

Breaking the chains

Mary Evans



THE dungeons can still shock, two centuries after their last inmates were freed. Damp and fetid in the tropical air, immersed in virtual darkness, this is where slaves were kept, often for months at a time—before being led down a tunnel through the “door of no return” to ships riding in the surf, ready to begin their appalling voyage over the ocean.

Just one of the countless inmates left a written record. Having been sold to white traders for a gun, a piece of cloth and some lead, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano recalled waiting in the dungeon till his time arrived: “To conduct us away to the ship, it was a most horrible scene; there was nothing to be heard but rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and groans and cries of our fellow men. Some would not stir from the ground, when they were lashed and beaten in the most horrible manner.”

When the dungeons were excavated in the late 19th century, a mass of caked excrement was removed, together with the bones of birds and animals on which the slaves presumably fed. On such misery was founded a global trading system that in its heyday, in the mid-18th century, was taking about 85,000 Africans a year across the Atlantic to work on sugar and tobacco plantations that made Europe rich.

Cape Coast Castle was the grandest of the slave emporiums, at the centre of the trade. But in present-day Ghana, then called the Gold Coast, there were over 30 more slave forts, built and maintained by almost all of the European trading powers of the day: the

Swedes, Danes, French, British, Dutch and Portuguese.

The “triangular trade” as it was known, whereby slave-ships left European ports for west Africa with rum, guns, textiles and other goods to exchange for slaves, and then transported them across the Atlantic to sell to plantation-owners, and then returned with sugar and coffee, also fuelled the first great wave of economic globalisation. Slavers in France would send their shirts to be washed in the streams of the Caribbean isle of St Domingue, now Haiti; the water there was said to whiten the linen better than any European stream.

At one point the plantations of St Domingue provided two-thirds of France's overseas wealth. By the mid-18th century, though, Britain was the biggest slaving nation, and ports like Bristol, Liverpool and London thrived as a result.

So integral to the British economy was the slave business that there were few men and institutions of wealth who did not want to invest in it, from the royal family and the Church of England downwards. Slavers could count on the Archbishop of Canterbury to defend them before God, and on politicians, like the young William Gladstone, himself the son of a plantation-owner, to plead their case in Parliament.

Given how entrenched the slave trade was at the time, it is remarkable that a campaign to abolish it which began in 1787 succeeded only two decades later. It was 200 years ago this week that a bill to abolish slavery got through its second, decisive reading in Parliament.

Ultimately it was the shame and degradation that the slave traffic brought to those involved, perpetrators as well as victims, that proved its undoing. And the atmosphere of shame is still palpable in the places where the transatlantic trade started, on the African coast.

Given the trade's vast scale, some call it a holocaust. Up to 20m Africans were taken across the Atlantic between the 15th and 19th centuries, denuding many places of their most able workers. The slaves were not meant to be killed, or even worked to death (though many did die); there was no effort to wipe out a race. Still, as the writer William

St Clair points out, in one way the analogy with Nazi death camps works—in “the organised fictions, hypocrisies and self-deceptions that enabled otherwise reasonably decent people to condone, to participate and to benefit.”

For most Europeans the existence of the slave trade, and slavery itself, was barely known. In England there was no slavery, so there was no particular reason for most people to face the ugly truth.

The means by which sugar lumps arrived on tables in polite society were carefully hidden. The young officers of the African Service who volunteered to man the slave forts and oversee the dungeons were children of the age of enlightenment. They saw themselves as well-endowed with all the refined feelings and sensibilities that could be expected of a gentleman.

Those fine feelings were spared from reality by careful euphemisms. There were no slave-traders; only “adventurers” in the “Africa” or “Guinea” trade. Prints of the gleaming white Cape Coast Castle made it look like a European palace; there was no hint at its real role. Shackles used to string captives together were just “collars”. The “Company of Merchants”, which ran Britain's slave trade, had on its logo an elephant and a beehive—denoting Africa and America—but nothing about slaves.

Of an evening, officers of the African Service might peruse a new work of history or philosophy: an eerie precursor of the Nazi officers who relaxed to the sound of Beethoven after a day in the gas chambers.

