# Introduction

As the recent bicentennial of the Abolition Acts of 1807 amply demonstrated, 'abolition' continues to speak to national interests as well as to specific (national) ways of remembering the past. In Britain, at least, the 2007 commemorations were seen by many, including government ministers, as an opportunity for Britons to reflect on 'the spirit of freedom, justice and equality that characterised the efforts of the early abolitionists' – 'the same spirit that drives our determination to fight injustice and inequality today'.[1] According to this view, abolition of the slave trade in 1807 embodied a certain kind of British philanthropy and – just as important – a certain kind of Britishness.[2] Similarly, in the USA, abolition has often been seen as a test of the country's democratic values. More recently, Andrew Delbanco has identified abolitionism (broadly defined) as a peculiar 'impulse' in American public life that links anti-slavery abolitionists of the mid nineteenth century to women's-rights and gay-rights campaigners in the twentieth century – and, at the other end of the political spectrum, modern-day pro-life advocates. As he puts it, such parallels 'should remind us [Americans] that all holy wars, whether metaphoric or real, from left or right, bespeak a zeal for combating sin, not tomorrow, not in due time, not, in Lincoln's phrase, by putting it "in the course of ultimate extinction," but *now*'.[3]

[1] Government Press Notice, 22 January 2007, quoted in J. R. Oldfield, '2007 Revisited: Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery', in David T. Gleeson and Simon Lewis, eds., *Ambiguous Legacy: The Bicentennial of the International Slave Trade Bans* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), pp. 192–207, at p. 195.

[2] For a discussion of these themes and the evolution of a 'culture of abolitionism' in Britain, see J. R. Oldfield, *'Chords of Freedom': Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery* (Manchester University Press, 2007).

[3] Andrew Delbanco, 'The Abolitionist Imagination', in Andrew Delbanco, John Stauffer, Manisha Sinha, Darryl Pinckney and Wilfred M. McClay, *The Abolitionist Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 1–55, at pp. 48–9.

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Yet abolition was never entirely a national issue. From the outset, activists on both sides of the Atlantic reached out to each other in a spirit of mutual cooperation. Self-styled 'citizens of the universe', these men (and they were by and large men) were intent on creating a new world order, one in which darkness (including slavery and the slave trade) would progressively give way to enlightenment (liberty, equality, fraternity). Many of the leading figures in these campaigns, among them Granville Sharp, William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, were themselves international celebrities, whose works were circulated and consumed across and within the Atlantic world. Indeed, the early abolitionist movement is best understood as an international movement that rested on dense networks that linked activists in large metropolitan centres such as Paris and London with those in more remote outposts such as Washington, Pennsylvania. In much the same way, activists on both sides of the Atlantic monitored each other's progress, shared ideas and strategies and, as the situation demanded, offered each other support and encouragement. One of the central arguments of this book is that these networks gave abolitionists a distinct advantage over their opponents (it is noticeable, for instance, that pro-slavery advocates, especially those in Britain and in the USA, created no comparable transatlantic connections), even if they did not necessarily guarantee success, at least in the short term.

Historians have long been aware of the international dimensions of abolitionism. One thinks, for instance, of Betty Fladeland's pioneering work on Anglo-American cooperation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More recently, Seymour Drescher and David Brion Davis, among others, have written major works on slavery and abolition that in different ways draw attention to international perspectives.[4] Yet, in saying this, historians have not always been alert to the 'circum-Atlantic' dimensions of this story – that is, the spaces in

[4] Betty Fladeland, *Men and Brothers: Anglo-American Antislavery Cooperation* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1972); Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford University Press, 2006). See also Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (London: Verso, 2011); Derek R. Peterson, ed., *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010); Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776–1848* (London: Verso, 1987); Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (London: Macmillan, 1986); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975).

which abolitionist ideas were circulated and exchanged.[5] Above all else, the early abolitionist movement was about communication. Through their networks, activists circulated a huge amount of material – letters, newspapers, prints, books and pamphlets – that, in turn, was abridged, translated and recycled, depending on local circumstances. Moreover, these 'circuits of knowledge' were multi-directional in the sense that information flowed from east to west and from west to east. Just as importantly, they also encompassed the Caribbean, a region that had a huge impact on slave-trade debates in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Only by excavating these Atlantic spaces, I would argue, can we fully understand the dynamics of international abolitionism, its structure, mechanisms and ways of doing business.

