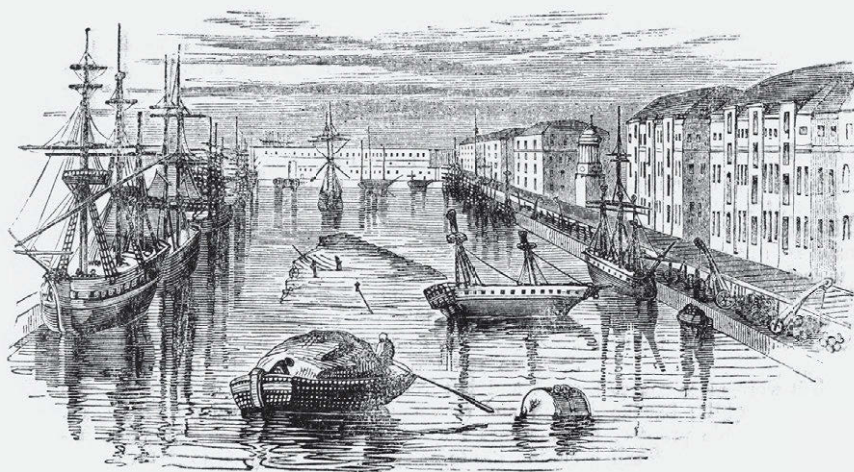


PROSLAVERY BRITAIN

Fighting for Slavery in an Era of Abolition



Paula E. Dumas



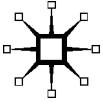
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Paula Dumas
June 2015

INTRODUCTION



On June 17, 1783, an MP in Britain's House of Commons brought forth a petition asking for the total abolition of Britain's participation in the slave trade. The timing and content of the petition had been inspired by a recent debate over the right of the members of the African Company to participate in the trade. After the petition was read aloud, former Prime Minister Lord North stated that, while he appreciated the sound, humanitarian sentiments of the petitioners, it would be impossible to abolish the slave trade. He continued, noting:

it was a trade which had, in some measure, become necessary to almost every nation in Europe; and as it would be next to an impossibility to induce them all to give it up, and renounce it for ever, so he was apprehensive that the wishes of the humane petitioners could not be accomplished.¹

Again he stressed the impossibility of the goal, regardless of its well-meaning proponents. The petition was allowed to lie on the table and the West Indians in the House could again feel secure in their wealth and their professions. It would take another two generations for slave trading, colonial slavery, and the apprenticeship system that was later established to finally be abolished in the British Empire.

Why did abolition and emancipation take so long if everyone knew that slavery was wrong? In the example above, Lord North clearly acknowledged the legitimacy of the Quakers' concerns. British abolitionists, it turns out, did not proceed unopposed, nor was abolition a universal goal among all Britons. Proslavery sentiments could be found just about anywhere: travel narratives were advertised across the country and reviewed in the biggest periodicals of the period; pamphlets were created and distributed by individuals and organized groups of West Indians in Britain; novels were available to purchase from booksellers and borrow from circulation libraries; plays were performed on stages in London; catchy songs were included in song books; and artwork was created and published by some of the biggest

names in political prints and caricatures. These works were read, viewed, and experienced by urban, educated, wealthier Britons with an interest in politics, arts, science, and religion and the leisure time to learn about and experience more of the world than their predecessors. They also point to the existence of a culture of proslavery within a distinct subsection of Britain at this time.² The arguments and rhetoric contained within this outpouring of work challenged the louder abolitionist claims about life in the colonies and the nature of the slaves. Members of the West Indian interest formed committees with the expressed purpose of producing their own propaganda and petitions. They even attacked the foundational logic of abolition and sentimental nature of abolitionist rhetoric. Far from being passive, doomed onlookers on the sidelines of the road to abolition, politicians, writers, members of the West Indian interest, and their supporters actively fought to maintain colonial slavery and the prosperity of the colonies and Britain.³

Just what is meant here by the term “proslavery?” Definitions of the word vary in their usage and meaning. In his foundational study of American proslavery, Larry E. Tise defined proslavery as “favoring the continuance of the institution of Negro slavery, or opposed to interference with it.”⁴ In this book, the term “proslavery” refers to arguments and individuals who promoted the institution of slavery as beneficial for them, the colonies, and Britain’s national interest in a public manner. This means that some individuals may be classed as supporters of colonial slavery or the slave trade because of what they did or said rather than their personal opinions and beliefs. They may not have held such views in private. *Proslavery Britain* is concerned about the public’s potential exposure to the slavery debates and the impact of the popular debate on British politics and abolition.