But there was still a pervasive feeling that, despite all the evasions, those involved in the trade were doing something deeply wrong. In the courtyard of Cape Coast Castle lies the tomb of Philip Quaque, the chaplain to the officers and men of the castle for 42 years in the second half of the 18th century. During all that time he failed to bring a single officer to the Christian rite of Holy Communion. In a letter he reflected that this had nothing to do with his (black) skin-colour, and more to do with a mood of shame: “The only plea they offer is that while they are here acting against Light and Conscience they dare not come to that holy Table.”

An essay that mattered

This sense of guilt was to prove the Achilles heel of the slave trade in Europe. The task the abolitionists set themselves was to expose the reality of the trade to an ignorant public. They thought the moral sense of ordinary people would do the rest, and in part they were right. But lighting the spark of conscience needs brave individuals—like Thomas Clarkson, the moving spirit behind the founding of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of Slavery in 1787. He had been a student at Cambridge University two years before. He entered the university's Latin essay contest, set by a vice-chancellor who was also an early abolitionist. The title was: Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will? After two months' research, he not only won the prize but also dedicated the rest of his long life to the cause of abolition. A large man with thick red hair, he would brook no compromise. A friend scolded him for being “deficient in caution and prudence”, but his lack of these qualities gave him the anger and energy to succeed.

If anyone was the founder of the modern human-rights movement it was Clarkson. Even the Quakers, the first abolitionists, were impressed by his zeal. It was essentially the alliance of Clarkson, an Anglican, and the Quakers, with their existing network of preachers and supporters, that made up the abolitionist movement; in an ironic nod to their success, slavers would call their ships the *Willing Quaker* and the *Accomplished Quaker*.

Clarkson fixed the strategy of the campaign. His first task was to gather evidence about the slave trade, not easy when things were so hidden from public view. He spent long periods in Liverpool and Bristol, trying to gather testimony from the captains or doctors of slave ships, or freed slaves. Almost nobody would talk to him, but over the years small chinks opened in the wall of silence.

One who came forward was John Newton, a former slave captain turned Anglican priest. His descriptions of the trade were very influential. Just as important was Clarkson's gathering of the physical evidence of the slave trade to confirm the oral and written accounts he collected. In Liverpool he picked up “collars”, thumbscrews and a device for

force-feeding slaves, which he would display at the hundreds of public lectures that he gave all over Britain, and France too.

But Clarkson's greatest coup was to get hold of a “plate”, or diagram, of the slave-ship *Brookes*, owned by a Liverpool family of that name, which operated between the Gold Coast and Jamaica. Clarkson and others reworked the plate to show the *Brookes* loaded with 482 slaves, lined up in rows and squashed together. As always, Clarkson and the abolitionists were strictly accurate; the ship had once carried over 600 slaves in even closer confinement, but they did not want to be accused of exaggeration. In 1789 they published 700 posters of this image and it was a sensation; nobody could now deny the horrors of the “middle passage”, during which many slaves either killed themselves or died of disease, starvation and cruel treatment. It became the abiding image of the campaign, rather like the thin and haunting faces of the newly freed inmates of the Belsen concentration camp.

Clarkson also organised what was probably the first ever consumer-goods boycott, of slave-grown sugar, to bring home to ordinary Britons at their tea tables the message that they were paying a dreadful price in human cruelty for indulging a sweet tooth. At one time more than 300,000 people joined the boycott, also designed to hit the profits of the plantation owners. And he inspired the parliamentary movement against slavery, recruiting as spokesman a young Tory, William Wilberforce (see [article](#)), who brought successive bills before Parliament to abolish the slave trade until one was passed in 1807.

Copy, copy and copy again

In its tactics, boycotts, moral zeal, lobbying, research and its use of images, the British campaign was a template for many later ones—against slavery in the Belgian Congo in the late 19th century; against apartheid in South Africa; and against segregation in the American south.

