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978-1-108-06014-1 - *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

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An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

This volume contains two works: a 1786 translation of a prizewinning Latin essay written by Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846) at Cambridge the previous year, and *Thoughts on the African Slave Trade* (1788) by the sailor, slave trader and Anglican clergyman John Newton (1725–1807). Clarkson's deep research into the Atlantic slave trade instilled in him a sense of duty, inspiring him to devote his life to abolitionism. The publication of the essay introduced Clarkson to like-minded campaigners, notably William Wilberforce (1759–1833) and Granville Sharpe (1735–1813), with whom he helped to establish in 1787 the pioneering Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Published thirty-four years after Newton's retirement from the slave trade, Newton's pamphlet apologises for his 'too late' conversion to the abolitionist movement and describes the horrific conditions aboard slave ships during the Middle Passage.

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Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

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Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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THOMAS CLARKSON



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Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

A N
E S S A Y
O N T H E
S L A V E R Y A N D C O M M E R C E
O F T H E
H U M A N S P E C I E S,
P A R T I C U L A R L Y
T H E A F R I C A N,
T R A N S L A T E D F R O M A
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W H I C H W A S H O N O U R E D W I T H
T H E F I R S T P R I Z E
I N T H E
U N I V E R S I T Y O F C A M B R I D G E,
F O R T H E Y E A R 1785,
W I T H A D D I T I O N S.

Neque premendo alium me extulisse velim.—LIVY.

L O N D O N:
PRINTED BY J. PHILLIPS, GEORGE-YARD, LOMBARD-
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Thomas Clarkson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

TO THE
RIGHT HONOURABLE
WILLIAM CHARLES COLYEAR,
EARL OF PORTMORE,
VISCOUNT MILSINTOWN.

MY LORD,

THE dignity of the subject of this little Treatise, not any persuasion of its merits as a literary composition, encourages me to offer it to your Lordship's patronage. The cause of freedom has always been found sufficient, in every age and country, to attract the notice of the generous and humane; and it is therefore, in a more peculiar manner, worthy of the attention and favour of a personage, who holds a distinguished rank in that illustrious island, the very air of which has been determined, upon a late investigation of its laws, to be an antidote against slavery. I feel a satisfaction in the opportunity, which the publication of this treatise affords me, of acknowledging your Lordship's civilities, which can only be equalled by the respect, with which I am,

Your Lordship's
much obliged,
and obedient servant,
THOMAS CLARKSON.

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Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

T H E

P R E F A C E.

AS the subject of the following work has fortunately become of late a topic of conversation, I cannot begin the preface in a manner more satisfactory to the feelings of the benevolent reader, than by giving an account of those humane and worthy persons, who have endeavoured to draw upon it that share of the publick attention which it has obtained.

Among the well disposed individuals, of different nations and ages, who have humanely exerted themselves to suppress the abject personal slavery, introduced in the original cultivation of the *European* colonies in the western world, *Bartholomew de las Casas*, the pious bishop of *Chiapa*, in the fifteenth century, seems to have been the first. This amiable man, during his residence in *Spanish America*, was so sensibly affected at the treatment which the miserable Indians underwent, that he returned to *Spain*, to make a publick

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi P R E F A C E.

publick remonstrance before the celebrated emperor *Charles* the fifth, declaring, that heaven would one day call him to an account for those cruelties, which he then had it in his power to prevent. The speech which he made on the occasion, is now extant, and is a most perfect picture of benevolence and piety.

But his intreaties, by the opposition of avarice, were rendered ineffectual: and I do not find by any books which I have read upon the subject, that any other person interfered till the last century, when *Morgan Godwyn*, a *British* clergyman, distinguished himself in the cause.

The present age has also produced some zealous and able opposers of the *colonial* slavery. For about the middle of the present century, *John Woolman* and *Anthony Benezet*, two respectable members of the religious society called Quakers, devoted much of their time to the subject. The former travelled through most parts of *North America* on foot, to hold conversations with the members of his own sect, on the impiety of retaining those in a state of involuntary servitude, who had never given them offence. The latter kept a free school at *Philadelphia*,
for

P R E F A C E. vii

for the education of black people. He took every opportunity of pleading in their behalf. He published several treatises against slavery,* and gave an hearty proof of his attachment to the cause, by leaving the whole of his fortune in support of that school, to which he had so generously devoted his time and attention when alive.

