

# CHILDREN AGAINST SLAVERY:

## JUVENILE AGENCY AND THE SUGAR BOYCOTTS IN BRITAIN

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**ABSTRACT:** In late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain, many contemporaries observed a striking phenomenon: that children were especially active in the boycotts of sugar produced by enslaved people. First-hand accounts often suggested that children's activism was unilateral and unmediated, whereas historians of British abolitionism have tended to assume that children were passive recipients of antislavery literature and adult influence. Engaging with both the historiography on British abolitionism and the new histories of childhood, this article examines the nature of juvenile engagement within the sugar boycotts. Collecting together some of the extensive but dispersed evidence of juvenile antislavery across the country, and focusing upon a case study of the Plymley household of Shropshire during the early 1790s, we explore the intricacies of children's involvement. Children's agency, we argue, needs to be understood as a specific, historicised phenomenon. Adults often chose to represent children's abolitionist activities as self-determined, for their participation in the boycotts affirmed both adult positions and their own child-rearing practices. However, whilst adults frequently solicited particular types of juvenile response, children often responded independently and in unexpected ways, negotiating their own positions in relation to their parents, siblings, and peers. We situate juvenile antislavery as a recursive process, operating within complex, intergenerational interactions.

### I

In her 1839 *A History of the Slave Trade and its Abolition*, Esther Copley made an extraordinary claim: 'in some instances, children, having heard the sufferings endured by Africans in cultivating the sweet cane, [...] resolutely abstained from it, and introduced into whole families the system of abstinence.'<sup>1</sup> This dramatic declaration—that the young unilaterally initiated boycotts of slave-produced sugar—remains largely unexamined by

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<sup>1</sup> Esther Copley, *A History of Slavery and its Abolition* (London, 1839), 2nd ed., 295. We thank Richard Huzzey for this reference.

historians. This is surprising given that the role of young people was, as we shall see, widely acknowledged by contemporaries.

The boycotts of slave-produced sugar in Britain and Ireland in the 1790s were among the first examples of mass consumer protest. They were popularised by the unprecedented success of William Fox's *Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Refraining from the Use of West India Sugar and Rum* (1791). Probably 'the most widely read pamphlet in British history',<sup>2</sup> it evidently enjoyed a juvenile as well as an adult audience. When William Dickson undertook a tour of Scotland for the Committee of the Abolition of The Slave Trade in 1792 he noted, among a number of instances of juvenile mobilisation, that the ten year old grandson of the Rev Alice at Paisley 'won't take sugr. Since he read Fox's tract'.<sup>3</sup> The boycotts sought both to raise awareness of the brutality of slavery and to undermine it economically through consumer pressure. Participation was widespread; abolitionist Thomas Clarkson claimed that some 300,000 families had joined the boycott by the end of 1791 - a figure Seymour Drescher has described as 'not an unreasonable guess.'<sup>4</sup> This number was even greater in the later boycotts of the 1820s, when women's leadership was more formally organised under the auspices of the new Female Antislavery Societies, notably the large provincial societies in Birmingham and Sheffield.<sup>5</sup> Often conflated with the 1791–1792 campaign, this second phase of boycotts related to a distinct phase in the antislavery movement, with its own blockbuster pamphlet in the form of Elizabeth Heyrick's *Immediate, Not Gradual Abolition* (1824).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> William Fox, *An Address to the People of Great Britain on the Consumption of West-India Produce An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum* (London, 1791). John Barrell and Timothy Whelan, 'Introduction', in *The Complete Writings of William Fox: Abolitionist, Tory, and Friend to the French Revolution* (Nottingham, 2011), ix.

<sup>3</sup> William Dickson, 'Diary of a visit to Scotland on behalf of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade', 24 January, 1792, Friends House Library, Temp MSS. Box 10/14, also cited in John R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion Against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807* (Manchester, 1995), 158.

<sup>4</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford, 1987), 79.

<sup>5</sup> See Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (London, 1992), chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Heyrick, *Immediate, Not Gradual Abolition; or, an Enquiry into the Shortest, Safest, and most Effectual Means of Getting Rid of West Indian Slavery* (London, 1824); Clare Midgley, *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790–1865* (London, 2007), chapter 2, especially 55–60.

