Burke to Dundas, Bath, 8 October 1792, in Sutherland, ed., *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 7: 248-55.

<sup>41</sup> Ramsay to Rev. Dean Tucker, Teston, 16 January 1785, Mss. Brit. Emp. s.2, f.2, RHO.

<sup>42</sup> On this theme, see Ronald K. Richardson, *Moral Imperium: Afro-Caribbeans and the Transformation of British Rule, 1776-1838* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987).

primary aim of successive administrations from 1782 to 1787 in negotiating a commercial treaty with Ireland was to minimize the political autonomy that the government had nominally forfeited. “Britain retained sufficient powers to be in a position to attempt to confine legislative independence within narrow parameters,” Kelly writes, and this objective received cross-party support. Once again, the split between Foxites and Pittites centered on the means of enhancing government power over Irish affairs, not the goal itself.<sup>43</sup>

As the examples of India and Ireland help illustrate, the refusal of American colonists to submit to metropolitan authority (and the fact that their defiance led all the way to independence) triggered a spate of reforms designed to bolster London’s authority throughout the Empire. More than anywhere else, however, the lessons of America looked applicable to the West Indies. Like a number of southern and mid-Atlantic colonies, the sugar islands featured extremely high concentrations of slaves. Like American colonists, West Indians had long demanded greater freedom in issues related to trade and self-government.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the planter class in many islands had publically supported the Americans during the recent war. Ramsay singled out these “ill-timed interpositions of the West-Indian planters with Parliament” as deserving particular censure, as well as proof that “too many of them favour opposition, and wishfully look

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<sup>43</sup> James Kelly, *Prelude to Union: Anglo-Irish Politics in the 1780s* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1992), citation on 238.

<sup>44</sup> An instructive case study of how colonial agendas were often in conflict with metropolitan agendas, and of the ways in which colonials could politically resist interpositions from Britain, is found in Jack Greene, “The Jamaica Privilege Controversy, 1764-1776: an episode in the process of constitutional definition in the early modern British Empire,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 21, no. 1 (1994): 16-53.

forward as to a desirable object, to an independency.”<sup>45</sup> Other evidence seemed to corroborate this claim. In 1784, the Governor of Canada wrote to the Committee of the Privy Council for Trade and Plantations that it was “not in the Revolted provinces alone that a Republican Spirit is to be found, but the tint has spread to other parts of America, and the West Indies.”<sup>46</sup> To a nation that had just emerged from a lengthy and costly war, these warnings served as calls to tighten its grip on its colonies before notions of separation advanced further.

Above all, solidifying metropolitan control over the West Indies meant curbing the powers, ambitions, and customary autonomy hitherto enjoyed by colonial assemblies. This required enforcing parliamentary claims to sovereignty: unlike in East India, in the West Indies there was no question about which branch of government should possess superintending power. In many ways, reviving and activating the rights of parliament was also a result of the way in which the American War had been prosecuted. Specifically, contemporaries had largely framed the conflict as pitting parliamentary prerogative against colonial ambition. As MP Henry Seymour Conway put it, “the Honour of Parliament was ostensibly, indeed ostentatiously, held out as the cause of quarrel.” Even George III had declared that Britons were fighting “the battle of the Legislature,” despite the fact that most Americans on the eve of war self-identified as subjects of the crown,

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<sup>45</sup> Ramsay, *Plan of Re-Union*, 5 and 175-76. Ramsay also made this point throughout his unpublished manuscript. Many American patriots likewise supported islanders’ calls for greater autonomy and trading rights, principally so that they could conduct business with colonies without restrictions. In 1783, for instance, Benjamin Franklin wrote that “it would be better for the Nations now possessing Sugar Colonies to give up their Claim to them, let them govern themselves and put them under the Protection of all the Powers of Europe as neutral Countries open to the Commerce of all, the Profits of the present Monopolies being by no means equivalent to the Expense of maintaining them.” [Benjamin Franklin], “Thoughts concerning the Sugar Colonies,” 8 May 1783, Hartley Papers, vol. 2, ff.63-64, WCL.

<sup>46</sup> Minutes of the Committee of the Privy Council for Trade, 15 March 1784, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter TNA), BT 5/1, f.14d.

not parliament.<sup>47</sup> Emerging from the conflict, parliamentarians set out to flex their imperial muscle while at the same time legislating on issues that were clearly within both their constitutional jurisdiction and their ability to enforce.<sup>48</sup> As Thomas Clarkson wrote decades later,

By asking the government of this country to do this [abolish the slave trade], and this only, they were asking for that, which it had an indisputable right to do; namely, to regulate or abolish any branches of commerce;... By asking the government, again, to do this and this only, they were asking what it could really enforce.<sup>49</sup>

Defences of parliamentary right and the indivisibility of sovereignty permeated the slave trade debates. Like Ramsay, a number of other abolitionists and policy makers found it difficult to discuss slavery reform without also referencing parliament's longstanding prerogative to legislate on the issue. This was true not only of proposals to regulate slave labour and conditions on plantations, but also of abolition; indeed, as an issue relating to trade, abolition fell even more unambiguously within parliament's remit. According to Lord Grenville, "With regard to our colonies, we were bound to assert our right, to prevent our islands from having... any further connexion with a trade, which we thought it our duty to abandon." He added not only that "that was the proper tone to assume to all Europe on such a subject," but also that it was "proper to let our dominions know, that it was in that view that we considered it."<sup>50</sup> Though Henry Dundas disputed a number of the central claims of abolitionists, he too spoke of parliamentary right when bringing forth his motion for gradual abolition in 1792: "If, for the sake of moral duty, or

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<sup>47</sup> "the Honour" cited in Gould, *The Persistence of Empire*, 200; "the battle" cited in Colley, *Britons*, 137.

<sup>48</sup> Gould, *The Persistence of Empire*, conclusion, esp. 128-29.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, & Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, by the British Parliament*, vol. 1 (London: James P. Parke, 1808): 285.

<sup>50</sup> Lord Grenville, 12 May 1789, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 28: 76.



national honour, or even of great political advantage, it is thought right, by authority of parliament, to alter any long established system, parliament is competent to do it.” To be sure, though, Dundas added that as “guardians of all who live under its protection,” parliament would demonstrate “a liberal feeling” to any planter for whom “hardship should arise, that can be distinctly and fairly pleaded.”<sup>51</sup>

Vague guarantees of redress by politicians such as Dundas brought little succour to slave owners. Like domestic Britons, most white creoles understood the slavery debate as part of a wider contest between metropolitan attempts to manage the colonies and colonial pursuit of limited self-government. From their perspective, abolition and slavery reform were part of a systemic suppression of colonial rights. To understand why West Indians felt this way, it is important to recognize the intra-imperial political context in which slavery first emerged as a contentious issue.<sup>52</sup> Since the conclusion of the American War, tensions between the sugar islands and the British government had been steadily rising. These deteriorating relations were largely triggered by parliament’s decision in 1783 to pass two new Navigation Acts that enforced a closed system of trade, thus preventing West Indian colonies from conducting business directly with America.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Dundas, 2 April 1792, in *Ibid.*, vol. 29: 1148. In a private letter to the Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica five months later, Dundas was equally as direct: “I strongly recommend it to you upon all occasions to fortify the minds of the inhabitants of Jamaica against all Doubts and apprehensions as to the free exercise of their control and authority over the Negroes.” Dundas to Lieut. Gov. Williamson, Whitehall, 6 September 1792, TNA, CO 138/42.

<sup>52</sup> There is no recent monograph devoted specifically to how West Indians responded to abolitionism and constructed a defence of slavery. The book that comes closest is David Beck Ryden *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Christer Petley also addresses this topic at various points in *Slaveholders in Jamaica: Colonial Society and Culture during the Era of Abolition* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009). See also relevant sections of Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>53</sup> Parliament passed these laws in spite of the fact that both Pitt and Fox proposed more liberal bills that would have allowed the West Indies and America to directly trade certain commodities. H. C. Bell, “British

Most metropolitan politicians cast this decision as maintaining the mercantilist *status quo* whereby British colonies could only trade directly with Britain or British territories abroad. But, for West Indians accustomed to sending molasses and rum northwards in exchange for wood and other raw materials, the prohibition on trade marked a major change to their business operations. From 1783 until the early 1790s, the Society of West India Planters and Merchants (SWIPM, the main West India lobby in London) forcefully pushed for the right to trade with America on the same terms as had existed before the war. At the very least, the SWIPM asked that planters be allowed to manufacture raw sugar on their own estates (the prohibition of which was a longstanding grievance) as compensation.<sup>54</sup>

It is perhaps because planters were so preoccupied by what they saw as unjust trade restrictions that they were slow to recognize and combat rising antislavery sentiment in Britain. Not until December 1787 did the Jamaica agent Stephen Fuller write to that island's assembly about the real danger that abolitionism posed. Not until February 1788 did the SWIPM strike up a subcommittee to coordinate efforts to defend the slave system.<sup>55</sup> When abolitionism did emerge as a major political force, the planter class came to see it as an existentialist threat in two ways. On the one hand, ending the supply of new slaves would strike at the heart of the labour supply on which their wealth—and by extension their political clout—was founded. On the other, the frequent calls by abolitionists to conduct free trade with West Africa or cultivate sugar in East

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Commercial Policy in the West Indies, 1783-1793," *English Historical Review* 31, no. 123 (July 1916): 435-38.

<sup>54</sup> These requests appear throughout the Society of West India Planters and Merchant papers from 1783 to 1793 housed in Senate House Library, University of London.

<sup>55</sup> Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition*, 189-95, esp. 189.

India or Sierra Leone threatened to further marginalize the West Indies in an increasingly global economy. While planters were quick to demand the right to conduct free trade with America, they were also eager to maintain their sugar monopoly with Britain. When ideas of growing sugar in India or buying sugar from French islands were mooted, the SWIMP pointed out that these schemes would violate the very Navigation Acts about which they complained so bitterly. For planters, abolition represented yet another in a series metropolitan attacks on their livelihoods.<sup>56</sup>

Besieged on multiple fronts, planters expounded a line of argument that was expansive enough to be employed in efforts to gain free trade with America, maintain a preferential sugar trade with Britain, and forestall both abolition and slavery reform. Their case revolved around the premise that as loyal British subjects they were constitutionally entitled to the rights and autonomy they had customarily experienced. In essence, they argued that long practice and past political allegiance conferred upon them entitlements enjoyed in the antebellum era. These included the rights to buy slaves and to regulate slavery without metropolitan interference. Like American patriots a decade earlier, West Indians did not ask for new rights *from* Britain: they demanded rights due to them *as* Britons themselves. Their argument for inclusion in the national body politic was nowhere more clearly expressed than in a November 1790 remonstrance from the

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<sup>56</sup> In 1792, a slave owner from St. Vincent laconically (and ominously) explained the situation to Lord Sydney: "It is not to be wondered at that men in general should feel sore at any measure being adopted that will materially affect their Interests. But the Concurrence, as it were, of so many things as the Resolution for abolishing the Slave Trade, and the several Resolutions for prohibiting the Exportation of Sugar, in order to Lower the price of it; and the Encouragement given to the East India Company to import Clayed Sugar from India; with the admission of foreign Sugar to be imported into Nassau in New Providence, and exported from thence to England; has enraged the proprietors in these Islands to such a Degree, that it is hard to form any opinion of what the consequences may be." [Illegible] to Sydney, St. Vincent, 3 June 1792, TNA, CO 260/11.

Assembly of Jamaica to King George III. In the widely publicized document, petitioners asserted that “the rights of British Colonists are as inviolable as those of their fellow citizens within any part of the British Dominions.” “Our loyalty to your Majesty,” they proceeded,

and long tried attachment to the Mother Country, are indisputable; and preserving these, unimpeached and unimpaired, we claim the full enjoyment of all the liberties, franchises and immunities of free Denizens in perfect equality with those who reside more immediately under the Royal protection.<sup>57</sup>

No doubt reminded of similar declarations from rebellious American colonists in the lead up to war, Dundas chastised the petitioners for attempting to circumvent parliament’s authority by writing directly to the crown.<sup>58</sup>

As we have seen, many other Britons joined Dundas in leveling disapprobation at pretentious colonial assemblies for claiming authority that parliament had never formally relinquished. Though planters publically grumbled about how “unfashionable” the “doctrine of colonial rights” had become, by the latter 1780s they were fighting an uphill battle.<sup>59</sup> A good window onto the hardening of attitudes against colonial rights from the end of the Seven Years’ War to the end of the American War is provided via Ramsay’s publishing history during these years. As early as 1768, Ramsay had begun forming his opinion that colonial assemblies, “from ignorance, prejudice, and a petulant ambition, burden our trade, cramp our liberties, and attempt to erect into little oppressive

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<sup>57</sup> “The Humble Address and Petition of the Assembly of Jamaica,” 12 November 1790, TNA, CO 137/89, ff.5-7. The remonstrance was published in a number of periodicals, including in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 60 (February 1790): 170-71. Though arguments for inclusion emanated from the colonies most frequently during the revolutionary era, this mode of advancing colonial rights was not new to the latter eighteenth century. As David Armitage has shown, an expansive and inclusive concept of nationhood was a hallmark of settler political discourse as early as the 1730s. David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 125-98.

<sup>58</sup> Dundas to James Seton, Whitehall, 8 September 1792, TNA, CO 260/11.

<sup>59</sup> Mr. Baillie, 2 April 1792, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 29: 1082.

aristocratical tyrannies.”<sup>60</sup> But, writing at a high point of imperial confidence, before the extent of the divisions between the home government and colonies became fully apparent, Ramsay chose to keep his views on imperial management to himself. Indeed, it was not until the outbreak of armed conflict that he first sought publication.

Despite the recently begun war, Ramsay’s initial attempts to print part of his manuscript in 1776 were, in his words, “strangled in the birth.”<sup>61</sup> Many Britons felt American grievances were legitimate and held out hope for a reconciliation; it is therefore likely that publishers predicted the tract would meet with little public support. As the war dragged on, though, hostility toward American colonists steadily grew. Gradually, the patriotism with which the war was prosecuted came to colour interpretations of how the conflict started in the first place. With willingness to criticize the alleged immorality and obduracy of colonists on the rise, Ramsay’s *Plan of Re-union* gave expression to the thoughts of a growing number of Britons about both the origins of the nation’s current troubles and how to prevent a similar situation from developing in the West Indies.<sup>62</sup> By the time Ramsay published his *Essay* in 1784, a majority of Britons had come to believe that parliament’s leniency as opposed to heavy-handedness had precipitated the conflict, and that a more active metropolitan presence in British territories abroad could help head-off future troubles. In addition to a program for

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<sup>60</sup> Ramsay, Untitled, Ad. Mss. 27621, 111, BL.

<sup>61</sup> Ramsay, *Plan of Re-Union*, A3.

<sup>62</sup> For how the American War catalyzed anti-colonial rhetoric and led a majority of Britons to come to see colonists as “unBritish”, see Stephen Conway, “From Fellow-Nationals to Foreigners: British Perceptions of Americans, circa 1739-1783,” *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series*, vol. 59, no. 1 (January 2002): 65-100.

reforming slavery, many of these individuals would have recognized in Ramsay's *Essay* his less explicit though equally urgent call to consolidate imperial rule.

***James Ramsay, Beilby Porteus, and Religion in the Service of Sovereignty***

One of the principal ways Ramsay believed metropolitan influence could be strengthened in the day-to-day life of the West Indies was through increasing the number of clergy ministering to slaves. His motives for wanting to expand missionary activity in the region were obviously not just political: as a devout Anglican with evangelical sensibilities, Ramsay saw the spread of Christianity as a worthwhile goal in and of itself. As Rowan Strong has illustrated, Anglican clerics throughout the eighteenth century preached the ontological equality of masters and slaves, and thus their mutual salvation through Christ. This was true among Church leaders and members of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), the arm of the Church of England responsible for promoting Anglicanism overseas. Throughout the century, however, Strong also notes that Anglican preachers consistently retreated from the emancipatory implications of their theological position by maintaining that a common humanity with masters in no way negated the legal status of slaves.<sup>63</sup> Though many slave owners may have worried about the liberating connotations of Anglican dogma, at least some merit in the argument often made by SPG preachers that belief in a Christian afterlife would make slaves more accepting of their lot in this one. "Missionaries," asserted one absentee planter, "might be of the utmost utility in the islands." "Where RELIGION was once

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<sup>63</sup> Rowan Strong, *Anglicanism and the British Empire C. 1700-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 83-117. On this topic, see also Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

instilled, there would be less punishment— more work done— and better done— more marriages— more issue— and more attachment to their Masters.”<sup>64</sup>

The disconnect between pronouncements of the metropolitan church about the ontological worth of slaves and the relative lack of ministry among them was a direct result of Anglicanism’s institutional weakness outside of Britain. In the West Indies, as in the mainland American colonies prior to their independence, the lack of a Church of England bishopric resulted in a chronic shortage of colonial clergy. This in turn meant that the local laity—which in many places consisted largely of slave owners and their dependents— controlled the affairs of many parishes. Clerics sent overseas with aspirations of ministering to slaves as well as settlers, therefore, frequently encountered an entrenched slave interest intent on limiting their chattel’s exposure to Christianity.<sup>65</sup> Such was the experience of Ramsay when he first arrived in St. Christopher in 1762 and met with numerous impediments to spreading the gospel among the slave population.

If the challenges faced by Ramsay were typical of those faced by other Anglican clergy sent to the West Indies, the vigour of his response to these hurdles was not. Instead of tempering his missionary zeal to colonial realities, Ramsay reflected at length on the

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<sup>64</sup> Captain Macarty, An Appeal to the Candour and Justice of the People of England, in Behalf of the West India Merchants and Planters (London: J. Debrett, 1792), 55. This paragraph touches on a larger debate, both contemporaneous and historiographic, about whether Christianity inherently reinforced or undermined European rule over non-Europeans. A good entry point to the subject is Andrew Porter, Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004). See also Susan Thorne, Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth-Century England (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), esp. 1-52. For Anglicanism and its relationship to the coerced labour in the Atlantic World, see the opposing views offered in Frank J. Klingberg, Anglican Humanitarianism in Colonial New York (Philadelphia: Church Historical Society, 1940) and Harry J. Bennett Jr., “The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel’s Plantations and the Emancipation Crisis,” in Samuel Clyde McCulloch, ed., British Humanitarianism: Essays Honoring Frank J. Klingberg (Philadelphia: Church Historical Society, 1950), esp. 15-29.

<sup>65</sup> Strong, Anglicanism in the British Empire, 87-94.

causes of his lack of success in winning converts. He eventually arrived at the conclusion that the principal obstacles to his efforts were the policies and customs established by planters. Instead of a natural mental inferiority among Africans, Ramsay attributed the failure of Christianity to take hold among the island's slaves to the fact that "their intellectual powers are wholly employed in the service of the body."<sup>66</sup> This debased condition was solely the result of the severity of masters. Instead of providing sufficient nourishment, owners kept slaves in a perpetual state of want. Instead of gently correcting improper behaviour, they inflicted excessive and too-frequent punishment. Instead of providing time off for rest and worship, they forced slaves to work seven days a week. Such mistreatment meant that slaves were consistently preoccupied with physical and material concerns, and had neither the time nor inclination to contemplate spiritual matters. "The intire [sic] want of law to secure them proper treatment," Ramsay wrote in his *Essay*, was the real barrier to slave conversions.<sup>67</sup>

Ramsay's inability to convert significant numbers of slaves to Christianity convinced him of more than just the need for the metropolitan government to implement and enforce slavery reform. The strident opposition with which his efforts were met likewise convinced him that creole society itself was in need of a moral reformation. As opposed to supporting efforts to spread the gospel, the plantocracy of St. Christopher put up barriers at every turn, directly ordering slaves not to attend the services Ramsay offered for them. In response to Ramsay's proselytizing, the white population of the island made him a pariah. The number of weekly churchgoers in his parish dwindled

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<sup>66</sup> Ramsay, *An Essay*, 150.

<sup>67</sup> Ramsay, *An Essay*, 133.



from what was already a sparse attendance. “He stood,” wrote Ramsay, characteristically referring to himself in the third person, “a rebel convict against the interest and majesty of plantership.” “Bitter was the censure heaped upon him.”<sup>68</sup> Such obloquy, combined with a desire to keep slaves ignorant of the gospel message, proved beyond doubt the irreligiosity of settler society, which prevailed to such a degree that Ramsay claimed it “cannot be explained to one unacquainted with the country.”<sup>69</sup> On the eve of parliamentary hearings into the slave trade, Ramsay prepared notes in case he was called to testify. In them, he responded to a hypothetical question about the presence of Christianity in the West Indies clearly and succinctly: it was so limited, he wrote, that “the whole hardly deserves to be taken into account.”<sup>70</sup>

The lack of religion that permeated West Indian society was no doubt a reflection on the avarice and moral degeneracy of the planter class. But it also bespoke a failure of the Church of England to meet its responsibility to promote the Christian faith abroad. “Hitherto,” Ramsay recorded in his journal sometime in the late 1780s, “Government cannot be said to have paid the least attention to the State of Religion in these Colonies.” The fact that “by the custom of the country, he was precluded from any exercise of his clerical function” was a testament to this neglect.<sup>71</sup> For Ramsay, the main argument by planters against converting slaves— that it went against the long established practice of minimizing their exposure to Christianity— was similar in kind to the argument against complying with tighter trade restrictions from Britain. In both cases, colonists argued that

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<sup>68</sup> See Ramsay, *An Essay*, 153-55, citations on 153.

<sup>69</sup> Ramsay, *An Essay*, 154.

<sup>70</sup> Ramsay, *Untitled*, Mss. Brit. Emp.s.2, f.60, RHO.

<sup>71</sup> Ramsay, *Untitled*, Mss. Brit. Emp. s.2, f. 87b, RHO; Ramsay, *A Reply to the Personal Invectives and Objections*, 17.

the *status quo* should be preserved, that innovations in colonial customs were dangerous, and that limiting the ability of colonists to control their own affairs violated inherited rights. The consistency of these arguments highlighted for Ramsay how questions of religion, slavery reform, and the political structure of empire were deeply intertwined. It also helped him recognize that both ameliorating slavery and enhancing Britain's control over its colonies would require intensifying the metropolitan presence on-the-ground in the West Indies.

Ramsay expressed his views on the connection between slavery and religion very clearly in the original manuscript version of what would later become both his *Plan of Re-union* and his *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves*. In the first half, he argued that “slavery takes place among Europeans, in the Western world, where proper religion and laws are not deemed to be in full force; and where individuals too often think themselves loosened from ties, which are binding in the mother country.”<sup>72</sup> To reaffirm such bonds of affection and obligation, Ramsay wrote in the second half of his treatise that the Church of England should increase the number of clergy in the sugar islands. Importantly, he included the clause that endowments for livings come directly from Britain: only this provision would ensure that ministers remained independent from the interests of slave owners. Moreover, the spiritual and social bonds created between metropolitan clergy and the planter class would aid in “connecting distant colonies more closely with their head.”<sup>73</sup> Though in his published *Essay* Ramsay did not stipulate that financing must come from the metropole, he did assert that “the fittest persons that could

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<sup>72</sup> Ramsay, Untitled, Ad. Mss. 27621, 69-70, BL.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 99.

be sent out would be discreet curates from England.” One of the “chief advantages” of his plan, therefore, was “that it may be set on foot by government, without depending on the caprice of individuals” in the West Indies.<sup>74</sup>

James Ramsay was not the only cleric whose thwarted efforts to convert slaves (and whose subsequent harassment by slave owners) led him to conclude that religious and political bodies in Britain should be more proactive in rehabilitating ties with the colonies. Though Moravian missionaries had gained some converts in Barbados, Jamaica, St. Christopher, Antigua, and St. Croix, they too had to circumnavigate significant planter hostility.<sup>75</sup> The Methodist missionary Benjamin Pearce wrote from Bridgetown, Barbados that planters there “publish me in the newspapers in a dreadful manner, and threaten behind my back what they will do, ‘If the impudent madman should build his Chapel.’”<sup>76</sup> Pearce’s colleague Thomas Coke had a similar experience on a number of islands. In a series of letters to John Wesley, Coke detailed the mendacity of the slave owners he encountered and shared the stories of other Methodist evangelists who had been similarly persecuted for working with slaves. These included a “Mr. Bull” who “several times narrowly escaped being stoned to death” by angry planters in St. Vincent, and a missionary named “Harry” who was flogged thirty-nine times for praying with slaves on

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<sup>74</sup> Ramsay, *An Essay*, 233, 226. I owe this observation to Brown, *Moral Capital*, 246 and 252. However, whereas Brown emphasizes how financing from the metropole was downplayed in the published *Essay*, I underscore how the idea persisted.

<sup>75</sup> The experiences of Moravian missionaries in the West Indies are well covered in J.C.S. Mason, *The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening in England, 1760-1800* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2001). Ramsay himself was very aware of the obstacles faced by Moravian missionaries, and outlined them in his *Essay*. He also noted, approvingly, that it was Brethren in Europe who provided the funds for missionary endeavours in the West Indies. Ramsay, *An Essay*, 161-65.

<sup>76</sup> Benjamin Pearce to Thomas Coke, Bridgetown, Barbados, 16 March 1789, in Thomas Coke, *To the Benevolent Subscribers for the Support of the Missions Carried on by Voluntary Contributions, in the British Islands, in the West Indies, for the Benefit of the Negroes and Caribbs* (London: [s.n.], 1789), 4.

St. Eustatius. On that island, laws expressly prohibited the practice.<sup>77</sup> In addition to highlighting how far into sin Britain's slave colonies had sunk, these accounts implied that moral reformation in the West Indies would never occur if left only to the initiative of creoles. Instead, a more vigorous, vigilant, and continuous metropolitan religious presence was required.