Throughout this study the term “abolitionist” has been applied to the politicians, writers, and many others who publically expressed any abolitionist sentiments. Here it refers to an individual or ideology that expressed support for abolishing the slave trade and/or slavery (because one could be in favor of ending Britain’s participation in the slave trade without necessarily calling for an end to colonial slavery) regardless of the possible motivations behind the sharing of such beliefs. Proslavery is also contrasted with “anti-abolition” and “anti-abolitionist,” both of which are used in the context of the pre-1808 debates to refer to people and arguments that were against a proposed abolition of the slave trade. Anti-abolition arguments in this period focused on defects in the abolitionist platform, emphasizing the illegal, illogical, inhumane, or pro-French nature of their aims.

Proslavery arguments, on the other hand, positively promoted slavery and the slave trade. This promotion of the institution of slavery receded quickly from the slavery debates in Parliament following the abolition of the slave trade as politicians became increasingly reluctant to appear supportive of a demonized institution.⁵

The term “anti-abolitionism” requires further clarification because the meaning of the word changes over time and depending on the context of its use, both in the contemporaneous debate and in this study. Whereas prior to the abolition of the slave trade the terms “anti-abolition” and “anti-abolitionist” can be generally defined as above in the context of the parliamentary debates, the words become more changeable in 1807 as Parliament resolved to abolish Britain’s participation in the slave trade.⁶ They can be used to describe an attack on an abolitionist and his position on slavery in Parliament, but they can also be used to describe a member or supporter of the West Indian interest who opposed immediate abolition. Some abolitionists, however, also opposed immediate abolition. This means that in some cases both “anti-abolitionists” and abolitionists opposed immediate abolition and advocated gradual abolition and amelioration in the 1820s. It was their motivations, chosen arguments, and rhetoric that differed. This study will therefore employ the terms “anti-abolition” and “anti-abolitionist” in the post-1807 period to refer to members of the West Indian interest and their supporters who, throughout the slavery debates, repeatedly opposed the proposals of abolitionists, openly refuted abolitionists’ arguments and facts, defended themselves and the colonists from charges of inhumanity, cruelty, and backwardness, and opposed the immediate abolition of slavery.

The term “West Indian interest” here refers to the individuals and organizations that had personal or business connections in Britain’s West Indian colonies. The West Indian interest in Britain possessed complex connections to the West Indies through the personal possession of property or slave ownership, family investments, birthplace, or relationships. It also included British and West Indian merchants, traders, ship owners and builders, dock owners, and mortgagees. British West Indians were not necessarily either attached to formal West Indian organizations or politically active. They might have been settled in the colonies, in London, in the major ports of Liverpool, Bristol, and Glasgow, or on a country estate. The West Indian interest in Britain was thus a large heterogeneous group whose members formed a formidable lobbying force in the eighteenth century and possessed much political and financial power at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Much of this book is devoted to examining and understanding the rhetoric of the West Indian interest as it reflects British proslavery thought and culture. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the West Indian interest had to develop new ways to depict, define, and defend itself in Parliament and to the British public because of the growing popularity of abolitionism. Its members possessed close ties to Britain, great wealth, transatlantic connections through practices such as absenteeism and intermarriage, and vital roles in ensuring Britain's economic prosperity and security during war and peace. These allowed the interest to maintain a significant hold on parliamentary decision-making in the face of popular abolitionism. This power became more concentrated in urban areas and more clearly defined as its members organized to fight abolition in the wake of the American Revolution. They also moved beyond straightforward proslavery arguments by beginning to employ pro-colonial rhetoric and familiar depictions of life in the colonies to remind the wider British public of their British roots, their unending support of Britain's investment in the colonies, and their need and worthiness of Britain's protection and compassion.