The domestic nature of the campaign, and its roots within home-based consumption, have been seen to constitute a form of lifestyle politics which facilitated an inclusive form of political activism.<sup>7</sup> It was, in James Walvin's words, 'female-led'.<sup>8</sup> Clare Midgley's landmark contributions have established the significance of women's actions, noting the huge potential for a 'feminised anti-slavery culture' to enable women to exert political influence without transgressing gendered expectations of propriety.<sup>9</sup> The proliferation of antislavery literature for juvenile consumption is also well known, with a huge number of tales, poems, and tracts dedicated to a young audience.<sup>10</sup> Family-based studies, which have illuminated the significance of the home as a site of global activism, have, to date, provided the most in-depth insights into these issues. Most notably, Alison Twells has explored how the Read family of Sheffield were acculturated to 'missionary domesticity' through a range of family activities.<sup>11</sup> British children's support for missionary causes has received scrutiny<sup>12</sup> and there

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<sup>7</sup> Midgley, *Feminism and Empire*, chapter 2; Clare Midgley, 'Slave Sugar Boycotts, Female Activism and the Domestic Base of British Anti-Slavery Culture', *Slavery & Abolition*, 17:3 (1996), 137-162; Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1997), 37-51; Julie L. Holcomb, 'Blood-Stained Sugar: Gender, Commerce and the British Slave-Trade Debates', *Slavery & Abolition*, 35:4 (2014), 611-628; Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge, 2009), 248-251.

<sup>8</sup> James Walvin, *Questioning Slavery* (London, 1996), 164.

<sup>9</sup> Midgley, *Feminism and Empire*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Julie L. Holcomb, *Moral Commerce: Quakers and the Transatlantic Boycott of the Slave Labor Economy* (Ithaca, NY, 2017), 115-122; Johanna M. Smith, 'Slavery, Abolition, and the Nation in Priscilla Wakefield's Tour Books for Children', in Brycchan Carey, Markman Ellis and Sara Salih (eds.), *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition: Britain and its Colonies, 1760-1838* (Basingstoke, 2004), 175-193; John R. Oldfield, 'Anti-Slavery Sentiment in Children's Literature, 1750-1850', *Slavery & Abolition*, 10:1 (1989), 44-59.

<sup>11</sup> Alison Twells, *The Civilising Mission and the English Middle Class, 1792-1850: The 'Heathen' at Home and Overseas* (Basingstoke, 2009), chapter 3. See also Zoë Laidlaw, "'Aunt Anna's Report": The Buxton Women and the Aborigines Select Committee, 1835-37', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 32:2 (2004), 1-28 and Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender and Political Culture in Britain, 1815-1867* (Oxford, 2009), chapter 7.

<sup>12</sup> F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1980), chapter 3; Brian Stanley, "'Missionary Regiments for Immanuel's Service": Juvenile Missionary Organisations in English Sunday Schools', in Diana Wood (ed.), *The Church and Childhood* (Oxford, 1994), 391-403; Hugh Morrison, 'British World Protestant Children, Young People, Education and the Missionary Movement, c. 1840s-1930s', *Studies in Church History*, 55 (2019), 468-478.

is now welcome attention to the resistance of enslaved children.<sup>13</sup> However, historians of slavery rarely examine in depth how and why adults solicited children's active support for abolitionism in Britain.<sup>14</sup> As Sarah Richardson has argued, the late Georgian and Victorian household formed a crucial incubator for children's political awareness. Richardson is one of the few historians to note children's decisions to abstain from sugar in response to familial education.<sup>15</sup>

This article builds upon these contributions through engaging with the insights of the new childhood history which seeks to excavate children's voices.<sup>16</sup> This provides an opportunity to revisit the phenomenon of British antislavery through the lens of its juvenile actors.

Kathryn Gleadle has suggested there was a 'juvenile enlightenment' in the late eighteenth century which, through rational education, social practices, and juvenile literature, created 'highly aware, often politicized, children with the ability to question and critique their own positions, their family's politics, and the world around them.'<sup>17</sup> A detailed consideration of children's involvement in the sugar boycott allows us to further explore this phenomenon, excavating the complex layers of influence, socialisation, and education which variously produced juvenile anti-saccharists.