Reports such as the ones furnished by Ramsay and Coke about the irreligiosity of West Indian society worried not only those concerned with the spiritual state of Britain's empire. To a number of postwar analysts, they also raised alarms about colonists' future political allegiance. As with political ties, a lack of religious bonds between Britain and its American colonies came to be seen during the conflict as an underlying cause of estrangement. As early as 1775, Edmund Burke cited the fact that the Church of England was, notwithstanding its legal privileges, "in reality no more than a sort of private sect, not composing most probably the tenth of the people" of the colonies as a principal reason for the growing rift.<sup>78</sup> This interpretation of the conflict's origins continued to hold weight in the years after the war. That colonists had been "seduced into the vanity of Irreligion," stated the Bishop of Oxford in 1784, represented a failure of the Anglican establishment.<sup>79</sup> As Strong has noted, the "new political attention given to the Church of England" in the West Indies following the loss of the thirteen colonies "marks a tacit acknowledgment" that the Church had erred in its *laissez-faire* approach to guiding

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 10, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Edmund Burke, The Speech of Edmund Burke, Esq. on Moving his Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies, March 22, 1775 (London: J. Dodsley, 1775), 18. In the same speech, Burke also argued that slaveholding made American colonists more passionately attached to liberty than other Britons, and that this connection helped explain their refusal to submit to parliament's authority. Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>79</sup> Beilby Porteus, A Sermon Preached before the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts; at their Anniversary Meeting in the Parish Church of St. Mary-Le-Bow, on Friday February 20, 1784 (London: T. Harrison and S. Brooke, 1784), 11.

religion abroad.<sup>80</sup> Policies in the years immediately following the war, therefore, were largely guided by the view that a more vigorous Anglicanism could serve as a bulwark against political disloyalty. In the words of the former imperial administrator William Knox, “the Prevalence of the Church of England in those Colonies is the best security that Great Britain can have for their Fidelity and attachment to her Constitution and Interests.”<sup>81</sup>

This attitude manifested itself in a variety of ways in the decade after the American War, and it is noteworthy that prominent abolitionists were often at the fore of efforts to grow Anglicanism abroad during this period. Granville Sharp, for example, actively campaigned for setting aside clergy reserves in British North America and for creating a bishopric in Nova Scotia. William Wilberforce, John Newton, and Henry Thornton all pressured the government to assign a Church of England chaplain to the First Fleet bound for New South Wales. In the West Indies, clergy were encouraged to be more insistent that colonists pay attention to their religious duties such as regular church attendance and restraint in drinking and gaming. A Reverend Duke of St. Thomas wrote to Sharp about the potential opposition among local creoles to enhanced clerical resolve, as well as the importance of sustained support from the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the face of such hostility: “should an Obedience to such an authority [the parish vicar] be deemed an innovation of old Rites & Customs, & an introduction of new modes for the

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<sup>80</sup> Strong, *Anglicanism in the British Empire*, 118-56, citation on 118. See also Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*.

<sup>81</sup> Cited in Vincent T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763-1793: New Continents and Changing Values*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, 1952), 738. Knox was Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1770 to 1782 and a member of the SPG.

laudable purpose of working reformation, the Clergy will have the sanction of their Superiors to protect them from obloquy & the charge of Pride & Fanaticism.”<sup>82</sup>

The member of the Church of England hierarchy who was perhaps most committed to strengthening the colonial church was Beilby Porteus, the Bishop of Chester. Porteus’ efforts and activism also clearly illustrate how this agenda overlapped with escalating humanitarian concerns about empire and a political program of centralizing imperial governance. Born in 1731 to erstwhile Virginia planters who had resettled in York, Porteus had demonstrated a keen interest in the spiritual and temporal welfare of African slaves since first taking orders in 1757. As revealed by the books and annotations found in his vast personal library, this concern was part of a broader interest in (and unease about) the effects of European imperialism on non-European peoples throughout the world.<sup>83</sup> Despite his extensive researches and longstanding disapprobation of the slave trade, it was not until 1777 that Porteus first publically denounced the practice, calling it a “disgrace of Religion, Justice, and Humanity.”<sup>84</sup> His sympathies must have become relatively well known soon thereafter, since in March 1778 Ramsay sent him excerpts of his unpublished treatise, here described in part as a plan for “the improvement of the sugar colonies, particularly of the slaves employed in their culture.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Rev. Duke of St. Thomas to Sharp, Barbados, 27 May 1784, 13/1/D20, GRO.

<sup>83</sup> Among other things, Porteus owned books on South Sea islanders, Jesuit missions in South America, relations between Amerindians and newcomers, and general works on colonialism in both the East and West Indies. Much of Porteus’ library is preserved in Senate House Library, University of London.

<sup>84</sup> According to Porteus’ first biographer, the “civilization” of Africans was the bishop’s “favourite object.” Robert Hodgson, *The Life of the Right Reverend Beilby Porteus: Late Bishop of London* (T. Cadell, 1813), 91.

<sup>85</sup> [James Ramsay], “Memorial suggesting motives for the improvement of the sugar colonies, particularly of the slaves employed in their culture, and offering reasons for encouraging the advancement of these last in social life and their conversion to Christianity; extracted from a manuscript composed on that subject by James Ramsay, Minister in the island of St. Christopher, and Author of a ‘Plan of Reunion between Great

The part of Ramsay's plan that called for the SPG to redouble its hitherto minimal efforts to minister to slaves caught Porteus' attention in particular. Over the coming years, the bishop actively urged the SPG to invest more resources and energy in this direction.<sup>86</sup> He also founded his own missionary organization entitled the Society for the Conversion and Religious Instruction of the Negroes of the West Indies, and advocated major changes to how the Church-owned and SPG-administered Codrington plantation in Barbados was run. Bequeathed to the Church in 1710, Codrington for most of the century had functioned according to the same principles as most other large estates in the Caribbean. It was characterised by an onerous labour regime, and despite its ownership only minimal efforts were made to provide slaves with regular Christian instruction.<sup>87</sup> In spite of this history, though, Porteus viewed Codrington as providing a unique opportunity for advancing his goal of creating a more activist, compassionate, and proselytizing Church abroad. In Codrington, Porteus argued, there would be no planters to oppose changing existing practices, clergy could instruct slaves without competition from other denominations, and reforms would prove that humane labour conditions were compatible with profit. In his words, Codrington "afford[ed] us materials for our compassions"; the "possession of an estate so circumstanced, must be considered as one

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Britain and her Colonies' published by Murray No 32 Fleet Street," to Beilby Porteus, 1778[?], Fulham Papers, vol. XX, ff.79-80, LPL. Though Ramsay is not explicitly identified as the sender, a number of clues indicate that he was the one who wrote Porteus and provided the excerpts. Porteus wrote in his private notes in 1783, for instance, that "I had for some years past thought much on the Subject, & had corresponded & conversed upon it with several Persons in this country and with one gentleman in the West Indies." Porteus, "Diary," 1783, Porteus MSS 2099, ff.57-59, LPL. Another copy of the excerpts from the same hand was sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury in March 1778. See SPG Papers, vol. XVII, ff. 221-23, LPL.

<sup>86</sup> Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, 140.

<sup>87</sup> Codrington administrators even used hot irons to brand the word "Society" onto the chests of their slaves in the same way that other slave owners did to mark their property. Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso Books, 1988), 91.

of the happiest events that could befall [sic] us.” As Porteus saw it, ameliorating conditions on Codrington would be a way of putting into practice SPG rhetoric about caring for non-Europeans. It would also prove to plantation owners throughout the region that slavery could be reformed without upending the existing social order.<sup>88</sup>

Porteus most famously expressed his ideas about reforming the Codrington estate and about the Church’s role in slave societies more broadly in a 1783 sermon delivered at the annual meeting of the SPG. By outlining specific measures for “render[ing] the Society’s plantation a MODEL for the other planters to follow,” the bishop broke the mould of sermons at these yearly gatherings.<sup>89</sup> Traditionally, the speaker provided a scriptural exegesis and an account of the historical growth of Christianity, while urging the Society’s members to continue to work to spread the faith abroad; rarely did the discourse contain a program for change or generate focused debate on a specific issue.<sup>90</sup> Almost to a point, Porteus’ arguments were lifted from Ramsay’s manuscript, which he readily acknowledged as his principal source.<sup>91</sup> “A certain degree of improvement and civilization,” Porteus told the Society’s members, “have always been found necessary to prepare the mind for the admission of the divine truths of Revelation.” Challenges in

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<sup>88</sup> Beilby Porteus, “An Essay towards the more Effectual Civilization and Conversion of the Negro Slaves, on the Trust Estate in Barbados...” in Hodgson, *The Life of the Right Reverend Beilby Porteus*, vol. 6: 168, 169. Sharp called on the Archbishop to proscribe slavery on Codrington in a personal letter to him two years later. Anthony Benezet began calling on the SPG to do the same beginning in 1767. By comparison, Ramsay’s propositions were moderate. Sharp to Archbishop of Canterbury, Old Jewry, 1 August 1786, D3549, 13/1/C3, GRO; Maurice Jackson, *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 138-39.

<sup>89</sup> Cited in Hodgson, *The Life of the Right Reverend Beilby Porteus*, 168. The original published sermon is Beilby Porteus, *A Sermon Preached before the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* (London: T. Harrison and S. Brooke, 1783).

<sup>90</sup> Sarah Hoare, daughter of the Quaker activist Samuel Hoare, wrote years later that it was Porteus’ sermon more than anything else that was responsible for “awakening the attention of the public, and interesting it in the cause of humanity.” Sarah Hoare and Hannah Hoare, *Memoirs of Samuel Hoare: By His Daughter Sarah and His Widow Hannah* (London: Headley Brothers, 1911), 17.

<sup>91</sup> See Shyllon, *James Ramsay*, 18-19.



winning converts stemmed not from an “incapacity in the Africans to receive or retain religious knowledge,... but to the prejudices formerly entertained by many of the planters against the instruction and conversion of their slaves.”<sup>92</sup> Further echoing Ramsay, Porteus claimed that slavery reform could also serve as a way of rehabilitating slave owners by forcing them to practice greater restraint, humanity, and charity in their relations with slaves. Codrington, he believed, could become a bridgehead for lessening the hardships of slavery throughout the West Indies, and for bringing about a moral reformation among slaves and masters alike. Such optimistic logic can be seen in a number of subsequent pieces of abolitionist literature. One anonymous publisher, for instance, urged his readers to “rejoice in the hope that a melioration of the state of slavery will be accompanied by a melioration of the tempers of slave-holders... May the spirit of humanity, and love of freedom, so congenial to the British nation, extend their influence.”<sup>93</sup>

Encouraged by the approbation with which his sermon was initially met, Porteus invested “a good deal of time & thought” over the following year creating a concrete plan for how to transform Codrington into “a NEW SCHOOL OF PIETY AND VIRTUE in the Atlantic ocean [sic].”<sup>94</sup> The plan was to be presented and put to a vote at the SPG’s 1784 annual meeting. To substantiate many of the claims made in his sermon, Porteus now referenced “a great variety of books and tracts on the subject,” as well as his

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<sup>92</sup> Porteus, A Sermon Preached before the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, 21-22, 11.

<sup>93</sup> [James Phillips?], “Publisher’s Note,” in Stephen Fuller, Notes on the Two Reports from the Committee of the Honourable House of Assembly in Jamaica, Appointed to Examine into, and to Report to the House, the Allegations and Charges Contained in the Several Petitions Which Have Been Presented to the British House of Commons, on the Subject of the Slave Trade, and the Treatment of the Negroes (London: J. Phillips, 1789), iv.

<sup>94</sup> Porteus, “diary,” 1784, Porteus MSS 2099, f.82, LPL; Porteus in Hodgson, The Life of the Right Reverend Beilby Porteus, 169. Capitalization in original.

personal conversations with “several well informed persons in England who had formerly spent much time in the West Indies.”<sup>95</sup> He also furnished his fellow bishops with information on successful conversion projects undertaken by Moravians in the Dutch West Indies and French missionaries throughout the region, identifying what he saw as the most effective ways of gaining converts. He argued, for instance, that French achievements could be partly attributed to the appointment of a *procureur* for each estate. Accordingly, he urged the SPG to follow suit. “This clergyman,” he wrote “might be called ‘The Guardian of Negroes.’”<sup>96</sup> His responsibilities would be the same as those of the “Protector of Negroes” outlined by Burke in his Negro Code: he would hear slave grievances, ensure adequate food and necessities were provided, and report violent behaviour by planters to government authorities. Though Porteus followed Ramsay’s lead in casting slavery reform as economically beneficial to the planter class, the powers to be assigned to the “Guardian of Negroes” show that the bishop was arguably more concerned with limiting the ability of planters to abuse their slaves.

Despite the accolades Porteus had received for his sermon the previous year, the Barbados committee of the SPG voted down his plan for reforming Codrington. Privately, Porteus complained bitterly that his colleagues had settled the spiritual fate of so many slaves in a mere four hours.<sup>97</sup> Yet instead of lasting dejection, the defeat led Porteus to redouble his efforts. Over the coming years, the bishop collected dozens of first-hand accounts of the plantation system. Within the Church of England, his reputation among the episcopacy as a reformer— as someone who wanted Anglicans to

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<sup>95</sup> Porteus, “diary,” 1784, Porteus MSS 2099, f.82, LPL.

<sup>96</sup> Porteus in Hodgson, *The Life of the Right Reverend Beilby Porteus*, 169.

<sup>97</sup> Porteus, “diary,” 1784, Porteus MSS 2099, f.89, LPL.

take the lead in winning converts in British colonies— steadily grew. The turning point in Porteus' career came in 1787 when he was transferred from Chester to the diocese of London. This promotion gave Porteus nominal authority over all ecclesiastical affairs outside of Britain, including the West Indies. In practice, however, the ability of the Bishop of London to direct clergy in the region (numbering only about 60 as late as 1792— “by no mean sufficient in Number, for the Work there was to be done”) had been severely curtailed by colonial customs.<sup>98</sup> On some islands, colonial assemblies had even passed specific edicts that prevented parish vicars from ministering to slaves. As Edward Long wrote in his *History of Jamaica*, “the Bishop of London claims this as a part of his diocese; but his jurisdiction is renounced, and barred by the laws of the island.” “His lordship's residence at so great a distance,” Long proceeded, would produce “obstacles to his working a thorough reformation in Jamaica.”<sup>99</sup>

Despite local opposition and distance from the West Indies, Porteus determined to work towards just the type of “thorough reformation” that Long thought improbable. Like Ramsay, the new Bishop of London believed that ameliorating slavery and converting slaves would catalyze this ambitious agenda. One of his first acts upon transferring dioceses was to send a circular letter to clergy in the West Indies inquiring about the religiosity of colonists and encouraging his charges to minister to slaves in spite of the barriers erected by their owners.<sup>100</sup> The responses Porteus received to this and subsequent letters were sobering. “I am sorry to inform your Lordship that Religion has made but a

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<sup>98</sup> Porteus, “diary,” 1792, Porteus MSS 2101, ff.55-56, LPL.

<sup>99</sup> Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, vol. 2 (London: T. Lowndes, 1774): 235, 239.

<sup>100</sup> The letter was later printed. Beilby Porteus, *A Letter to the Clergy of the West-India Islands* (London: [s.n.], 1788).

very small progress in any Parish,” wrote Thomas Robertson from Harbour Islands, Bahamas. Referring to the whites he encountered, Robertson noted that “there are very few that can read... & in general they have but little Knowledge of Religion.” “The Blacks,” he added, “are still worse.” When Robinson suggested that slaves be taught to read the Bible, owners told him “that if they saw any of their Slaves with Books in their Hands they would cut them to pieces, for they were only made to work & serve them.”<sup>101</sup>

Alex Richardson, one of only three active Church of England ministers in all Bermuda, claimed that he had to baptize slaves in secret for fear of retaliation from planters. Such information substantiated that provided to Porteus by the island’s governor about the “forlorn state of this Colony.”<sup>102</sup> Equally as adamant in his condemnation of settler irreligiosity was William Gordon, who served in Exuma, Bahamas in the early 1790s. “I believe in all the West-India Islands there is more Infidelity and disregard of Religion than in Britain,” he informed Porteus in June 1792. In another letter three months later, he shared his view that slaves “are subjects of Great Britain and therefore intitled [sic] to her protection.” To this, though, he added a point of which Porteus was already well aware: “the colonies,” he wrote, “would be displeased if such laws were made for them by the British Parliament.”<sup>103</sup>

On the whole, Porteus’ correspondents painted a bleak picture of both the state of religion and the conditions of slavery throughout the West Indies. More optimistically, though, many of them also leant credence to the bishop’s view that one way of effecting

<sup>101</sup> Thomas Robertson to BP, Harbour Island, 17 June 1790, SPG Papers, vol. XV, ff. 80-82, LPL.

<sup>102</sup> Alex Richardson to BP, Bermuda, 13 May 1789, SPG Papers, vol. XVII, ff. 45-46, LPL; Henry Hamilton to BP, St. George’s, Bermuda, 24 August 1792, SPG Papers, vol. XVII, ff. 67-68.

<sup>103</sup> William Gordon to BP, Exuma, Bahamas, 18 June 1792, SPG Papers, vol. XV, ff. 82-85, LPL; William Gordon to BP, Exuma, Bahamas, 2 Sept 1792, SPG Papers, vol. XV, ff. 87-93, LPL.

change in settler society was through furthering Christianity among the slave population. Gordon, for instance, claimed that “the teaching of the Negroes Religion and good Morals would tend to the reforming of the Whites in the Colonies.” The Rector of Westmoreland, Jamaica agreed, writing that “I have well grounded hopes that if a proper attention is paid to the instruction of the Negroes, it may well have good effects not only of the lower class of White people, but even spread its influence over the whole system.”<sup>104</sup> An increased clerical presence on estates, both men suggested, would serve as an ongoing reminder to owners and overseers of their Christian obligation to treat slaves humanely.

On the question of abolition, the clergy with whom Porteus corresponded were divided. Some believed that only abrogating the continuous supply of new labour would provide planters with sufficient economic incentive to improve conditions so that slaves would live longer and reproduce more. Others predicted that abolition would simply increase hostility from owners whose cooperation was crucial to implementing slavery reform. While Porteus would have taken all this advice into consideration, it appears that his stance in favour of abolition had solidified by the time the public campaign first began in late 1787. In a letter sent to the SEAST on 2 February 1788, Josiah Wedgewood wrote that he had heard through Porteus’ brother-in-law that the bishop felt “he could not be a first mover in the business,” but that he “would give it his best support when it was set on foot by more proper Persons.”<sup>105</sup> Ten days later, Porteus was appointed to the Committee of Council for the Consideration of all Matter relating to Trade and Foreign

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<sup>104</sup> W. Stanford to BP, Westmoreland, Jamaica, 22 July 1788, SPG Papers, vol. XVIII, f. 68.

<sup>105</sup> Wedgewood to SEAST, 2 February 1788, in Fair Minute Book, vol. 1, Add. Ms. 21255, BL.

Plantations. From this post, he soon began working to shepherd ameliorationist legislation through parliament, including William Dolben's 1788 Slave Trade Act that set restrictions on slave transportation based on a ship's tonnage. Porteus shortly thereafter helped Clarkson select witnesses for the Privy Council investigation into the slave trade and subsequently "superintended" the proceedings on behalf of abolitionists. As a member of the House of Lords, Porteus' access to the corridors of power and his near constant attendance at the hearings made him an extremely valuable asset to the cause.<sup>106</sup>

Neither Beilby Porteus nor James Ramsay saw any inconsistency in supporting abolition on one hand and slavery reform on the other. They each wanted the slave trade abolished and believed that such a measure would compel owners to implement more humane labour practices on their plantations. Since there was no discussion of ending slaveholding itself, this position was fully compatible with their desire that the institution be regulated and amended. Their shared conviction that rules governing slavery should emanate from the metropole and be "as universally uniform as their [colonies'] various circumstances will permit" explains in part why Ramsay and Porteus each praised the French *Code Noir*.<sup>107</sup> Here was a set of clear rules that ensured slaves received adequate religious instruction and that specified the obligations of masters to them. Citing his proposals to begin the workday with a prayer, assign a protector figure to all plantations, and forbid the separation of slave families, Porteus told leaders of the SPG in 1784 that he was essentially asking them to "compose a *Code Noir* for their own estate."<sup>108</sup> In

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<sup>106</sup> "superintended" in J.C. Pollock, *Wilberforce* (London: Constable, 1977), 82.

<sup>107</sup> Ramsay, *Plan of Re-Union*, 156.

<sup>108</sup> Porteus, "An Essay towards the more Effectual Civilization and Conversion of the Negro Slaves,..." in Hodgson, *The Life of the Right Reverend Beilby Porteus*, vol. 6: 190. A number of Anglican clergy in the

periodical reviews of both Porteus' published sermon and of Ramsay's *Essay*, commentators identified the takeaway message as being that Britain should "soon imitate the French in establishing a BLACK CODE 'for the protection, the security, the encouragement, the improvement, and the conversion,' of our negroes."<sup>109</sup>

James Ramsay and Beilby Porteus were far from alone in admiring many aspects of the *Code Noir*. For advocates of political, religious, and humanitarian reform, the *Code* represented an enlightened approach to imperial management that benefitted slaves, colonists, and metropolitans alike. That so many reformers in Britain in the latter 1780s and early 1790s lauded the French regulations might at first appear odd: France and Britain had gone to war twice in the past generation and would soon do so again. Indeed, as Linda Colley has influentially argued, the constant threat of hostilities meant that even into the late eighteenth century Britons largely defined their national policies and institutions in favourable contrast to those of their rivals across the Channel.<sup>110</sup> Yet, as stories of the horrors of unregulated plantation life proliferated in the aftermath of the American War, maintaining claims of moral superiority in the imperial arena became increasingly difficult. The author James White succinctly captured the apparent paradox

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West Indies specifically identified the *Code Noir* as worthy of emulation in their letters to Porteus. See, for example, William Gordon to Porteus, Exuma, Bahamas, 2 September 1792, SPG Papers, vol. XV, ff.87-93, LPL. For the same message sent to Granville Sharp, see Rev. Duke to Granville Sharp, St. Thomas, Barbados, 27 May 1784, 13/1/D20, GRO.

<sup>109</sup> "Review of Porteus' Sermon," *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 53 (October 1783): 859-60. Such Francophilia opened Ramsay up to attack from pro-slavery forces, including Tobin who wrote of the *Essay* that "Mr. Ramsay loses sight of his main subject, in pursuit of what seems his particular delight, degrading English planters, and exalting those of the French islands." James Tobin, *Cursory Remarks Upon the Reverend Mr. Ramsay's Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the Sugar Colonies* (London: G. and T. Wilkie, 1785), 33.

<sup>110</sup> Colley, *Britons*, esp. 18.

this situation presented. That the “arbitrary power” which demarcated the French system of government, he wrote,

should ever be a friend to liberty, or to the alleviation of slavery, may appear a thing too opposite to its very nature to be admitted. But so it is... An individual in the French islands dares not to be tyrannical: he is kept in awe by a higher and stronger hand, that would instantly crush him, should avaricious views of private emolument tempt him to dishonour or endanger the community.<sup>111</sup>

Other critics of Britain’s largely hands-off approach to West Indian slavery used the *Code Noir* to attempt to spur their countrymen to action. Citing French regulations alongside similar Spanish regulations, for example, an anonymous contributor to *The Templer* urged that “while we affect to despise the foibles of other nations, let us not blush to emulate their virtues.”<sup>112</sup>

### *The Legal Autonomy of Colonists*

Advocates of slavery reform in Britain lauded the *Code Noir* not only for the specific regulations it contained. For many, the mechanisms through which rules were enforced were equally as significant as measures governing the treatment of slaves and the obligations of slave owners. In addition to establishing the centrality of clergy to plantation life, the *Code Noir* stipulated that government officials such as judges, justices of the peace, crown attorneys, and constables be sufficiently present in slave societies to,

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<sup>111</sup> James White, *Hints of a Specific Plan for an Abolition of the Slave Trade, and for Relief of the Negroes in the British West Indies* (London: J. Debrett, 1788), 18-19.

<sup>112</sup> That many British abolitionists commended both the *Code Noir* and the alleged humaneness of slavery in Spanish America deserves greater scholarly attention. Caroline Spence has shown the centrality of a “White legend” of Spanish slavery to debates about reforming slavery in the British West Indies in the early nineteenth century; my research indicates that a favourable perception of both French and Spanish slave law can be traced back further. As early as 1776, for example, Granville Sharp stated that in the New Word “Spaniards are more civilized than the English, of which their new regulations for the abolishing of slavery afford ample proof.” Granville Sharp, *The Just Limitation of Slavery in the Laws of God, Compared with the Unbound Claims of Africa Traders and British American Slaveholders* (London: B. White, 1776), 54. See Caroline Q. Spence, “Ameliorating Slavery: Slavery and Protection in the British Colonies, 1783-1865,” Unpublished PhD. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2014.



as Ramsay put it, “check the abuse of power in the master.”<sup>113</sup> Presuming that those with a vested interest in the plantation system were incapable of impartially enforcing slave laws, activists insisted that legal administrators come from Britain. An unknown reader of the *Gentleman’s Magazine* underscored the importance of this proviso in a letter he submitted to the periodical in March 1788: “what are laws,” he rhetorically asked, “in the hands of those whose interest it is to pervert them?”<sup>114</sup> By having the home government supply the personnel for a more robust judicial and legal system in the West Indies, reformers believed that the welfare of slaves would become less dependent on the caprice of owners. Many also hoped that the increase in metropolitan officials would remind colonial elites that they were subject to English law, not outside of it. Much like missionaries, metropolitan legal officials were seen as potential vehicles for furthering the twin objectives of lessening the hardships of slavery and reigning in the autonomy of colonists.

Historians have largely overlooked the concern with colonial legal autonomy that permeated late eighteenth-century antislavery discourse. The frequency of calls for legal reform, however, suggests that the application and enforcement of slave laws was actually at the heart of discussions about the future of West Indian slavery. By extension, debate about legal norms in the sugar islands became a point of contestation in colony-metropole relations more broadly. Among advocates of both abolition and amelioration who seriously considered the issue of policy implementation, many recognized that furthering their agenda required that those charged with enforcing the law be independent

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<sup>113</sup> Ramsay proceeded to write in his assessment of the *Code Noir* that the French regulations “may well put British negligence to shame.” Ramsay, *An Essay*, 54.

<sup>114</sup> “Letter to Editor,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 58 (March 1788): 211-12.

from the planter interest. Politicians and imperial administrators in Britain also saw the importance of built-in checks to the legal power of planters. From their perspective, circumventing judicial institutions and procedures inherited from the home country was yet another indicator of colonial independency. For policy makers aiming to tighten London's control over the management of empire, dispatching officials to ensure colonists complied with slave regulations offered a concrete way of demonstrating where political authority lay.