For all the fervour of its opponents, the slave trade would not have collapsed without

rebellions by the victims. The most important was in 1791 on St Domingue. Within two months the slaves had taken control of the island, led by the remarkable Toussaint L'Ouverture. His guerrillas saw off the two greatest imperial armies of the day, the French and British; this led to the establishment of the republic of Haiti in 1804 and to the emancipation of about 500,000 slaves. It was clear that European armies would find it hard to contain many more uprisings, a point proved again on the British islands of Grenada and Barbados. Samuel Sharpe's uprising on Jamaica in 1831 was put down at great cost; the British feared that if slavery continued, they would lose some colonies altogether. So in 1833 slavery was abolished throughout their empire.

Britain was not the first to outlaw the slave trade in its territory; the Danes had done so in 1803, the French temporarily in 1794 and several northern American states had also done so before 1807. But as Britain was the big sea power of the day, it alone could enforce abolition throughout the world, as its navy resolutely tried to do for the rest of the 19th century. Other European nations, notably the Portuguese, persisted with the trade into the 1860s.

The European and American role in the slave trade is now well-known and governments, such as Britain's and France's, as well as individual cities have apologised. There will be much talk about apologies this year. Some will ask whether words of regret are enough. In America slave descendants are fighting a long-running legal battle, in a class-action lawsuit, to get financial compensation from corporations alleged to have benefited from slavery.

In Ghana, meanwhile, Nii Anum Akwete Momli, the chief of slave descendants in the village of Sesemi, north of the capital Accra, says some compensation is arriving already—in the form of electricity and water, part of an aid package from Denmark, another slave-trading nation.

Most European states have tried to face up to the past, but slavery's legacy is in some ways even more poisonous in places like modern Ghana. A smokescreen still covers the African role in this pernicious trade. It is an awkward fact that the traffic could not have existed without African chiefs and traders. Europeans rarely went far from their forts; slaves were brought to them. Indeed, when the Europeans arrived the slave trade and

slavery were already integral parts of local tribal economies. One of the few Ghanaian historians to touch these issues, Akosua Adoma Perbi, writes that “slavery became an important part of the Asante state [the Gold Coast's most powerful] right from its inception. For three centuries, Asante became the largest slave-trading, slave-owning and slave-dealing state in Ghana.”

When the Portuguese arrived on the scene in 1471, they were intermediaries, bringing slaves (and other goods) from Senegal and Benin along the coast to Ghana to sell them in exchange for gold to the Asante and other local peoples. The Asante then mounted slave-trading expeditions to get labour for gold mines.

The forts themselves were not owned by the Europeans; the land on which Cape Coast Castle was built was rented to the British by the local chief for a monthly sum. It was in the interests of the Europeans to respect local customs and laws, as that included the institution of slavery. This meant that they could take slaves but not, for instance, kill animals for amusement; when one officer, James Swanzy, shot a crocodile there was a huge fuss and compensation was paid.

Most of the slaves sold to Europeans in later centuries were men and women captured in battles between tribes like the Asante and the Acan. Many of the captives were kept as slaves by the victors, where they were treated relatively well and could gain some social standing within their new families. Still, the proliferation of wars between the tribes was, as Ms Perbi writes, “mostly aimed at acquiring slaves for sale to the European companies and individual European merchants”. So integral did the slave trade

become to the local chiefs' welfare that its abolition hit hard. In 1872, long after abolition, Zey, the king of Asante, wrote to the British monarch asking for the slave trade to be renewed.



Ghana's slave dungeons: still a shock, two centuries on

AP

Yaw Bedwa of the University of Ghana says there has been a “general amnesia in Ghana

about slavery”. The role of the chiefs is particularly sensitive, as they still play a big role in Ghana. “We don't discuss slavery,” says Barima Kwame Nkye XII, a paramount chief in the town of Assin Mausso. He defends domestic slavery in the past as a generally benevolent institution, and insists that the chiefs had little to do with the slave trade.

The wounds of slavery are still too raw to be exposed in public, even more so as the stigma of slavery remains attached to slave descendants who, in some cases, still cannot inherit property. Mr Bedwa faces anger from African-Americans who come to Ghana looking for roots, only to be confronted with the role of Africans in the slave trade. Mr Bedwa tells them that Africans who did not suffer from slavery were still victims of colonialism, poverty and disease. But, as in every exploitative system, some had it worse than others.