Till this time it does not appear, that any bodies of men had collectively interested themselves in endeavouring to remedy the evil. But in the year 1754, the religious society, called Quakers, publicly testified their sentiments upon the subject,|| declaring, that “ to live in ease and plenty by the toil
“ of those, whom fraud and violence had
“ put into their power, was neither consist-
“ ent with Christianity nor common justice.”

Impressed with these sentiments, many of this society immediately liberated their slaves; and though such a measure appeared to be

* A Description of Guinea, with an Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave Trade, &c.—A Caution to Great Britain and her Colonies, in a short Representation of the calamitous State of the enslaved Negroes in the British Dominions. Besides several smaller pieces.

|| They had censured the *African Trade* in the year 1727, but but had taken no public notice of the *colonial* slavery till this time.

viii P R E F A C E.

attended with considerable loss to the benevolent individuals, who unconditionally presented them with their freedom, yet they adopted it with pleasure: nobly considering, that to possess a little, in an honourable way, was better than to possess much, through the medium of injustice. Their example was gradually followed by the rest. A general emancipation of the slaves in the possession of Quakers, at length took place; and so effectually did they serve the cause which they had undertaken, that they denied the claim of membership in their religious community, to all such as should hereafter oppose the suggestions of justice in this particular, either by retaining slaves in their possession, or by being in any manner concerned in the slave trade: and it is a fact, that through the vast tract of North America, there is not at this day a single slave in the possession of an acknowledged Quaker.

But though this measure appeared, as has been observed before, to be attended with considerable loss to the benevolent individuals who adopted it, yet, as virtue seldom fails of obtaining its reward, it became ultimately beneficial. Most of the slaves, who
were

P R E F A C E. ix

were thus unconditionally freed, returned without any sollicitation to their former masters, to serve them, at stated wages, as free men. The work, which they now did, was found to be better done than before. It was found also, that a greater quantity was done in the same time. Hence less than the former number of labourers was sufficient. From these, and a variety of other circumstances, it appeared, that their plantations were considerably more profitable, when worked by free men, than when worked, as before, by slaves; and that they derived therefore, contrary to their expectations, a considerable advantage from their benevolence.

Animated by the example of the Quakers, the members of other sects began to deliberate about adopting the same measure. Some of those of the church of England, of the Roman Catholics, and of the Presbyterians and Independants, freed their slaves; and there happened but one instance, where the matter was debated, where it was not immediately put in force. This was in *Pennsylvania*. It was agitated in the synod of the Presbyterians

x P R E F A C E.

rians there, to oblige their members to liberate their slaves. The question was negatived by a majority of but one person ; and this opposition seemed to arise rather from a dislike to the attempt of forcing such a measure upon the members of that community, than from any other consideration. I have the pleasure of being credibly informed, that the manumission of slaves, or the employment of free men in the plantations, is now daily gaining ground in North America. Should slavery be abolished there, (and it is an event, which, from these circumstances, we may reasonably expect to be produced in time) let it be remembered, that the Quakers will have had the merit of its abolition.

Nor have their brethren here been less assiduous in the cause. As there are happily no slaves in this country, so they have not had the same opportunity of shewing their benevolence by a general emancipation. They have not however omitted to shew it as far as they have been able. At their religious meetings they have regularly inquired if any of their members are concerned in the iniquitous *African* trade. They have appointed

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P R E F A C E. xi

appointed a committee for obtaining every kind of information on the subject, with a view to its suppression, and, about three or four years ago, petitioned parliament on the occasion for their interference and support. I am sorry to add, that their benevolent application was ineffectual, and that the reformation of an evil, productive of consequences equally impolitick and immoral, and generally acknowledged to have long disgraced our national character, is yet left to the unsupported efforts of piety morality and justice, against interest violence and oppression; and these, I blush to acknowledge, too strongly countenanced by the legislative authority of a country, the basis of whose government is *liberty*.