One of the most obvious shortcomings of the way in which justice was administered in the West Indies stemmed from the fact that many judges, jurors, and attorneys either owned slaves or had strong economic and social ties to the plantocracy. Since Britain sent very few legal professionals to its colonies in the eighteenth century, officials tended to come from the limited number of educated settlers on a given island. Reflecting the distrust that most abolitionists had for the planter class, William Cowper complained to John Newton that this preponderance of colonials resulted in “a want of Prosecutors or righteous Judges” throughout the West Indies.<sup>115</sup> In addition to being evident in criminal trials themselves, the biases of legal administrators also served to deter both the crown and slaves from initiating proceedings against slave owners. In most islands, laws were designed so that multiple individuals would be involved in assessing cases brought against masters, thus providing many opportunities for the local proslavery interest to shape outcomes.

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<sup>115</sup> Cowper to Newton, 19 April 1788, in William Cowper, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. John King and Charles Ryskamp, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981-86): 149.

The systemic bias that characterized colonial slave law is well illustrated by the hotly debated Consolidated Act for Regulating the Treatment of Slaves, passed by the Jamaican legislature in December 1788. Like slave codes adopted by other assemblies around the same time, the Consolidated Act was an attempt by the plantocracy to arrest growing support for abolition by demonstrating “the good order and government of slaves” that prevailed in the colony. Another of its stated objectives was to prove “the humanity of their [slaves’] owners.”<sup>116</sup> Among other things, planters and their allies lauded the Act for outlining a legal process through which slaves could seek redress for maltreatment. As abolitionists pointed out, however, the procedure was deeply flawed at point of application, and contained numerous obstacles that significantly limited the chances of an owner actually being convicted of an offence. First, a slave would have to find a sympathetic magistrate willing to hear his or her complaint—a difficult task considering the remoteness of many plantations and the lack of regular visits by officials. The magistrate would then have to consult two other magistrates to determine whether the slave had a case against the master. The next step was to establish a Council of Protection comprised of leading members of the community (almost certain to include slaveholders) to assess the evidence. If the Council concluded that the slave owner did

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<sup>116</sup> Jamaica Assembly, The act of assembly of the island of Jamaica, to repeal several acts, and clauses of acts, respecting slaves, and for the better Order and Government of Slaves, and for other Purposes (London: B. White, and Son, et al..., 1788): 4. Because Jamaica was Britain’s largest Caribbean colony, and because the Consolidated Act was passed at the onset of widespread abolitionist fervour, the Act received considerably more attention than the revised slave codes subsequently passed by other islands. James Ramsay, for instance, wrote an entire unpublished commentary on the legislation. Underscoring how Ramsay viewed slavery through the lens of colonial power, he placed his comments on the Act under one of two headings: “Con Planter” or “Pro Planter.” Ramsay, “Strictures on the Jamaica Consolidated Act for the Government of Slaves,” 1788 [?], Add. Ms. 27621, ff.233-34, BL. Another interesting commentary on the Act from someone with experience serving in the West Indies comes from William Dickson, who had been private secretary to Governor of Barbados Edward Hay before returning to Britain and emerging himself in the abolitionist campaign. Like Ramsay, Dickson saw the lack of enforcement mechanisms as a major shortcoming of the legislation. See William Dickson, Letters on Slavery, by William Dickson, Formerly Private Secretary to the Late Hon. Edward Hay, Governor of Barbadoes (London: J. Phillips, 1789).

not violate any law, his accuser would be subject to hard labour or whippings for spreading unfounded allegations. Not without reason, antislavery activists in Britain denounced the Consolidated Act as a mere public relations exercise that in no way protected slaves.

A lack of metropolitan officials in the West Indies also meant that legal personnel frequently assumed multiple roles, thereby compounding the proslavery bias inherent in the judicial system. The same person, for instance, was often responsible for rendering a verdict and both assigning and administering punishment. With so much power concentrated in the hands of a single individual, often a slave owner himself, it was not uncommon for “horrible tortures [to be] inflicted judicially on slaves” found guilty of crimes. To metropolitan observers, the courtroom appeared to be little more than an extension of the plantation where “the master was accustomed to assume to himself the offices of judge, jury, and executioner.”<sup>117</sup> Trials, many believed, were formalized though still arbitrary ways for slave owners to inflict violence on their chattel. In parliamentary and Privy Council hearings, investigators took a keen interest in the conflation of jurisdictional roles that in Britain were separate. In response to questions on the subject, a number of witnesses reported that slave owners could order public floggings without first obtaining permission from a magistrate or justice of the peace. Many witnesses further testified that such punishments often went unsupervised, and that the settler population of the islands saw nothing improper with dispensing justice in this way.

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<sup>117</sup> “A Letter on the Slave Trade from the Honourable Mr.C. lately Member of Parliament for the County of Derby, to the Rev. Dr. B. of Grosvenor Street,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 61 (July 1791): 707-13, on 712; [James Phillips?], “Preface,” in Fuller, *Notes on Reports from Jamaica*, ii.

Most jurors who determined innocence and guilt in criminal trials had an even stronger pro-slavery bias than officials who administered the law. In trials by jury, it was therefore exceedingly rare for a ruling to go against a slave owner. The theologian William Paley highlighted this systemic injustice in a speech he delivered in 1792 by contrasting the murder trial of a West Indian slave owner with that of a London woman charged with killing her domestic servant. The case against the planter was that he “beat his female slave with his own hands, in so cruel a manner, that she died about half an hour after.” Though it appeared obvious to impartial observers that “she died of the blows she received from her master,” a surgeon hired by the defendant convinced the jury that death was caused by “fits” to which “many women” her age (seventeen) were subject. Juxtaposed to this example, Paley recounted the prosecution of Elizabeth Brownrigg whose crime was “extremely similar” to the unnamed slave owner but occurred on English soil. In conformity with English legal customs, Brownrigg was charged, tried, found guilty, and executed in due course. According to Paley, that Brownrigg was convicted whereas the slave owner avoided punishment was not due to the particulars of their respective cases. Rather, the difference in outcome was due to the fact that “one was tried by an impartial English jury, and the other by a jury of West-Indian slave-holders.”<sup>118</sup> To abolitionists, the injustices that took place in the West Indian courtroom were further evidence of the lack of British values and authority in the region.

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<sup>118</sup> Elizabeth Brownrigg was executed in September 1767. Paley provides no specifics for his West Indian example, thus making the trial difficult to identify. In a published copy of Paley’s speech in the Library of Congress, a reader has underlined “slave-holders” and put a series of exclamation marks where Paley identifies and deprecates their bias. This interaction with the text suggests that the reader was equally as agitated by the prejudices of settlers as by the suffering of slaves. All citations from William Paley, Recollections of a Speech, Upon the Slave Trade; Delivered in Carlisle, on Thursday the 9th of February, 1792 (Carlisle: F. Jollie, 1792), 9.

The numerous flaws and prejudices that demarcated West Indian legal systems meant that proceedings against slave owners for abusing or neglecting slaves were infrequent. Still more infrequent were convictions. The rarity of both these occurrences lent credence to the accusation that creole elites worked to collectively place themselves above the law. According to Africanus, the penname of the pamphleteer and reverend William Leigh, by 1788 there had not been “above three or four instances of Planters having been called to account, and still fewer of them having been punished, for the murder of a Negro.”<sup>119</sup> Though this figure was an exaggeration, it did point to the reality that planters were seldom successfully prosecuted for exceeding limits on the amount or intensity of punishment they could legally inflict on slaves. In rare cases where an owner was found guilty of wantonly or excessively beating his slave, the penalties he received were minimal. “Instances of the greatest enormity, even the most wanton or deliberate murder of slaves,” wrote the Quaker antislavery committee in their first published tract in 1783, are “only punished, if punished at all, by trifling fines.” Owners, therefore, were but “weakly restrained by the colony laws.”<sup>120</sup> Witnesses appearing before parliamentary and Privy Council inquiries corroborated this conclusion. When asked about the legal status of slaves in the West Indies, the former slave trader Henry Hew Dalrymple provided a representative answer:

I do not believe that they were considered as under the protection of the law. My reasons for being of this opinion are, that in many instances Negroes have been treated in a cruel manner, without the person who committed this cruelty being punished for it; and in more instances than one, murders have been committed,

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<sup>119</sup> Africanus [Rev. William Leigh], *Remarks on the Slave Trade, and the Slavery of the Negroes. In a Series of Letters* (London: J. Phillips, 1788), 53.

<sup>120</sup> William Dillwyn and John Lloyd, *The Case of Our Fellow-Creatures, the Oppressed Africans, Respectfully Recommended to the Serious Consideration of the Legislature of Great-Britain, by the People Called Quakers* (London: James Phillips, 1783), 9-10.

not only with impunity, but without its being supposed that they were subject to punishment on this account.”<sup>121</sup>

The lack of judicial restraint to which planters were subject, as well as the lack of deterrence provided by existing penalties, attracted the attention of imperial administrators in London. In a circular dispatch sent to West Indian assemblies in March 1788, Home Secretary Lord Sydney asked for responses to fifty-three “Heads of Enquiry.” His first question went to the heart of government concerns about colonial rule: “What is the legal power which Masters have over their Slaves in each of the British Islands of the West Indies?” Subsequent questions continued in this vein: “What is the protection granted to Slaves by Law in each of the British Islands?”; “To what penalties are their Masters, or those who act under them, subject?”; “If they [masters] transgress the Laws made for the protection of Negro Slaves, or in any other respect exercise Acts of cruelty towards them,... to what Courts are they in such cases amenable?”<sup>122</sup> The responses to these queries confirmed a growing sense in Britain that laws, mechanisms for enforcing laws, and “the general police of the Colonies” all stood “in need of revival and amendment.”<sup>123</sup> When asked how severely an owner could punish a slave, for instance, the Grenadan assembly reported “there are no laws, which inflict Penalty on Masters, for correcting their Slaves, sometimes cruelly.” Regulations in Barbados provided hardly less of a disincentive: representatives from that island informed Sydney

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<sup>121</sup> Testimony of Henry Hew Dalrymple in Sheila Lambert, ed., House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century, vol. 73 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1975): 304.

<sup>122</sup> For a representative letter, see Sydney to Assembly of Grenada, 1788, TNA, CO 101/28, f.167. These citations are all taken from a truncated copy of the questionnaire found in “Heads of Information,” 1788, Add. Ms. 38416, ff. 217-20, BL. A number of questions also focused on missionary activity in the West Indies, thus underscoring the connection that many contemporaries drew between a metropolitan religious presence in the colonies and the exercise of metropolitan sovereignty.

<sup>123</sup> Africanus, Remarks on the Slave Trade, 59.

that someone who “wantonly, without Cause, and with any Circumstances of Cruelty, put an End to his Slave’s Life” was a subject to a fine of a mere fifteen pounds.<sup>124</sup>

Since both abolitionists and government officials saw significant problems with the legal autonomy of slave owners, members of both groups suggested various ways to bring jurisprudence in the West Indies under greater metropolitan oversight. As we have seen, the most widely proposed idea was to dispatch more crown attorneys, justices of the peace, and magistrates from Britain to the colonies. Beyond this step, many argued the need for structural changes to legal systems in slave societies. Considering judicial reform a first step towards abolition, William Roscoe called on the government “to establish in every Colony, a Court of Judicature, which shall be both of a criminal and civil nature, to be composed of three judges, appointed by the crown, none of whom shall be either merchants or planters.”<sup>125</sup> Recognizing that at present “White men are... beyond the reach of the law,” the former Chief Justice of Saint Vincent put forward a proposition similar to recommendations found in Burke’s *Negro Code*. “Councils of protection or guardians should be appointed in each parish in the islands,” he wrote, “whose duty it should be to frequently visit the plantations in their respective parishes, in order to inspect the treatment of Slaves, and to see that those provisions which may be made for their benefit are put in force.” The retired jurist also agreed with a host of antislavery

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<sup>124</sup> Response to Heads of Inquiry, Grenada, TNA, CO 101/28, ff.167.

<sup>125</sup> William Roscoe, *A General View of the African Slave-Trade, Demonstrating Its Injustice and Impolicy: With Hints toward a Bill for Its Abolition*. (London: R. Faulder, 1788), 32.



campaigners that slave testimony should be made admissible in court. This, he argued, would help check the ability of planters to predetermine the outcome of a trial.<sup>126</sup>

### *James Stephen and the Slavery Debate Redux*

No individual was more agitated by the miscarriages of justice that occurred in the West Indies than the lawyer and humanitarian James Stephen. No government official would channel this outrage into promoting antislavery legislation more than Stephen either. To most historians, James Stephen is best known as the sharpest legal mind of the abolitionist movement. Throughout his long legal and political career from the 1780s to the 1830s, Stephen used his influence as attorney for the Privy Council, master of the chancery, member of parliament, and legal advisor to successive Prime Ministers to promote an antislavery agenda. Most famously, he was responsible for drafting the 1805 order-in-council that banned British planters from purchasing slaves from foreign ships, thereby immediately eliminating one-third of the slave trade and paving the way for total abolition two years later. Stephen's activism continued into the post-abolition era during which he championed a slave registration system and various ameliorationist policies. When the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery formed in 1823 to push for an end to slavery itself, Stephen joined Wilberforce and Clarkson as one of the antislavery movement's elder statesmen, providing legal council to the next generation of activists. His reflections on colonial autonomy and slavery provide a good window onto

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<sup>126</sup> Testimony of Drewry Ottley, in Lambert, ed., *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, vol. 82: 158, 160. In addition to fairness before the law, many advocates of slavery reform claimed that allowing slaves to testify at trials would be a good way to prepare them for civic participation in a post-slavery society. Wilberforce, for instance, claimed that giving slaves "a power of appealing to the laws, would be to awaken in them a sense of dignity of their nature," which he saw as a precondition for emancipation. William Wilberforce, 18 April 1791, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 28: 274.

the intersection of these issues during the era of abolition and emancipation. They also highlight how the maintenance of metropolitan sovereignty was always an important component of the overall case for slavery reform and antislavery.

Though scholars have consistently acknowledged the ways in which Stephen shaped slave law, they have generally failed to explore how slave law shaped Stephen.<sup>127</sup> Stephen's career trajectory as both an abolitionist and activist lawyer can be traced back to a specific incident on his first voyage to the West Indies in 1783 when he witnessed the trial of four Barbadian slaves charged with murder. Prior to this event, there was nothing in Stephen's past to indicate that he would one day become an antislavery luminary: he had never excelled in school, studied law only intermittently due to his family's strained financial situation, and had hitherto displayed no strong inclinations toward any religious or philanthropic cause. During the war era, Stephen's strongest political attachment was to that of "the revolted colonies, which I deemed to be that of liberty throughout the world." A combination of idealism, wanderlust, and a lack of job prospects at home even led him to contemplate joining Washington's army in 1775, writing only decades later that being "brought into contact with those slave-driving champions of liberty and justice" would have brought an end to "the delusions which had given them my sympathy."<sup>128</sup> When Stephen did speak in opposition to the slave trade in

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<sup>127</sup> While Stephen's significance is noted in almost all histories of abolitionism, he has thus far escaped the detailed scrutiny afforded other leading abolitionists of his era. There remains, for instance, no authoritative biography on him. A short overview of his life and activism is provided in Stephen Tomkin, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain* (Oxford: Lion, 2010), esp. 148-52.

<sup>128</sup> James Stephen, *The Memoirs of James Stephen: Written by Himself for the Use of His Children*, ed. Merle Bevington (London: Hogarth Press, 1954): 259, 259-60. Stephen continued to express outrage at the hypocrisy of American slave owners well after the war had ended. "In all human character," he wrote to Wilberforce in a letter that appears to have been written in the late 1820s, "I know nothing so detestable as

a public debate in 1779, his sole motivation was to showcase his oratorical skills and win admiration from a female companion. Instead of igniting his own interest in slavery, Stephen's performance ignited the romantic feelings of both the woman he was courting and her much younger friend. For the next four years, Stephen pursued relations with both women, becoming the centerpiece of an ever-more complicated love triangle.<sup>129</sup>

It was partly to extricate himself from "such painful embarrassments" that in the summer of 1783 Stephen made "a speedy migration" to join his uncle and brother in St. Christopher.<sup>130</sup> En route, the newly minted lawyer had a brief stopover in Bridgetown, Barbados where he learned that four slaves were to be tried the following day for the murder of a white doctor. He also learned that many in the community "strongly doubted the guilt of the prisoners" but anticipated a guilty verdict nonetheless.<sup>131</sup> Curiosity led Stephen to attend the trial, and it is indicative of the deep impression the day's

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a democratic slave-master or defender of private slavery." Bevington, "Introduction," in Stephen, The Memoirs of James Stephen, 19.

<sup>129</sup> Stephen would later describe his 1779 speech as "the best, and by far the best received, of any I ever made in my life." Stephen, The Memoirs of James Stephen, 276. Interestingly, one of the speakers in favour of slavery that evening was Sir Robert Dallas, the principal defense attorney in the Hastings trial. Stephen's rhetoric and vigour succeeded in impressing Nancy, the object of his affections, and her younger friend Maria. Within months of the debate Stephen and Nancy got engaged and Stephen and Maria began a clandestine affair. Stephen's recollections of his liaisons with Maria decades later provide an interesting case study of how many evangelicals looked back on their transgressions prior to their conversion experience: "Maddened with admiration of her person, I always forgot in her presence the resolutions with which I met her and, instead of the friend and the monitor, acted the part not only of a passionate lover but of a seducer, bent on the destruction of her virtue.... In short, my guilt, as well as my infatuation, was gross." Stephen went on to explain the immense remorse he felt in being unfaithful to Nancy who almost committed suicide when she learned of the affair. Maria ended up pregnant and had a baby in 1782, at which point Stephen and Maria hastily married in a parish in Shoreditch; here, no one knew them, and nobody could therefore object to the marriage banns on the grounds of Stephen's infidelity. Stephen intended to pass the child off as his and Nancy's if Maria died, and hoped to get re-married to Maria if Nancy died. Nancy's father apparently approved of the plan. It is perhaps because of the scandalous nature of the story that Stephen's descendants did not publish his memoirs, in which Stephen recounted the sordid saga, until 1954. See Stephen, The Memoirs of James Stephen, 315-26, 421-25.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

<sup>131</sup> James Stephen, The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated: Being a Delineation of the State in Point of Law, vol. 2 (London: J. Butterworth and Son, 1830): xviii

proceedings left on him that he was able to vividly recount them in his autobiography forty-seven years later. In numerous ways, Stephen was stunned by the “contrast there was between the proceedings of a slave court, and the humanity of our criminal tribunals [in England].”<sup>132</sup> The injustices of the trial were indeed many: there was no arraignment; the defendants had their wrists tightly bound and were in physical pain throughout the proceedings; no defence lawyers were provided; there were no written charges in advance, so the accused only learned of the case against them as it unfolded. Most egregious of all was the judge’s bullying of a slave girl called to testify as a witness to the murder. As Stephen recalled, “she was admonished in the most alarming terms, to beware not to conceal any thing that made against the prisoners.” “Every word implied a premature conviction in the mind of the court... and that she would be probably disbelieved and punished if she said any thing tending to acquit them.” Based on her testimony alone, the adjudicating panel of five magistrates who heard the case convicted the four slaves and recommended an “exemplary death” of gibbetting or burning alive.<sup>133</sup>

The trial was an eye-opening experience for the twenty-five-year-old Stephen who was disgusted by what he witnessed as both a man and a lawyer. “I could not but be deeply impressed with the shocking contrast it presented to the impartial and humane administration of British justice,” he recalled, embellishing the supposed fairness of court proceedings in Britain, “and its reversal of every principle that I had been taught to

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., xix

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., xvii-xxx. After the verdict was rendered, the owner of two of the slaves produced evidence that they were otherwise engaged when the murder occurred. The magistrates then proceeded to reverse their verdict for these two slaves in light of the new information. The fact that the judgment handed down to the other two slaves was not likewise reconsidered solidified in Stephen’s mind that the entire trial was a sham.

reverence.”<sup>134</sup> More than simply exposing judicial shortcomings in the West Indies, the trial also provided Stephen with a window onto settler society, revealing just how deeply the colonies had been corrupted by slavery. During his voyage to St. Christopher and his brief layover in Barbados, Stephen had conversed extensively with many West Indians who were hospitable and of “pleasing manners.” He was therefore astonished that instead of sharing his disapprobation of “the mode of trial, and conduct of the court,” these same individuals “defend[ed] such proceedings.” They even approved of the fact that the guilty slaves “were literally roasted to death.”<sup>135</sup> That “so many of my humane countrymen” (including his planter uncle) supported such a cruel punishment convinced Stephen that generations of slave owning had distorted the collective moral sense of white communities in the sugar islands.<sup>136</sup> Like many abolitionists who spent time in the West Indies, Stephen came to the conclusion that a “long exposure” to slavery had attenuated the “native feelings” of planters of British ancestry. More than anything, the trial revealed “the corrupting effects of familiarity and contact with the harsh system, in the minds of those who have long resided in the colonies.”<sup>137</sup>

In addition to transforming Stephen’s previously favourable views of West Indian society, the proceedings against the four Barbadian slaves marked a personal turning point in the young lawyer’s life. After observing the trial, Stephen began to immerse himself in slave law, learning with horror that white men in Barbados “were not only exempt from all such barbarous departures from the laws of England; but for the wilful

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., xxviii.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., xxviii, xxix, xxvii.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., xxvii.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., xxx, xvi.

[sic] murder of a slave, were liable only to a fine of fifteen pounds.”<sup>138</sup> His investigations would eventually lead him to conclude by the 1820s that colonial slavery itself was not sanctioned by English common law, but “is only to be found in the custom of the colonies, and the strict acts of their assemblies.”<sup>139</sup> Through both his legal researches and his direct observations of the plantation system in action, Stephen during the mid-1780s gradually converted to the cause of abolition. In private, he began sending information to Wilberforce whom he had met during a brief trip home in 1789. Beyond the injustices of slaveholding and the brutality of plantation life, letters between Stephen and Wilberforce and his coterie also explored religious themes. This correspondence played a pivotal role in catalyzing the second major conversion of Stephen’s life, from “theological opinions commonly called liberal” to evangelical Christianity.<sup>140</sup> When Stephen returned to Britain permanently in 1794, he settled in Clapham alongside a vanguard of other Anglican reformers with evangelical leanings. He married Wilberforce’s sister Sarah in 1800 after the death of his first wife.<sup>141</sup> In contrast to Ramsay, Porteus, and the Evangelicals studied in the following chapter, Stephen’s conversion to antislavery predated and precipitated his conversion to “real Christianity.”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., xxviii.

<sup>139</sup> James Stephen, The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated: Being a Delineation of the State in Point of Law, vol. 1 (London: J. Butterworth and Son, 1824): 15.

<sup>140</sup> Bevington, “Introduction,” in Stephen, The Memoirs of James Stephen, 13; Stephen, The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated, vol. 2: xv.

<sup>141</sup> There is no indication of what had become of either Maria or Stephen’s illegitimate son by this point. On Stephen’s centrality to the Clapham Sect and the network of Evangelicals that grew out of it, see Tomkin, The Clapham Sect.

<sup>142</sup> Stephen often reiterated this point later in life when proslavery forces attacked him as a religious enthusiast. As he wrote in 1830, “It is not true, then, that zeal for Christianity, or what my opponents call enthusiasm in religion, made me an enemy to slavery. It would be much nearer the truth, for certain reasons, to say that this enmity made me a Christian.” Stephen, The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated, vol. 2: Pxvi.

During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, Stephen continued to pay close attention to reports from the West Indies on the trials of slaves and slave owners alike. The accounts he read proved that abolition in 1807 had not brought about the general reformation of the West Indian slave system that he and others had hoped for. In his two-volume *The Slavery of the West Indian Colonies Delineated*, published in 1824 and 1830, Stephen reflected at length on how little had changed since his eleven years in St. Christopher. The book contained an admixture of his own recollections and more recent reports from others about life in the sugar islands. Predictably, the flaws of West Indian legal systems was a prominent theme. Similar to advocates of slavery reform in the 1780s and 1790s, Stephen inveighed against how the “modes of trial” of slaves were “highly dangerous to the innocent; as well as inconsistent with the lenity and humane circumspection of English law.” He juxtaposed the mildness with which planters were treated when found guilty of crimes with the punishments (of a “severity unknown to the laws of the mother-country”) that were inflicted on slaves.<sup>143</sup> He also denounced the proscription of slave testimony in court and wrote about “the non-execution and perversion of laws which profess to restrain [masters’] abuses.”<sup>144</sup> As he had first concluded during the trial in Barbados over thirty years earlier, Stephen here reiterated that public approbation of biased legal proceedings was proof of colonial moral degeneracy. That those few attorneys who did prosecute slave owners for violent crimes became “object[s] of general dislike,” and that owners with violent reputations “stand

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<sup>143</sup> Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 1: 457.

<sup>144</sup> Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 2: 4.

highest in local rank and responsibility,” pointed very clearly to “the still unreformed bad spirit which characterizes West Indian Societies [sic].”<sup>145</sup>

Nowhere was this “bad spirit” more on display than during the trial of a St. Christopher slave owner in 1786 in which Stephen served as a member of the prosecution. While writing *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated* nearly forty years later, Stephen was still able to clearly recall the case. The defendant was charged with beating two child slaves in a most savage and inhumane manner even by the standards of the time. Among other things, a doctor who inspected the children determined that they had been beaten with a rope, repeatedly struck in the head, had their hair pulled out, and were gagged with a wooden gagging hoop to stifle their cries. As much as he was shocked by the brutality of the owner and the suffering of the “mere enfants,” Stephen was equally revolted by the reaction of the accused to being put on trial. As opposed to feeling shame, as “the European reader would no doubt be ready to conclude,” the defendant “assumed an air of indignation and defiance; challenging their [the magistrates’] authority to interfere between master and slave.” Even more dispiriting was the widespread support he received from fellow planters who disparaged the magistrates hearing the case. Some even stood forward as sureties. When a guilty judgment was rendered, the convicted slave owner

instead of being dishonoured by this verdict, was elevated into the character of the suffering patriot; the champion, and the martyr, of the sacred rights of slave-owners and master. The horror due to his cruelty was lost in contemplation of the danger of the precedent established against him; or rather in public indignation against those who had instituted and supported the prosecution.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 429, 437, 451-52.



