

# The Transatlantic Slave Trade

## The Abolition

Thomas Clarkson

THE  
HISTORY  
OF THE  
RISE, PROGRESS, AND ACCOMPLISHMENT  
OF THE  
ABOLITION  
OF  
THE SLAVE TRADE.

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CHAPTER I.

*No subject more pleasing than that of the removal of evils—Evils have existed almost from the beginning of the world—but there is a power in our nature to counteract them—*

I come now to the evil, as it has been proved to arise in the third case; or to consider the situation of the unhappy victims of the trade, when their painful voyages are over, or after they have been landed upon their destined shores. And here we are to view them first under the degrading light of cattle. We are to see them examined, handled, selected, separated, and sold. Alas! relatives are separated from relatives, as if, like cattle, they had no rational intellect, no power of feeling the nearness of relationship, nor sense of the duties belonging to the ties of life! We are next to see them labouring, and this for the benefit of those, to whom they are under no obligation, by any law either natural or divine, to obey. We are to see them, if refusing the commands of their purchasers, however weary, or feeble, or indisposed, subject to corporal punishments, and, if forcibly resisting them, to death. We are to see them in a state of general degradation and misery. The knowledge, which their oppressors have of their own crime in having violated the rights of

nature, and of the disposition of the injured to seek all opportunities of revenge, produces a fear, which dictates to them the necessity of a system of treatment by which they shall keep up a wide distinction between the two, and by which the noble feelings of the latter shall be kept down, and their spirits broken. We are to see them again subject to individual persecution, as anger, or malice, or any bad passion may suggest. Hence the whip—the chain—the iron-collar, Hence the various modes of private torture, of which so many accounts have been truly given. Nor can such horrible cruelties be discovered so as to be made punishable, while the testimony of any number of the oppressed is invalid against the oppressors, however they may be offences against the laws. And, lastly, we are to see their innocent offspring, against whose personal liberty the shadow of an argument cannot be advanced, inheriting all the miseries of their parents' lot.

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### Case Study

Thomas Clarkson, one of the greatest driving forces behind the anti-slavery campaign in Britain, was born in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire in 1760. While studying for a masters degree at Cambridge, Clarkson wrote an essay 'Is it right to enslave men against their will?', which won a competition and changed his life forever. The subject of the essay would not leave his mind and he decided that if it were true then someone needed to 'see these calamities to an end'. Clarkson became that person and he was to spend the rest of his life dedicated to the campaign against slavery.



Along with several other people, in 1787 he set up a national organisation, the 'Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade', to build public support for the abolitionist cause. Next, his commitment to revealing the truth about the slave trade, took him on a five month tour of Britain. By the end of it, he had collected the names of over 20,000 sailors who had sailed on slave ships and interviewed them about what happened on the ships and in Africa. In the ports, Clarkson found that it was easy to buy the instruments like leg irons, thumb screws and branding irons that were used on enslaved Africans, as well as devices that forced open the jaws of slaves who refused to eat.

In the ports like Liverpool and Bristol, the idea of abolition was very unpopular because of the city's economic dependence on the trade. Clarkson found himself in a number of risky situations because he spoke out against the slave trade. One night in Liverpool, several men tried to push him into the sea to drown, but luckily Clarkson managed to escape.

When he returned to London, Clarkson used a number of different ways to reveal what he had learned about the slave trade and to gather support for the abolition movement. He suggested that opponents of slavery started local groups and organised petitions (which became very popular with the public), to send to Parliament to demand change. He wrote a

number of papers, reports, pamphlets and books and designed an image of one of the larger slave ships from Liverpool - the *Brookes* - to show how so many slaves were packed tightly into a small space. This image became known as 'The Print' (see page 11) and became an incredibly important and powerful tool in Clarkson's campaign. Wherever he went, Clarkson would always be found with a chest full of fine African made goods, to demonstrate African peoples' culture and skills. This challenged the slavers propaganda that Africans were 'ignorant savages', an argument often used to justify the trade in slaves. Josiah Wedgwood, the potter and Quaker, was a member of the abolition movement. One of his workers designed what would become the 'emblem' of the abolition cause, showing an image of an African slave in chains with the slogan 'Am I not a Man and a Brother?' (another version was 'Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?' see page 17). This emblem was reproduced on many different products, from plates to bracelets, hairpins and snuff boxes. At the time women could not vote, or sign petitions so this meant that they too could join the campaign, and show their support.

However, despite Clarkson's determination and enormous dedication to the abolition cause, it took a long time for the campaign to achieve success. In 1807, twenty-two years after the publication of Clarkson's competition winning essay, Parliament abolished the slave trade in the British Empire. This meant that English ships were no longer permitted by law to take part in the trade or buy and sell slaves in Britain and its colonies.

The next stage of the British campaign was launched in the 1820s. This time it was against the institution of slavery itself, which was finally abolished throughout the British colonies in 1834.