Nothing can be more clearly shewn, than that an inexhaustible mine of wealth is neglected in *Africa*, for the prosecution of this impious traffick; that, if proper measures were taken, the revenue of this country might be greatly improved, its naval strength increased, its colonies in a more flourishing situation, the planters richer, and a trade, which is now a scene of blood and desolation,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii P R E F A C E.

desolation, converted into one, which might be prosecuted with *advantage* and *honour*.

Such have been the exertions of the Quakers in the cause of humanity and virtue. They are still prosecuting, as far as they are able, their benevolent design; and I should stop here and praise them for thus continuing their humane endeavours, but that I conceive it to be unnecessary. They are acting consistently with the principles of religion. They will find a reward in their own consciences; and they will receive more real pleasure from a single reflection on their conduct, than they can possibly experience from the praises of an host of writers.

In giving this short account of those humane and worthy persons, who have endeavoured to restore to their fellow creatures the rights of nature, of which they had been unjustly deprived, I should feel myself unjust, were I to omit two zealous opposers of the *colonial* tyranny, conspicuous at the present day.

The first is Mr. *Granville Sharp*. This Gentleman has particularly distinguished himself in the cause of freedom. It is a
notorious

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978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

P R E F A C E. xiii

notorious fact, that, but a few years since, many of the unfortunate black people, who had been brought from the colonies into this country, were sold in the metropolis to merchants and others, when their masters had no farther occasion for their services; though it was always understood that every person was free, as soon as he landed on the British shore. In consequence of this notion, these unfortunate black people, refused to go to the new masters, to whom they were consigned. They were however seized, and forcibly conveyed, under cover of the night, to ships then lying in the *Thames*, to be retransported to the colonies, and to be delivered again to the planters as merchantable goods. The humane Mr. *Sharpe*, was the means of putting a stop to this iniquitous traffick. Whenever he gained information of people in such a situation, he caused them to be brought on shore. At a considerable expence he undertook their cause, and was instrumental in obtaining the famous decree in the case of *Somerfett*, that as soon as any person whatever set his foot in this country, he

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978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv P R E F A C E.

he came under the protection of the *British* laws, and was consequently free. Nor did he interfere less honourably in that cruel and disgraceful case, in the summer of the year 1781, when *an hundred and thirty two* negroes, in their passage to the colonies, were thrown into the sea alive, to defraud the underwriters; but his pious endeavours were by no means attended with the same success. To enumerate his many laudable endeavours in the extirpation of tyranny and oppression, would be to swell the preface into a volume: suffice it to say, that he has written several books on the subject, and one particularly, which he distinguishes by the title of “*A Limitation of slavery.*”

The second is the *Rev. James Ramsay*. This gentleman resided for many years in the *West-Indies*, in the clerical office. He perused all the colonial codes of law, with a view to find if there were any favourable clauses, by which the grievances of slaves could be redressed; but he was severely disappointed in his pursuits. He published a treatise, since his return to England, called *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African*

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)P R E F A C E. xv

African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies, which I recommend to the perusal of the humane reader. This work reflects great praise upon the author, since, in order to be of service to this singularly oppressed part of the human species, he compiled it at the expence of forfeiting that friendship, which he had contracted with many in those parts, during a series of years, and at the hazard, as I am credibly informed, of suffering much in his private property, as well as of subjecting himself to the ill will and persecution of numerous individuals.

This *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves*, contains so many important truths on the colonial slavery, and has come so home to the planters, (being written by a person who has a thorough knowledge of the subject) as to have occasioned a considerable alarm. Within the last eight months, two publications have expressly appeared against it. One of them is intitled “*Cursory Remarks on Mr. Ramsay’s Essay* ;” the other an “*Apology for Negroe Slavery*.” On each of these I am
bound,

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978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi P R E F A C E.

bound, as writing on the subject, to make a few remarks.

