

## THE DEBATE FOR ABOLITION, 1807

The Bill came down to the Commons from the Lords, where It had been passed. Below are some of the comments made by MPs during the debates which followed. Opponents of the Bill are denoted by *italics*.

### 10 February 1807: First Reading

- George Hibbert*: It would 'put at risk our West Indian commerce, most Important source of the empire'.
- Gen Gascoyne*: 'The church, the theatre, and the press, had laboured to create a prejudice against the slave trade'.
- Capt. Herbert*: 'This bill ... would become the min of the British colonies in the West Indies'.
- Mr I H Browne He said he was 'the uniform enemy of the Slave Trade, and that from a conviction of its injustice, inhumanity as well as impolicy.

### 20 & 23 February 1807: Second Reading

- Lord Howick: 'It was universally admitted ... that the slave trade, so far as regards Africa, was unjust and impolitic, founded In robbery, kidnap and murder, and affording an incentive to the worst passions and crimes'.
- 'It was contrary to the fundamental principles of Christianity...: "to do unto others, as you would they should do unto you".'
- The trade was no longer important: 'In 1805, the African tonnage was not quite 1-52nd part of the whole export tonnage, and the seamen employed, not quite 1-23rd part'.
- 'The mortality amongst the seamen in that trade was to the mortality [on other voyages] as eight to one. The readiness with which the men entered the king's ships on their arrival in the West Inches, showed what their opinion of that trade was'.
- Abolition would make the planters take more care of their slaves, 'and so promote the morals and comfort of the negroes ... so the negroes in the islands would become attached to the soil, and to their masters, from kind treatment, and afford the increased means of defence from a foreign enemy'.
- 'The result of this measure will, I trust, lead to the abolition of slavery'.
- He opposed the slave trade 'on the grounds of facts, of experience, of justice, of humanity, and of Christianity'.
- Gen Gascoyne*: He said 'that no other method had been found out for bringing [the colonies Into cultivation] but by slaves, and that under this system our navy and commerce had so flourished, he should ... wish the slave trade to be continued'.
- 'This was It subject of magnitude in a commercial point of view; it was no small matter of capital which employed [£] two millions, with 40,000 tons of shipping, and 4,000 seamen'.
- He had proof that 'there had been no more mortality on board these ships than on board a man of war'.
- Mr Roscoe: 'He could not help strongly condemning the practice of this disgraceful traffic, which supplied the Africans on the coasts with the means of wee and debauchery, in furnishing them with brandy and fire-arms in exchange for their slaves ... for 30 years I have never ceased to condemn this Inhuman traffic '.