There was no static and universal definition of what constituted a 'child' in the period, and the transition to adulthood was always defined in relation to gender, class, 'race', ability, location, religion and personal maturity. Any assignation of child status is therefore bound to be arbitrary. While influential contributions from writers such as Mary Birkett (aged 17) and

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<sup>13</sup> Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, 2017), 254–256; Paula T. Connolly, *Slavery in American Children's Literature, 1790–2010* (Iowa City, 2013), 13–90; Colleen Vasconcellos, *Slavery, Childhood, and Abolition in Jamaica, 1788–1838* (Athens, GA, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> A notable exception is Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, 16–20, 142–148. For brief allusions in classic accounts, see Drescher, *Abolition*, 221; Midgley, *Women Against Slavery*, 61; David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780–1860* (London, 1991), 89–90.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Richardson, *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain* (New York, 2013), chapter 1, especially 23–25.

<sup>16</sup> For example, William A. Corsaro, *The Sociology of Childhood* (Thousand Oaks, 1997), chapter 4; Kristine Moruzi, Nell Musgrove, and Carla Pascoe Leahy, 'Hearing Children's Voices: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges', in Kristine Moruzi, Nell Musgrove, and Carla Pascoe Leahy (eds.), *Children's Voices from the Past: New Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland, 2019), 1–25.

<sup>17</sup> Kathryn Gleadle, 'The Juvenile Enlightenment: British Children and Youth During the French Revolution', *Past and Present*, 233:1 (2016), 144.

Maria and Harriet Falconar (aged 17 and 14, respectively) indicate the significance of interventions from young people, in this article we focus especially upon those below the age of 12.<sup>18</sup> Most of our subjects are considerably younger. In so doing, we hope to capture the experiences of those who might reasonably have been acknowledged as ‘children’ by modern readers as well as contemporaries. Legal definitions of childhood in this period varied considerably from one context to another, but in focusing upon those under the age of 12, we are also mindful of the lowest age at which children were deemed to have attained the “age of discretion” (meaning they could consent to marriage and issue a statement concerning personal property).<sup>19</sup> It is notable that most accounts of juvenile anti-saccharism relate to middle-class children. While the sugar boycotts – particularly in the 1820s – boasted extensive cross-class popular support, they reflected broader trends within abolitionism in that they were formally organised by middle-class activists.<sup>20</sup> While some evidence tentatively suggests that the children of the poor were targeted as potential activists,<sup>21</sup> their responses were not usually recorded, particularly within the domestic settings at the core of our analysis.<sup>22</sup> As such our focus is largely upon middle-class households.

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Birkett, *A Poem on the African Slave Trade. Addressed to Her Own Sex* (Dublin, 1792); Maria Falconar and Harriet Falconar, *Poems on Slavery* (London, 1788). See also the anonymous ‘On the Slave Trade, by a Young Lady at School’, *Manchester Mercury*, 4 March 1788.

<sup>19</sup> Girls were deemed to attain the age of discretion at 12 years, although boys not until 14. Anna-Christina Giovanopoulos, ‘The Legal Status of Children in 18th-Century England’, in Anja Müller (ed.), *Fashioning Childhood in the Eighteenth Century: Age and Identity* (Aldershot, 2006), 47. In her study of eighteenth-century childhood, Alys Levene chose to treat those under the age of 13 as children, noting, for example, this was the age at which children were generally bound out as apprentices. Alys Levene, *The Childhood of the Poor: Welfare in Eighteenth-Century London* (Basingstoke, 2012), 16–17.

<sup>20</sup> See Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, chapter 1.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, Rawson/Wilson Anti-Slavery Papers, GB 133 Eng MS 742, ‘Minute Books of the Sheffield Ladies’ Antislavery Society, 1825–1833’, ff. 38–39.

<sup>22</sup> During the 1820s and 1830s, children working in factories were themselves increasingly likened to slaves. This was one facet of an increasingly complex and troubled relationship between working-class reform and abolitionism during this period. Understanding how these contexts affected representations of juvenile antislavery among the poor demands dedicated attention to the dynamics of class, labour, radicalism and reform, which is regrettably beyond the scope of the present article. See Robert Gray, *The Factory Question and Industrial England, 1830–1860* (Cambridge, 2002), 21–47; Kathryn Gleadle, “‘We Will Have It’: Children and Protest in the Ten Hours Movement”, in Nigel Goose and Katrina Honeyman (eds.), *Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England: Diversity and Agency, 1750–1914* (Farnham, 2013), 215–230; Ryan Hanley,

