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0521772494 - French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848

Lawrence C. Jennings

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FRENCH ANTI-SLAVERY

Some works have examined the first and temporary abolition of French Colonial slavery during the French Revolutionary era, but relatively little is known about the second French abolitionist movement that culminated in the freeing of a quarter of a million slaves in 1848. This book fills the huge gap in existing historiography by providing the first detailed study of French anti-slavery forces during this period of the first half of the nineteenth century, explaining why France abolished colonial slavery fifteen years later than Britain but fifteen years before emancipation in the United States. It traces the largely political struggle of a cautious, elitist group of humanitarians against a well-organized colonial lobby and a largely indifferent July Monarchy government. The few radical, determined abolitionists, like the black Cyrille Bissette, were too marginal to move French public opinion and bring about abolition until the Revolution of 1848 brought the Second Republic to power.

Lawrence C. Jennings is Professor of History at the University of Ottawa in Canada. A frequent traveler and researcher in France over the past forty years, he has published on various aspects of nineteenth-century French and French colonial history. He is the author of *France and Europe in 1848* (1973) and *French Reaction to British Slave Emancipation* (1988). His numerous articles have appeared in *French Historical Studies*, *American Historical Review*, *French History*, *Journal of Modern History*, *Slavery and Abolition*, *Journal of African History*, *Canadian Journal of History*, and several French language journals.

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P R E F A C E

Enlightenment thought and the growth of evangelicalism sparked anti-slavery and anti-slave trade activity in the eighteenth century. The formation of a British abolitionist organization in the late 1780s was imitated in France, where the process accelerated because of the Revolution of 1789 and especially the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue. Faced with a *fait accompli* in Saint-Domingue, France in 1794 became the first great power to abolish colonial slavery. However, this achievement was undone by Napoleon. He reestablished both colonial slavery and the slave trade in 1802, before proceeding to repress the remnants of the first French abolitionist groupings. It was not until the latter part of the Restoration monarchy of Louis XVIII and Charles X, and especially after the advent of the July Monarchy of King Louis Philippe in 1830, that French anti-slavery was reborn. This book examines this second French abolitionist movement from its inception until the final abolition of colonial slavery by France in 1848.

Such a study is sorely lacking in the current state of historiography. Indeed, no aspect of the vast history of abolitionism has been so neglected by scholars treating either the anti-slave trade or anti-slavery movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A large number of monographs published over the past decades have helped us to understand the American and British efforts to abolish both the slave trade and slavery. The first French abolitionist movement in the eighteenth century has also been covered by numerous articles and a handful of books. The question of French slave trade abolitionism in the nineteenth century, which culminated in the 1820s and 1830s, has found its historians in a series of French scholars. Those seeking a detailed overall view of the process that led to the definitive eradication

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of French colonial slavery in 1848, however, have had to resort until now to scattered chapters or limited studies on the subject.

The ground-breaking historian André Jean Tudesq, in a section of his richly documented magnum opus, *Les grands notables en France*, offered a brief and largely accurate analysis of French abolitionism under the July Monarchy as dominated by conservative *notables* unwilling to operate outside legislative channels and incapable of effecting slave liberation. Similarly, Seymour Drescher, in his study on Tocqueville, provides a chapter outlining the general development of anti-slavery prior to 1848.¹ Still, these studies offer mere glimpses of the second French abolitionist movement and whet the reader's appetite for a more complete discussion and profound analysis. The appearance of a group of publications, coinciding with the sesquicentennial of French emancipation, has not filled this lacuna. Anxious to provide rapid, all-encompassing overviews of a question on which relatively little groundwork has been done, publishers have often turned to anthropologists or political scientists rather than historians for explanations. The most noticeable results have been the studies by David Rigoulet-Roze and Fabienne Federini, which put forth the politically correct hypothesis that blacks were agents of their own liberation in 1848 as in 1794 by sparking colonial unrest and revolts. However, as my book demonstrates, there is no solid historical evidence substantiating these assumptions for the period preceding 1848. A brief recent book by Patricia Motylewski, while also stressing this theme, at least aims to give credit to the French abolitionists of the July Monarchy for preparing the way for emancipation, thus reducing in the process the role ascribed to Victor Schoelcher in many popular accounts.² Unfortunately, Motylewski's attempts to analyze the Société française pour l'abolition de l'esclavage fail dismally due to inadequate research. She bases her examination almost exclusively

¹ André Jean Tudesq, *Les grands notables en France (1840-1849): Etude historique d'une psychologie sociale* (2 vols.; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), II, 834-51; Seymour Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy: Tocqueville and Modernization* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), 151-95.