Using a little-known clause in St. Christopher's slave code, the owner proceeded to sue the island's Deputy Provost Marshall (into whose care the children had been placed) for confiscating his property. He sought three hundred pounds in damages—a figure much greater than the market value of the slaves. "However strange it might seem to the English reader," wrote Stephen, a civil jury ruled in the master's favour.<sup>146</sup>

It was not only his personal memories from decades past that Stephen summoned up in composing *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*. The veteran abolitionist also revisited the public debates over the slave trade and slavery reform that had played out in the press, pamphlets, and parliament beginning in the mid-1780s. At first glance, citing decades-old writings and testimonies might appear an odd way to pursue the antislavery movement's new goal of slave emancipation. As Stephen explained to his readers, however, his strategy was to show how the initial arguments of abolitionists were validated by subsequent experience, and how, in hindsight, it was apparent that slave codes passed by colonial assemblies to forestall abolition were empty vessels. By highlighting the proven falsity of the claims of slavery apologists, Stephen believed he could convincingly demonstrate the ongoing need for strong antislavery legislation from the home government: like slavery reform in the late eighteenth century, amelioration measures in the 1820s and 1830s would be "impotent" if left to the initiative of colonial assemblies.<sup>147</sup> Since it was James Ramsay's 1784 *Essay* that "formed the basis of the long controversy on that subject which ensued," and "to the refutation or support of his statements, that the respective combatants chiefly bent their efforts," Stephen

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<sup>146</sup> Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 1: 456-64, citations on 458, 459, 460, and 464.

<sup>147</sup> Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 2: 94.

dedicated a considerable amount of space validating Ramsay's arguments.<sup>148</sup> Though attacked by opponents for using sources of "an old date," Stephen believed that the terms of the debate and the intransigence of colonial legislatures had changed little in the intervening decades.<sup>149</sup> He could therefore make a current point by winning an old battle.

Considering the substantial efforts Stephen went to to corroborate Ramsay's claims, it is unsurprising that he came to share many of Ramsay's views on slavery, West Indian society, and how to reform them both. Indeed, though the two men never met in person (Ramsay left St. Christopher four years before Stephen arrived, and died before Stephen returned to Britain), the similarities in their writings are striking. Like Ramsay, Stephen attributed planter violence to both desensitization and the immoral environment of the West Indies—to the "almost irresistible effects of early habit and prejudice, the long exercise of slave discipline, and the contagion of bad example and harsh popular feelings, in the society of a place peopled wholly with slave masters and slaves." Like Ramsay, Stephen saw the sugar islands as places of moral regression, wondering "whether human nature retains its ordinary frailty and peccability in the West Indies." Like Ramsay, Stephen believed that an entire "colonial reformation" could be brought about through reforming (and eventually ending) slavery.<sup>150</sup> Slavery was a "disease," he declared, and its abolition the "only real palliative" to the "enormous" evils that pervaded settler society.<sup>151</sup> In similar rhetoric to that employed by abolitionists a generation earlier, Stephen cast himself as a physician "proposing remedies for the inveterate, deeply seated,

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 415.

<sup>150</sup> Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 2: 429; Ibid., 425; Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 1: lxxi.

<sup>151</sup> Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 2: xxxiii.

and deadly disease of colonial slavery.” Even into the 1820s, it was a “still subsisting malady.”<sup>152</sup>

Above all, retrospectively evaluating the debate that Ramsay sparked in the 1780s about slavery reform proved that colonies could not be trusted to lessen the severity of the institution without constant metropolitan scrutiny. The subterfuge employed by the Jamaica Assembly in avoiding a slave registration system in 1815 strengthened Stephen in this opinion.<sup>153</sup> By the time he wrote the first volume of *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*, Stephen was directly identifying “colonial partisans” and “colonial enemies” as the principal barrier to amelioration.<sup>154</sup> Composed “for the most part either [of] planters... or managers and other dependents of such planters,” island assemblies were the mouthpieces of the slave interest and the epitome of obstructionism. That they in no way enforced the slave acts that they themselves had passed decades earlier “for the sole purpose of averting parliamentary interference” proved “the hopelessness of any effectual melioration of slavery, and still more of its gradual termination, by acts of their local legislatures.”<sup>155</sup> If anything, the fact that Britain had done nothing to ensure that slave owners complied with these acts only emboldened colonial legislatures in their opposition to metropolitan slave legislation in subsequent decades. Echoing Ramsay’s claim that parliament had for too long “slept over the police of her colonies,” Stephen complained that colonists had been hitherto treated with “too

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 2, 3. Stephen had a predilection for employing disease imagery. He referred often to “the malignant character of the disease” of slavery and how harsh treatment of slaves was like a “contagion” that planters transmitted to each other via example. Abolition was needed, he argued, to “cure what is morbid” in the West Indies in order to prevent a “fatal termination” of colonial society. Ibid., 452, 429, xxxiii, 3.

<sup>153</sup> See, for example, Stephen to Lord Grenville, 20 May 1816, Ad. Mss. 58998, BL.

<sup>154</sup> Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 2: xiv.

<sup>155</sup> Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 1: xiv, xiii, 6.

much complaisance.”<sup>156</sup> For slavery to be reformed and British sovereignty maintained, parliament needed to tighten its authority over obdurate colonials.

Stephen did not set out to promote centralized imperial authority when he began his opposition to slavery. Unlike Ramsay, he had no strong political agenda at the onset of his sojourn in the West Indies. Yet both his personal experiences abroad and his later analysis of why slavery remained unreformed well into the nineteenth century led him to adopt a theory of imperial sovereignty that was nearly indistinguishable from that of his antislavery predecessor. Colonial assemblies were wrong to threaten to disregard slave regulations passed by parliament not only because non-compliance would be inhumane: the threats themselves were acts of political defiance, amounting to calls for the “abdication of the controlling power of parliament.” To acquiesce to “such a pretension,” Stephen declared, “would be to lay down the imperial sceptre at the foot of every petty assembly... to place this great empire at best in the state of inferior or vassal ally.”<sup>157</sup> He consistently warned that “the fatal subdivision of legislative jurisdiction in the British West Indies” would inevitably ensue if parliament did not rigorously enforce the amelioration laws that it itself had passed.<sup>158</sup> Again seeing echoes of a past controversy in present debates, Stephen wrote in 1824 that there was little difference between the aspirations for autonomy currently expressed by West Indian legislatures and the claims

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<sup>156</sup> Ramsay, Ad. Mss. 27261, f.39, BL; Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 1: viii.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, xxix, xxi.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.

of American assemblies in the early 1770s.<sup>159</sup> The lessons of America, he believed, were still something that imperial policy makers needed to heed.

### *Conclusion*

Like James Stephen, a number of antislavery campaigners from the 1780s and 1790s spent their latter years warning that neither reforming nor ending colonial slavery could be left to colonists. Among others, these included Wilberforce, Clarkson, William Smith, and Zachary Macaulay. In the era of amelioration and emancipation, each of these veteran abolitionists made the case that ending slavery and making empire a more moral undertaking required simultaneously centralizing imperial authority. In his final speech in the House of Commons on 11 June 1824, Wilberforce publically warned his colleagues about what he had warned his successor as parliamentary spokesman of the antislavery cause Thomas Fowell Buxton about in private: namely, of “the utter hopelessness of any honest co-operation from the Colonial assemblies.”<sup>160</sup> Wilberforce was equally as succinct in a letter to his long-time friend and co-agitator Henry Brougham that same year. Though colonists gave their assent “in words” to laws for ameliorating slavery, most harboured “the real intention of evading the execution of them.” James Stephen would have agreed.<sup>161</sup>

The connection between slavery reform and metropolitan authority, however, is not only a story of the nineteenth-century liberal empire. As this chapter has illustrated,

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., xxi-xxii.

<sup>160</sup> WW to Buxton, 23 March 1826, cited in Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 299.

<sup>161</sup> WW to Henry Brougham, Kensington Gore, 28 March 1826, in Robert I. and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1840): 496.

issues of sovereignty and humanitarianism were entwined from the very inception of organized antislavery. While a wide variety of abolitionists made the case for enhancing Britain's administrative presence in its slave colonies, the argument was posited most directly by leaders of the movement who sought to channel moral outrage into a policy agenda. As exemplified by James Ramsay, Beilby Porteus, and James Stephen, influential Anglicans concerned with the place of the Church of England and state of religion in British territories overseas were especially attuned to how colonial autonomy could undermine their cause. In the case of Ramsay and Stephen, their experiences in the West Indies convinced them that ameliorating both slavery and the moral state of the colonies required metropolitan policy makers to take a more active role in creating and enforcing colonial laws. Porteus reached the same conclusion largely based on the reports he read from clergy who served abroad. In the decade after American independence, Britain's political establishment and imperial administrators were more receptive than at any previous point to such calls to centralize the governance of empire.

Examining efforts to reform slavery and end the slave trade as part of a wider contest between metropolitan and colonial rights underscores the high stakes of the slavery debates. Both regulating slaveholding and stopping the supply of new slaves to the colonies had major implications for where the balance of power lay within the British Empire, as well as where it would lie in the future. Contemporaries were acutely aware of this fact, and many of those who advocated tightening Britain's grip on its colonies saw the regulation of slavery as a means through which to actuate claims of sovereignty overseas. The recognition that humanitarian policies and metropolitan authority could

advance hand-in-hand should not call into doubt the genuine revulsion that many abolitionists and imperial administrators felt towards colonial slavery. It does, however, help explain why grassroots antislavery agitation was favourably received by a significant number of politicians and officials charged with managing Britain's empire. The issue of imperial sovereignty, in short, helps explain why antislavery gained traction as a viable political program.

## Chapter Five

### *Evangelical Reformers: Abolitionism, India, and the Missionary Awakening*

On 31 May 1792, a group of Baptist clerics and laymen congregated for their monthly meeting near the East Midlands town of Northampton. Known as the Northamptonshire Association, the group's stated purpose was two-fold: to pray for their parishes and parishioners, and to find ways to spread the gospel message to non-Christians and Christians in name only. Under the leadership of the preacher and schoolmaster William Carey, the Association had for some time been debating the merits of establishing a society to promote missionary work overseas. Carey made the case for such an organization most forcefully in a treatise he wrote in 1789 entitled *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. While Carey called for Baptists to enlighten all those in "pagan darkness" who have "no Bible, and are only lead by the most childish customs and traditions," he showed particular concern for the spiritual welfare of Hindus in British-controlled India.<sup>1</sup> At their May 1792 meeting, a majority of members of the Northamptonshire Association voted to make Carey's vision a reality by establishing the Particular Baptist Missionary Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen (PBMS). The organization was the first explicitly evangelical missionary society in Britain, and catalyzed the formation of a number of similar organizations by other denominations in the following decades. The founding of the PBMS was therefore a seminal moment in what historians have come to term the "missionary awakening."

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<sup>1</sup> William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (Leicester: Ann Ireland, 1792), citations on 62. Carey did not publish his *Enquiry* until 1792.



Less well known than the resolution to establish an overseas missionary organization was another decision taken by the Northamptonshire Association earlier in the same meeting. As they had done during previous gatherings, members on this occasion voted to make a donation towards “the abolition of the inhuman and ungodly trade in the persons of men.”<sup>2</sup> The contribution continued a growing trend among English Baptists: though Church leaders instructed clergy in the West Indies not to raise the contentious issues of slavery or the slave trade, many members’ private sympathies by the early 1790s increasingly tended toward abolition. When the SEAST was founded in 1787, wealthy Baptists were among its biggest donors. In 1791-92, a number of Baptists helped spearhead the boycott of slave-grown sugar. William Carey even suggested that individuals donate money saved from not purchasing West Indian sugar to the PBMS.<sup>3</sup> Though Carey’s *Enquiry* focused on the importance of propagating Christianity abroad, the treatise also condemned “the accursed slave trade” and lauded the “noble effort” of those who campaigned against it. It likewise applauded the labours of those who sought to undermine the traffic through their “praise worthy [sic] effort to introduce a free settlement, at *Sierra Leona, on the coast of Africa*.”<sup>4</sup>

Antislavery activism brought growing numbers of Baptists into contact and co-operation with reformers of other denominations. These included influential Anglican

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in M.A.G. Haykin, *One Heart and One Soul: John Sutcliff of Olney, His Friends and His Times* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1994), 218-24, citation on 218.

<sup>3</sup> Newton to Wilberforce, London, 4 August 1792, in Adam Matthews, *Abolition & Emancipation* microfilm series, c.49, ff.43-44; Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians*, 86.

<sup>4</sup> Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians*, 118, 79-80.

Evangelicals such as John Newton and William Wilberforce.<sup>5</sup> When the PBMS began operations, Carey went to Newton for both practical advice and moral support. Over the following years, Newton consistently encouraged the efforts of Baptist missionaries in India, and served as an informal mentor to Carey who in 1800 became the first Baptist evangelist in the subcontinent.<sup>6</sup> Carey's commitment to antislavery undoubtedly facilitated the friendship. Through giving funds to the fledgling PBMS in 1792 and 1793, Wilberforce, Charles Grant, and Henry Thornton all signalled their approval of the organization.<sup>7</sup> Though they were reluctant to lend too much public support to the Baptists, whose dissenting theology and working-class membership led many in the Church of England establishment to view them with suspicion, their donations reveal an increased willingness among Anglican elites to look beyond denominational fissures in promoting Christianity overseas. They also indicate recognition among many Anglicans that the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel was largely failing to meet the demand for proselytization generated by imperial expansion in the East. This was in addition to the Society's shortcomings in the West Indies that Porteus and others studied in the previous chapter sought to rectify.

The founding of the PBMS at the height of antislavery fervour and the support the Society received from non-Baptists illustrate two important things about imperial culture

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<sup>5</sup> As in previous chapters, I here follow the convention of referring to Anglican Evangelicals with a capital 'E'. I use a lower-case 'e' to denote the interdenominational, cultural phenomenon of evangelicalism that was on the ascent in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

<sup>6</sup> For Newton's relationship with Carey, see in particular J.C. Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward: Embracing the History of the Serampore Mission*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1859): 19. For a representative example of the type of correspondence between Newton and prospective missionaries, see Claudius Buchanan to Newton, Queen's College Cambridge, 24 October 1792, MS 3096, ff.117-19, LPL.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Porter, *Religion Versus Empire?: British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 41.

in late eighteenth-century Britain. First, ending the slave trade and propagating Christianity abroad, especially in India, were concomitant endeavours for a growing number of Britons whose worldviews were shaped by their religious convictions. This contemporaneity was not a coincidence, as abolitionism and the missionary awakening were mutually reinforcing in a myriad of ways. Among other things, both movements drew energy from outward-looking religious communities, both sets of activists argued that promoting the welfare of non-Europeans was an obligation of imperial rule, and both causes were framed as a way to atone for previous iniquities. By examining the ways in which antislavery and early missionary efforts intersected, this chapter illustrates how contemporaries often saw the two movements as part of the same broad program of re-orienting empire. Second, interdenominational support for the PBMS shows how many Britons with evangelical leanings were increasingly willing to set aside traditional rivalries in the pursuit of their common goal of making empire a more moral undertaking. To be sure, denominational competition was still significant; this was especially true in the mission field, where doctrinal controversies were never wholly surmounted. But, as a willingness to collaborate in opposing the slave trade and pressuring the government to promote missions abroad indicates, a shared belief in Britain's Christian calling in the world could often trump sectarian differences.

Whereas the previous chapter examined how intra-imperial politics helped shape attitudes toward slavery among influential Anglicans with evangelical sensibilities, this chapter looks at how evangelical abolitionism was part of a broader shift in attitudes toward empire among those who embraced "real Christianity." Both inside and outside

the Church of England, self-identifying evangelicals were vital to bringing about a broad-based antislavery movement. Uncovering how a reassessment of imperial purpose helped motivate their opposition to the slave trade, therefore, is central to understanding why abolitionism emerged when it did. To illustrate this, this chapter features case studies of two prominent Evangelicals who saw the injustices inherent in the Atlantic slave system and imperium in India as fundamentally linked: the poet William Cowper, and his spiritual mentor John Newton. While the antislavery stances of both men have been well documented, there is little scholarship on their concerns about British rule in the East or their broader thinking about empire. Cowper and Newton also serve as valuable case studies because they employed many of the concepts discussed in previous chapters—including subjecthood, imperial trusteeship, geographic morality, and legal uniformity—in advancing their arguments for moral reform. The second half of this chapter takes up connections between evangelical abolitionism and the missionary awakening in greater detail by highlighting overlaps in the personnel, goals, paradigms, and vocabularies of the two emergent causes. Collectively, these relationships illustrate how many late eighteenth-century evangelicals saw their opposition to slavery as part of a larger project of cleansing empire.

### *Evangelicals and Empire*

The term “evangelical” was both elastic and imprecise in the late eighteenth century, denoting a broad set of religious sympathies as opposed to a specific set of doctrine. At their core, all evangelicals were united by a belief in the redemptive power of Jesus Christ and the importance of the personal conversion experience. Eschewing

excessive ritualism, they were instead concerned with zealously and steadfastly putting godliness at the center of their lives. Though Britain's evangelical awakening had been occurring for the past half century, inspired by preachers such as George Whitefield and John Wesley from the 1730s onward, it was not until the final decades of the 1700s that evangelical leaders began consistently stressing the importance of engaging with society. Indeed, by century's end most self-defined evangelicals held that maintaining rigorous personal and sectarian moral standards was not itself sufficient for leading a truly godly life. Instead, they believed that activism—"the expression of the gospel in effort"—was central to a Christian's religious identity.<sup>8</sup> "Action is the life of virtue," wrote Hannah More, a leading Evangelical of her day, "and the world is the theater of action."<sup>9</sup>

This outward-lookingness produced a more populist and proselytizing form of Christianity that aimed to spread divine revelation and its attendant blessings to the poor and unchurched of society through a host of philanthropic endeavours. Though exceptional in terms of the number of causes he patronized, Wilberforce provides good insight into the scope of the aspirations of evangelicals at the end of the eighteenth century. Among numerous other philanthropic and religious ventures, Wilberforce was involved in the nascent Sunday School movement; prison-reform; an anti-bear-baiting league; agricultural improvement organizations; the Society for Bettering the Condition

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<sup>8</sup> D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1-20, citation on 3. As late as 1800, David Turley surmises that only about ten percent of Anglican clergy would have willingly accept the label 'Evangelical.' Ford K. Brown estimates that by 1785 only about one hundred self-defined Evangelicals had moved beyond simply setting an example for their countrymen and had begun to pro-actively work to transform society. David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860* (London: Routledge, 1991), 8; Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Hannah More, *An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World* (London: T. Cadell, 1808 [originally published 1791]), 8.

and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor; was a governor of St. Bartholomew's Hospital; and, most ambitiously, founded the Society for the Reformation of Manners in 1787.<sup>10</sup> In these and related causes, he was joined by evangelicals of various denominations who brought with them commitment, zeal, and a deep belief in the righteousness of their actions.

This upsurge in evangelical activism in the late eighteenth century extended beyond the confines of the British Isles. In Britain's growing empire, evangelicals saw both the need for moral reformation as well as opportunities to spread the gospel message. When organized antislavery emerged as a political force in the late 1780s, much of the campaign's leadership, polemical might, and grassroots energy came from evangelicals who publically condemned human bondage in unprecedented numbers. Concomitant with their mounting opposition to slavery, many denominations joined the Baptists in for the first time contemplating the establishment of overseas missionary organizations. Along with India and the West Indies, regions such as West Africa, British North America, and the South Pacific were seen as ripe for the winning of converts. Though a widespread missionary culture was still decades away, and advocates of missions often faced significant hurdles in winning support even among their co-religionists, growing interest in missionary work is evident in the increase in publications and on the subject. As we saw via James Ramsay and Beilby Porteus in the previous

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<sup>10</sup> For a more complete list of the charitable and reform causes in which Wilberforce involved himself, see J.C. Pollock, *Wilberforce* (London: Constable, 1977), 139-43. His ambitions are aptly summarized by an oft-quoted passage from his journal on 28 October 1787, shortly after his religious conversion: "God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners." Cited in Robert I. and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1838): 77.

chapter, it also manifested itself in calls for the SPG to revitalize its efforts to minister to subject peoples. As Susan Thorne has shown, it was in the two decades following the American War that Protestant philanthropy shifted from focusing primarily on the provision of social welfare at home to a “more ambitious and self-perpetuating missionary program” that was “global in its scope” and aimed at “securing the religious conversion of its targets.”<sup>11</sup> That this reorientation coincided with the emergence of abolitionism (and, more specifically, evangelical abolitionism) warrants investigation.

Despite their contemporaneity, abolitionism and the missionary awakening have rarely been brought into the same analytic field. In fact, ever since Eric Williams demolished whiggish narratives that placed Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect at the center of the abolitionist struggle, scholars have been reluctant to focus on the contributions of Evangelicals to early antislavery in general.<sup>12</sup> The few historians who have focused on British Evangelicals offer one of two explanations for why abolitionism became a popular cause among this group. The first is that there was something intrinsic to the evangelical worldview that generated opposition to slavery. The most eloquent proponent of this interpretation was Roger Anstey, who claimed that Evangelicals saw in enslaved Africans their own spiritual bondage prior to conversion; working to free slaves, therefore, was a way of externalizing their personal spiritual deliverance. According to Anstey, that slavery for the Evangelical represented “the polar opposite of his own

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Thorne, *Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth-Century England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 23-24. Also see Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?: Britons, Indians, and Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23.

<sup>12</sup> Boyd Hilton has recently called on historians to once again shift their attention to the role of religion in catalyzing organized antislavery. See Boyd Hilton, “1807 and All That,” in Derek Paterson, ed., *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010): 63-83.

religious experience at its deepest level” provided his antislavery activism with “a drive which few men, concerned as humanitarians but lacking the tension and analogues which the Evangelicals knew so well, could generate.”<sup>13</sup>

The second explanation for Evangelical antislavery directs attention to the political and social dynamics of late eighteenth-century religious revivalism. In so doing, it highlights how Anstey’s thesis fails to account for the timing of abolitionism: if concepts such as sinfulness, bondage, liberation, and rebirth had been central to the evangelical worldview since the 1730s, why did most evangelicals not start questioning slavery until the 1780s? Further, if the logic of evangelical theology was inherently hostile to slavery, why did many American evangelicals actively defend the institution?<sup>14</sup> As an alternative explanation, historians such as Ford K. Brown, David Brion Davis, and Christopher Leslie Brown have all argued that Evangelical abolitionism should be understood as a part of broader evangelical efforts gain increased social acceptance and make piety fashionable. When seen from this perspective, abolitionism comes across primarily as a “by-product” of the pursuit of a more ambitious social agenda.<sup>15</sup> While these assessments draw attention to the domestic environment in which evangelicalism was developing, like Anstey’s analysis they largely overlook the movement’s imperial context. Though asserting that “[t]he main thrust of eighteenth-century revivalism ended

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<sup>13</sup> Roger Anstey, The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810 (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975), 157-99, citation on 191. For another version of this argument, see C. Duncan Rice, The Scots Abolitionists, 1833-1861 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 13-14, 24-27.

<sup>14</sup> On these two questions, see in particular Christopher L. Brown, Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 336-38.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Brown, Fathers of the Victorians, 115. Also see: David Brion Davis, “The Ideology of anti-slavery,” Times Literary Supplement, 24 October 1975; David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 246, 427, 461; Brown, Moral Capital, 336-41, 351-52.



with the missionary, not the abolitionist,” Davis, for instance, fails to elaborate on the connection between the two campaigns. In *Moral Capital*, Christopher Brown explores Evangelicals’ frustrated attempts to establish missions in the West Indies, but leaves out efforts by many of these same individuals to found missions in India during the same period.<sup>16</sup>

Like scholars of antislavery, mission historians have also acknowledged overlaps between abolitionism and the missionary awakening yet have for the most part failed to analyze the two movements alongside each other in any sustained way. In celebratory narratives of the founding and early years of missionary organizations, produced mainly in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, writers often traced the religious networks of societies’ founding fathers. This social mapping led them to observe that it was abolitionist initiatives that first brought many of these men together. Such works, however, were almost wholly descriptive and congratulatory; they contained very little analysis of causes beyond the piety and beneficence of the actors involved.<sup>17</sup> In more recent scholarship, the trend of noting though not probing connections between missions and antislavery has continued. Andrew Porter, for instance, goes no further than to state that the missionary impulse of the 1780s and 1790s was part of “a many-sided

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<sup>16</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 388; Brown, *Moral Capital*, 346-52.

<sup>17</sup> A good example of this historiography is Eugene Stock, *The History of the Church Missionary Society: Its Environment, Its Men, and Its Work*, 4 vols. (London: Church Missionary Society, 1899-1916). In listing twelve events in 1786 that “combin[ed] to produce the Missionary Awakening” or “were more or less connected with that Awakening,” Stock includes Wilberforce’s vow to commit himself to ending the slave trade (though this actually took place in 1787), the publication of Thomas Clarkson’s essay against the slave trade, and Granville Sharp’s plan for establishing a colony in Sierra Leone for liberated slaves. Stock, *The History of the Church Missionary Society*, vol.1: 58.

reassessment of Britain's overseas responsibilities" largely impelled by "the gathering momentum of the anti-slavery movement."<sup>18</sup>

As a consequence of this historiographic bifurcation, evangelical reformers are often still portrayed as turning their attention to Christianity in India only after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. In terms of emphasis, there is some merit in this conventional narrative: throughout the early nineteenth century, India did come to occupy a greater share of evangelicals' energy than ever before. By 1813, for example, Wilberforce could describe "laying a ground for the communication to our Indian fellow-subjects of Christian light and moral improvement" as "the greatest of all causes, for I really place it before Abolition."<sup>19</sup> The problem with comments such as this, however, is that they can obscure as much as they elucidate connections between antislavery and the missionary awakening. Specifically, the concerted and successful attempt by Evangelicals in 1813 to convince parliament to permit unrestricted missionary activity in India tends to draw attention away from similar though less successful endeavours two decades earlier. It thereby minimizes the significance of early missionary forays into Asia, efforts at developing a missionary consciousness, and rhetoric about the need to atone for abuses committed by the EIC— all of which began emerging in the 1780s.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Porter, *Religion Versus Empire?*, 39-40.

<sup>19</sup> Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, 108.

<sup>20</sup> A good corrective to the chronology presented in most accounts of evangelicals in India can be found in Andrea Major's book *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772-1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012). In it, Major discusses abolitionism, Indian reform, and missionary activity in the late eighteenth century alongside each other, exploring "the wider shared social, political and ideological landscape in which both missionaries and abolitionists functioned" (237). Though her stated objective is to account for the absence of antislavery sentiment focused on India (as opposed to explain the development of antislavery sentiment focused on the Atlantic), historians of Atlantic abolitionism would benefit from close engagement with her text. My approach to this chapter is influenced by Major's work, and I am grateful for her helpful suggestions and advice.