Clearly, family dynamics of socialisation did not occur in isolation from the broader political climate, but at the same time, a nuanced understanding of how children's agency operated demands a forensic and tightly delimited focus. Thus, we look first to the broad contours of how children's engagement with the antislavery movement was publicly represented, drawing on the fragmentary reports of juvenile activity. We then turn to a detailed case-study of how this played out within the home during the 1791–1792 boycott. Juvenile engagement with the slavery question needs to be understood as a dynamic and complex phenomenon that defies easy categorisation. We seek to explore what children's contribution to abolitionism, and its representation, reveal about the complex interplay between adult influence and juvenile agency. We follow recent critiques of historians' consideration of childhood agency, understanding it, in the words of Mona Gleason to be, 'relational and complicated'.<sup>23</sup> However, we hope to contribute further to this conversation, by exploring how conceptions of juvenile agency are in themselves a historically specific phenomenon. In this case, it requires close attention not only to the political specificities of the antislavery campaign, but to contingent understandings of childhood development, specific emotional cultures and distinctive family dynamics.

## II

Scholars of abolitionism, where they have discussed children's participation, have generally characterised it as adult-led. Drescher, for instance, suggests that children in some schools were 'not allowed' to consume sugar.<sup>24</sup> Sympathetic observers, however, were more likely to emphasise children's initiative. In 1792 educationist Maria Edgeworth asserted, 'Twenty-five thousand people in England have absolutely left off eating West Indian sugar, from the hope that when there is no longer any demand for sugar the slaves will not be so cruelly treated. Children in several schools have given up sweet things, which is surely very benevolent'.<sup>25</sup> In

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'Slavery and the Birth of Working-Class Racism in England, 1814–1833', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 26 (2016), 103–123; Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford, 2002), 141–180.

<sup>23</sup> Mona Gleason, 'Avoiding the Agency Trap: Caveats for Historians of Children, Youth, and Education', *History of Education*, 45: 4 (2016), 457.

<sup>24</sup> Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery*, 216, footnote 46.

<sup>25</sup> Frances Edgeworth (ed.), *A Memoir of Maria Edgeworth, with a Selection from Her Letters* (London, 1867), 33.

1792, *The Times* published a letter supposedly from a young boy concerning his anti-saccharism, but the veracity of its authorship are impossible to verify.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, questions concerning agency are inherent in many of the scattered references to children's participation in the antislavery campaign, providing a crucial context for understanding juvenile sugar abstention. Within individual households, it is evident that the very young sometimes made striking efforts to express their antislavery sympathies. Nine year old Mary Ann West's 'LIBERTY and SLAVERY' sampler, completed in 1828, painstakingly cross-stitched over 1,000 words from Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, decrying the moral corrosion of colonial slavery.<sup>27</sup> This, and other examples of children's antislavery needlework samplers, seems to indicate at least the exercise of a negotiated form of political agency in producing them, but without understanding the family dynamics involved, it is difficult to assess.<sup>28</sup>

John Oldfield points out that schools and teachers were likely to have been prominent in negotiating and encouraging children's public engagement with antislavery.<sup>29</sup> While their influence over syllabi and day-to-day teaching were not always clear, several abolitionists, notably Hannah More and James Cropper, were involved in establishing and running schools.<sup>30</sup> After the Slavery Abolition Act had passed Parliament in 1833, anti-slavery was often appropriated within schools as a nonpartisan moral issue which reflected well on British identity. Indeed, schoolchildren were frequently foregrounded in public celebrations of emancipation. In Methodist, Baptist and Anglican-affiliated schools around the country, festivals and celebratory meals were held to mark abolition.<sup>31</sup> It is harder to tease out from extant reports of these events how the children responded. It was noted in the *Bradford Observer*, for instance, that following the municipal celebrations of emancipation day on 1 August 1834, pupils at the local Eastbrook Quaker school returned to their schoolroom with their teachers, where they 'subscribed twenty shillings [...] for the black population in the

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<sup>26</sup> 'Letter to the editor', *The Times*, 30 March 1792.

<sup>27</sup> Carol Humphrey, *Friends. A Common Thread: Samplers with a Quaker Inheritance* (Witney, 2008), 60.

<sup>28</sup> Other examples include Temperance Fisher's wool sampler, 'Jubilee Hymn for the First of August, 1834', and Esther Stewart's 1836 coloured wool sampler 'The African Slave'. Pamela Clabburn, *Samplers* (Princes Risborough, 1998), 2nd ed., 21, 24. We are grateful to the late Prof. Malcolm Chase for bringing these samplers to our attention.