The *curfory remarker* insinuates, that Mr. Ramsay's account of the treatment is greatly exaggerated, if not wholly false. To this I shall make the following reply. I have the honour of knowing several disinterested gentlemen, who have been acquainted with the West Indian islands for years. I call them disinterested, because they have neither had a concern in the *African* trade, nor in the *colonial* slavery: and I have heard these unanimously assert, that Mr. *Ramsay's* account is so far from being exaggerated, or taken from the most dreary pictures that he could find, that it is absolutely below the truth; that he must have omitted many instances of cruelty, which he had seen himself; and that they only wondered, how he could have written with so much moderation upon the subject. They allow the *Curfory Remarks* to be excellent as a composition, but declare that it is perfectly devoid of truth.

But the *curfory remarker* does not depend so much on the circumstances which he has advanced, (nor can he, since they have

xviii P R E F A C E.

though, were they explained, they would be even reputable. The *curfory remarker* has adopted this method of dispute; but Mr. *Ramsay* has explained himself to the satisfaction of all parties, and has refuted him in every point. The name of this *curfory remarker* is *Tobin*: a name, which I feel myself obliged to hand down with detestation, as far as I am able; and with an hint to future writers, that they will do themselves more credit, and serve more effectually the cause which they undertake, if on such occasions they attack the work, rather than the character of the writer, who affords them a subject for their lucubrations.

Nor is this the only circumstance, which induces me to take such particular notice of the *Curfory Remarks*. I feel it incumbent upon me to rescue an injured person from the cruel aspersions that have been thrown upon him, as I have been repeatedly informed by those, who have the pleasure of his acquaintance, that his character is irreproachable. I am also interested myself. For if such detraction is passed over in silence, my own reputation, and not my
work,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

P R E F A C E. xix

work, may be attacked by an anonymous hireling in the cause of slavery.

The *Apology for Negroe Slavery* is almost too despicable a composition to merit a reply. I have only therefore to observe, (as is frequently the case in a bad cause, or where writers do not confine themselves to truth) that the work refutes itself. This writer, speaking of the slave-trade, asserts, that people are never kidnapped on the coast of *Africa*. In speaking of the treatment of slaves, he asserts again, that it is of the very mildest nature, and that they live in the most comfortable and happy manner imaginable. To prove each of his assertions, he proposes the following regulations. That the *stealing* of slaves from *Africa* should be felony. That the *premeditated murder* of a slave by any person on board, should come under the same denomination. That when slaves arrive in the colonies, lands should be allotted for their provisions, *in proportion to their number*, or commissioners should see that a *sufficient* quantity of *sound wholesome* provisions is purchased. That they should not work on *Sundays* and *other holy-days*. That extra labour,

xx P R E F A C E.

labour, or *night-work*, *out of crop*, should be prohibited. That a *limited number* of stripes should be inflicted upon them. That they should have *annually* a suit of clothes. That old infirm slaves should be *properly cared for*, &c. — Now it can hardly be conceived, that if this author had tried to injure his cause, or contradict himself, he could not have done it in a more effectual manner, than by this proposal of these salutary regulations. For to say that slaves are honourably obtained on the coast; to say that their treatment is of the mildest nature, and yet to propose the above-mentioned regulations as necessary, is to refute himself more clearly, than I confess myself to be able to do it: and I have only to request, that the regulations proposed by this writer, in the defence of slavery, may be considered as so many proofs of the assertions contained in my own work.

I shall close my account with an observation, which is of great importance in the present case. Of all the publications in favour of the slave-trade, or the subsequent slavery in the colonies, there is not one,
which

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978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

P R E F A C E. xxi

which has not been written, either by a chaplain to the African factories, or by a merchant, or by a planter, or by a person whose interest has been connected in the cause which he has taken upon him to defend. Of this description are Mr. *Tobin*, and the *Apologist for Negroe Slavery*. While on the other hand those, who have had as competent a knowledge of the subject, but not the *same interest* as themselves, have unanimously condemned it; and many of them have written their sentiments upon it, at the hazard of creating an innumerable host of enemies, and of being subjected to the most malignant opposition. Now, which of these are we to believe on the occasion? Are we to believe those, who are parties concerned, who are interested in the practice?—But the question does not admit of a dispute.