If there is a 'circum-Atlantic' dimension to this study, there is also a comparative or 'trans-Atlantic' dimension to it as well.[6] Part of the intention here is to de-centre Britain. Instead, the approach I have chosen is 'triangular', in the sense that it sets out to compare Britain with two other important centres of abolitionist activity, France and the USA, not as a way of stressing British or American exceptionalism but as a way of explaining why activists made the decisions they did. As we shall see, transatlantic abolitionism moved at different paces, depending on local circumstances. One of the most glaring of these differences was the decision of British and French activists, at a relatively early stage in the campaign, to attack slavery through the slave trade, thereby distancing themselves from American efforts to attack slavery head-on. These subtle distinctions were initially the source of some confusion and misunderstanding. Nevertheless, for all their differences, anti-slavery activists were highly dependent on each other, particularly during periods of crisis. Indeed, international cooperation proved critical in sustaining the Société des Amis des Noirs, probably the most vulnerable of the early abolitionist societies, as well as offering support and encouragement to others, including the London-based Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST), organised in 1787.

But while at one level the transatlantic history of abolition is about synergies, at another it is about strains and tensions. Indeed, a central

[5] I am adopting David Armitage's use of the term 'circum-Atlantic' here. See David Armitage, 'Three Concepts of Atlantic History', in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 11–27, at pp. 18–20.

[6] Armitage, 'Three Concepts of Atlantic History', pp. 20–3. Rightly, Armitage stresses that 'trans-Atlantic' history can be called international history, not least in the sense that it 'joins states, nations, and regions within an oceanic system' (p. 22).

theme of this book is what might be described as the limits of inter-nationalism. Naively perhaps, early abolitionists saw themselves riding intellectual currents (the American and French revolutions were important here) that would sweep away slavery and the slave trade. The reality was somewhat different. National governments tended to view abolition with suspicion, not least because if acceded to it ran the risk of surrendering an important economic advantage to their competitors. In short, the question became who would make the first move. For this reason, abolition was all too often seen as a plot of some kind, designed to threaten either British or European interests, depending on one's point of view. If anything, the Terror and the Revolutionary war with France (1793–1801) heightened these tensions. As a conservative reaction set in, activists on both sides of the Atlantic struggled to make themselves heard. Local societies folded, sympathisers, especially those living in the American South, deserted the cause, and, to all intents and purposes, the flow of abolitionist publications dried up.

Reluctantly, activists were forced to adapt to these changing circumstances. One approach, that adopted by James Stephen, a key British strategist, was to turn the international situation to their advantage, in effect realigning national and international interests. The French colony of Saint-Domingue was central to these debates. We tend to think of Saint-Domingue as having a negative impact on slave-trade debates, and certainly the revolt of 1791 caused alarm on both sides of the Atlantic, precipitating a reaction that united French planters and merchants, the West India lobby in the British Parliament and slave-holders in the American South in their condemnation of abolitionist activity.[7] Yet, ironically, Saint-Domingue also acted as a stimulus to reform. The unsuccessful French invasion of 1801–4, which resulted in the creation of an independent black republic (Haiti) in the centre of the Caribbean, caused what many activists saw as a new colonial crisis. As I argue here, Saint-Domingue (and the Caribbean region generally) played an important role in the slave-trade debates of 1804–7. Indeed, for many activists, chief among them Henry Brougham, Haiti posed a simple choice: either to give up the slave trade or to risk losing everything – slaves, property, livelihoods – in a wave of violence orchestrated

[7] David Geggus, 'British Opinion and the Emergence of Haiti, 1791–1805', in James Walvin, ed., *Slavery and British Society, 1776–1846* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 123–49. See also David Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001); Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolutions in the Caribbean, 1789–1804: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

by Haiti's military leaders or, at the very least, patterned after their example.

In this sense, the national and the international were in delicate balance with each other, sometimes colliding, at other times coalescing to effect meaningful political change. Abolition proceeded by degrees, nudged forward by war, shifting political alliances and, above all, the prospect of international cooperation. As Philip D. Morgan has recently pointed out, abolition in 1807 was never merely 'a parochial British affair'.[8] On the contrary, British activists were profoundly aware of the international situation not only in the Caribbean (Haiti, Trinidad, Dutch Guiana) but also in the USA. Indeed, as we shall see, they spent a lot of time ascertaining whether Americans would take deliberate action in 1807–8, as the US Constitution seemed to imply they would. It may well have been that government ministers could have carried abolition in 1807 without outside help, but news of Congress's intention to abolish the slave trade, which reached Britain ahead of the crucial debates in the House of Lords, undoubtedly strengthened their hand and made pushing abolition through Parliament that much easier, as did their earlier success in pushing through the Foreign Slave Act (1806), which in many ways should be regarded as a war measure or, at least, one made possible by European war.