<sup>29</sup> See Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, 147.

<sup>30</sup> Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford, 2004), chapter 5; National Museums Liverpool, Cropper Family Archives, 'Henry Brougham to James Cropper, 6 November 1833', D/CR/11/73.

<sup>31</sup> Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery*, 89–90, 107–108.

colonies.’<sup>32</sup> While we cannot recover the dynamics of the event, it is apparent that the children were positioned in this account as active recipients of the antislavery message. This tendency of representation is crucial when assessing retrospective narratives which stressed juvenile activism.

Those below the age of 14 were discouraged from signing antislavery petitions.<sup>33</sup> However, direct appeals to children changed over time. The first sugar boycott predated the widespread production of antislavery literature for children, which was especially a feature of the 1820s and 1830s in Britain.<sup>34</sup> Most of this literature encouraged merely affective responses.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, some campaigners solicited more decisive involvement, for instance by exhorting children to contribute financially to the cause, especially after the boycotts of the 1820s.<sup>36</sup> The annual reports of the Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves in Birmingham detailed a number of donations from children. Sometimes these were mediated through schoolteachers or parents,<sup>37</sup> although other small donations purported to be from children acting independently. The records sentimentally emphasised the donor’s young age, for example listing ‘a little boy’ and a ‘little girl’ as donating one shilling apiece.<sup>38</sup> This suggests the figure of the self-motivated child activist could be mobilised to prompt adults into taking action. In a similar vein, a poem written by Sarah Read in the mid-1820s featured a young boy who resolved to urge his father to relinquish slave-produced sugar after seeing an advertisement for an antislavery meeting.<sup>39</sup> In exploring claims of children’s unilateral

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<sup>32</sup> *Bradford Observer*, 7 August 1834.

<sup>33</sup> Plymley Notebooks, Shropshire Archives (hereafter SA), 1066 /9 (1792), f.18. Our thanks to the owners of the Plymley archive and to Shropshire Archives for their kind permission to use the Plymley material.

<sup>34</sup> Scholars have only identified sporadic publications prior to this. For the increase in antislavery literature from the 1820s, see Oldfield, ‘Children’s Literature’, 50–51.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Susanna Moodie, ‘The Vanquished Lion (1831)’, in Susannah Moodie, *Voyages: Short Narratives of Susanna Moodie*, ed. John Thurston (Ottawa, 1991), 31–42.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. Frances Rolleston, ‘Anti-Slavery Hymn for Children’, GB/133/Eng MS 742/30, University of Manchester, John Rylands Library, Rawson/Wilson Anti-Slavery Papers, Letters and Papers.

<sup>37</sup> *The Fifth Report of the Female Society, for Birmingham [...] for the Relief of British Negro Slaves* (Birmingham, 1830), 68.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 68; *The Third Report of the Female Society, for Birmingham [...] for the Relief of British Negro Slaves* (Birmingham, n.p., 1828), 35.

<sup>39</sup> Twells, *The Civilising Mission*, 97.



sugar abstention, therefore, it is important to be alert to the wider discursive resonance such an image held, and the functions it might be hoped to serve.

This is especially apposite when considering retrospective accounts, such as autobiographies. The antislavery movement provided a significant point of reference for many nineteenth-century autobiographers when describing their childhood development.<sup>40</sup> Tracing juvenile engagement through the lens of such sources poses methodological challenges. Narrative shaping occurred through the lens of subsequent collective memories and often projected a teleological construction of a coherent self.<sup>41</sup> Thus, like contemporary adult observers, many autobiographers presented their juvenile involvement in the sugar boycott as unmediated and spontaneous. Recalling her childhood in Bristol during the 1820s, the pioneering physician Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910) claimed the ‘children voluntarily gave up the use of sugar, as a ‘slave product’.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the famous scientist Mary Somerville (1780–1872) recalled:

when I was a girl I took the anti-slavery cause so warmly to heart that I would not take sugar in my tea, or indeed taste anything with sugar in it. I was not singular in this, for my cousins and many of my acquaintances came to the same resolution.<sup>43</sup>

Writer Lucy Aikin (1781–1864), niece to the author Anna Letitia Barbauld, paid greater attention to the wider political agenda of the adults around her, recounting the personal impact of a 1788 vote in Commons for the abolition of the slave trade alongside the unsuccessful motion for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts.<sup>44</sup> Yet Aikin was keen to portray the striking commitment of children to the sugar boycott: ‘I should scarcely be believed were I to recount the bitter persecutions we poor children underwent in the

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<sup>40</sup> See for example Roxanne Eberle, “‘Tales of Truth?’ Amelia Opie’s Antislavery Poetics’, in Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt (eds.), *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception* (Lexington, 1999), 76.