While evangelical attitudes toward empire were not homogenous, they did contain a number of overarching similarities. Evangelicals of all denominations, for instance, celebrated Britain's expanding worldwide influence as a vehicle through which Christianity, liberty, and other hallmarks of British society could be disseminated to non-Europeans. Their faith in the redemptive power of the conversion experience led them to believe that a soul turned towards God would produce a whole host of moral and material improvements. This outlook infused many of their writings with a utopian, quasi-millenarian tone. William Carey, for example, likened the accretion of British power around the globe to "a glorious door" being opened—to which, he added, it "is likely to be opened wider and wider." Rejoicing over "[o]ur great harvest in the British dominions of America," the Methodist missionary Thomas Coke described West Indian plantations as "fields" that are "ripe indeed" for further conversions.<sup>21</sup> Such enthusiasm was not limited to dissenters. Upon receiving reports of Amerindian converts in British North America, Wilberforce stated that "there is scarce any thing which more fills my mind with holy admiration than seeing the grace of God thus breaking forth in various Quarters of the Globe." Turning his attention to aborigines residing near the fledgling colony of Botany Bay, the progenitor of the Clapham Sect Henry Venn looked forward to the day when "'a vast multitude, whom no man can number,' shall 'call upon His Name;'"—when 'the wilderness shall become a fruitful field,' and all the savageness of the Heathen shall be put off." Such rhetoric was similar in tone and content to Beilby Porteus' description of slaves on the Codrington estate as "materials for our compassions, our

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<sup>21</sup> Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians*, 79-80; Thomas Coke, *An Address to the Generous Contributors for the Support of the Missions, Carried on by the Methodist Society, in the West Indies, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland* (London: [s.n.], 1787), 6.

charity, our zeal, [and] our piety to work upon... for shewing to the whole world what great things may be done by the joint operation of these principles.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite this optimism, evangelicals also worried about the luxury and decadence that could result from imperial expansion, as well as both the social and moral decay these vices could induce. For those from denominations that saw virtue in austerity, these anxieties were particularly acute. As Anstey has observed, evangelical fears about empire manifested themselves in providential interpretations of major events and in predictions of divine wrath for continued iniquities.<sup>23</sup> Surveying national affairs during the tumultuous 1790s, Wilberforce argued that national profligacy and intemperance were “the marks of a declining empire” that “bear upon us too plainly.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, as Anstey also notes, “On Providence, in the sense of the continuing moral government of the world, they [evangelicals] had common ground with the general run of the theology of their age.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, though evangelicals took the threat of divine retribution more seriously than most other Britons did, their providentialist outlook and rhetoric were similar to those of many other advocates of imperial reform. In the first major antislavery pamphlet from British Quakers, for instance, John Lloyd and William Dillwyn asserted that “the Righteous Judge of the whole earth chastiseth nations for their sins, as well as

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<sup>22</sup> William Wilberforce to unnamed, Yoxall Lodge, 6 November 1792, in Adam Matthews, Abolition and Emancipation (microfilm), Reel 15, f.176; Henry Venn to Jane Venn, Yelling, 28 October 1786 in Henry Venn, The Life and a Selection from the Letters of the Late Rev. Henry Venn, ed. John Venn (London: John Hatchard and Son, 1834), 446-47; Robert Hodgson, The Life of the Right Reverend Beilby Porteus: Late Bishop of London, vol. 6 (London: T. Cadell, 1813): 168.

<sup>23</sup> Anstey, The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 157-62

<sup>24</sup> William Wilberforce, A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes on This Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity (London: T. Cadell, 1797), 487. Though Wilberforce did not publish his Practical View until 1797, evidence suggests that he began writing it in 1792 or 1793.

<sup>25</sup> Anstey, The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 158.

individuals.” “[C]an it be expected,” they proceeded to ask, that “he [sic] will suffer this great iniquity [the slave trade] to go unpunished?”<sup>26</sup> In presenting his case against Hastings, even Edmund Burke, whose religious views were far from evangelical, argued that “the ruin not of individuals only, but of nations and empires, could not ultimately escape the righteous judgement of God.”<sup>27</sup>

Two figures who embody the fears, aspirations, and paradoxes of late eighteenth-century evangelical attitudes toward empire are William Cowper and John Newton. Though each will be treated separately in this chapter, the life stories of the two men are deeply intertwined. In July 1767, Cowper and his friend Mary Unwin moved to the town of Olney after the poet had suffered a severe nervous breakdown marked by melancholia, paranoia, and attempted suicides. This relocation brought the pair into regular contact with Newton who years earlier had inspired Cowper with his story of embracing “real Christianity” after eleven debaucherous years in the African slave trade. The two became close friends over the next decade, with Cowper acting as Newton’s assistant at the local Anglican church in Olney. Unfortunately, Newton’s departure for the London parish of St. Mary Woolnoth in 1780 triggered another series of breakdowns in Cowper; the Calvinist conceptions of sin and unworthiness he had imbibed under Newton only exasperated the sense of being “debarred from all that was good” that he had experienced during previous bouts of depression. From this point onward, writes Cowper’s

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<sup>26</sup> John Lloyd and William Dillwyn, *The Case of Our Fellow-Creatures, the Oppressed Africans, Respectfully Recommended to the Serious Consideration of the Legislature of Great-Britain, by the People Called Quakers* (London: James Phillips, 1783), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Edmund Burke, 30 July 1784, in T. C. Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803* vol. 24 (London: T.C. Hansard): 1261.

biographer, the poet came to believe that “the God who could transform all men had decided irrevocably against himself.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite his inner turmoil, Cowper remained engaged with many of the social and political issues of his day. He shared the evangelical conviction that living one’s faith required a commitment to improving the lives of the destitute and spiritually wayward both at home and abroad. As Ford K. Brown notes, Cowper’s politics were also shaped by a deep sense of empathy and a worldview that placed personal freedom above of almost all other values. In this sense, he was a “true libertarian” and a “lifelong foe of the Tory die-hards.”<sup>29</sup> This outlook was at odds with the views of a number of more socially and theologically conservative Evangelicals, and differentiated him from Newton who professed to “meddle not with disputes of party” and claimed to be “neither Whig nor Tory, but a friend to both.”<sup>30</sup> As a result of his frequent bouts of depression and reclusiveness, Cowper’s only involvement in the abolitionist campaign was through his writing. Newton, by contrast, was a connecting figure between a number of Evangelical and antislavery scions. He was, for instance, a spiritual mentor to both Wilberforce and Hannah More, was patronized by Lord Dartmouth and Henry Thornton, and counted Thomas Clarkson and John Wesley among his friends. As noted in chapter two, Newton

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<sup>28</sup> James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986), xiii, 55. From their first meeting in 1767, Newton estimates that Cowper only had about “ten good years.” Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 232.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, 379. For Cowper’s libertarianism and other differences “between him and the great or typical Evangelicals,” see *Ibid.*, 406-08.

<sup>30</sup> “meddle not...” cited in Newton to Mrs P—, August 1775, in John Newton, *The Works of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of the United Parishes of St. Mary Woolnoth and St. Mary Woolchurch Haw, London*, vol. 6, (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1808): 250; “neither Whig...” cited in Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 189.

also became well known among the public in the 1780s for his moving condemnations of the slave trade from the pulpit and in print.

What makes Cowper and Newton important subjects of study is not simply that they represent different strands of evangelical thought or fulfilled different roles within the abolitionist movement. Rather, the two warrant scrutiny because they each spoke beyond the fledgling evangelical public sphere to a wider audience that shared their disquietude over imperialism.<sup>31</sup> When in 1788 the SEAST asked Cowper to compose some verses for its cause, he was already among the most widely read poets of his generation. His popularity ensured a large readership, and Thomas Clarkson would later state that the “extraordinary circulation” of these poems, *The Negro’s Complaint* and *The Morning Dream*, made them among the decade’s most effective pieces of antislavery literature.<sup>32</sup> Almost immediately after establishing himself at St. Mary Woolnoth, Newton’s impassioned sermons (which he limited to forty-five minutes in an effort to win over “babes in Christ”) began attracting the faithful of many different denominations.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, despite his steadfast allegiance to the Church of England, Newton was at the fore of a group of evangelicals willing to set aside doctrinal disputes in favour of interdenominational cooperation in a host of reform projects. Writing to an

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<sup>31</sup> On the evangelical public sphere and its relationship to the mainstream British press, see Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, 239-40.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, & Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, by the British Parliament*, vol. 1 (London: James P. Parke, 1808): 108. The style and sentimental appeal of these poems has long been of interest to both historians and literary scholars. The best recent analysis of Cowper’s antislavery poetry is found in Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery 1760-1807* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 98-100. Reflecting the special appreciation that evangelicals held for Cowper and his works, Hannah More reported after first reading a selection of his poems that she had finally found “what I have been looking for all my life, a poet whom I can read on Sunday.” M.G. Jones, *Hannah More* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 90.

<sup>33</sup> Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 172.

American correspondent in 1791, he described himself as “a sort of middle man” appealed to by “middle people of all denominations.”<sup>34</sup> During an era in which religious zeal was still viewed with suspicion, Cowper and Newton did much to ensure the concerns and ideas of evangelicals reached a broader public.

### *William Cowper and the Problems of Empire*

To understand how William Cowper first came to oppose the slave trade we must go back to the early 1780s when it became apparent that Britain had permanently lost many of its American colonies. As a staunch patriot, Cowper blamed the colonists for instigating the conflict, arguing that they had “incurred the guilt of parricide” by separating from the parent country.<sup>35</sup> Yet as a devout Anglican with an evangelical worldview, he also interpreted the prolonged and bloody war as divine punishment on Britons for collectively having turned away from God. “This stain upon our national honor [sic] and this diminution of our national property,” he wrote to Newton in 1783, “are a judgement upon our iniquities.”<sup>36</sup> In his first printed collection of poems known as the *Moral Satires*, written between 1779 and 1781 under Newton’s guidance, Cowper meditated extensively on the popular evangelical themes of national apostasy and guilt.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Newton to unnamed, 8 November 1791, MS 2935, ff. 265-66, LPL.

<sup>35</sup> Cowper to Newton, 26 January 1783, in William Cowper, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. John King and Charles Ryskamp, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981-86): 101. In backing Britain in the conflict, Cowper differed from Newton who at least tacitly supported the colonists and their cause. As Cowper wrote to William Bull near the war’s conclusion, “Mr. Newton and I have exchanged several letters on the subject, sometimes considering, like grave Politicians as we are, the State of Europe at large, sometimes the state of England in particular, sometimes the conduct of the House of Bourbon, sometimes that of the Dutch, but most especially that of the Americans. We have not differed perhaps very widely, nor even so widely as we seemed to do, but still we have differed.” Cowper to William Bull, 7 March 1783, MS3096, ff.6-7, LPL.

<sup>36</sup> Cowper to Newton, 8 February 1783, in Cowper, *Letters and Prose*, 104-05.

<sup>37</sup> Newton’s role in the production, editing, and publication of the *Moral Satires* is discussed in King, *William Cowper*, 93-118. For the centrality of providence to national prosperity, and the urgency of moral reformation to avoid divine judgment, see in particular Cowper’s poem *Expostulation*.



He cited numerous Old Testament examples of how God punished sinful nations, and compared present-day Britain to ancient Israel. Just as God had destroyed the Israelites via the flood for their sinfulness, so too would He punish the British if they did not recognize the conflict with America as a call to mend their errant ways. “O learn from our example and our fate,” wrote Cowper in the voice of the Israelites, “Learn wisdom and repentance e’er too late.”<sup>38</sup>

Though Britain’s sins of avarice, decadence, and irreligion were the same as those of ancient Israel, the field of British iniquity was significantly larger. Accordingly, Cowper drew attention to unchristian behaviour both at home and abroad. In *Table Talk*, which Cowper believed to be the best of his moral satires, he described the selling of “Two or three millions of the human race/... To turn a penny” as a practice which “Bespeaks a land once Christian, fallen and lost.”<sup>39</sup> In *Charity*, another moral satire, the incompatibility between the slave trade and Christian values was made even more clear. In this poem, Cowper rhetorically asks a slave trader, “Canst thou, and honour’d with a Christian name,/Buy what is women born and feel no shame?”<sup>40</sup> Like many other late eighteenth-century writers, including Hugh Mulligan, the term “slavery” had multiple meanings for Cowper. In addition to describing the physical state of being enslaved, as in the Atlantic slave trade, it was also used metaphorically to denote other situations where an excessive power imbalance resulted in oppression. It is in this latter sense that Cowper, in the poem *Expostulation*, accused the EIC of having “Exported slav’ry to the

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<sup>38</sup> William Cowper, *Poems by William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.* (London: J. Johnson, 1782), 23.

<sup>39</sup> Cowper, *Poems by William Cowper*, 22, 23. For Cowper’s opinion that *Table Talk* was his best moral satire, see King, *William Cowper*, 99.

<sup>40</sup> Cowper, *Poems by William Cowper*, 189.

conquer'd East."<sup>41</sup> Comparing Company rule to that of India's earlier Mughal rulers, he wrote that Britons treat the native population even more cruelly than the previous "tyrants India serv'd with dread." Not only were EIC officials politically oppressive, but they also drained India of its resources by feeding "from the richest veins of the Mogul [sic]," and bringing back to Britain treasures "obtain'd by rapine and by stealth." Much like slave traders in Africa, Britons in India had become corrupted by avarice, and had come to normalize wholly unchristian practices. Cowper vowed in the future to continue to speak out against British oppression whether it occurred "In Afric's torrid clime or India's fiercest heat."

Like many evangelicals, Cowper's misgivings about British imperialism intensified following the conclusion of hostilities with America. In late 1783 and early 1784, he closely followed the progress of Fox and Pitt's respective East India bills. Debates over these proposals involved extensive recounting of British abuses in the subcontinent. These recitations in turn led Cowper to begin privately questioning whether any measure could sufficiently reform Britain's presence in the region. Echoing Burke's claim that all political power ought to be exercised for the benefit of those subject to it, Cowper began expressing the view that not only was British behaviour immoral, but that British rule in India was itself unjust since the EIC was administering territories for its own profit rather than for the welfare of the Indian people.<sup>42</sup> Company officials have "ruled with a rod of Iron," he wrote to his friend William Unwin (Mary's son) in January 1784

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>42</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 5, ed. P.J. Marshall and J. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981): 385

to which it is impossible they should ever have a right... [They] make the happiness of 30 millions of mankind a consideration subordinate to that of their own emolument, oppressing them as often as it may serve a lucrative purpose, and in no instance that I have ever heard, consulting their interest or advantage.<sup>43</sup>

In a letter to Newton three weeks later, Cowper stated his opinion even more laconically, writing that he “would abandoned all territorial interest in a country to which we can have no right, and which we cannot govern with any security to the happiness of the inhabitants.”<sup>44</sup> Despite sharing these anti-imperial views in his personal correspondence, however, Cowper never directly questioned the legitimacy of British control over large parts of India in any of his published works. In his 1785 poem *The Task*, for instance, he continued to restrict his condemnation to the mode as opposed to the existence of British rule in the East, criticizing the EIC for “Build[ing] factories with blood” and conducting trade “At the sword’s point.”<sup>45</sup>

While *The Task* marked the final time Cowper publically decried injustices in the East, it also marked the first occasion that he employed what was becoming an increasingly common argument against the slave trade. Along with condemning the practice as unchristian and inhumane, Cowper used *The Task* to criticize the incongruity between the prohibition of slavery in Britain and its prevalence in the nation’s Caribbean colonies. As we saw earlier through Granville Sharp and others, this legal bifurcation was condemned with much greater frequency in the immediate aftermath of the American Revolution than in the decades prior. Indeed, abolitionists pointed out with more and more intensity throughout the 1780s how Mansfield’s decision raised an important yet

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<sup>43</sup> Cowper to William Unwin, 3 January 1784, in Cowper, *Letters and Prose*, vol. 2: 195.

<sup>44</sup> Cowper to Newton, 25 January 1784, in *Ibid.*, 206-07.

<sup>45</sup> William Cowper, *The Task, a Poem in Six Books* (London: J. Johnson, 1785), 172.

simple question: in Cowper's words, "[If] We have no slaves at home— then why abroad?"<sup>46</sup>

A number of Cowper's major works from the latter 1780s and early 1790s echo this call to expand the reach of British laws and values into the periphery empire. Unlike the *Moral Satires* (1779-81), which focused on how continuing the slave trade would lead to divine retribution, *The Task* (1785) highlighted how honourable it would be if the Mansfield ruling were extended throughout Britain's growing imperial orbit. Instead of evoking national anxieties, Cowper now appealed to patriotic sentiments by describing the illegality of slavery in Britain as something that is "noble, and bespeaks a nation proud." "Spread it then," he continued, "And let it circulate through every vein/ Of all your empire; that where Britain's power/Is felt, mankind may feel her mercy too."<sup>47</sup>

Three years after publishing *The Task*, Cowper again celebrated the idea of Britain's commitment to liberty being extended overseas in his poem *The Morning Dream*. Here, he described a British vessel plying the Atlantic not with human cargo, but with a mission to rescue recently enslaved Africans. As the poem illustrates, Cowper believed that Britain should not only extend freedom beyond its own shores, but also that the nation had both an obligation and opportunity to suppress the Atlantic slave trade more broadly. It was this conviction— that the British Empire could and should be an international force for good— that led Cowper to support the free-labour colony of Sierra Leone, the brainchild of a number of London Evangelicals.<sup>48</sup> In his 1792 poem *A Sonnet Addressed*

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<sup>46</sup> Cowper, *The Task*, 47. For more on this, see pages 201-08.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>48</sup> Among other places, Cowper lauded the Sierra Leone scheme in a letter to Newton in 1792 in which he stated that "The African Colonization and the manner of conducting it has long been a matter to us of

to *William Wilberforce, Esq.*, he optimistically looked forward to a day when Africans would be protected from enslavement by living in regions “fenced with British laws.”<sup>49</sup>

Initially, it may appear difficult to reconcile Cowper’s enthusiasm for intervention in West Africa with his desire for “the annihilation, if that could be accomplished, of the very existence of our authority in the East Indies.”<sup>50</sup> Upon closer examination, however, the two positions are not that inconsistent. Like other imperial commentators in the 1780s, Cowper knew that Britain would never simply abandon its interests and dominion in India; the most he could therefore hope for was significant reform. As with the slave trade, the measures he supported all involved a projection of metropolitan laws, values, and authority into the periphery of empire. In both India and West Africa, Cowper believed that the virtues on which the British prided themselves— such as a commitment to freedom, justice, and Christianity— had become attenuated. Particularly worrying was the fact that Britons abroad were abiding by a different set of moral standards than Britons at home. In the case of slavery and the slave trade, the discrepancy between metropolitan and imperial standards was legally enshrined in the *Mansfield decision*, which created a formal dichotomy that Cowper both highlighted and opposed in his poetry. Significantly, this incongruity was also a recurring theme in his analysis of British rapacity in India: when discussing India and EIC officials, Cowper almost always drew a contrast between “home” and “away.” “Though suckl’d at fair freedom’s breast,” Britons

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pleasing speculation.” Cowper to Newton, Weston, 20 February 1792, in Cowper, *The Works of William Cowper*, vol. 4: 326.

<sup>49</sup> William Haley, *The Works of William Cowper: His Life and Letters*, vol. 4 (London: Saunders and Otley, 1835): 353-54. This evidence supports Seymour Drescher’s argument that the period from 1783 to 1792 was demarcated more by imperial confidence than anxiety. See Seymour Drescher, “The Shocking Birth of British Abolitionism,” *Slavery & Abolition* 33, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 517-93.

<sup>50</sup> Cowper to Newton, 25 January 1784, in Cowper, *Letters and Prose*, vol. 2: 206-07.

nonetheless “Exported slav’ry to the conquered East.” Those who succumbed to “Asiatic vices” had “left their virtues behind.” In a letter to a friend, he stated that “Whatever we are at home, we have certainly ben [sic] Tyrants in the East.”<sup>51</sup> In these and similar comments, Cowper was both applying Burke’s paradigm for understanding injustices in India as well as voicing his own opposition to the notion of “geographic morality.”<sup>52</sup>

For Cowper, the only way to end imperial double standards in India was to locate authority over the subcontinent in Britain itself. He therefore supported Fox’s 1783 India Bill that would have led to parliamentary control over almost all EIC operations. As he wrote to William Unwin, it is “self evident” that the government should “Unking these tyrants. And if having subjugated so much of this miserable world... we must keep possession of it, it appears to me a duty so binding upon the legislature to rescue it from the hands of these Usurpers.”<sup>53</sup> In 1788, when the Hastings trial generated a national debate on whether returned EIC officials should be tried according to domestic standards of justice for actions committed abroad, Cowper was unequivocal: “If these men, as they are charged, rioted in the miseries of the innocent, and dealt death to the guiltless with an unsparing hand, may they receive a retribution that shall make all future Governors and

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<sup>51</sup> Cowper, *Poems by William Cowper*, 121-22; Cowper to Lady Hesketh, 16 February 1788, in Cowper, *Letters and Prose*, vol. 3: 103.

<sup>52</sup> As Peter Kitson observes, “Burke’s anti-Hastings language also left an enduring rhetorical legacy. Its figurative power, its enthralling excess, its violent attack upon colonial violence fascinated Cowper, Wordsworth, Coleridge and their radical mentors. All admired Burke’s rhetoric and echoed it in their own attacks upon the slave-trade.” With regards to Wordsworth and Coleridge, Kitson goes so far as to claim that “their participation in the anti-slavery campaign... can be seen to derive from Burke’s attack on the current forms of British colonialism.” Peter J. Kitson, “Romanticism and Colonialism: Races, Places, Peoples, 1785-1800,” in Tim Fulford and Peter Kitson, eds., *Romanticism and Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16-17.

<sup>53</sup> Cowper to Unwin, 3 January 1784, in Cowper, *Letters and Prose*, vol. 3: 195.

Judges of ours in those distant regions tremble.”<sup>54</sup> In Cowper’s view, British courts should have jurisdiction wherever Britons venture. Legal uniformity, he believed, could help project the values of the mother country outward to cleanse the imperial enterprise hitherto marked by a disregard for supposedly national virtues.

### *John Newton and Imperial Atonement*

Politically and theologically, Cowper was more liberal than most evangelicals of his day. His prescriptions for remedying imperial abuses therefore sometimes differed in emphasis from those proposed by his religious associates, including his spiritual mentor John Newton. Yet Cowper and Newton nonetheless shared many of the same outlooks on both the immorality of the British imperial enterprise to date and on the future place of Britain in the world. Like Cowper, it was during the American War— “the snare which sin has spread for us”— that Newton first came to see “Acts of oppression and violence, in... our widely extended settlements” as “contribut[ing] to enhance and aggravate our national sin.”<sup>55</sup> Though only a relatively small number of individuals committed abuses abroad, Newton believed that all Britons bore responsibility for their iniquities. The entire nation would therefore experience the consequences of inaction if atrocities went undenounced. As he rhetorically asked his congregation during a Fast Day sermon in 1781,

If the welfare and the lives of thousands have been sacrificed to the interests of a few; if the ravages of cruelty and avarice... have met with no public censure or

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<sup>54</sup> Cowper to Lady Hesketh, 16 February 1788, in *Ibid.*, 103. Incidentally, Hastings and Cowper were schoolmates at Westminster School in the 1740s, though neither appears to have made much of a lasting impression on the other. Michael Edwardes, *Warren Hastings: King of the Nabobs* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1976), 20.

<sup>55</sup> Newton to Cowper, Charles Square, 21 October 1780, Egerton MS. 2662, ff.5-6, BL; John Newton, *The Guilt and Danger of Such a Nation as This* (London: J. Buckland, 1781), 21.

punishment, may we not expect that God himself will avenge the oppressed and plead his cause, not only against their actual oppressors, but against the whole community that refused to hear their cries and redress their wrongs [?]<sup>56</sup>

By invoking providence in this way, Newton joined a large chorus of evangelicals who spoke about the collectivization of sin at the national level. This was a discourse that abolitionists frequently tapped into and applied to their own cause, especially once the workings of the slave trade had become widely known to the public. Speaking before a congregation in Manchester in autumn 1787, Thomas Clarkson stated that “though the sin of the Slave-trade had been hitherto a sin of ignorance, and might therefore have so far been winked at,... as the crimes and miseries belonging to it became known, it would attach even to those who had no concern in it.”<sup>57</sup> For most evangelical abolitionists, however, the collectivization of sin was more than just a rhetorical strategy. Their Manichean moral universe left little room for shades of grey, and the nation’s knowing complicity in the slave trade amounted to a direct sin against both God and man. According to Newton, “National Sins” such as the slave trade were greater than the aggregate of the individual iniquities of Britons involved: they were sins that “by their notoriety, frequency or circumstance, contribute to mark the character or spirit among one nation.”<sup>58</sup> For the Anglican divine Peter Peckard, all Britons were to some extent accountable for the trade in human beings because “we make it in form a National Act,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>57</sup> Clarkson, *The History*, vol. 1: 423

<sup>58</sup> Newton, *Guilt and Danger*, 14. By 1794, the public outpouring of support for abolition led Newton to conclude that the slave trade, though practiced by an unprecedented number of British vessels, no longer “rank[ed] among... national sins.” Indeed, the fact that “a very great majority of the nation earnestly long for its suppression” was enough for exculpate Britons from collective responsibility and guilt. This evidence lends itself to David Brion Davis’ conclusion that “from a psychological perspective, the [slave trade] investigations can be seen as a ritual of expiation that temporarily exorcised the slave trade’s worst evils.” John Newton, “The Imminent Danger and the Only Sure Resource of this Nation,” in Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, vol. 5: 262; Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 422-23.



we deliberate, we debate upon it, we establish, we protect it by what we call a Law.”<sup>59</sup>

During the first wave of public interest in the slave trade in the spring of 1788, Cowper told a friend that “Till now, we were chargeable perhaps only with Inattention, but hereafter... we cannot be wronged by the most opprobrious appellations.” Writing to Newton three weeks later, he reiterated that “we can no longer plead either that we were not aware of it or that our attention was otherwise engaged.” It was therefore now “inexcusable” to leave the slave trade “unredressed.”<sup>60</sup> Combined with the belief that God actively passed judgment on human affairs, this understanding of national guilt imbued evangelical efforts to initiate a national moral reformation with a sense of urgency.