One aim of this book, therefore, is to tease out the relationship between the national and the international. After 1807, for instance, British activists set out to make abolition 'universal', partly out of self-interest and partly out of humanitarian zeal. But, here again, as the Congresses of Vienna (1814–15) and Aix-la-Chapelle (1818) demonstrated, there were limits to how far they could push internationalism, particularly if that meant signing up to binding international agreements. Debates around the mutual right of search, a key element of the suppression politics of the early nineteenth century, exposed serious differences of opinion, not only between Britain and Europe but also between Britain and America. Nevertheless, it proved difficult to turn a blind eye to such initiatives or the interests and ideologies that lay behind them. The USA provides an interesting case study. Wary of anything that touched on either their independence or their self-respect, members of Congress instead decided to take matters into their own hands, tightening existing prohibitions against the slave trade, even to the extent of authorising the President to send navy patrols to the west coast of Africa. Of

[8] Philip D. Morgan, 'Ending the Slave Trade: A Caribbean and Atlantic Context', in Derek R. Peterson, ed., *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic*, pp. 101–28, at pp. 120–1.

course, internal domestic pressures were also important here, but, by the same token, we cannot ignore the international context, or the pressures it brought to bear on nineteenth-century slave-trade debates.

As will already be obvious, in writing this book I have been strongly influenced by recent work on Atlantic history, which in the past twenty years or so has steadily grown in importance.[9] In particular, I have been influenced by David Armitage's 'three concepts of Atlantic history', although, like him, I would want to stress that these concepts ('circum-Atlantic', 'trans-Atlantic' and 'cis-Atlantic') are by no means mutually exclusive.[10] I have also been influenced by the 'new imperial history', which, at the risk of oversimplification, sees metropole and colony as constituent parts of what might be called 'Greater Britain'. As Antoinette Burton puts it, 'Empire was not just a phenomenon "out there," but a fundamental part of English culture and national identity at home.'[11] The slave-trade debates of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries particularly lend themselves to analysis of this kind. As we shall see, the Caribbean was a constant presence in these debates and not simply because of its strategic importance or the political muscle of the West India lobby. Books, pamphlets, newspapers and prints were all responsible for circulating ideas about the Caribbean – many of them decidedly negative – that had a profound effect on how those in the metropole viewed both colonial planters and the violent and seemingly

[9] See, for instance, Jack D. Greene and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Bernard Bailyn and Patricia L. Denault, eds., *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500–1830* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); Eliga H. Gould, 'Atlantic History and the Literary Turn', *Early American Literature*, 43 (1) (2008): 197–203; Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Nicholas P. Canny, 'Atlantic History: What and Why? *European Review*, 9 (4) (October 2001): 399–411; Nicholas P. Canny, 'Writing Atlantic History; or, Reconfiguring the History of Colonial British America', *Journal of American History*, 86 (3) (1999): 1093–114.

[10] Armitage, 'Three Concepts of Atlantic History', pp. 28–9. Armitage defines 'cis-Atlantic' history, the third of his three concepts, as the 'history of any particular place – a nation, a state, a region, even a specific institution – in relation to the wider Atlantic world' (p. 24).

[11] Antoinette Burton, 'Who Needs the Nation? Interrogating "British" History', in *Empire in Question: Reading, Writing, and Teaching British Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 41–55, at p. 43. See also L. Tabili, 'Colony and Metropole: The New Imperial History', *The Historian*, 69 (1) (2007): 84–6; Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); David Feldman, 'The New Imperial History', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 9 (2) (2004): 235–9; Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

'un-British' societies they had created under the gaze of the British Empire.

This book is divided into three distinct parts. In the first of these I look at the ways in which activists on both sides of the Atlantic went about creating a transatlantic network that proved remarkably enduring, owing in no small part to a number of key actors, among them James Pemberton, William Dillwyn and Jacques-Pierre Brissot. Almost without exception, these men shared an international vision that transcended narrow national boundaries. In a telling comment, Thomas Clarkson, another important figure in this transatlantic story, said of Brissot that 'he was no patriot in the ordinary acceptation of the word; for he took the habitable globe as his country, and wished to consider every foreigner as his brother.'[12] James Pemberton aspired to the same cosmopolitan ideal, as did Granville Sharp. Indeed, what united British, French and American activists was their sense that their activities had a global reach and significance. Time and shifting political currents would disrupt these associations – and, indeed, it is tempting to see them as a manifestation of the late 1780s, years of revolutionary fervour – nevertheless, they proved highly adaptable, providing activists on both sides of the Atlantic with a ready-made support system.