<sup>41</sup> See Kathryn Gleadle, ‘Playing at Soldiers: British Loyalism and Juvenile Identities during the Napoleonic Wars’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 38:3 (2015), 335–348.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Blackwell, *Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women: Autobiographical Sketches* (London, 1895), 7.

<sup>43</sup> Mary Somerville, *Personal Recollections, from Early Life to Old Age, of Mary Somerville, with Selections from her Correspondence* (London, 1874), 124.

<sup>44</sup> Mrs. Herbert Martin (ed.), *Memories of Seventy Years by One of a Literary Family* (London, 1884), 18. (Original emphasis)

children's parties which we frequented, for the offence of denying ourselves *on principle* the dainties which children most delight in'.<sup>45</sup> A similar narrative emerges in the autobiography of Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck (1778–1856), (née Galton), who came from a Birmingham Quaker family of gun manufacturers. She too noted the significance of adults whilst continuing to emphasise juvenile initiative in the face of persecution. She described how she and her female cousins read antislavery pamphlets, examining 'in detail the prints of slave ships and slave treatment'. Despite delineating a variety of adult abolitionist influences (including the inspiring presence of family friend Thomas Clarkson), she presented her sugar abstention as a positive decision made by herself and her peers: 'both my cousins and I resolved to leave off sugar'. Her emphasis upon juvenile agency was enhanced by her account of the difficulties she faced in continuing with her resolve on returning to her nuclear family. Her governess, in particular, mocked the practice. It was thanks to the antislavery literature which her (adult) cousin Lizzie Forster lent her, that she was able to abstain 'more zealously than ever, though alone in my family, from using sugar', despite being 'subject to daily ridicule and taunts'.<sup>46</sup> The parliamentary abolitionist Thomas Fowell Buxton claimed he was first 'made to think' about the issue of slavery during his childhood years because his sister Anna 'refused to eat sugar because it was produced by the enforced industry of slaves'.<sup>47</sup> A common thread throughout these accounts is the significance of peer-to-peer socialisation of young people in affecting their stance on sugar consumption and the place this held in their narratives of moral development into adulthood.

Representations of children's involvement in the antislavery campaign therefore raise complex questions concerning the nature and scope of juvenile agency, and opens up further layers to investigate within the micro-ecologies of abolitionist families. To understand why many contemporaries categorised children's involvement in the sugar boycott as a decision taken independently of adults, we now turn to a specific case study.

### III

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>46</sup> Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck, *Life of Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck: Autobiography*, C. C. Hankin (ed.) (London, 1858), 51, 166, 180–1, 285.

<sup>47</sup> T. Wemyss Reid, *The Life of the Right Honourable William Edward Foster* (London, 1888), 2 vols., v. 1, 21.

The notebooks and diaries of Katherine Plymley (1758–1829) provide one of the most detailed insights of children’s socialisation in, and responses to, the British antislavery movement. Plymley was a member of the Shropshire gentry and sister of the local Archdeacon, Joseph Corbett.<sup>48</sup> When Corbett’s wife died in 1787, Katherine and her younger sister Ann (born 1761), took on the responsibility of caring for their children: Panton (bap. April 1785), Josepha (born 1786) and Jane (born 19 November 1787).<sup>49</sup> The Plymley household combined an evangelical Anglicanism with sympathy for the cosmopolitan ideals of the French Revolution. Corbett was a key figure in the antislavery movement, heading up local petitions throughout Shropshire and working closely with the London committee for the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST) and its successor organisations. The family was in close contact with prominent abolitionists, and Thomas Clarkson, the preeminent extra-parliamentary figure of the movement, was a frequent house guest.<sup>50</sup> Plymley and the children revered him.<sup>51</sup> It was Clarkson’s first visit to the household in 1791 that inspired Plymley to begin her copious diaries detailing her brother’s involvement in the campaign.<sup>52</sup> These notebooks included transcripts of correspondence, accounts of parliamentary proceedings, philosophical digressions, and narratives of family conversations

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<sup>48</sup> Joseph Corbett (formerly Plymley) changed his surname to Corbett in 1806, having inherited his uncle’s estate in 1804. Dahn, ‘Women and Taste’, 153. For the sake of clarity, Joseph will be referred to as Corbett.