Newton’s ideas of providence and national sin were major impetuses behind his commitment to antislavery. Though he admitted that as a slave ship captain he had been “sometimes shocked with an employment that was perpetually conversant with chains, bolts and shackles,” like most Britons prior to the 1780s he felt “no scruple of the lawfulness of it.”<sup>61</sup> Once Wilberforce convinced him to publically come out in favour of abolition in 1788, however, Newton became one of the cause’s most passionate and

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<sup>59</sup> Peter Peckard, National Crimes the Cause of National Punishments. A Discourse Deliver'd in the Cathedral Church of Peterborough, on the Fast-Day, Feb: 25th, 1795 (Peterborough: Jacob, 1795), 13. The theme of collective sinfulness and responsibility recurs in many of Peckard’s sermons on the slave trade. See also, for instance, Peter Peckard, Justice and Mercy Recommended, Particularly with Reference to the Slave Trade. A Sermon Preached before the University of Cambridge (Cambridge: J. Archdeacon, 1788) and Peter Peckard, The Neglect of a Known Duty Is Sin. A Sermon Preached before the University of Cambridge, on Sunday, Jan. 31, 1790 (Cambridge: J. Archdeacon, 1790).

<sup>60</sup> Cowper to Lady Hesketh, Newport, 31 March 1788, in Cowper, Letters and Prose, 140; Cowper to Newton, 19 April 1788, in Cowper, Letters and Prose, 149.

<sup>61</sup> John Newton, “An authentic narrative of some remarkable and interesting particulars in the life of \*\*\*\*\*,” 1764, in John Newton, The Journal of a Slave Trader (John Newton) 1750-1754, ed. Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell (London: Epworth Press, 1962), 95; Sheila Lambert, ed., House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century, vol. 73 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1975): 149.

effective spokesmen. Among other things, he denounced the traffic in sermons, before the House of Commons investigating committee, and in his influential *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*.<sup>62</sup> Though Newton began this pamphlet by arguing that God would punish the nation “sooner or later, unless repentance intervene[s],” the rest of the work employed almost wholly secular arguments.<sup>63</sup> Cowper described it as “the most satisfactory publication on the subject.”<sup>64</sup> In describing the “enormities” involved in obtaining and transporting slaves across the Atlantic, Newton wrote with the authority that only firsthand experience can bring, providing specific and graphic examples of the violence that pervaded the industry. In relating his stories, Newton, like Cowper, emphasized to his readers in Britain that though abuse and cruelty “are little known *here*,... [they] are considered, *there*, only as a matter of course.”<sup>65</sup>

While Newton’s transformation from slave-ship captain to antislavery activist has captured the interest of generations of historians and non-academics, his thinking about British rule in India has gone largely unexplored. This omission is somewhat surprising since, like other influential evangelicals who followed national and global affairs, Newton was deeply disquieted by Britain’s expanding presence in Asia. Long before telling his parishioners that “There is a cry of blood against us... of thousands, of scores of thousands,” of African slaves, Newton condemned “The cry of blood, the blood of thousands, perhaps millions, from the East Indies.”<sup>66</sup> Though he did not devote the same

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<sup>62</sup> *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* was the first tract published by the SEAST and was distributed to members of parliament as they entered Whitehall for the slave trade hearings. See Fair Minute Book, Ad. Mss. 25254, f.35, BL.

<sup>63</sup> John Newton, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* (London: J. Buckland, 1788), 6.

<sup>64</sup> Newton, *Journal of a Slave Trader*, xv.

<sup>65</sup> “enormities” in *Ibid.*, 17; “are little known” in *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>66</sup> Newton, *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, vol. 5: 263; Newton to Mrs. P\*\*\*, in Newton, *Ibid.*, 2: 86.

energy to India as he did to the slave trade, Newton's views on India deserve attention. Not only do they speak to a growing global consciousness among late eighteenth-century evangelicals, but they also shed light on key aspects of his abolitionism, and provide insight into the broader Christian critique of empire that was developing at the time.<sup>67</sup>

Newton saw two overarching types of problems with British imperialism in Asia. On the one hand, he shared the widespread view that, in their pursuit of wealth, EIC employees had despoiled the subcontinent and violated the rights of Indians in a myriad of ways. These included demanding unfair levels of tribute and rent, pillaging resources, and committing acts of physical violence against defenceless citizens. On the other hand, and closely connected to these "sins of commission," were what are best described as "sins of omission": namely, the failure of the British to proactively improve the lives of the native population. Using Burkean language about the moral obligations of government, Newton argued that Britons had a particular duty to bring Christianity to those over whom they ruled. This national obligation to proselytize grew in proportion to British influence in a given region. Britons were therefore especially bound to "promote it [Christianity] in Asia, where our influence and opportunities have been the greatest."<sup>68</sup>

In addition to bringing the exercise of British power in line with emerging views on imperial morality, Newton viewed promulgating Christianity abroad as a way of making amends for previous injustices. He therefore believed that the degree of

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<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, at the age of twenty-one Newton almost went to India after being captured by a press-gang and placed on board the *H.M.S. Harwich*. A storm forced the *Harwich* to seek shelter in Plymouth harbour where Newton fled and returned to London. See Newton, *Journal of a Slave Trader*, ix-x.

<sup>68</sup> Newton, *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, vol. 4: 363.

obligation to which the British were under to spread the gospel in a given region was largely proportional to the nation's prior iniquities. "In the eastern parts," for instance, Newton argued that missionaries were needed to atone for "the cruelty and tyranny" of EIC fortune-seekers who merely "bear the name of Christians."<sup>69</sup> This sense of proportionality also informed his calls to send missionaries to the Caribbean and West Africa, as Newton regarded evangelization as a vehicle of reparation for the evils of slavery and the slave trade respectively. As he stated in one sermon, "What obligations the natives of Africa are under to us, for instruction or example, may be estimated, in part, by a cursory survey of the state of our West India islands."<sup>70</sup>

John Newton was not alone in arguing that prior rapacity placed a moral obligation on Britons to spread the gospel overseas. Many other advocates of missionary work during this period also claimed that exculpating the nation from guilt accrued through slavery, plunder in India, and other imperial abuses yielded a responsibility to intensify conversion efforts. The bishop Richard Hurd, for example, told the SPG's annual meeting in 1781 that by "carrying on this great work of conversion among savage tribes and infidel nations," and by diffusing "the invaluable blessings of his [Christ's] Religion to the ends of the world,... thus shall we make some amends for those multiplied mischiefs, and... injuries, which our insatiable Commerce occasions."<sup>71</sup> For Wilberforce, it was revelations of abuses that came out during the Hastings trial that first helped turn his attention to the exercise of British power in the East. Having both

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 420.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 363.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Hurd, *A Sermon Preached before the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts; at Their Anniversary Meeting in the Parish Church of St. Mary-Le-Bow, on Friday February 16, 1781* (London: T. Harrison and S. Brooke, 1781), 16.

watched and participated in the Hastings prosecution and debates over Indian reform, Wilberforce like Newton began conceiving of missions as a way to help atone for decades of British misdeeds on the subcontinent.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, it is largely through the concepts of redemption and atonement that concerns about the rapaciousness of slave traders and EIC officials expressed during the 1780s contributed to the growing evangelical interest in missions that would coalesce in the following decades. As such, these concepts are pivotal in understanding how debates over imperial morality in the years after the American War helped lay the groundwork for the invasive, Anglicizing, and proselytizing empire that characterized much of the nineteenth century.

In relation to slavery and the slave trade, atoning for what Thomas Clarkson described as “the stain of the blood of Africa now upon us” manifested itself in multiple ways.<sup>73</sup> According to Wilberforce, Britain’s status as the world’s foremost slave trading nation meant that the country had an obligation to show leadership in abrogating the traffic. “As we have been great in our crime,” he told the House of Commons in April 1792, “let us be early in our repentance.” William Pitt shared this view, and also argued that since “there is no nation in Europe that has... plunged so deeply into this guilt as Great Britain,” Britain more than any other country should be “looked up to as an example” in ending it.<sup>74</sup> To absolve the nation from having plundered and depopulated West Africa, a handful of Evangelical abolitionists worked tirelessly from the late 1780s to 1800 to found and nurture the free-labour colony of Sierra Leone. The colony was

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<sup>72</sup> For Wilberforce’s involvement in the Hastings trial, see page 85, especially note 103.

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Ellen Gibson Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 38.

<sup>74</sup> Wilberforce, 18 April, 1791, in Hansard, ed., *Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 28: 277; Pitt, 2 April 1792, in Hansard, ed., *Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 29: 1152.

conceived of as a bridgehead for spreading Christianity, commerce, civilization to the “injured” continent, and was spoken of as a vehicle for the “the redemption of Africa.” In the words of James Ramsay, Sierra Leone was a way to “try to make up for our past treachery to the Natives” of the region. Other missionary projects along the African coast were likewise described by various evangelicals as opportunities to “make some amends to this nation [Africa] for the Cruelties hitherto inflicted upon them [sic].”<sup>75</sup> To redress the injustices perpetrated against slaves themselves, advocates of missions in the West Indies also often employed this type of language. Thomas Coke, for instance, reasoned that “surely the least compensation we can make to them [slaves], is to endeavour to enrich them in return with the riches of grace.” Elsewhere, he pleaded with planters to “make a full compensation to them for the *temporal* distresses they endure” by employing Christian clergy to provide slaves with “an offer of *eternal* blessings.”<sup>76</sup> The rhetoric of recompense also pervaded the writings of Ramsay and Porteus, who each saw the provision of religious instruction as a means of at least partially rectifying the ongoing legacy of slavery.

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<sup>75</sup> “the redemption...” cited in Henry Thornton in P.E.H. Hair, “Henry Thornton and the Sierra Leone Settlement,” *The Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, 10; “try to make...” cited in Ramsay, *An Inquiry*, 14; “make some amends...” cited in William Wilberforce in J.C.S. Mason, *The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening in England, 1760-1800* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2001), 123. Also consider Granville Sharp’s valuation of the Sierra Leone Colony: “Perhaps there never was an opportunity before, so favourable for propagating Christianity, and instructing multitudes of poor Heathens on that Coast, who have hitherto learned nothing from the Europeans but knavery, oppression & drunkenness.” Sharp to the Archbishop of Canterbury, 1 October 1791, D3549, 13/1/C3, GRO. For Sierra Leone as a means of helping redress the slave trade, see Suzanne Schwarz, “Commerce, Civilization and Christianity: The Development of the Sierra Leone Company,” in Suzanne Schwarz, Anthony Tibbles, and David Richardson, eds., *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007): 252-76.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas Coke, *An Address to the Pious and Benevolent, Proposing an Annual Subscription for the Support of Missionaries in the Highlands and Adjacent Islands of Scotland, the Isles of Jersey, Gurnsey, and Newfoundland, the West Indies, and the Provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec* (London: [s.n.], 1786), 8; Coke, *An Address to the Generous Contributors for the Support of the Missions*, 7.

In debates over East Indian reform and the prosecution of EIC officials in the 1780s and 1790s, the theme of atonement was equally as prominent. Though Charles Fox “heartily wished... that all that had been taken from individuals could be restored,” he recognized that this would be impossible. He therefore believed that punishing Hastings would be the best way to symbolically “make atonement to the oppressed... [to be] avengers of the oppressed.”<sup>77</sup> Gilbert Elliot employed a similar argument when he prosecuted former Chief Justice of Bengal Elija Impey for allegedly colluding with Hastings to sentence to death their political opponent, the Maharaja Nundcomar, on spurious grounds. In laying out his case, Elliot described British atrocities in the East as calling out to “our justice for correction and atonement,” and proclaimed the “judicial murder” of Nundcomar to be “bursting our walls for vengeance.”<sup>78</sup> In both the Hastings and Impey trials, the principal aims of the prosecutors were political: to punish a delinquent, to send a message to future British officials in India, and to demonstrate that Britain took seriously its commitment to protect the native population. More broadly, arguments about recompense and making amends were used by Fox, Elliot, Burke, and their allies to advance the Foxite agenda of bringing imperial affairs under greater parliamentary control.

It should not be surprising that evangelicals such as Newton adopted these initially political paradigms in their efforts to make religious conversion a greater priority for government, the EIC, and their co-religionists. On a personal and spiritual level, late eighteenth-century evangelicals were already familiar with guilt, penance, and atonement

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<sup>77</sup> Fox, 13 June 1786, in Hansard, ed., *Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 26: 98.

<sup>78</sup> Elliot, 9 May 1788, in Hansard, ed., *Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 27: 442. Elliot was also one of the managers of the Hastings trial in the House of Commons.

as primarily religious concepts. As Protestants, most believed that man could never completely shed original sin, and that good works were not requisite for salvation. By the last decade of the eighteenth century, though, all but the strictest of Calvinists held that at least some degree of ablution for pre-conversion sinfulness could be obtained through leading a godly life.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, one of the major features of evangelicalism in this period was an attempt to rise above the Calvinist/Arminian dispute that had recently shaken the movement by stressing the importance of personal experience. Newton, for instance, frequently described his efforts to end the slave trade and to spread the gospel in West Africa as ways of atoning for his actions during the time he spent in the slave trade. At minimum, charity and social activism— especially attempts to rejuvenate Christianity at home and spread the faith abroad— were outward manifestations of an individual's internal turn towards God. Extrapolating and applying this reasoning to Britain as a nation, evangelicals in the decades following the American War cast missionary projects as ways to redress the destructive consequences that often followed British commerce and expansion. Missions, in short, were framed as the potential fruits of a national spiritual renewal.

### *Evangelical Networks and Imperial Reform*

Historians have not always been attentive to the way in which the desire to atone for previous sins acted as a catalyst for the missionary awakening. This is in part due to the fact that most historiography on British missions in India has focused on nineteenth-century attempts to stamp out “heathen” practices associated with Hinduism in particular. In the late eighteenth century, however, the idea that Indians and Indian society were

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<sup>79</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, esp. 14-17.



systematically inferior to Britons and British society was by no means universal. From the assumption of control of large parts of India in 1757 until the early years of the 1800s, Orientalists such as William Jones (and to some extent Edmund Burke as well) argued that the history, language, customs, and religions of India all contained much that was admirable and deserving of conservation.<sup>80</sup> By the beginning of the Victorian era, when EIC officials in India included such arch imperialists as J.S. Mill and Thomas Macaulay, very few Britons would have subscribed to this relativist view.

Evangelical missionary advocates in the 1780s and 1790s were part of the vanguard of this transition toward growing support for the Anglicization of India. On the one hand, they believed strongly in British cultural and religious superiority, and that Indian society was in need of saving. Yet on the other hand, they also recognized that much of India's current underdevelopment was due to decades of economic exploitation by the EIC. Their rhetoric about the need to rescue the native population from spiritual ignorance and sin was therefore intermixed with arguments about the moral responsibility to redress past wrongs. This dual focus was also a feature of abolitionist discourse of the same decades. It should be noted, though, that contemporaries generally held Europeans more responsible for West Africa's troubles than for India's plight, since India's problems could be at least partially attributed to the backwardness of its traditional

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<sup>80</sup> Jones' veneration of Indian civilization and learning led him to found the Asiatick Society of Bengal in 1783. His orientalist philosophy was not outlined in any specific work, but rather in his cumulative writings on India. Michael J. Franklin, "William Jones," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15105?docPos=12> (accessed 13 February 2012). For the countervailing view that assumptions of British cultural superiority were rapidly increasing by the 1780s, and that Hindu society and traditions were no longer deemed estimable by most Britons, see Amal Chatterjee, *Representations of India, 1740-1840: The Creation of India in the Colonial Imagination* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 25.

religious and cultural practices. This perception goes some way towards explaining why abolitionism generated more widespread support among both evangelicals and the public-at-large than missionary work in India during the final decades of the eighteenth century.

One influential figure who helps illustrate the mixed motives and nuances of the late eighteenth-century missionary impulse is the life-long EIC man Charles Grant. Grant was born to a Jacobite family in Glen Urquhart in 1746, and at the age of twenty-one left his penurious life in Scotland to join the EIC army in Bengal. Over the next four decades his ambition and dedication to the Company would see him steadily ascend the EIC ranks: Grant attained a writership in 1772, became a director in 1794, and acceded to the position of chairman in 1804. His professional climb was marred by personal tragedy, however, as in 1776 his two infant daughters died of smallpox within nine days of each other. Their deaths marked a turning point in Grant's life. Hitherto, his lifestyle resembled that of many EIC civil servants in India: he gambled (and lost heavily), attended church only sporadically, and used his Company position for personal profit. The death of his daughters led him to reassess all these behaviours. Shortly thereafter, he concluded that their fates were a punishment from God for his own sinfulness. This realization in turn triggered an emotional conversion to evangelical Christianity, which furthered Grant's re-evaluation of his behaviour and lack of piety. It also led him to begin reflecting of the state of religion and morality in Britain as a whole. Just as the death of his daughters was divine retribution for his own waywardness, Grant came to see the American War as a punishment on the entire nation for having "departed from God." Well aware of the violence and oppression that were endemic to Company rule in India,

he wrote to a friend in 1785 that he now feared “more chastisement” for Britons’ greed and immorality in the “eastern scene of our offences.”<sup>81</sup>

It was at this point in his career that Grant began thinking in earnest about the Christian imperative to spread the gospel to those who had yet to receive it. Alongside this vision of a more activist form of Christianity, he also began identifying traditional Indian religious systems as based on superstition and falsehoods. Hinduism in particular, he argued, degraded both its adherents and Indian society more broadly. As Grant saw it, the entire religion was little more than a set of rules and rituals created by high-caste Brahmins to suppress the impoverished multitudes. Hindus themselves, he wrote, were “exceedingly deprived,” “lamentably degenerate and base,” and “destitute of boldness of spirit,” possessing a “disposition to cruelty... [and a] deficiency in natural affection.”<sup>82</sup> Further, “the extreme Wretchedness of [the] State of Heathenism” under which the vast majority of Indians laboured created “among them a universal want of those qualities that cement society— of integrity, truth, and faithfulness.”<sup>83</sup> Reflecting a Manichean worldview shared by many evangelicals of his era, Grant saw Hinduism itself as “the enemy.”<sup>84</sup> Only Christianity, he believed, could redeem a society that had been corrupted by generations of idolatry and false religion.

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<sup>81</sup> Grant to Rev. C.F. Schwartz, Malda, November 1785, in Henry Morris, The Life of Charles Grant: Sometime Member of Parliament for Inverness-Shire, and Director of the East India Company (London: J. Murray, 1904), 123-24.

<sup>82</sup> Charles Grant, Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great-Britain, Particularly with Respect to Morals; and on the Means of Improving It (London: East India Company, 1797), 43, 71, 47, 50.

<sup>83</sup> David Brown, William Chambers, Charles Grant, and George Udny to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Calcutta, 19 September 1787, SPG Papers, vol. IX, ff.217-18, LPL; Grant to Thomas Raikes, Malda, 23 October 1784, in Morris, The Life of Charles Grant, 96-97.

<sup>84</sup> Morris, The Life of Charles Grant, 105.

In spite of this deep-seated antipathy for Hindu culture and religion, Grant was not blind to his own country's role in perpetuating what he perceived as India's poverty, stasis, and social ills. Though maintaining that Indian civilization had always been demarcated by ignorance and backwardness, he nonetheless reckoned that conditions had become noticeably worse since the British arrived. As Andrea Major has observed, Grant in the 1780s and 1790s grew increasingly "critical of the corruption and exploitation that characterized the early years of EIC rule and argued for an improvement in the quality and morality of EIC administration."<sup>85</sup> No where did Grant articulate these positions more clearly than in his 1792 treatise *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great-Britain, Particularly with Respect to Morals; and on the Means of Improving it*. This document was at first shown only to Dundas, Wilberforce, and a few other individuals interested in the prospect of missions in India; not until 1797 was it formally circulated among the EIC Court of Directors as a paper of business.<sup>86</sup> In the first of four chapters, Grant recounted at length the detrimental effects of Britain's presence in India thus far, arguing that "the past effects of our administration" yielded an obligation to introduce measures to proactively ameliorate the lives of ordinary Indians. "The history of our rule in Bengal is in great part a history of our errors," Grant wrote, "or the abuses public and private of power derived from us." Surveying the damage done during the quarter-century in which he himself had served in the subcontinent, Grant concluded that "at the end of that long period, the country and the people were not in so good a

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<sup>85</sup> Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, 252.

<sup>86</sup> See Morris, *The Life of Charles Grant*, 169. The document was printed in 1813 for the same purpose for which it was written twenty years earlier: to build support for making the admission of missionaries a condition of the EIC's charter renewal. All quotations in this study are from the 1797 Paper of Business. This version is virtually identical to the original 1792 version found in the Oriental and India Office Collections, MSS Eur, E93, BL. For how Grant's *Observations* influenced Wilberforce's thinking about India and missions in the East, see Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, chapter seven.

condition as that which we found them.” By opening his case for admitting missionaries with these observations, Grant’s stated objective was

forcibly to impress upon the mind, the sense of those particular obligations under which we lie [sic] to the people of our Asiatic territories, on account of the benefits we draw from them, the disadvantages they have suffered and must still in certain ways suffer from their connection with us.<sup>87</sup>

When Grant began to actively solicit support for missions in the late 1780s, it is telling that he first approached influential Evangelicals who were simultaneously emerging as leaders of the antislavery movement. In autumn 1787, he sent fourteen copies of a tract he wrote entitled *A Proposal for Establishing a Protestant Mission in Bengal and Behar* to his London representative Thomas Raikes with instructions to forward copies to Newton and Wilberforce as soon as possible. The humanitarian and pious reputations of the pair, Grant wrote to Raikes, had already distinguished them as likely “to rejoice to exert themselves in forwarding the spread of the Gospel.” In his response, Raikes concurred, writing of Wilberforce that “I doubt not of his attention to the souls of the poor Natives of Indostan, [he] who hath been busied for a year past in a scheme for bettering the Situation of the Negroes in the West Indies.”<sup>88</sup> Of his own initiative, Raikes also sent a copy of the *Proposal* to Beilby Porteus, who was already widely recognized as an advocate for the welfare of African slaves. Also detecting a possible symbiosis between abolitionism and support for missions in the East, John Owen, an Anglican cleric serving the European community in Calcutta, wrote Granville

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<sup>87</sup> Grant, *Observations*, 216, 36, 36-37, and 38. Even when Hastings’ reputation had largely been vindicated by the 1810s, Grant was one of the few EIC officials to vote against making his pension retroactive to 1795, maintaining that the former Governor General’s nabobery and his non-imposition of British values had had lasting detrimental effects on India and its inhabitants. Ainslie T. Embree, *Charles Grant and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 47-48.

<sup>88</sup> Both quotations cited in Morris, *The Life of Charles Grant*, 106, 115.

Sharp asking him to petition the government to support missionary work in Bengal.

Having “rejoiced to see you stand forth... in the cause of the oppressed,” Owen wrote, in reference to Sharp’s antislavery activism, he was sure that Sharp would agree that it was “dishonorable [sic] in the highest degree for Xians to rule pagans without seeking to instruct them in the gospel.”<sup>89</sup> Like Grant and Raikes, Owen believed that highlighting similarities between opposition to the slave trade and support for missions would be an effective way to win backers for his cause.

Grant’s 1787 *Proposal* was moderately successful in orienting Evangelicals and Evangelical networks toward promoting missions in India. In his unfinished autobiography, Wilberforce cited the *Proposal* as the document that first directed his attention to “the religious Interests of British India.” As soon as he read it, he sent copies to a number of friends, including William Pitt.<sup>90</sup> Though Newton had shown interest in the subject as early as 1783, when he researched a plan by the Baptist missionary John Thomas for “spreading the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and his glorious gospel, in and about Bengal,” it was Grant’s treatise that transformed his concerns into action.<sup>91</sup> From 1787 to 1793, Newton and Wilberforce worked hard to raise funds for missionary work in the East. They also actively recruited candidates for the task from Magdalene College, Cambridge, then under the direction of their mutual friend and fellow Evangelical Charles Simeon.<sup>92</sup> It is an indication of the importance both men placed on evangelization

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<sup>89</sup> John Owen to Granville Sharp, Calcutta, 12 March 1789, SPG Papers, vol. IX, ff.225-26, LPL.

<sup>90</sup> “Autobiography of William Wilberforce,” in Adam Matthews, *Abolition and Emancipation*, Reel 2, f.21; Morris, *The Life of Charles Grant*, 120. Also see Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward*, vol. 1: 33-34.

<sup>91</sup> C.B. Lewis, *The Life of John Thomas* (London: Macmillan, 1873), 42-43, 243-44.

<sup>92</sup> John Walsh and Ronald Hyam, *Peter Peckard Liberal Churchman and Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (Cambridge: Magdalene College, 1998), 19. Simeon also read a copy of Grant’s *Proposal*, possibly

that their correspondence during this period features more references to missionary work in India than to efforts to abolish the slavery. Throughout the remainder of their respective lives, Newton and Wilberforce's interest in the spread of Christianity in India would continue to grow. In 1806, the year before the slave trade was outlawed, Wilberforce asserted that "next to the Slave Trade, I have long thought our making no effort to introduce the blessings of religious and moral improvement among our subjects in the East, the greatest of our *national* crimes."<sup>93</sup>

Historians of abolitionism have long recognized the importance of interpersonal networks in creating a nationwide campaign against the slave trade. Indeed, much scholarship over the past two decades has fruitfully shown how information and ideas circulated through webs of personal connections and how, in turn, a shared commitment to antislavery expanded and nurtured these relationships.<sup>94</sup> Highlighting contemporaneous efforts to promote missions in India reminds us that participants in evangelical and humanitarian networks did not direct their energies toward a single objective. Rather, they were part of what David Lambert and Alan Lester have termed "the complex cartography of philanthropic connection."<sup>95</sup> Within growing evangelical

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received via Wilberforce. See Henry P. Thompson, Into All Lands: The History of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, 1701-1950 (London: Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, 1951), 176.

<sup>93</sup> Wilberforce to Arthur Wellesley, 14 April 1806, Wellesley Papers, Add. Ms. 37309.108, BL.