In Chapter 2, I go on to look at the way activists exploited these networks, using them to circulate abolitionist books and pamphlets, creating in the process an information highway that encompassed Europe, the USA and the Caribbean. As we shall see, activists were tireless letter-writers, picking up their pens on a regular basis to tell each other about their victories and setbacks, to share information and, where necessary, to offer criticisms. But the crucial point is that these 'circuits of knowledge' made transatlantic abolitionism work and gave it purchase. Finally, in Chapter 3, I consider abolitionist strategies, looking in detail at the different positions taken by British, French and American activists. In particular, I have taken trouble to trace the evolving nature of French anti-slavery debates as activists struggled to come to terms with events in Saint-Domingue. The growing importance of free coloured rights, which loomed large in French anti-slavery debates after 1789, is another example of how metropolitan debates were influenced by people at the margins, among them Julien Raimond, a free

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[12] Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees & Orme, 1808), vol. II, p. 166.

coloured Saint-Dominguan, whose career as an Atlantic traveller has been reconstructed in painstaking detail by John D. Garrigus.[13]

In Part II, I move on to consider how the international vision of the late 1780s was disrupted first by the French Revolution (particularly the Terror) and then by the 1791 slave revolt in Saint-Domingue. Together, these cataclysmic events provoked a reaction across the Atlantic world as conservative interests sought to protect the institution of slavery, adopting a siege mentality that saw 'outsiders', whether they were free blacks in the American South or black émigrés from Saint-Domingue, as a menace that needed to be checked and controlled. Inevitably, these pressures took their toll. This is perhaps most evident in Britain and France, where organised societies failed during the 1790s, but, as the proceedings of the American Convention demonstrate, in the USA, too, activists were forced onto the defensive. As a result, slave-trade debates during the 1790s were much less expansive in character. In Chapter 5, I explore some of these developments, using newspapers, plays and prints to recreate cultures and mentalities that, if anything, (re)presented abolition as a national impulse or, at least, as one that spoke to national sensibilities.

Part III begins with the slave-trade debates of 1807, which engineered a breakthrough, catapulting Britain and the USA into a new abolitionist era. Chapter 6 examines these debates in detail, building on a lot of existing work to present a more rounded, international history of abolition. Chapter 7 continues this story, looking at British attempts to make abolition universal, a campaign that worked at two distinct levels: the first, diplomatic activity, where activists found themselves working in close cooperation with government ministers; and the second, perhaps less well known, involving attempts to educate Europeans (particularly the French) about slavery and the slave trade. Part of my argument here is that these opinion-building activities deserve much closer attention, not least because they did have an impact, particularly in France, where by 1820 we can see an abolitionist culture starting to take root. The final chapter deals with the related issue of colonisation, related in the sense that the idea of a black nationality, whether in Africa or the Caribbean, was for a long time a key part of abolitionist thinking.[14] Here again

[13] John D. Garrigus, 'The Free Colored Elite of Saint-Domingue: The Case of Julien Raimond, 1774–1801', available online at http://users.ju.edu/jgarrig (accessed 14 June 2011).

[14] See Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 88–105; Christopher Leslie Brown, 'Empire without America: British Plans for Africa in the Era of the American Revolution', in Derek R. Peterson, ed., *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 84–100.

colonisation was a common concern, uniting activists on both sides
of the Atlantic and creating, in turn, networks that stretched from the
USA to Britain and from Britain to Africa and the Caribbean. No less
striking is the involvement of blacks in colonisation schemes, among
them Paul Cuffe, another remarkable Atlantic traveller. Colonisation,
however, was also a contested space, leading many blacks to reject what
they saw as 'forced migration', a decision that re-energised abolitionist
debates in the USA, forcing them into new and unexpected directions.

The book ends in 1820. At first glance, this might seem like an arti-
ficial demarcation. But there is a real sense in which the early 1820s
marked the opening of a new chapter in transatlantic abolitionism, one
that was much more restless, more uncompromising and concerned,
above all, with challenging slavery head-on. Of course, early abolition-
ists were hardly oblivious to the plight of enslaved Africans, whether in
the Caribbean or the USA. Nevertheless, their approach was cautious
and, in the main, accommodating. As John Stauffer astutely observes,
'they compromised effectively and worked across sectional, and occa-
sionally racial, divisions'.[15] Above all, they found common cause in the
international slave trade. For British activists, in particular, this was the
key to everything. Only abolish the slave trade, they argued, and slavery
itself would eventually crumble to dust. By the early 1820s, however,
this orthodoxy was starting to break down. Britons would go on trying
to suppress the international slave trade but increasingly they came to
see that their American counterparts were right in focusing their atten-
tion on slavery as well. As a result, the 1820s would witness a series
of transformations as activists on both sides of the Atlantic adopted
increasingly radical positions until by 1832 'immediatism' (that is,
the immediate and unconditional abolition of slavery) had become for
many, especially younger activists, a new kind of orthodoxy and one
that gave transatlantic abolitionism of the 1830s a new and very dis-
tinctive character.

[15] John Stauffer, 'Fighting the Devil with His Own Fire', in Andrew Delbanco, John
Stauffer, Manisha Sinha, Darryl Pinckney and Wilfred M. McClay, *The Abolitionist
Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 57–79, at
p. 71.