<sup>49</sup> Corbett married Matty Dansey in 1790. They had further children, but it was agreed that Katherine and Ann would continue to care for the three eldest children. For detailed discussions of Katherine Plymley, see Kathryn Gleadle, ‘“Opinions Deliver’d in Conversation”: Conversation, Politics and Gender in the Late Eighteenth Century’, in José Harris (ed.), *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions* (Oxford, 2003), 61–78; Kathryn Gleadle, ‘Gentry, Gender, and the Moral Economy during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in Provincial England’, in Lana L. Dalley and Jill Rappoport (eds.), *Economic Women: Essays on Desire and Dispossession in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Columbus, 2013), 25–40; Johanna Dahn, ‘Women and Taste: A Case Study of Katherine Plymley, 1758–1829’, PhD Thesis, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2001.

<sup>50</sup> Corbett’s sons, Panton and his half-brother Uvedale were later elected directors of the antislavery African Institution. As an MP Panton supported the antislavery campaign. D. R. Fisher (ed.), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1820–1832* (Cambridge, 2009) [Online] Available from: <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/corbett-panton-1785-1855> (Accessed 30 Sep. 2019); SA 1066/90 (1812), f. 40.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, SA 1066/48 (1797), f. 18. The family’s opinion of him later cooled, regretting, amongst other things, his move towards Unitarianism. See SA 1066/131–134 (1825–1828).

<sup>52</sup> SA 1066/1 (1791), f. 1.

and encounters. Taken together, they comprise an unofficial, highly partial history of the antislavery movement.

Plymley's first decisive claim as to children's initiative in the sugar boycott was a reference to a local Shrewsbury printer, Mr Eddowes: 'His family have left off the use of sugar & the little people were the first to wish it'.<sup>53</sup> However, her wider narrative pointed to the organised sugar boycott campaign within which such decisions were located. Earlier, in autumn 1791, she had visited the family of the famous abolitionist Josiah Wedgwood at their home in Etruria, Staffordshire. Here she presented sugar abstention as a family, rather than a children's, issue: 'Mr. Wedgewood's [sic] family wou'd not have any West India sugar', noting they had ceased all sugar consumption whilst waiting for a consignment of East Indian-grown product. When she described this visit to Clarkson, he informed her of the emerging impact of Fox's *Address*.<sup>54</sup> Clarkson subsequently suggested that campaigners should induce their local booksellers to bulk buy Fox's pamphlet for distribution. Her own brother, Plymley recorded, ordered 500 copies from Eddowes. It was only at this point, by which time Plymley had laid out Corbett and Eddowes' roles in a coordinated strategy to promote the sugar boycott, that she suggested Eddowes's children had been 'the first to wish it'.<sup>55</sup> This stark declaration of juvenile agency therefore belied the multiple influences which, as Plymley was aware, underpinned these actions.

Her complicated positioning of children's decisions is underlined by comparing Plymley's contemporaneous to her retrospective accounts of the same events. In April 1792, she recorded the family's early history of sugar abstention through a conversation with Clarkson:

My Br. mention'd to Mr Clarkson his little people's zeal in the disuse of sugar & that little Jane had said she wou'd not use any till it came from Sierra Leone. Mr. C observed the virtue of little Children was wonderful. I have before noticed in this particular instance as among those children who are inform'd on the subject I

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<sup>53</sup> SA 1066/4 (1792), ff. 10–12.

<sup>54</sup> SA 1066/1 (1791), ff. 12–13. Timothy Whelan, 'William Fox, Martha Gurney, and Radical Discourse of the 1790s', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 42:3 (2009), 397–411.