- Mr Lushington: He commented on facts and figures: 'He could never stop to balance imports and exports against justice and humanity. [Parliament ought] to Interfere on behalf of those wretched creatures, who had been made the instruments of gratifying avarice and the basest passions'.
- Mr Fawkes '... a traffic, the most unjust and execrable; a trade, which has, dung the whole course of my existence, excited the strongest abhorrence in my mind ... the claims of plundered, persecuted Africa, shall not be forgotten'.
- 'The laws of our common country, encourage the inhuman slave dealer, whilst he hangs on to the rear of the army, which he has stimulated to carnage and slaughter, for the purpose of purchasing the flesh and blood of his fellow-creatures, to satisfy the cravings of a sordid and criminal avarice'.
- He spoke of the 'floating dungeons, and the merciless treatment to which these unhappy children of Africa are subjected, m consequence of the cruel necessity which tears them from ... father, husband and wife, and which, not satisfied with this extreme injustice and persecution, consigns them to a foreign shore, after a beastly exposure, to the disposal of the highest bidder'.
- 'It disrobes the Gospel of its purity, and plunders mankind of their hopes'.
- Lord Mahon He alluded 'to the miseries of the middle passage, and to the cruelties which are proved to have been practised in the West Indies. These facts cannot, I think, be disputed ... if you admit the facts, you must also admit the atrocity of the slave trade'.
- 'Let us wash our hands of this foul pollution'.
- Mr Bathurst: He asked that the slave trade might be phased out gradually, perhaps by putting a tax on it.
- 'He thought the present population not equal to the cultivation of the colonies, and that if the importation of negroes from Africa was immediately stopped, other the planters would suffer considerably, or Illegal means would be resorted to, to obtain a supply'.
- Mr Hibbert: 'Is a unjust? By all the laws and customs of Africa, existing from the remotest antiquity, it is authorised'.
- Is the slave trade unchristian? 'In the Old Testament, the slave trade, or the sale of men, is spoken of indifferently, just as other trades ... Saint Paul sends back Onesimus, who was Philemon's slave and had run away from his master – he sends him back'.
- Britain was at war with France. To abolish the slave trade 'would open the door to France to form and to extend colonies upon terms more advantageous'.
- 'It cannot be doubted that in the West ladles the treatment of slaves has been progressively ameliorated'.
- He criticised the use of 'pathetic stones' by those who wanted to abolish the slave trade: 'I could show you, at no great distance from London, an industrious mother with 6 or 8 children, their countenances pale, their limbs emaciated, and their bones swoln (sic) with famine yet our philanthropists do not make it the theme of declamation or the object of reform'.
- Mr Wilberforce: The debate showed that members of Parliament 'were forward to assist the rights of the weak against the strong, to vindicate the cause of the oppressed; and that where a practice was found to prevail, inconsistent with humanity and justice, no consideration of profit could reconcile them to its continuance. These generous and human principles were worthy of a British Parliament'.

## **27 February 1807: The Bill moved to Committee stage**

- Sir Charles Pole:* He could not be persuaded to support 'a bill, ruinous to the colonies and to the commerce of the country ... to risk one third of the British exports, besides imports to a large amount, independent of the employment given to such a number of seamen as were employed in the trade with Africa'.
- Mr Hurghan:* He felt obliged 'to raise his voice in defence of that system of our ancestors under which our commercial prosperity had attained its present extent, and our naval strength its power'.
- 'He would tell the hon. members, from his own personal observation, that there did not exist a more happy race than the slaves in our colonies'.
- 'The grossest exaggerations and misrepresentations had been resorted to, declamation was substituted for argument, and pathetic addresses for sound reasoning'.
- 'The slave trade in Africa was the result of slavery, and slavery was produced by the barbarism of its inhabitants'.
- All the abolitionists' descriptions of the slave trade came from twenty years previously. Nowadays, 'with respect to the carrying trade ... it was no uncommon thing for a slave ship to perform a voyage without losing a negro'.
- Mr A Browne* 'He admitted that the trade was a great political evil of itself; but yet it was an evil interwoven with the most important interests of the country'.
- Mr Barham:* 'He considered that, in order to promote any thing of civilisation and religion among the negroes, it would be necessary to educate them, and to accomplish that, it would be necessary to give them more liberty; this, however, would be a dangerous experiment'.
- Mr Montague:* 'He would ask one of the opponents of the bill, who was a member of the board of aldermen of London [i.e. Mr Hibbert], whether he would think it a happy change, to be snatched away from one of the city banquets, and crammed into a slave ship as the blacks are?'

## **16 March 1807: The Bill had its Third Reading (and became law)**

- Mr Lytleton:* 'The slave trade was so enormous and humble, that there was no parallel to it in the annals of the world'.
- Mr Thornton:* 'This measure would throw wide open the doors of civilisation for Africa ... and have the effect of putting an end to wars, crimes, and kidnappings, which were resorted to in Africa to obtain slaves'.
- Capt. Herbert:* 'They ought to consider the good that this measure might do to Africa, and the evil it might do to ourselves'.
- Mr T W Plummer:* 'It was to be recollected how much Great Britain had already lost in her colonial strength, by the discussion of abstract principles; to that she owed the revolt and loss of her American colonies, and it behoved her to be aware of propagating notions of political right among a people so unintelligent and so easily provoked to revolt as the Negroes'.
- Mr Windham:* 'Nor was this a time to venture such an experiment. We were engaged in a dangerous war with a powerful enemy [France]'.