

## *Abolition of the British 'Slave' Trade Meaning and Context*

*It was we who freed  
ourselves from slavery*

- The destruction of slavery in the Americas in the 1800s was a watershed in human history. It was we Africans and children of Africans who smashed that set of social and economic arrangements. We waged a determined war for our freedom. "Right from the arrival of the first slave ships from Africa in the Caribbean, in the early [sixteenth] century," notes one observer, "the newcomers threatened the exclusive claim to rule of the Europeans . . . ."<sup>1</sup> We battled slave raiders in Africa. We mutinied aboard ships on the water. We revolted on land in the Americas. We built communities and nations past the frontiers of European colonies and we fought and died to defend them. We crushed white supremacist rule in the richest colony, as it then was, in the world. We helped to turn the tide from defeat to victory in the war to hold the United States together – the war, as we saw it, to shatter slavery. Aided by white allies on the ground and aided by white allies in legislative chambers, we set our faces against slavery and led the fight for our freedom.

*Slavery was an experience of  
lacking control over one's life*

- This 'slavery' that we ended – what was it? What slavery meant, as a lived experience, was to live one's life at another person's impulse. That impulse might be considerate. We have recollections from persons who once were enslaved that their 'masters' and 'mistresses' behaved decently. That was the experience of Samuel Riddick, and also of Mary Prince in her early childhood years.<sup>2</sup> Riddick remembered good food, almost no whipping, and no rapes of enslaved women. Mrs. Prince recalled gentle treatment, light work, plenty of play, and, as an older child, agreeable responsibilities. On the other hand the whimsy of an 'owner' might be savage. We have recollections too of exploitation and brutality, of humiliation and manipulation. Jacob Manson remembered poor housing, poor clothing, poor food, harsh work, endless whippings, sexual coercion, and no education. Mattie Curtis recollected scant food and clothing, barbarous whippings – "I seen him whip my mammy with all the clothes off her back. He'd buck her down on a barrel and beat the blood out of her" – and sexual license and incest and the sale of children.<sup>3</sup> But whether kindness or barbarism greeted persons who were enslaved, what stayed the same was refusal of the right to make basic decisions about one's own life.

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<sup>1</sup> Werner Zips, *Black Rebels: African-Caribbean Freedom Fighters in Jamaica* (Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Belinda Hurmence, ed., *My Folks Don't Want Me to Talk about Slavery* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1984) pp. 29-31; Mary Prince, "The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave Related by Herself," in Verene Shepherd and Hilary McD. Beckles, eds., *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2000) pp. 843-857

<sup>3</sup> Hurmence, ed., *My Folks*, pp. 35-43

*Slavery collapsed only gradually*

- It took four hundred years of confrontation and blood before the avarice of planters and merchants and investors gave way to the claims of decency and justice. Slavery folded in stages, first here, now there, in a rolling cascade marked by struggle. It crumbled first on the island of San Domingue in a vicious – no, cataclysmic – contest that came to a close in 1804. It fell thereafter in territories controlled by Britain over the course of 1833-1838, then in those of France in 1848, then in those of Portugal over two decades, from 1858 through 1878. Dutch territories ended slavery in 1863, the United States followed on in 1865, Cuba terminated slavery during the 1870s and 1880s, and, finally, Brazil ended slavery between 1871 and 1888. The nineteenth century was a proving ground for our great grandparents' great grandparents. The outcome – the freedom they handed to us – stands testimony to their mettle.

*Slavery was fundamentally a relation,  
and one brought about by law*

- It took law, as well as force, to break apart slavery. The label 'slave' expressed a *relation* between persons, as did the labels 'master' and 'mistress'. The labels pointed, that is, to a tie linking persons and expressed the nature of the tie, not the nature of the persons, who might be gifted or inept, disciplined or lazy, cruel or kind, perceptive or naïve, deceitful or honourable. The tie binding 'slave' to 'master' or 'mistress' obliged the one to suffer, without recourse, the disposal by the other of his life, his labour, his children, his all. The tie came into being by enactment of laws. The laws were arranged by a class of persons who committed themselves to piling up wealth and privilege and having other people pay the price. Because the relation of 'slave' to 'master' was an artifact of *law*, only law could abolish the relation once and for all.<sup>4</sup>

*British abolitionists successfully challenged  
the legal foundation of one arm of slavery*

- A committed team of British activists took clear aim at the foundation in law of a major arm of slavery. Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp set up the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787. William Pitt, then Prime Minister, launched debate on the slave trade in the House of Commons in the following year. A Committee of the Privy Council was instructed, also in 1788, to look into the state of the trade in captive persons. William Wilberforce led the battle in the House of Commons to call a halt to the traffic in human beings. It took a generation for the cause to reap success. A bill seeking an end to the trade in African persons was presented to Parliament in 1806. It survived fierce opposition from 'owners' of 'slaves' in the House of Lords. It was passed in February, 1807. It received the crown's assent one month later. The law declared that as of May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1807, trading in Africans, whether in Africa, the West Indies, or America, was unlawful. It