<sup>94</sup> See, for instance, Turley, The Culture of English Antislavery; John R. Oldfield, Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807 (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1998); Judith Jennings, The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade, 1783-1807 (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997); Stephen Tompkins, The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2010); and Anne Stott, Wilberforce: Family and Friends (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>95</sup> Cited in Major, Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 233. See David Lambert and Alan Lester, "Geographies of Colonial Philanthropy," Progress in Human Geography 28, no. 3 (June 2004): 320-41 and David Lambert and Alan Lester, "Introduction," in David Lambert and Alan Lester, Colonial Lives across

communities throughout Britain, commitment to one issue— be it related to empire such as antislavery or missions, or a domestic matter such as establishing Sunday Schools— suggested receptiveness to other causes in which one’s co-religionists were involved. When evangelical concerns about the lack of Bibles in Wales led to the founding of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) in 1804, most of the organization’s leadership were well known abolitionists. It included John Shore as President, Wilberforce and Porteus as Vice-Presidents, Granville Sharp as honorary Chairman, and Henry Thornton as Treasurer. The BFBS also included Hannah More, James Stephen, Zachary Macaulay, and James Phillips as members. When Charles Grant returned from India in 1790, he also diversified his philanthropic endeavours by quickly “throwing himself heart and soul” into the abolitionist campaign. Elected to the SEAST the following year, Grant joined Henry Thornton and William Smith in devoting more time than anyone to helping Wilberforce prepare questions for the slave trade hearings in parliament.<sup>96</sup>

As revealed by correspondence between Evangelical leaders in the 1780s and 1790s, Newton and Wilberforce were particularly central figures in an increasingly politically active network of Evangelical humanitarians with contacts and projects extending throughout the empire, including New South Wales, India, and the West Indies. Though only six Evangelicals sat in the House of Commons between 1775 and 1790, their connections and zeal led them to accrue an influence over national politics

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the British Empire: *Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>96</sup> “Minutes of Meeting,” 28 December 1791, in Fair Minute Book, vol. III, Add. Ms. 21254, f.36, BL. For Grant’s contributions to the antislavery movement, see Embree, *Charles Grant*, 153 and Morris, *The Life of Charles Grant*, 178-80. Wilberforce singles Grant out as an especially close co-agitator in Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, vol.1: 142.



that John Brooke has claimed “was out of all proportion to their numbers.”<sup>97</sup> In addition to the geographic scope of their networks and ambitions, another central feature of evangelical imperial reform campaigns in this period was their ecumenism. Recall Newton’s self-description, for example, as “a sort of middle man” whose advice was sought by “middle people of all denominations.”<sup>98</sup> As many historians have noted, in the decade between the American and French Revolutions the pursuit of shared objectives tended to trump doctrinal differences and sectarian rivalries. Within the Anglican Church, these “ecumenical stirrings,” to borrow Roger Martin’s phrase, were spearheaded largely by upper-class laymen and by reformist clergy for whom maintaining sectarian segregation was less important than it was for many in the Church hierarchy.<sup>99</sup>

Like Wilberforce, Newton, and other well-connected Evangelicals within the Church of England, a number of influential dissenters in the late eighteenth-century were also willing to set aside theological differences in pursuit of imperial reform and spreading Christianity abroad. Further similar to Anglican reformers, many of these individuals first warmed to interdenominational cooperation through their involvement in the abolitionist movement. As a member of the clerical discussion group The Eclectic Society, the Moravian Benjamin La Trobe spoke with Newton about the slave trade and possible missionary enterprises on at least three different continents. Newton also introduced La Trobe by Newton to Grant, Wilberforce, and John Thornton, each of whom

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<sup>97</sup> John Brooke and Lewis Namier, *The House of Commons, 1754-1790: Introductory Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 171.

<sup>98</sup> Newton to unnamed, 8 November 1791, MS 2935, ff. 265-66, LPL.

<sup>99</sup> Roger H. Martin, *Evangelicals United: Ecumenical Stirrings in Pre-Victorian Britain, 1795-1830* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983). For evangelical interdenominationalism in the late eighteenth century, see also: Mason, *Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening*, 68; Thorne, *Congregational Missions*, 23-55; and D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 289-324.

donated funds to Moravian missionary endeavours in St. Kitts. They also solicited La Trobe's advice on establishing a missionary outpost near the fledgling settlement of Sierra Leone.<sup>100</sup> Through their involvement with antislavery, many Quakers were similarly brought into consistent and meaningful contact with Anglican Evangelicals. The sustained co-operation that ensued led many Church of England adherents to develop an abiding admiration for the still marginalized sect. "If it were not that I should be obliged to wear such frightful clothes," wrote Hannah More, "I [would] have some thoughts of turning Quaker myself." Quakers also participated in the founding meetings of the BFBS, a fact that the Society's first biographer found unsurprising since their leadership in the abolitionist movement had already proven their concern for the welfare of non-Europeans.<sup>101</sup>

As with groups of Moravians, Quakers, and Baptists, Methodist involvement with imperial reform in the late eighteenth century also illustrates how opposing the slave trade and promoting missions could be both mutually reinforcing and facilitate interdenominational cooperation. Like Baptist leaders, most high-ranking Methodists instructed clergy in the West Indies to avoid openly discussing issues related to slavery. Downplaying the opposition of growing numbers of members to the Atlantic slave system was difficult, however, as John Wesley had very publically disapproved of it in

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<sup>100</sup> John H. Pratt and Josiah Pratt, *Memoir of the Rev. Josiah Pratt: Late Vicar of St. Stephens's* (London: Protestant Episcopal Society for the Promotion of Evangelical Knowledge, 1855); Mason, *Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening*, 123, 139, 177. See also Elizabeth Elbourne, "The Foundation of the Church Missionary Society: The Anglican Missionary Impulse," in Colin Haydon and John Walsh, and Stephen Taylor, eds., *The Church of England c.1689-1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 257.

<sup>101</sup> More to Horace Walpole, Cowslip Green, September 1790, in W.S. Lewis, ed., *The Correspondence of Horace Walpole*, vol. 31 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-1983): 350-51; John Owen, *The History of the Origin and First Ten Years of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (London: James Eastburn & co., 1817), 38-41.

his 1776 tract *Thoughts upon Slavery*. Wesley's position on slavery was formed largely through correspondence with Granville Sharp and the Quaker Anthony Benezet, and he imparted his antislavery convictions onto many of his disciples. These included Thomas Coke, who Wesley appointed superintendent of American Methodism in September 1784.

Though in each of Coke's four visits to the West Indies in the 1780s and 1790s he assured planters that Methodist preachers posed no threat to slavery, he simultaneously worked in private to undermine his own Church's official message. He pled with George Washington to emancipate the new republic's slaves, and in August 1787 quietly became one of the first non-founding members of the SEAST.<sup>102</sup> As with evangelicals of other denominations, Coke saw the West Indies as just one sphere of missionary potential. In his 1784 *Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathen*, he talked about sending preachers to West Africa, North America, India, and other far-flung regions of the empire. In January 1784, Coke even wrote to Charles Grant inquiring about the likelihood of obtaining converts were he to establish a Methodist mission in Bengal. Grant responded to the query in the affirmative.<sup>103</sup> It was only because of Wesley's judgement that the Americas presented fewer "uncertainties and difficulties... [and] countries to which we have so much easier admittance" that Coke decided to focus his energies primarily on the New World. He nonetheless continued to correspond with Grant about the possibility of missions in the East in the future, and kept Wilberforce and

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<sup>102</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 339; Fair Minute Book, vol. I, 27 August 1787, Add. Ms. 25254, f.14, BL.

<sup>103</sup> John Telford, *A Short History of Wesleyan Methodist Foreign Missions* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1906); Coke, *An Address to the Pious and Benevolent*, 3 and Morris, *The Life of Charles Grant*, 98-101.

other prominent Anglican Evangelicals appraised of the work of Methodist preachers among slaves in the West Indies.<sup>104</sup>

By bringing energetic and pious members of various churches together, the abolitionist movement and early missionary schemes served as incubators of interdenominational cooperation. These collaborations suggest recognition that certain denominations held similar enough worldviews to be able to put the pursuit of shared objectives overseas (a safe distance from Britain itself) ahead of the impulse to propagate sectarian beliefs. In many ways, both antislavery and missionary work offered an escape from theological disputes of the past, as well as a way to make manifest a religion of the heart. While the missionary awakening did fuel a competitive drive between churches to recruit souls, most evangelicals agreed to greater or lesser extents that diffusing the gospel message as widely as possible was more important than disseminating the doctrine of one's own church.<sup>105</sup> As Wilberforce put it to dissenters who expressed fears that admitting missionaries into India would lead to jurisdictional conflict with the Church of England, "Alas! Alas! Let us have some substance before we differ about form."<sup>106</sup> In order to minimize possibilities for friction, evangelicals conscientiously sought out causes that were not tied to questions of dogma. This strategy helps explain why the

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<sup>104</sup> Telford, *Wesleyan Methodist Foreign Missions*, 14; Coke to Wilberforce, London, 24 August 1790 in Wilberforce and Wilberforce, eds., *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, vol. 1: 73.

<sup>105</sup> Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery*, 8.

<sup>106</sup> Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, vol. 2: 93. While Wilberforce exclaimed this during the lead up to the 1813 EIC charter renewal, it is also reflective of the animating spirit behind efforts twenty years earlier to force the EIC to admit missionaries into India.

distribution of bibles— an activity in which Porteus stated there could be “no rivalry, no competition, no clashing of interests”— was always a popular venture.<sup>107</sup>

Despite aspiring to ecumenical cooperation, sectarian tensions were bound to surface on occasion when activists from different denominations worked together. For upper-class Anglicans, these were often as much connected to the social composition of the membership of dissenting congregations as to their theology. Though on the one hand courting Baptist support in the antislavery campaign, Evangelical coteries at Teston and Clapham were wary of the grassroots energy that abolitionism could stir up among the Baptist Church’s middle- and working-class adherents. As Wilberforce’s sons recognized, their father’s “appeal to the people... [was] no appeal to the political impulse of the multitude,” but was instead “addressed to the moral sympathies” of those with social influence.<sup>108</sup> After the outbreak of the French Revolution, fear of class conflict only increased among Anglican reformers. Regarding the boycott of slave-grown sugar, impelled by the lower and middle classes, Newton told Wilberforce that “as a minister, I do not enforce it... [it] has its beginning, as we say, at the wrong end.”<sup>109</sup> In addition to some personal reluctance to work across religious and class divides, Anglican Evangelicals also had to consider the opposition of their episcopacy to

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<sup>107</sup> Porteus to John Shore, Sundridge, 29 September 1806, in John Shore, Memoir of the Life and Correspondence of John, Lord Teignmouth, vol. 2 (London: Hatchard, 1843): 104-07.

<sup>108</sup> Wilberforce, The Life of William Wilberforce, vol. 1: 128. To be sure, the claims of Robert and Samuel Wilberforce on points of religion need to be read with care. Part of their agenda in their biography of their father was to highlight the centrality of conservative Anglicans to abolitionism while downplaying the contributions of heterodox thinkers such as Thomas Clarkson. Still, their point about the target of their father’s appeal is accurate.

<sup>109</sup> Newton to Wilberforce, London, 13 December 1794, in Wilberforce, The Correspondence of William Wilberforce, vol. 1: 112-17.

interdenominational alliances. “One thing I fear will impede immediate progress,” Raikes wrote to Grant regarding missions in India, is

that the Clergymen who are mentioned on this side [in Britain] as the Promoters and Agents in the Scheme are those who are called or supposed to be Methodists, the Bishops will be very shy of employing them, for though they may be, and I doubt not are, men of great Piety and strictest manners; they never like to give the reins into the hands of warm imaginations.<sup>110</sup>

Though the most sympathetic of all Anglican bishops to evangelical causes, Porteus refused to give the Baptist William Carey a licence to preach in India, and kept his admiration for Moravian missions largely to himself.<sup>111</sup> He also avoided lending public support to non-SPG missionary plans in India—a reflection of both his own cautiousness and the implicit restrictions placed on bishops in confessional Britain from working too closely with dissenters.<sup>112</sup>

### *Subjects and Slavery*

Having looked at some of the efforts during the 1780s and 1790s to generate enthusiasm for propagating Christianity overseas, it is important to be mindful that support for missions within both religious communities and British society more broadly during this period was limited. Indeed, it would be decades until a widespread missionary consciousness and culture developed in Britain. Most significant for our purposes, therefore, are not the material results of the late eighteenth-century missionary awakening. Rather, it is how groups of evangelicals went about reconceiving Britain’s

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<sup>110</sup> Raikes to Grant, London, 5 April 1788, in Morris, *The Life of Charles Grant*, 115.

<sup>111</sup> Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey*, Marshman and Ward, 256; Mason, *Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening*, 90-95.

<sup>112</sup> Porter, *Religion Versus Empire?*, 51.

relationship with the world beyond its shores. While the previous section surveyed some of the personal and denominational linkages that fostered this rethinking, this section briefly examines two of the ideological overlaps between evangelical abolitionism and the missionary awakening. They are changing notions of who constituted a British “subject,” and theological understandings of the intersection between sin, slavery, and freedom. Because of their concomitant rise, antislavery and the evangelical missionary impulse were each part of a much larger “cross-fertilization of ideas between various movements for social reform at home and overseas.” As such, they contributed to what Andrea Major has called a “shared discursive terrain” that led thinking about one issue or place to influence outlooks on others.<sup>113</sup>

As illustrated in chapter three, debates over Indian reform in the 1780s and early 1790s were infused with arguments about the moral imperative for imperial rulers to govern in a way that promoted the welfare of the native population. Encapsulating this notion, Burke had famously stated that “political dominion... [is] in the strictest sense a *trust*... all political power which is set over men... ought to be in some way or other exercised for their benefit.”<sup>114</sup> In making this claim, Burke sought to provide a moral and philosophical foundation for ending British misrule in Asia, and to compel Britons to show greater reverence for Indian society. Personally, Burke had great admiration for Hindu civilization in particular, and believed that it should be left to develop with

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<sup>113</sup> Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, 237.

<sup>114</sup> Burke, 1 December 1783, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 23: 1317. Emphasis in original.

minimal European interference.<sup>115</sup> However, because the laws, customs, and modes of governance that would be most “for their [Indians’] benefit” were matters of subjective judgment, the doctrine of imperial trusteeship that he championed was inherently malleable. As we saw through P.W. Hall, Granville Sharp, and others, this allowed reformers to apply the principle to other “problems of empire.” For evangelicals who advocated establishing missions in the subcontinent, governing “for the benefit” of the native population meant going beyond simply maintaining order and preventing oppression: namely, it required propagating British values through, first and foremost, the spread of Christianity.<sup>116</sup> The preface to the 1793 bill that would have made the EIC charter renewal dependent on permitting missionaries to operate in its territory reflected this attitude. “It is the particular and bounden duty of the legislature,” the proposed legislation asserted, “to promote, by all just and prudent means, the interests and happiness of the inhabitants of the British dominions in India.”<sup>117</sup>

The way in which the doctrine of imperial trusteeship, along with the language of moral duty it entailed, was applied to the cause of missions is well illustrated in the correspondence and writings of Charles Grant. Referring to official inquiries into EIC misrule in the early 1780s, Grant applauded the fact that “the evils that afflict the people and the means of redressing them are now deservedly become a business of Government.” He believed that by assuming greater oversight over the EIC, the British

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<sup>115</sup> See Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); G.D. Bearce, *British Attitudes Towards India, 1784-1858* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), esp. 12-13.

<sup>116</sup> Peter J. Marshall, *Problems of Empire: Britain and India, 1757-1813* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), 67.

<sup>117</sup> Cited in Owen, *The History of the Origin and First Ten Years*, 357.



government had “established a new responsibility” to “help these poor people whose land we enjoy, who are now in effect subjects of Britain.”<sup>118</sup> Since Christianity was the foundation of all personal and social development, exercising this responsibility required the diffusion of missions and missionaries. Only “By planting our language, our knowledge, our opinions, and our religion, in our Asiatic territories,” Grant wrote in his *Observations*, will Britons “have done an act of strict duty to them [Indians].” “Duty calls upon us,” he further reflected, to promote “the gradual improvement of their condition... which is due to them as useful subjects and as fellow creatures, whose happiness is committed to our care.”<sup>119</sup>

Grant’s consistent use of the term “subjects” to describe Indians in both his public and private writings is significant. By advocating the provision of religious instruction to non-Europeans, those Britons who championed missionary outreach were arguing for more than simply a recognition of the responsibilities of imperial rule. Like abolitionists, they were making the broader claim that non-whites were legitimate subjects of the crown, and that this status entitled them to many of the same rights, freedoms, and benefits enjoyed by other Britons. While this was certainly not an argument for political or social equality between native Britons and the people over whom they ruled, it was evidence of a growing shift in understandings about whose interests “counted” in creating imperial policy. Indeed, though the wishes of merchants and settler populations often remained the government’s principle concern when making decisions about the Empire,

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<sup>118</sup> Grant to Raikes, Malda, 23 October 1784, in Morris, *The Life of Charles Grant*, 96-97.

<sup>119</sup> Grant, *Observations*, 220, 41. For Grant and imperial trusteeship, see also Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India, 1707-1858* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 146.

promoting the welfare of the colonized was now recognized as a significant component of moral rule that could not be easily ignored.

The language of subjecthood that became central to discourses of empire in this period was employed not only by British evangelicals. Indeed, it was used by all sorts of reform-minded individuals who sought a policy of greater imperial trusteeship than had hitherto existed. In 1789, a group of EIC chaplains in Calcutta wrote to the Governor-General of India that it was lamentable and incongruous that “subjects of a nation enlightened and exalted” should remain “wholly destitute of moral instruction.”<sup>120</sup> The same year, James Anderson of Manchester urged greater Christian instruction for slaves by arguing that exposure to the gospel would help “those men we wish to exalt to the rank of British subjects... perform the part of free-men, with energy and propriety.”<sup>121</sup> Writing to Beilby Porteus in 1792, one West Indian cleric pointedly asserted that African slaves “are subjects of Great Britain and therefore intitled [sic] to... regulations for teaching them Christianity and good Morals.”<sup>122</sup> For a correspondent to the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, ameliorating “the moral and intellectual state of our Indian subjects” was similar in kind to “undermin[ing] the slave-trade in Africa”: in both cases, an imperative ensued from the fact that non-Europeans were lawful British subjects, who should therefore be afforded basic rights and opportunities available to freeborn Britons.<sup>123</sup> That

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<sup>120</sup> David Brown, Robert Carr, John Owen, and Thomas Blanshard to Earl Cornwallis, Calcutta, 20 June 1788, SPG Papers, vol. IX, ff.220-23, LPL.

<sup>121</sup> James Anderson, *Observations on Slavery; Particularly with a View to Its Effects on the British Colonies, in the West Indies* (Manchester: J. Harrop, 1789), 23.

<sup>122</sup> William Gordon to Porteus, Exuma Bahamas, 2 September 1792, SPG Papers, vol. XV, ff.87-93, LPL.

<sup>123</sup> Phaedo, “Letter on the charter renewal of the EIC,” *Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 63 (July 1793): 616-17.

these views were expressed by diverse individuals in a variety of contexts underscores the centrality of changing definitions of subjecthood to arguments for imperial reform.

Equally as intrinsic to the status of British subject as the right to practice Christianity was freedom over one's body and labour. Over the previous centuries, "British Liberty" had gradually evolved into what many Britons saw as a demarcating feature of national identity.<sup>124</sup> Unlike many of their colleagues in the abolitionist movement, however, evangelicals saw freedom as meaning something beyond just physical autonomy. For them, freedom also had ontological and theological connotations. Most saliently, it meant being an autonomous moral agent who was intellectually capable of understanding and accepting the basic truths of Christianity. As Wilberforce put it in a speech before the House of Commons

Freedom itself was a blessing the most valuable in nature; but it could be enjoyed only by a nation where the faculty of thought had been for some time employed... True liberty was a plant of celestial growth, and none could perceive its beauties, but those who had employed the nobler faculties of the human soul in contemplating the goodness of the divine essence from whence it sprung.<sup>125</sup>

Indeed, in the late eighteenth-century evangelical worldview, free will was a precondition for being a Christian, and the faculty of thought was necessarily in order to be able to exercise free will. All social, labour, and religious systems that impeded a person's intellectual development thus ultimately denied his or her moral agency. Into this category fell both chattel slavery in the West Indies and Hinduism in India.

According to many evangelical abolitionists, West Indian slavery was not only immoral

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<sup>124</sup> The idea of a distinctly British strand of liberty was especially pronounced when juxtaposed with French liberty during the era of the French Revolution. See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>125</sup> Wilberforce, 2 April 1792, in Hansard, ed. *Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 29: 1061.

because of its physical effects on enslaved Africans, but also because it kept slaves' minds "in chains," preventing them from acquiring the mental capacity necessary to freely choose to convert to Christianity. As Hannah More put it, slavery erected barriers to cultivating "heads to think" and, thus, "souls to act."<sup>126</sup> Likewise, Hinduism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was increasingly referred to as a system of "slavery," with the majority of Indians described as oppressed by both their social subordination to the Brahmin class and their adherence to superstitious dogma. In both the Eastern and Western scenes of empire, therefore, evangelicals were able to cast Britons as potential liberators who could bring freedom to those whose minds and spiritual selves were held in a state of bondage.

As illustrated by James Ramsay and Beilby Porteus in the previous chapter, many abolitionists with deep religious convictions believed that slaves would only be free to contemplate spiritual matters and convert to Christianity if their material conditions were improved. Since slaves must "be considered as men, and as moral agents, before they can be made Christians," Porteus argued, it was imperative that attempts at proselytization be accompanied by regulations to make plantation life less severe.<sup>127</sup> For evangelicals who turned their attention eastward, there was likewise a connection between the moral and material states of their Indian "fellow subjects." Yet as most saw it, this relationship was the inverse of what it was for enslaved Africans: in India, it was a mental slavery to religious superstition that "contract[ed] the human mind almost below rationality" and

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<sup>126</sup> Hannah More, *Slavery, a Poem* (London: T. Cadell, 1788), 5.

<sup>127</sup> Porteus, "An Essay towards the more Effectual Civilization and Conversion of the Negro Slaves, on the Trust Estate in Barbados..." in Hodgson, *The Life of the Right Reverend Beilby Porteus*, vol. 6: 168. See pages 245-55 in the previous chapter for more on this theme.

prevented material and social development.<sup>128</sup> Once again, it is Charles Grant who perhaps most comprehensively and persuasively characterized Hinduism in this way. Out of India's "myriad religious traditions," Grant deciphered and then perpetuated "the concept of a single, unified Hindu religion" that "kept the masses of India in subjugation and ignorance."<sup>129</sup> His *Observations* is replete with language and metaphors associated with slavery, and Hindu beliefs and customs are repeatedly described as constituting a "most grievous bondage."<sup>130</sup>

Chattel slavery in the Atlantic and Hinduism in India were analogous in the minds of many late eighteenth-century evangelicals in that they each prevented the exercise of free will and thus perpetuated a form of spiritual captivity. This belief, combined with the perceived connection between material and spiritual depravity, enabled evangelicals to frame both their abolitionist and missionary efforts as projects of dual liberation. Among other things, missions in the East would lead to "an emancipation from their [Indians'] chains of darkness, and an admission into 'the glorious liberty of the children of God.'"<sup>131</sup> Referencing both Africans and Indians, the missionary advocate Joseph White wrote that if Britain "seeks to protect and not impoverish; if it desires to govern, and not to enslave, it will be equally intent to diffuse among its subjects the rights of freedom, and the privileges of Christianity."<sup>132</sup> As David Brion Davis has argued, the nexus of slavery,

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<sup>128</sup> Phaedo, "Letter on the charter renewal of the EIC," *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 63 (July 1793): 616-17.

<sup>129</sup> Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, 253.

<sup>130</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>131</sup> Thomas Thurlow, *A Sermon Preached before the Incorporated Socceity for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foregin Parts; at Their Anniversary Meeting in the Parish Church of St. Mary-Le-Bow, on Friday February 17, 1786* (London: T. Harrison and S. Brooke, 1786), 22.

<sup>132</sup> Joseph White, *A Sermon Preached before the University of Oxford, July 4, 1784. On the Duty of Attempting the Propagation of the Gospel among out Mahometan and Gentoo Subjects in India* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1785), 56.

conversion, and liberation was perhaps most vividly articulated by Cowper in his moral satire *Charity*. Like other evangelicals, Cowper held that the enslaved African “feels his body’s bondage in his mind,” and that material deprivations impeded moral agency and spiritual growth. Since physical amelioration was needed to allow slaves to begin to recognize, contemplate, and accept Christianity, liberating slaves from the hardships of plantation labour also involved liberating them from them from sin and ignorance. In this way, “slaves, by truth enlarg’d, are doubly free.” For Cowper, the hero of the manumission narrative is the Christian Briton—the “benefactor” and “deliverer” who exercises his “godlike privilege to save [slaves]” from “the chain... [of] superstition.”<sup>133</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Cowper’s appraisal of the dual nature of slavery and liberation provides an appropriate point at which to conclude this chapter, as it brings it almost full-circle to where it began. As exemplified by Cowper’s poetry from the late 1770s to early 1790s, rapacity in India and slavery in the Atlantic were concomitant concerns for a number of reformers with evangelical leanings. Moreover, the two sets of injustices shared important underlying characteristics that enabled critics to denounce them alongside each other. Though Cowper held mixed views about whether empire could ever be made a truly moral undertaking, his mentor John Newton was more optimistic, seeing the diffusion of Christianity via missionaries as a way to atone for the destructive effects of empire on colonized peoples. This belief in redemption resonated with Anglicans and

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<sup>133</sup> All citations from Cowper, *Poems by William Cowper*, 191-92. David Brion Davis’ insightful analysis of *Charity* can be found in Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 368-73. Though arguably most famously expressed in *Charity*, the redemption of slaves through conversion to Christianity was a popular theme in much evangelical antislavery poetry. See, for instance, Hannah More’s *Cheap Repository. The Sorrows of Yamba; or, the Negro Woamn's Lamentation* (London: J. Marshall, 1795).

dissenters alike, and helped bring members of different religious communities together in joint antislavery activism and in support of efforts to establish missions overseas. The chapter concluded by briefly looking at two of the conceptual intersections between abolitionism and a growing missionary impulse: changing ideas of who constituted a British subject, and the multiple ways in which an individual could be “enslaved.” On each of these three levels— individual, communal, and ideological—British evangelicals saw salient connections between opposition to the slave trade and efforts to propagate Christianity abroad.