The term "amelioration" also requires some explanation. According to J. R. Ward, amelioration refers to concerns regarding raising the standards of practice of colonial slave ownership that began in the second half of the eighteenth century and became a more defined method of plantation management from the 1790s onward.⁷ Ward notes that by 1823 "amelioration" meant different things to different people. Whereas the West Indian colonists viewed amelioration as a method to reinforce slavery and make the institution more efficient, humanitarians believed that amelioration could lead to a better social state with less racial hierarchy and subordination in the colonies.⁸ In this study the term "amelioration" is used to describe an effective method employed by the West Indian interest to delay and defeat calls for abolition as well as to demonstrate progress and the material benefits of slavery for the slaves in the colonies. It most frequently refers to the period after 1823 when Parliament formally asked the colonies to institute reforms on the plantations to benefit the slaves. The term "slave" is used here to denote enslaved men, women, and children.

Finally, it is vital to define the term "culture." In his study of English anti-slavery, David Turley defined culture as "the range of ways of responding to and judging the world within contained limits common to a group."⁹ In this study, culture is used in much the same way. Proslavery culture involved a set of shared goals, principles, viewpoints, and practices possessed by members of the West

Indian interest. It centered on the beliefs that slavery was necessary for the survival of the colonies and that the slave trade was necessary to develop, maintain, and increase production on colonial plantations. These viewpoints compelled absentee planters in Britain to promote slave trading and colonial slavery while opposing abolition in print and in Parliament. Writers, artists, politicians, satirists, members of the West Indian interest, and their supporters expressed these beliefs in a number of accessible formats that were distributed throughout urban Great Britain for an intended audience of elite, politically active Britons. These will be discussed widely in Chapters 2 and 3.

How does this study differ from the countless studies of British slavery and abolition? By concentrating solely on the proslavery position in this period, this study is able to expose and explore abolition's opposition. The West Indian interest and their supporters advanced powerful, influential arguments to challenge abolition and defend slave trading and owning; they affected the timing and nature of abolition and emancipation and their history deserves to be told. Perhaps historians have been cautious about investigating the proslavery case or embarrassed by the existence of Britain's proslavery past, or maybe they continue to be influenced by the first generation of historians of British abolition who focused on the work of abolitionists and moralized the debate. Douglas Hamilton has argued for the need to recognize Britain's role in creating the institution of the transatlantic slave trade in order to fully understand and be proud of her role in suppressing the trade.¹⁰ This study seeks to tell the story of proslavery in Britain and to do so in a non-judgmental, analytical manner so that it might first formally recognize the value of proslavery works; second, acknowledge the existence of a proslavery culture within a narrow segment of the British public; and third, better inform our understanding of the great victory of abolition.

Generations of British historians have attempted to understand why Britain ended its participation in the slave trade and why abolition and emancipation occurred when they did. Until the mid-twentieth century the conventional history of abolition depicted abolition as the successful outcome of the work of saintly abolitionists.¹¹ This interpretation required anti-abolitionists to be treated as either a stagnant, inhumane force standing in the way of human progress or as insignificant in (or even absent from) the story of abolition. Historians have since begun to consider economics, slave resistance, the historical and international context of the anti-slavery movement, and the work (and motives) of abolitionists to provide a more balanced, intellectual history of abolition.¹² This broadening of the scope of research has led to

two opposing theories about the origins of popular abolitionism and the movement's ability to gain political backing. As such, historians of British slavery and abolition tend to take sides as to whether it was mainly economics or humanitarian efforts that shaped the processes of abolition and emancipation.¹³