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<sup>4</sup> In the case of slavery in British territories, for example, the ending of slavery began with legislation by the British Parliament in 1833. In the case of slavery in the United States, an amendment to the constitution extinguished slavery.

disallowed insurance for vessels which sought to trade in persons. It levied penalties, including fines and forfeiture of property, upon persons who violated the law. It stipulated that the Crown would take possession of persons being traded and place them in military service or as apprentices, and would determine what should happen to them upon their completing their terms of apprenticeship. It offered to persons authorized to capture slaving vessels rewards for successful missions. It extended a grace period to traders whose vessels cleared a British port on or before May 1<sup>st</sup> 1807 and landed in the West Indies on or before March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1808.<sup>5</sup> Although slavery would continue in British territories for another three decades, this abolition of the legal right to buy and sell persons was a landmark in the war to break the institution apart.

*Historians debate the question of why Britain passed legislation abolishing 'slave' trading*

- British traders in London and Bristol, in Liverpool and Glasgow, had made extravagant profits for decade upon decade by buying and selling Africans. What prompted the British Parliament now to force its traders to forego so lucrative a trade? One view is that British abolitionists sought an end to the trade because they cared about the well-being of enslaved persons. Hugh Thomas, for example, insists that "moral conviction" animated the abolitionist troupe. His judgment echoes a standard assessment that "the principal motive power which originated and sustained their efforts was Christian principle and feeling."<sup>6</sup> Another view rejects that assessment. It argues that economic interest, above all, drove the British political elite to abolish the trade in persons. C. L. R. James, for instance,<sup>7</sup> points to national economic interest. By his account, British merchants vied with French traders for control of world trade and the profits which issued from such control. What strengthened the hand of the French traders were fantastic profits that they drew from the French colony of St. Domingue. Those profits rested firmly on exporting sugar produced using the labour of enslaved persons. Many of the 'slaves' found their way to St. Domingue through the hands of British 'slave' traders. Persuaded that ending the trade in enslaved persons would cut off St. Domingue's supply of workers and so destroy the prosperity of the colony and undermine French power, William Pitt asked William Wilberforce to champion the move to abolish the trade in Africans.<sup>8</sup> Abolishing the traffic in people, then, was mainly prompted by economic imperatives.

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<sup>5</sup> The Act is available for viewing at: <http://slavetrade.parliament.uk/slavetrade/assetviews/documents/acttoabolishtheslavetrade1807printedversion.html>

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) pp. 494-495 and 506-508; John Kellis Ingram, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. 25, p. 223. (New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1910-1911). Eleventh Edition.

<sup>7</sup> Joining him in arguing that economic reasons took center stage in prompting British abolition of slave trading even if humanitarian impulses also made themselves felt were W. E. B. Du Bois and Eric Williams. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro* (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1975 [c. 1915]) and Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994)

<sup>8</sup> C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1963) If James's analysis appears too cynical in his treatment of the motives of the British political elite, we might keep in mind that Britain's abolition of the trade did not stop British investors from financing slave trading ventures carried out by nationals of other European countries. See Kevin Shillington, "Abolition and the Africa Trade," *History Today* Vol. 57 No. 3 (Mar. 2007) pp. 22-27

*Although the legislation did not stop all slave trading,  
it contributed to abolishing slavery*

- Whatever the reasons for the 'slave' trade legislation, it would be wrong to think that passing the law broke the back of slave trading all by itself. There was too much profit in buying and selling people for merchants so readily to surrender to law. The reason why there was so much profit was that planters and others in the Americas continued to demand a supply of people whom they did not have to pay to plant, weed, harvest, herd, mine, build, repair, clean, wash, cook, and so on: they continued to seek to maintain, in a word, the conditions on which rested their wealth, social prestige, physical leisure, moral authority, ideological dominance, and political power. Not only did the trade in people carry on after 1808; possibly it increased. The ongoing demand of 'masters' for 'slaves' led the *illegal* trade in Africans to continue for decades after formal abolition. By one estimate, the number of Africans forced from Africa between 1800 and 1850 reached about one hundred thousand per year.<sup>9</sup> That trade had to be actively suppressed. It took naval confrontation to do it. Even so, the overthrow of the legal right to trade in people in British dominions was a central step in the war for liberation of Africans and their descendants.

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<sup>9</sup> Shillington, "Abolition," p. 27