

Heroes of Abolition: Thomas Fowell Buxton; Zachary Macaulay; Thomas Clarkson

Wilberforce, Clarkson, and their associates had assumed that ending the slave trade would lead directly to *general emancipation* (freeing of all slaves). When it became clear that this would not happen, Clarkson joined with Thomas Fowell Buxton in 1823 to form the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery (later the Anti-Slavery Society). When West Indian planters refused to make concessions, the abolitionists hardened their stance, and by the late 1820s abolitionists were demanding immediate slave emancipation. The great pressure they exerted, combined with continuing slave unrest, led Parliament to pass the Emancipation Act in 1833. This enacted gradual, compensated emancipation, which meant that slaves were freed but were forced to work for their former masters for a period to compensate them for monetary loss. By 1838 all slaves in the British Empire were free.

Thomas Clarkson 1760-1846

He intended to follow in his father's footsteps and enter the church. He was, in fact, ordained deacon but never proceeded to priest's orders.

It was while he was in Cambridge, in 1785, that he entered a Latin essay competition. The topic of the essay was *Is it lawful to enslave the unwilling?* and it led Clarkson to consider the question of the slave trade, reading everything he could on the subject. He was appalled and challenged by what he discovered – and it changed his life. He also researched the topic by meeting and interviewing those who had personal experience of the slave trade and slavery.

To gain a wider audience, Clarkson published it in English in 1786 as an essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species, particularly the African, translated from a Latin Dissertation which was honoured with the first prize in the University of Cambridge, for the year 1785.

Three of the pioneering Anglicans that co-founded the committee (SAST) were Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, and William Wilberforce, all evangelical Christians sympathetic to the religious revival that had predominantly nonconformist origins but which sought wider non-denominational support. The Committee included Granville Sharp as Chairman and Josiah Wedgwood as well as Clarkson himself. Clarkson also approached the young William Wilberforce, who as an (Evangelical) Anglican and an MP could offer them a link into the British Parliament. Wilberforce was one of very few parliamentarians to have had sympathy with the Quaker petition, marking himself out as one of the earliest Anglican abolitionists. Clarkson took a leading part in the affairs of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and was given the responsibility for collecting information to support the abolition of the slave trade. In 1787, Clarkson published his pamphlet: *A Summary View of the Slave Trade and of the Probable Consequences of Its Abolition*.

Thomas Clarkson was very effective at giving the Committee a high public profile, spending the next two years riding around England, promoting the cause and gathering evidence. This included his interviewing 20,000 sailors, and obtaining equipment used

on the slave-ships (such as iron handcuffs, leg-shackles, thumb screws, instruments for forcing open slave's jaws and branding irons) for use in publications and public meetings. His research took him to English ports such as Bristol, where he received a great deal of information from the landlord of the Seven Stars pub, still standing in St Thomas Street, as well as Liverpool and London and his collection of evidence was vital in supporting the arguments of the abolitionists. In the next year he rode some 35,000 miles in search of evidence, seeing local anti-slave trade societies founded in the cities he visited.

He continued to write against the slave trade, filling his works with the descriptions he had heard first hand, publishing in 1789 as *An Essay on the Slave Trade*. In the previous year he had published his *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (1788), which was printed in large numbers. These works provided a firm basis for the first abolitionist speech of William Wilberforce in the House of Commons on 12 May 1789, and the twelve propositions which it contained.

In 1789 Clarkson wrote to the Rev. Mr. Jones at Trinity College, introducing Gustavus Vassa (Olaudah Equiano) the African anti-slavery author, who wished to visit Cambridge, and asking the Rev. Jones for help in selling Equiano's autobiography. After the passage of the Slave Trade Act in 1807 his efforts were mainly directed towards ensuring the enforcement of the act and seeking to further the campaign in the rest of Europe. He travelled to Paris in 1814 and Aix-la-Chapelle in 1818, with the aim of arriving at an internationally-agreed timetable for abolition.

After 1823, when the *Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery* (later the Anti-Slavery Society) was formed, Clarkson once again travelled the length of the country, covering 10,000 miles, activating the vast network of sympathetic anti-slavery societies which had been formed. This resulted in 777 petitions being delivered to parliament demanding the total emancipation of slaves. When the society finally adopted a policy of immediate emancipation, he and Wilberforce appeared together for the last time to lend their support.

Thomas Fowell Buxton 1786-1845

Buxton was elected as a Member of Parliament for Weymouth and Melcombe Regis in 1818.

He helped found the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery (later the Anti-Slavery Society) in 1823. He took over as leader of the abolition movement in the House of Commons after William Wilberforce retired in 1825. His efforts paid off in 1833 when slavery was officially abolished in the United Kingdom. Buxton held his seat in Parliament until 1837.

In 1839 Buxton urged the British government to make treaties with African leaders to abolish the slave trade. They sent a team (not including Buxton) to the Niger River Delta in 1841 that set up a headquarters and began negotiations. The party suffered so many deaths from disease that the government called them back.

In 1840 Buxton was created a baronet. His health failed gradually, which some believed was caused by the disappointment over the failed mission to Africa. He died a few years later. There is a monument to him in Westminster Abbey, and a memorial to the emancipation of slaves and dedicated to Buxton in Victoria Tower Gardens

Zachary Macaulay 1768-1838

In late 1784, Macaulay emigrated to Jamaica, where he worked as an assistant manager at a sugar plantation. He was at first deeply affected by the horrific violence of the slavery which surrounded him, but eventually became hardened to the plight of the slaves (by his own admission “callous and indifferent”). He eventually began to take an interest in the slaves and their welfare.

In 1789 Macaulay returned to Britain and secured a position in London. His sister Jean had married Thomas Babington of Rothley Temple, Leicestershire, a country gentleman and ardent evangelical, and soon after Macaulay went to stay with them he began to come under their influence. He underwent what he described as a conversion experience, and soon became to know Babington’s associates, among whom were William Wilberforce and Henry Thornton.

Partly because of his experiences in Jamaica, in 1790 Macaulay was invited to visit Sierra Leone, the west African colony originally founded by Granville Sharp to provide a home for emancipated slaves from the United States and Nova Scotia.

Macaulay became a member of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, working closely with William Wilberforce, and soon becoming a leading figure in the parliamentary campaign against the slave trade. He later became secretary of the committee, which became known as the African Institution.

His major contribution was to work on the collection and collating of the huge volume of evidence and drafting of reports – a role to which he was ideally suited as a skilled statistician with a meticulous approach and an exceptional head for figures.

In the 1820s Macaulay turned his attention towards securing the total abolition of slavery itself. He helped found the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery (later the Anti-Slavery Society) in 1823, and was editor of its publication, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*.