Studies of proslavery sentiment do exist. The study of American proslavery thought, for example, has benefited from generations of historical research.¹⁴ In contrast, there has been limited scholarly interest in British proslavery arguments and rhetoric. As Christer Petley recently noted, historians such as Gordon K. Lewis, David Brion Davis, and Roger Anstey repeatedly oversimplified the lives of the proslavery advocates, their campaigns, and their ideology in their histories of British slavery and abolition.¹⁵ Proslavery arguments and rhetoric taken from specific slavery debates in Parliament and in major publications have also been examined.¹⁶ These studies tended to characterize proslavery arguments as defensive, but, as discussed below, there was a variety and strategy to these arguments for which the West Indian interest has never fully received credit. Their size, strength, composition, and motivations have also been the focus of historical study. Researchers studying Britain's West Indian colonies have attempted to assess the origins and extent of the decline of their power and influence that contributed to their inability to effectively fight abolition.¹⁷ David Beck Ryden completed a detailed chronology of the formation and activities of West Indian societies in Britain and examined how they responded to the abolitionist threat. His research led him to conclude that the planters were facing decline in the period due to three major factors: first, that mercantilist policy was working against their interests; second, that it was no longer easy or inexpensive to control their slaves; and third, the overproduction of sugar caused economic decline.¹⁸ These factors, he maintained, combined to explain the timing of abolition.¹⁹ Ryden and Srividhya Swaminathan have noted that a detailed study of proslavery is missing from the historiography of British abolition.²⁰ *Proslavery Britain* helps to fill this gap.

Chapter 1, *The Proslavery Position*, is an examination of the proslavery arguments that were developed and utilized in Britain to explain and defend the proslavery position in the face of growing public and parliamentary pressure. This section explains how Britain's participation in the slave trade and the practice of slaveholding were justified by contemporaries using racially charged arguments, rational economic arguments, and paternalist, humanitarian arguments. It also provides some wider context in which these arguments could be

created and deemed credible. The arguments identified in this chapter continue to be revisited and explored throughout the study.

The following two chapters delve into the sources of proslavery arguments that had the ability to permeate the urban British elite. "Proslavery in Print" explores the proslavery position as it was presented in pamphlets and treatises, scientific studies, medical manuals, travel narratives, and popular periodicals. Through the use of short excerpts from a range of publications, it becomes clear that proslavery arguments were woven into a variety of printed sources and that these arguments were framed, supported, and utilized in an attempt to influence a slightly wider audience outside of Parliament. "Proslavery Arts and Culture" looks at representations of the proslavery position in various artistic genres, including literature, poetry, artwork, caricature, and drama. These chapters support the argument that a multifaceted British proslavery culture existed among the West Indian interest in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The final two chapters focus on the proslavery position in Parliament as the successes and failures of the West Indian lobby in Westminster are assessed. In "Proslavery Politics and the Slave Trade," specific strategies of anti-abolitionist MPs and peers are carefully assessed to see how they shaped and hindered the process of abolition and, in particular, how the opposition to abolition attacked abolitionist rhetoric and the MPs who supported ending Britain's participation in the slave trade. This chapter highlights the importance of the parliamentary debates in the story of abolition because of their primary role in debating, crafting, and justifying crucial legal decisions about British slavery and abolition. "Proslavery Politics after Abolition" contains an examination of proslavery arguments and rhetoric employed in Parliament after 1807. This chapter makes two important claims: first, that proslavery politicians adapted their arguments in response to abolition and the pressure they now faced; and second, that anti-abolitionists clearly shaped the process and nature of the emancipation act of 1833 that officially ended slaveholding in Britain's West Indian colonies. The result is a clearer understanding of how politicians continued to defend and justify slaveholding and plantation slavery after the defeat of 1807 and in the face of surging abolitionism in the 1820s. *Proslavery Britain* concludes with a short examination of the contents of the bill for emancipation and the many clauses that financially benefited the planter at the expense of general British public and the former slaves who would remain tied to the plantations for several more years following emancipation. This section recognizes that emancipation was intended, in part, to benefit the planters.