Concerning my own work, it seems proper to observe, that when the original Latin Dissertation, as the title page expresses, was honoured by the University of Cambridge with the first of their annual prizes for the year 1785, I was wait-

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xxii P R E F A C E.

ed upon by some gentlemen of respectability and consequence, who requested me to publish it in English. The only objection which occurred to me was this; that having been prevented, by an attention to other studies, from obtaining that critical knowledge of my own language, which was necessary for an English composition, I was fearful of appearing before the publick eye: but that, as they flattered me with the hope, that the publication of it might be of use, I would certainly engage to publish it, if they would allow me to postpone it for a little time, till I was more in the habit of writing. They replied, that as the publick attention was now excited to the case of the unfortunate *Africans*, it would be serving the cause with double the effect; if it were to be published within a few months. This argument prevailed. Nothing but this circumstance could have induced me to offer an English composition to the inspection of an host of criticks: and I trust therefore that this circumstance will plead much with the benevolent reader, in favour of those faults, which he may find in the present work.

Having

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

P R E F A C E. xxiii

Having thus promised to publish it, I was for some time doubtful from which of the copies to translate. There were two, the original, and an abridgement. The latter (as these academical compositions are generally of a certain length) was that which was sent down to Cambridge, and honoured with the prize. I was determined however, upon consulting with my friends, to translate from the former. This has been faithfully done with but few * additions. The reader will probably perceive the Latin idiom in several passages of the work, though I have endeavoured, as far as I have been able, to avoid it. And I am so sensible of the disadvantages under which it must yet lie, as a translation, that I wish I had written upon the subject, without any reference at all to the original copy.

It will perhaps be asked, from what authority I have collected those facts, which

The instance of the *Dutch* colonists at the Cape, in the first part of the Essay ; the description of an African battle, in the second ; and the poetry of a negroe girl in the third, are the only considerable additions that have been made.

xxiv P R E F A C E.

relate to the colonial slavery. I reply, that I have had the means of the very best of information on the subject; having the pleasure of being acquainted with many, both in the naval and military departments, as well as with several others, who have been long acquainted with *America* and the *West-Indian* islands. The facts therefore which I have related, are compiled from the disinterested accounts of these gentlemen, all of whom, I have the happiness to say, have coincided, in the minutest manner, in their descriptions. It must be remarked too, that they were compiled, not from what these gentlemen heard, while they were resident in those parts, but from what they actually *saw*. Nor has a single instance been taken from any book whatever upon the subject, except that which is mentioned in the 235th page; and this book was published in *France*, in the year 1777, by *authority*.

I have now the pleasure to say, that the accounts of these disinterested gentlemen, whom I consulted on the occasion, are confirmed by all the books which I have ever perused upon slavery, except those which
have

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

P R E F A C E. xxv

have been written by *merchants, planters, &c.* They are confirmed by Sir *Hans Sloane's* Voyage to Barbadoes ; *Griffith Hughes's* History of the same island, printed 1750 ; an Account of North America, by *Thomas Jefferies*, 1761 ; all *Benezet's* works, &c. &c. and particularly by Mr. *Ramsay's* Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of the African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies ; a work which is now firmly established ; and, I may add, in a very extraordinary manner, in consequence of the controversy which this gentleman has sustained with the *Curfory Remarker*, by which several facts which were mentioned in the original copy of my own work, before the controversy began, and which had never appeared in any work upon the subject, have been brought to light. Nor has it received less support from a letter, published only last week, from Capt. J. S. Smith, of the Royal Navy, to the Rev. Mr. Hill ; on the former of whom too high encomiums cannot be bestowed, for standing forth in that noble and disinterested manner, in behalf of an injured character.

I have

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxvi P R E F A C E.

I have now only to solicit the reader again, that he will make a favourable allowance for the present work, not only from those circumstances which I have mentioned, but from the consideration, that only two months are allowed by the University for these their annual compositions. Should he however be unpropitious to my request, I must console myself with the reflection, (a reflection that will always afford me pleasure, even amidst the censures of the great,) that by undertaking the cause of the unfortunate *Africans*, I have undertaken, as far as my abilities would permit, the cause of injured innocence.

London, June 1st 1786.

CONTENTS.