² David Rigoulet-Roze, "A propos d'une commémoration: L'Abolition de l'esclavage en 1848," *L'Homme: Revue française d'anthropologie*, no. 145 (1998): 127-36; Fabienne Federini, *L'Abolition de l'esclavage en 1848: Une lecture de Victor Schoelcher* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998); Patricia Motylewski, *La Société française pour l'abolition de l'esclavage, 1834-1850* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998).

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on the printed works of the French abolition society, while totally ignoring the vast amount of material in the French colonial archives, French press, British abolitionist papers, and even the Schoelcher manuscripts, not to mention the entire panoply of English language secondary studies on the topic. The result is a poorly informed, highly limited, one-sided picture of the leading French anti-slavery formation. Therefore, the 150th anniversary of the ending of French slavery, like the 100th anniversary, has failed to produce a definitive study of the second French abolitionist movement.³ This book is an attempt to remedy this situation. It provides the first detailed analysis in any language of the French anti-slavery lobby in the first half of the nineteenth century, but does not purport to be a study of French colonial slavery itself, something already extensively examined by scholars. Similarly, it does not attempt to cover the late nineteenth-century sequel to French colonial slavery, when France encountered the problem once again following its imperialistic conquests in Africa. That is a different story, and one already treated by Africanists.

In undertaking my research on the second French abolitionist movement I have proceeded by asking the question of why it took some fifteen years after the British decision to terminate slavery for French liberal governments to free the quarter of a million slaves in their plantation colonies of Guadeloupe, Martinique, Bourbon (Réunion), and Guiana. Answering this query has led me to center my analysis on the French abolitionist movement under the July Monarchy (1830–48), its structure, modus operandi, objectives, weaknesses, and achievements. This in turn has required an examination of planter interests that opposed emancipation and of government policy on all slavery and colonial issues. To explain the interaction between these different elements over time, and to show the progress, setbacks, fresh starts, and ultimate failures and achievements of French anti-slavery, I have found it preferable to adopt a largely chronological approach. I hope in this way to demonstrate the extreme complexities of an issue that could not be resolved until it was caught up in the vortex of the Revolution of 1848.

³ The centennial of 1848 resulted especially in two books by Gaston Martin that were serious studies for their time, but are now dated: *L'Abolition de l'esclavage, 27 avril 1848* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948) and *Histoire de l'esclavage dans les colonies françaises* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948).

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The results of some twenty years of research, this book attempts to break away from the standardized secondary accounts of French anti-slavery by basing its findings on a thorough examination of primary sources, most of which have so far been neglected by historians. In carrying out this research, the author has examined all of the rich documentation in the French colonial archives (Aix-en-Provence) concerning slavery and its abolition. This material makes it possible to fathom the official governmental view on the question, at the same time that it reveals colonial strategies for the defense of slavery. All of the extant port city press of Bordeaux, Nantes, and Le Havre have been read for the period 1830–48 because of the close connections their constituencies had with the colonies. So has much of the Parisian press, in an attempt to sound public, pro-colonial, and abolitionist opinion. Most important, all available French abolitionist papers and writings, and particularly those of the French abolition society, have been carefully scrutinized. This has made it possible to trace the complex development of French anti-slavery. Finally, French abolitionist correspondence with the British, largely unexploited by previous historians, has provided precious insights into the thoughts, aims, and procedures of French anti-slavery. All of this work on primary sources, when correlated with existing secondary source material, has enabled the author to put forth what he hopes will prove to be a comprehensive and definitive account of the French movement against colonial slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century.

I am grateful to Eric Jennings of the University of Toronto and David Eltis of Queen's University for having read the manuscript form of this book and for improving it with their suggestions. I wish to thank Mme Maïte Court-Isambert for sharing with me her knowledge of the French abolition society, and all the personnel of the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (Aix-en-Provence) for their kind assistance over the many years I worked there. I am indebted to the *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* and *French History* for permitting me to reproduce passages from my articles published with them. Finally, I could not have been able to undertake much of the research that made this book possible without the generous support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.