The aims of *Proslavery Britain* are as follows: first, to demonstrate that proslavery arguments and rhetoric in Britain across this period were multifaceted and could be adapted to suit personal experience, format, and external events; second, to identify ways in which members of the West Indian interest and their supporters shared elements of a culture of proslavery with specific segments of the wider public; and third, to recognize that proslavery arguments and rhetoric were significant factors in the timing and nature of abolition and emancipation. It does so through a close reading of the parliamentary records in combination with a wide range of print and artistic sources. *Proslavery Britain* set out to explore the other side of the slavery debate and, in the process, uncovered a wealth of convincing arguments that shaped the processes of abolition and emancipation. In the end, we find that the true story of British abolition is far more complex than the traditional tale has let on.

CHAPTER 1



THE PROSLAVERY POSITION

In 1807, during the final days of debate over the bill for abolition, West Indian MPs argued their case and defended the colonies much as they had done for the prior two decades. During the discussions on 23 February following a request to read the bill for abolition in the Commons for the second time (a request that had already been postponed once), for example, George Hibbert alluded to the West Indian interest's historic successes as he attempted to explain his opposition to the bill:

if I had been told...of any measure that, although it was indisputably enjoined by every principle of justice and humanity, yet that in the course of almost 20 years discussion, it had not been able to make its effective progress through the British parliament (recommended, at the same time, by the cry of the people out of doors, and by an union of the greatest talents within), until it received the protecting hand of his majesty's principle minister in either house, I should say, "it is impossible; there must be some mistake in the application of these great principles to the measure."¹

Members of the West Indian interest and their supporters were able to delay and defeat motion and motion for abolition and amelioration in the 1790s and early 1800s despite the often-overwhelming popular support for the measure. But just how was this accomplished? Calls for abolition were repeatedly defeated through the use of convincing, clear, supposedly logical, and often pro-colonial arguments. The West Indians' successes cast doubt upon the propriety of the bill for abolition. In truth, the proslavery position significantly impacted upon the nature and timing of British abolition. This chapter will explore the ways in which this took place.

Abolition entered the political sphere in Britain in the early 1780s. The first anti-slavery petition was presented to Parliament in 1783.² Far from being welcomed with cheers and acceptance, Lord North declared its aims to be impossible before it was allowed to lie on the table. But this was only the beginning. In 1787 the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed. In response, the largest and most influential West Indian organization in Britain, the Society of West India Planters and Merchants of London, formed a subcommittee to counter the abolitionist movement.³ In 1789 they agreed on a specific plan to finance their opposition campaign. By the end of the 1780s, planters, merchants, and many others were actively responding to an organized abolitionist threat. Their funded, targeted campaigns shaped ideas about slavery and about the British Empire in the minds of the British public.⁴

Annual debates raged in the British houses of Parliament over whether or not to abolish the slave trade. Between 1783, when the Quakers presented their petition to Parliament requesting the abolition of the inhumane traffic in slaves, and 1807, when Britain abolished her participation in the transatlantic slave trade, nearly one hundred MPs defended Britain's long-standing involvement in the slave trade. Many of these men had direct links to the West Indies. For some, their family fortune had been made in the islands; others had worked on or owned plantations themselves or were involved in trading enterprises. Those who represented the major ports of Liverpool and London spoke up on behalf of their constituents regarding their respective city's need for the trade to continue. There were also many more MPs without obvious links to the trade or the colonies who chose to defend Britain's merchants, traders, and colonial interests as they sought to hold back the growing surge of popular abolitionism.

In the decades leading up to the abolition of the slave trade, members of the West Indian interest were confident that the long-established trade in slaves would continue for the foreseeable future. They presented arguments to Parliament that extolled the benefits of the slave trade for Great Britain, her colonies, and her people. These arguments justified their participation in the slave trade. To be convincing they needed their listeners to hold a number of basic assumptions, including that the trade directly contributed to Britain's prosperity and level of industrialization, that Africans and men and women of African descent possessed lesser mental capabilities and a lesser level of civilization, and that other nations would continue to trade in slaves regardless of Britain abolishing her role in the international trade. Proslavery and pro-slave trade MPs also utilized timely

arguments to defend their position by alluding to or directly referring to the French revolution, war with France, and the mass uprising and loss of St. Domingo (Saint-Domingue). Finally, they stressed that the act of debating abolition and the use of inflammatory language could cause all-out rebellion in the colonies. These convincing sentiments helped postpone, reverse, modify, and throw out numerous bills for abolition and amelioration throughout the 1790s and on into the early 1800s. While the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire was becoming increasingly likely in the first decade of the 1800s, in 1807–8 the majority of MPs discussing the ramifications of abolition publicly opposed emancipation.