The important linkages that existed between abolitionism and the missionary awakening do not mean that the two movements were simply different sides of the same coin. Antislavery and early missionary endeavours had separate (though reinforcing) aims, and each cause faced a different set of political obstacles. An even more salient distinction is the fact that it would take decades for grassroots support for missions to come to match the intensity of popular abolitionism of the late 1780s and early 1790s. Indeed, the efforts of prominent evangelicals to advance missionary work—the principal focus of this chapter— did not always meet with the support of their co-religionists. Yet, as important as it is not to overstate the connections between antislavery and the missionary awakening, historians must also not allow the lack of success of most missionary schemes prior to 1800 to diminish what these projects can elucidate about shifting attitudes toward empire. For the purpose of understanding the origins of British antislavery, missionary aspirations help illustrate how late eighteenth-century evangelicals were engaged in far-reaching attempts to inject both morality and

Christianity into their nation's presence overseas. When viewed alongside the missionary awakening, therefore, evangelical abolitionism comes across as one component of a more comprehensive and ambitious program of imperial reform.



## Conclusion

By spring 1792, it looked as if the arguments and activism of the abolitionists examined in this study were about to produce their intended result. In April, Wilberforce brought forth a motion in the House of Commons to immediately and completely abrogate the British slave trade. The proposed bill was the culmination of five years of organized agitation, and for many activists a much longer period of rumination on and unease with the “African commerce.” The conditions in which Wilberforce introduced his motion were more favourable than at any previous point in time. Abolitionist presses were turning out an unprecedented amount of material, the boycott of slave-grown sugar was in full swing, and donations from local abolitionist societies continued to flow into the SEAST headquarters in London. “Of the enthusiasm of the nation at this time,” Thomas Clarkson later reflected, “none can form an opinion but they who witnessed it. There never was perhaps a season when so much virtuous feeling pervaded all ranks.”<sup>1</sup> Most notably, public sentiment manifested itself in the 519 petitions calling for an end to the slave trade that flooded into parliament before the April vote (in contrast to only four petitions for continuing the trade). The petitions contained nearly 400,000 signatures—more than for any previous cause, and more than the number of eligible electors in Britain at the time. Wilberforce assured his fellow parliamentarians that the petitions had no bearing on the question of how much influence “the people” should have in the legislative process, but did note that they were a potent reminder that parliament’s reputation in the eyes of the nation was at stake.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, & Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, by the British Parliament*, vol. 2 (London: James P. Parke, 1808): 352.

<sup>2</sup> Petition numbers cited in Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso Books, 1988), 144. “the people” from William Wilberforce, 2 April 1792, in T.C. Hansard, ed., *The*

Through a shrewd political manoeuvre, though, the hopes of the petitioners were soon dashed. Midway through the final debate on Wilberforce's motion in the House of Commons, Home Secretary Henry Dundas surprised nearly all the assembled members by proposing the word "gradual" be inserted before "abolition" in the text of the bill. Coming from Dundas, who controlled the votes of virtually all the Scottish MPs, the proposition carried significant weight. The suggested amendment was debated until sunrise the next morning, with the House eventually voting 193 to 125 to add "gradual," and then 230 to 85 in favour of the revised piece of legislation. Later in the month, MPs set 1796 as the terminal year of the trade. Outwardly, a number of abolitionists put on a brave face, noting that the majority of members were now on record as agreeing in principle that the slave trade was immoral and damaging, and that ending it would be consistent with justice, humanity, and sound policy. Others, however, found it harder to mask their disappointment. The decision for gradual rather than immediate abolition, wrote the Evangelical preacher Thomas Gisborne, was "humiliating to the character of the British nation." Wilberforce took the defeat personally, writing to a friend that "I am congratulated on all hands, yet I cannot feel but hurt and humiliated."<sup>3</sup>

A few months later, even the most optimistic abolitionists would be forced to acknowledge that their cause had received more than just a minor setback. Upon being presented with the Commons' bill for gradual abolition, the House of Lords decided to

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*Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, vol. 29 (London: T.C. Hansard, 1803-20): 1055.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Gisborne, *Remarks on the Late Decision of the House of Commons on the Abolition of the Slave Trade on APRIL 2d, 1792* (London: B. White and Sons, 1792), 15; WW to Mr. Hey, April 1792, Robert I. and Samuel Wilberforce, eds., *The Life of William Wilberforce*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1838): 346.

launch its own investigation into the slave trade. Their decision to do so was a sobering reminder of the limitations of public opinion in Britain's unreformed political system. In June, the Lords further demoralized abolitionists by postponing their inquiry until the autumn session. Already the impact of the French Revolution was being felt in Britain, as both progressive causes and their champions were starting to be viewed with suspicion by many in the political establishment. Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, published in two parts in March 1791 and February 1792, increased fears that Britons too might soon take to the streets to demand greater political rights and freedoms. Such anxieties led to efforts to stop large public gatherings—the type of meetings often used by abolitionists to promote their cause and gather signatures on petitions. Moreover, the French Revolution had also sparked the largest slave uprising in the history of the Atlantic World in Saint-Domingue beginning in August 1791. By the following spring and summer, stories were steadily streaming into Britain about the fighting and chaos engulfing the colony. Anti-abolitionists argued that the revolt was at least partially triggered by antislavery agitation emanating from Britain, and in their rhetoric aimed to conflate abolitionism with “French principles” and the violence taking place in the Caribbean. Even prior to introducing his motion in the Commons in April 1792, Wilberforce reported that his fellow legislators were “all panic-struck with the transactions in Saint-Domingo.”<sup>4</sup>

The reverses of 1792 ushered in what became an extremely bleak decade for the antislavery cause. In the fall of that year, the French Revolution entered a bloodier and more radical phase, punctuated by the regicide of Louis XVI in January 1793 and a

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<sup>4</sup> WW to Thomas Babington, March 1792, in Wilberforce and Wilberforce, eds., *The Life of Wilberforce*, vol. 1: 340.

declaration of war against Britain the following month. Fears that Jacobin-inspired uprisings could spread across the Channel lasted for the remainder of the century. They were underscored by labour unrest, the stoning of the king's carriage in 1795, mutinies in two major naval yards in 1797, and a rebellion in Ireland in 1798. Pitt's government responded to this turbulent situation by steadily scaling back civil liberties and enhancing state surveillance of its own citizens. Spies were used to infiltrate organizations suspected of radical activity, and the passage of the Treason and Seditious Meetings Acts in 1795 severely curtailed freedom of speech and assembly respectively. Not only did progressive politics suffer from government repression, but the climate of fear from 1792 onward produced an aversion among ordinary Britons to publically support causes that could be seen as sharing in the ideals of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*. Though leading abolitionists aimed to distance their campaign from French republicanism, antislavery declarations from the National Assembly in Paris made this difficult. "It is certainly true and perfectly natural, that these Jacobins are all friendly to Abolition," Wilberforce observed, but "it is no less true and natural that this operates to the injury of our cause." It did not help matters that the National Assembly elected both him and Clarkson honorary French citizens.<sup>5</sup>

The turmoil in France also exposed divisions within the abolitionist ranks. While many in the movement's parliamentary and Evangelical branches were broadly supportive of the government crackdown on dissent, a number of grassroots activists

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<sup>5</sup> Wilberforce cited in Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975), 279. Clarkson recognized the impolitic nature of being awarded honorary French citizenship, even though he agreed with many of the aims of the Revolution. Wilberforce, who strongly opposed republican government, was mortified at the "honour."

sympathized with the aims of the French revolutionaries. Because of his involvement in subversive organizations such as the London Revolution Society and Manchester Constitutional Society, the chairman of the Manchester antislavery committee Thomas Walker was tried for high treason in 1794. Like dozens of other abolitionists caught up in revolutionary politics at the time—including Thomas Hardy, Horne Tooke, and a number Liverpool activists associated with Roscoe and his circle—Walker was eventually acquitted. But his high-profile trial was a poignant reminder of the dangers of political agitation, and watching it had a demoralizing effect on reformers throughout the country, moderate or otherwise. Clarkson, for one, was outraged at the proceedings, which reinforced his decision to retire from public life. Already the previous year he had begun to show signs of mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. By the middle of 1794, he “felt obliged, though very reluctantly,” to take leave of the abolitionist cause.<sup>6</sup> Those few crusaders who did continue to publically denounce the slave trade had their true intentions called into question as never before. As Colonial Cawthorn declared in the House of Commons, “Whatever were the pretended motives of religion, justice, and humanity, he suspected the real motives of the abolitionists were attributable to their disaffection. Long had that party betrayed symptoms of their hatred towards the constitution of this country.”<sup>7</sup> No longer were abolitionists simply quixotic visionaries: in the era of the French Revolution, they now represented a dangerous fifth column.

The international situation that abolitionists faced during the 1790s was no friendlier to reform than the domestic or European ones. The ferocity of fighting in Saint-

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<sup>6</sup> Clarkson, *History*, vol. 2: 453.

<sup>7</sup> Col. Cawthorne, 7 February 1794, in Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. 30: 1440.

Domingue appeared to work against abolitionist arguments about the virtue and humanity of enslaved Africans, and to bolster the pro-slavery claim that a firm hand was needed to rule over Africans and their descendants in the New World. Moreover, in 1793 British forces began a campaign to pry the lucrative slave colony away from the French. That they launched their invasion at the invitation of local *grandeers* intent on restoring the plantation system suggested that Pitt had no desire to abolish Britain's slave empire, but rather to expand it.<sup>8</sup> It would take five years and cost nearly 13,000 British lives before the plan was abandoned.<sup>9</sup> Though the Saint-Domingue expedition was an utter failure, Britain did win Trinidad, Guiana, and parts of Southern Africa from the French and Dutch during the French revolutionary wars. These acquisitions led to a ten-fold expansion in the amount of British territory suitable for cultivation by slaves.<sup>10</sup> An unlikely alliance of established planters and abolitionists temporarily blocked efforts to open up these territories to new slave imports, but it was unlikely this prohibition would last into the postwar era. The only abolitionist counterweight to Britain's slave colonies, the free labour settlement of Sierra Leone, was ransacked by a French squadron in 1794 and spent much of the following years rebuilding.

These and other factors had the cumulative effect of halting the momentum abolitionists had built up during the late 1780s and early 1790s. Unable to fully shake the

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<sup>8</sup> A number of abolitionists blamed Dundas for Pitt's intervention in Saint-Domingue. Wilberforce, for example, wrote years later that he was convinced the invasion "would never have taken place but for Mr. Dundas's influence with Mr. Pitt and his persuasion that we should be able with ease and promptitude, at a small expense of money and men, to take the French West Indian Islands." Cited in Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 149.

<sup>9</sup> The most thorough work on this topic is David Patrick Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint-Domingue, 1793-1798* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1982). The figure of 13,000 is Geggus' best estimate as to the number of British deaths during the occupation. *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>10</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 224.

association between abolitionism and political radicalism, the SEAST significantly scaled back its activities beginning in late 1792. Over the next five years, the Society's printer James Stephen published almost no material related to slavery or the slave trade aside from various reports from the Sierra Leone Company. This downturn was paralleled throughout the country, as abolitionists published at only half the rate they had done during the previous five years, and produced almost no new material. The period from 1798 to 1804 saw an even further decline in the amount of antislavery literature made available to the public.<sup>11</sup> In recognition that their prospects for success were diminishing, the SEAST gave notice to their landlady in May 1794 that they would no longer require use of her apartment near parliament, which had hitherto served as the headquarters of their lobbying efforts. Privately, many abolitionists wrote to each other of their disappointment. In August 1795, the Quaker activist and SEAST mainstay Samuel Hoare informed his colleagues in the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society that British campaigners were labouring "under circumstances of great discouragement." Years later, Wilberforce lamented to Hannah More that "the tales of horror, which once caused so many tears to flow, are all forgotten."<sup>12</sup> In his 1,059-page history of abolitionism, Clarkson devoted a mere twenty-eight pages to the entire period between July 1792 and July 1805.<sup>13</sup>

By the turn of the nineteenth century, things did indeed look unpromising for abolitionists. Yet paradoxically, it was precisely during abolitionism's darkest days that

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<sup>11</sup> John R. Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-Slavery, c.1787-1820* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 130 and Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 203.

<sup>12</sup> "under circumstances" cited in Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism*, 106. "the tales of horror" cited in Wilberforce to More, Broomfield, 21 February 1804, in Wilberforce and Wilberforce, eds., *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, vol. 1: 226.

<sup>13</sup> Clarkson, *History*, vol. 2: 472-500.

the international context was shifting in a way that began to open up space for humanitarian imperial reform to once again become a viable political program. In France, the emergence of Napoleon as the nation's effective dictator served to mitigate fears of popular radicalism that had consumed Britain's political elite for much of the previous decade. Now, the threat from across the Channel was from a despotic military general, not the unfettered liberty of the masses. Moreover, Napoleon's decision to reinstate slavery in France's Caribbean colonies meant that abolition could now be cast as a manifestation of Britain's moral superiority vis-à-vis its continental rival. Even more significantly, the successful independence struggle of former slaves in Saint-Domingue was a decisive blow to the French colonial economy. Haitian independence, combined with Britain's dominance at sea (especially post-Trafalgar), severely limited France's ability to pick up additional trade were Britain to stop transporting slaves across the ocean. This therefore removed what had been the most frequently cited argument against abolition over the previous fifteen years. In recognition of the changing circumstances in Britain and the Atlantic World more broadly, the SEAST reconvened in May 1804. Two months later, Wilberforce introduced a motion against the slave trade in the House of Commons for the first time that century. The bill went down to defeat, but the margin was close enough to signal that the tide was again starting to turn in the abolitionists' favour.

After seeing the limits of popular agitation in the late 1780s and early 1790s, abolitionist leaders knew that more than public pressure and humanitarian arguments were needed to produce a legislative victory. They had to find a way to turn the changed



international situation to their advantage, and to show how ending the slave trade was in Britain's strategic interest. Because of his deep knowledge of maritime law, and his position as an advisor to the prime minister and a number of cabinet ministers, James Stephen was well placed to do this. In 1805, he wrote a book entitled *The War in Disguise* in which he made the case that the Royal Navy should be permitted to seize cargo from all ships flying a neutral flag that were supplying enemy colonies.<sup>14</sup> The measure, Stephen and its supporters argued, was a patriotic one; why, they asked, should French and Dutch colonies continue to flourish when Britain now ruled the waves? It also appealed to a number of influential interests such as the naval community who welcomed the increase in potential prize money and landowners in the West Indies who saw the competitive advantage in stifling the import of goods to non-British plantations. What Stephen downplayed was the fact that the measure would choke off the supply of slaves to enemy colonies, which by 1805 was conducted almost entirely by British ships flying neutral flags (most often American). Indeed, one-third of Britain's slave trade at the time was with foreign colonies, so the proposal had broad implications for the entire Atlantic slave system. As Roger Anstey has demonstrated, a combination of stealth and astute parliamentary manoeuvring helped abolitionists mask the humanitarian motives of the bill they drew up under Stephen's guidance. It was not until its final reading in the House of Commons in May 1806 that the pro-slavery member for Liverpool suspected that since the abolitionists' "measure could not be carried in its general form, they were now coming by a side wind."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> James Stephen, *The War in Disguise; Or, the Frauds of the Neutral Flags* (London: C. Wittingham, 1805).

<sup>15</sup> Banaster Tarleton, 16 May 1806, in T.C. Hansard, ed., *The Parliamentary Debates from the Year 1803 to the Present Time*, vol. 6 (London: T.C. Hansard, 1812): 919. In the conclusion of his groundbreaking

That the bill sailed through the House of Lords even after its full impact on Britain's slaving economy had been ferretted out suggested that the current political, economic, and parliamentary conjuncture could be favourable to full abolition. It also provided the fillip that the SEAST and the rest of the movement's leadership needed to reactivate their public campaign to bring pressure to bear on parliamentarians. Thomas Clarkson came out of retirement to travel the country and reactivate many of his old connections. He was heartened to discover that the long interlude in public agitation had not diminished "a general warmth in favour of the injured Africans," and quickly concluded that "the ardour, which we had seen with so much admiration in former years, could be easily renewed."<sup>16</sup> As Seymour Drescher has shown, the revival of grassroots support for abolition was nowhere more evident than during the general election of 1806 in which the slave trade for the first time in British history became a nationwide campaign issue. Prospective MPs in many constituencies were made to pledge to vote for abolition if elected, and those incumbents who had previously supported the slave trade were forced to recant or defend their position. Abolitionists were particularly buoyed when Liverpool elected William Roscoe as one of its representatives.<sup>17</sup> They were also heartened that the majority of the 100 Irish MPs who had entered Whitehall after the

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article on the topic, Anstey aptly notes that the abolitionist strategy had remained unnoticed by scholars for so long because in our time "we are so conditioned to expecting interest to masquerade as altruism that we may miss altruism when concealed beneath the cloak of interest." Roger Anstey, "A re-interpretation of the abolition of the British slave trade, 1806-1807," *English Historical Review* 87, no. 343 (April 1972): 331.

<sup>16</sup> Clarkson, *History*, vol. 2: 502-03.

<sup>17</sup> Seymour Drescher, "Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the British Slave Trade," *Past & Present*, no. 143 (May 1994): 136-66. For Roscoe's antislavery activism, see pages 41-45 of this dissertation. This victory would be short-lived, however, since Roscoe's views on the slave trade forced him to step down or face certain defeat in the general election the following year. His victory in 1806 can therefore be attributed mainly to his stance on issues other than the slave trade, such as his vocal opposition to religious disabilities.

1801 Act of Union appeared to support the cause. “How popular Abolition is, just now!” wrote Wilberforce in his diary in February 1807. Characteristically, he saw the outpouring of support after such a long hiatus as proof that “God can turn the hearts of men.”<sup>18</sup>

By the beginning of 1807, changed international circumstances, the recent abrogation of the slave trade to foreign colonies, and renewed public pressure all combined to provide abolitionists with the window of opportunity for which they had been waiting. Inside parliament, Clarkson observed that “there appeared to be the same kind and degree of feeling as manifested within the same walls in the year 1788, when the question was first started.”<sup>19</sup> To avoid dilatory tactics by members of the House of Lords, which had hampered abolition over a decade prior, a bill for the complete termination of the British slave trade was first introduced in the upper chamber. With government backing the bill met with general approbation, and in February was sent to the House of Commons. As the tide of the debate made it clear that the bill would pass, all but the most ardent supporters of the slave trade defected to the abolitionist side so as to not appear on the wrong side of history. In the end, the decisive vote in the Commons was not even close: 283 MPs voted for abolition, and sixteen voted against. In the speechifying that followed, members collectively congratulated themselves on their humanity, vision, and boldness of action. Wilberforce was singled out for particular praise. According to Samuel Romilly, whereas Napoleon would return home at the end of the day “tortured, by recollections of the blood he has spilt, and the oppressions he has

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<sup>18</sup> Cited in Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 305.

<sup>19</sup> Clarkson, *History*, vol. 2: 574-75.

committed,” Wilberforce “shall retire into the bosom of his happy and delighted family... reflecting on the innumerable voices that will be raised in every quarter of the world to bless his name.”<sup>20</sup> Foreshadowing the imperialistic legacy of abolition, the Lord Chancellor stated on 25 March, the day the king signed the bill into law, that it was evidence that it was Britain’s “boast and glory was to grant liberty and life, and administer humanity and justice to all nations.”<sup>21</sup> The national self-congratulation had clearly begun.

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Historians have often understood the relationship between abolition and the British Empire of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the concept of moral capital.<sup>22</sup> The abrogation of the slave trade, they argue, made Britons confident in their nation’s virtuosity, which in turn helped justify Britain’s civilizing mission. To future generations, abolition proved that British power was a force for good. This self-assuredness underpinned a host of paternalistic and imperialistic policies that shaped Britain’s relationship with the non-European world for generations. Using the social and moral capital that they as a group had accrued through their opposition to the slave trade, many evangelical abolitionists came to spearhead successful efforts in 1813 to open up EIC territory to missionary activity. In the ensuing decades, many of these same activists channelled their energies into repressing “heathen” Indian customs such as widow

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<sup>20</sup> Cited in Thomas Price, *Memoir of William Wilberforce*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Light & Stearns, 1836), 60.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 358.

<sup>22</sup> Among recent works to examine how antislavery shaped nineteenth-century British imperialism, see Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012) and Seymour Drescher, “Emperors of the World,” in Derek Peterson, ed., *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010): 129-49.

burning and idol worship. Moreover, antislavery itself emerged as a central component of British foreign policy for much of the nineteenth century, as Britain pressured other nations to ban the slave trade and, after 1838, to follow Britain's lead by emancipating their slaves. British efforts to suppress the Atlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades led to territorial expansion in West and East Africa respectively, enlarging both the size and ambitions of British imperium on the continent. Britain's civilizing mission was also characterized by efforts to spread Christianity and British laws, values, and institutions throughout the globe. All of these things, as we have seen, were deeply interwoven with antislavery from the very inception of the movement. They were also each buttressed by celebratory interpretations of both abolition and abolitionism that remained prominent until the era of decolonization.

While it is indisputable that early antislavery helped provide the moral capital necessary for future empire building, focusing solely on how the movement generated the ethical certainty necessary to embark on a more ambitious and self-aware imperial project risks missing other ways in which it contributed to Britain's imperial trajectory. As this study has argued, abolitionists during the decade after the American War did more than simply associate their cause with moral righteousness: they also articulated concerns, ideas, and paradigms for understanding empire that would continue to shape imperial policy and culture well beyond 1807. Most significantly, they framed the exploitation of non-Europeans in British territory overseas—and by extension the immoral actions of Britons abroad—as resulting from an underlying discrepancy between metropolitan ideals and imperial realities. This brought abolitionist rhetoric in line with calls to cleanse

the British presence in Asia through reforming the East India Company, and helped create a shared discursive terrain for advocates of humanitarian imperial reform. The problem, abolitionists and other reformers claimed, was not with British values. Rather, it lay with an attenuation of British values in the periphery of empire. This not only explained immoral actions overseas, but also posed a threat to Britain itself. Through casting the slave trade as a source of divine punishment, and through highlighting the negative impact of returned slave owners and slave traders on British society, abolitionists made the case that Britain's prosperity was directly connected to the morality of her empire. In so doing, they encouraged Britons to see the actions of their countrymen abroad as a reflection on national character, and to see British space overseas as an extension of the nation. Reducing the psychological distance between nation and empire was an important precondition for the more centralized, invasive, and Anglicizing version of empire that would reach its apogee a century later.

If the ways in which abolitionists framed the problems and dangers of imperial power lasted well beyond the abolition of the slave trade itself, so too did the solutions they proposed. Leading antislavery thinkers always aimed at more than simply ending the African slave trade. In their campaign against the traffic, they made the case for fundamentally reorienting the goals, management, and structures of empire. Their proposals were therefore broad enough to appeal to other advocates of reform inside and outside of government who saw in abolition a way to advance complimentary imperial agendas. As the final three chapters of this study illustrated, some of the most prominent objectives interwoven with early antislavery were ending a legal bifurcation between

Britain and her overseas possessions, bolstering parliamentary authority in the nation's colonies, and spreading Christianity among non-white subjects of empire (and Britons abroad, whose behaviour was less than Christian). Advancing each of these programmes involved the outward projection of British values and power into parts of the empire where making British sovereignty manifest had hitherto been only a sporadic concern. Abolitionism, therefore, was part of the wider movement in the late eighteenth century towards consolidating imperial authority in the name of promoting the interlinked goals of justice, humanity, and good governance. In this sense, it both helped trigger and was reinforced by a broader agenda of "recolonizing" British colonies and territory overseas.

When looked at from a long-term perspective, abolitionism offered a blueprint for imperial rejuvenation at a moment when uncertainty about Britain's future place in the world was running high. The movement began taking shape during and in the aftermath of the disastrous American War, when many Britons were unsure whether their empire could (or should) continue to exist in its current form. Abolitionists responded to this situation by changing the terms of debate about empire, arguing that the treatment of non-Europeans should be a central criterion of moral rule. Though almost no one claimed that non-Europeans were entitled to the same set of rights and liberties as freeborn Britons, abolitionists did make a persuasive case that the British government had an ethical obligation to promote the welfare of all those under its authority. Not only did this argument reflect changing attitudes toward non-white "subjects" of empire, but it also signalled an evolution in self-perception within many parts of British society. Those who supported ending the slave trade could now draw attention to the moral benefits of

imperial power, and cast themselves as enlightened liberators and agents of progress. Once abolition was achieved, Britons were able to replace their nation's centuries-long involvement in the slave trade with their own efforts to end it as a central chapter in the narrative of British imperial power. This revision absolved Britain of the sin of slave trading, and helped lay the groundwork for using cultural imperialism as a way to promote cohesion within an increasingly global and multiracial empire.

To be sure, neither abolition nor abolitionism was the sole force in catalyzing what Vincent Harlow long ago termed the "Second British Empire." Many hallmarks of British imperialism in the nineteenth century and beyond developed alongside antislavery, and by the 1780s and 1790s were already beginning to fundamentally reshape Britain's relationship with the non-European world. Growing authoritarianism was leading to the centralization of political power in metropolitan institutions, resulting in less and less autonomy for British settlers, colonial assemblies, and private trading companies. Industrialization was starting to emerge in certain industries, and within half a century would make free trade the empire's dominant economic model, entirely transforming the commercial relationship between Britain and its colonies. In the decades after the loss of America, other regions of the globe came to occupy greater space in the imperial imagination: most significantly South Asia, but also West Africa, the Cape Colony, the Indian Ocean World, Australia, the Antipodes, and the Far East. Moreover, the humanitarian ideals that abolitionists helped advanced were never limited to simply the Atlantic slave system. Territorial expansion in India in particular forced Britons to rethink the responsibilities that attended imperial power, helping generate new notions of



moral rule and imperial purpose. Any overarching account of how Britain came to more explicitly embrace empire at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century requires close scrutiny of these and other trends.

As this study has argued, though, abolitionism was a significant component of Britain's imperial transition. It was certainly more significant than historians have generally acknowledged. The timing of the movement's birth and high point is important: abolitionism came of age during a decade of peace, in which Britons had the opportunity to reflect on the course, consequences, and future of their nation's empire. Bookended by revolutionary wars, these years featured conditions that enabled debates about empire to circulate widely and gain political traction. When peace again returned to Britain in the early nineteenth century, both abolition and many of its intellectual underpinnings would emerge as ideological cornerstones of the nation's fast-expanding imperial project. In both its origins and legacies, then, abolitionism was about more than simply ending the transatlantic slave trade. Indeed, it was about nothing less than coming to grips with the exercise of British power on a global scale.

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