In the years immediately following abolition, the focus of the slavery debates shifted to the international transatlantic slave trade being carried on by Britain's European rivals. Slave registration, the defense of the colonies, and the enforcement of abolition were pressing issues during the Napoleonic Wars. Sugar duties angered the West Indian interest and advocates of free trade. The West Indian interest in Parliament was faced with a determined, popular, organized abolitionist movement from 1823. That was the year George Canning introduced a series of resolutions in the House of Commons meant to ameliorate the conditions of the slaves on the plantations. These resolutions angered the colonists and may have further dehumanized black slaves by focusing on rationalizing slavery, improving production, and improving their breeding habits.⁵ The emancipation debates of the late 1820s and early 1830s took place among a backdrop of reform and upheaval. Unrest at home, in the colonies, and across Europe troubled MPs, encouraging some to cling to tradition and others to push for reforms to prevent a full-scale revolution.⁶ Parliamentary reform extended the franchise to a limited extent and changed some electoral constituencies, thereby lessening the power of the landed classes (and thus the power of the planters). In the early 1830s West Indian planters appeared more willing to agree to legislation as long as they received adequate compensation. This shift in rhetoric may have been due to financial losses already incurred, the devastation caused by natural disasters and revolts in the colonies, or perhaps a sense that, after parliamentary reform, emancipation was inevitable and, by agreeing to some elements of the plan, they would be more likely to receive a favorable settlement. As discussed later, the planters received significant compensation in the 1833 bill for emancipation.

Under close examination, two broad categories of relevant arguments emerged in the slavery debates. There were those who supported slavery and the slave trade and spoke out in favor of its

continuance. This category of argument I have termed “proslavery,” because it focused on the benefits of plantation slavery rather than on the negative effects of impending abolition. Several prominent MPs voiced their strong opposition to abolition and listed reasons for their position. These included the timing of the bill or motion and the potential ramifications of the bill. I have labeled these arguments “anti-abolition” arguments because they were directed at the proposed bills for abolition and the men who brought them forth. Some individuals, however, believed that the institution of slavery was necessary for the survival of the West Indian colonies but also that, if enough warning was given to the planters to secure the necessary number of slaves to work their plantations, the slave trade could (or should) be abolished. This more nuanced argument weaves through many of the proslavery arguments identified later. Over time, as a growing number of West Indians reported incidents of attacks and slander, experienced a decline in their influence, and held views that were now considered morally questionable at best, anti-abolition arguments became the more common of the two.

Before entering into a detailed discussion of proslavery argument and rhetoric, it is necessary to take note of the ways in which parliamentary speeches were recorded and shared with the British public. A small number of wealthy Londoners might have been able to attend Parliament, sit in the gallery, and watch the debates, but the majority would have had to rely on printed reports and articles for news and opinion pieces on the slavery debates. A growing number of daily, tri-weekly, and weekly newspapers, particularly out of London, reported on political news and opinions. Most of the records of the early slavery debates come from newspaper and magazine reports that were incomplete and often at odds with one another.⁷ William Cobbett’s *Parliamentary Debates* was first published in 1804 and the first volume of Cobbett’s *The Parliamentary History of England*, which would eventually provide a record of parliamentary activity from 1066 to 1803, was not published until 1806. It has been suggested that performing rhetorical analysis on these speeches is problematic because the rhetoric recorded during these debates may demonstrate more about the audience’s views than the speaker’s attitudes or beliefs.⁸ The reports may also have been subject to heavy or careless editing, omission, and manipulations, but despite these potential problems they remain vital records for one’s understanding of the nature of the debate. They also demonstrate what the British public could have been able to learn of the parliamentary debates on slavery.⁹ As such, much of the evidence found in this chapter has been drawn from Cobbett’s