<sup>55</sup> SA 1066/4 (1792), ff. 10–12.

have heard of more readiness to give up the use of sugar than among grown people.<sup>56</sup>

Looking back in 1797, Plymley recounted these events slightly differently:

Mr Clarkson observed, at the time that it was thought advisable to abstain from West India Sugar, & we had mentioned to him that Panton, Josepha and Jane, then very young, were the first to leave off its use among us. 'It is wonderful the virtue of little children, I have known numbers of such instance'.<sup>57</sup>

These two accounts were substantially similar, suggesting that the children's abstention was a repeated, shared narrative within the family's circle. However, in the later account, the balance between unilateral juvenile action and adult influence had shifted. It was implied that the children pioneered the family's anti-saccharite activity while references to adult influences over this decision had been excised. By contrast, in the 1792 account, the significant qualifier 'among those children who are inform'd on the subject' acknowledged that childhood anti-saccharism could be a negotiated, if nevertheless deliberate, response to adult expectations.

Plymley's diaries therefore illuminate how a specific narrative of juvenile determination was favoured. In order to understand her account, it is necessary to excavate the views of childhood which circulated in her network, and the interconnected ideas on consumption, gender, morality, and education, through which the children's actions were both enabled and interpreted. Within this, the particularities of the family's emotional culture served to cohere an investment in the values of bodily restraint and sensibility to suffering, whilst also affirming affective expression as an appropriate means to demonstrate concurrence to stated ideals. Hester Barron and Claire Langhamer have observed that recent histories of emotion, despite sensitivity to the 'power dynamics of emotional learning', tend to position children somewhat passively within adult-dominated models.<sup>58</sup> Emphasising instead the significance of intersubjective behaviour and responses, they argue, reveals that children can be highly cognisant of their potential to influence adult emotions. Our understanding of the Plymley

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<sup>56</sup> SA 1066/9 (1792), ff. 10–11.

<sup>57</sup> SA 1066/46 (1797), ff. 9–10.

<sup>58</sup> Hester Barron and Claire Langhamer, 'Feeling through Practice: Subjectivity and Emotion in Children's Writing', *Journal of Social History*, 51:1 (2017), 104.

children is mediated through adult-authored sources, limiting the potential to explore their own subjectivities or the likelihood of teasing out diverse emotional responses beyond the purview of their aunt, father or Clarkson. Nevertheless, this does not necessitate viewing them as simply responsive to the emotional demands of the adults around them. Plymley's approving accounts of her nieces' and nephew's behaviour includes indications of the children's agentic conduct as well as the ways in which their responses affirmed and shaped adult identities.

Writing a retrospective account of Panton's childhood around 1800, Plymley recalled fondly his tenderness of disposition.<sup>59</sup> She was particularly proud of the then six-year-old's imaginative response to Clarkson's *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*: 'when he read the part which mentions that the kidnappers lie conceal'd in the long grass to catch slaves, he wish'd a flight of locusts wou'd come there & eat up the grass that they may not have it to hide in.'<sup>60</sup> Panton's imaginary rescue of the hunted Africans by divine intervention signified an appropriately interior, self-reflective response that confirmed his socialisation into the evangelical-political nexus occupied by his family and their circle.

Panton's emotional sensitivity was praised in other political contexts. Plymley reported he was left inconsolable after hearing of Lafayette's mistreatment in a Prussian jail. With evident satisfaction at his precocious sensibility, she added, in parentheses, 'He is not 8 years old.'<sup>61</sup> Plymley's approval of Panton's tears of sympathy evinced the positive valorisation of the 'masculine sensibility' which, as Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff have suggested, was endorsed within the evangelical middle-class family.<sup>62</sup> Many scholars have observed that sentimental responses to African suffering could act as moral palliatives, allowing metropolitan onlookers to indulge a sense of sympathy without motivating meaningful

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<sup>59</sup> SA 1066/56, (1800–1801), f. 22.

<sup>60</sup> SA 1066/9 (1792), f. 4.

<sup>61</sup> SA, 1066/14 (1792–1793), ff. 17–18.

<sup>62</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London, 1987), 111.

action.<sup>63</sup> It may well be that for many adults the ‘solipsistic’ nature of antislavery sensibility represented an ideal juvenile response.<sup>64</sup>

The children’s encouragement to interact with the antislavery movement then, was woven into an intricate web of ideological assumptions and family pressures. Their ready response to the sugar boycott was probably enhanced by the fact that the family already encouraged close reflection on the politics of food and its consumption. Another document authored by Plymley dating from this period discussed the waste of food in elite households; and the virtues of controlling ‘intemperate passions’ were recurring themes in her notebooks.<sup>65</sup> She quoted with evident gratification a letter sent from Houlbrooke to her brother in which he expressed his delight with the children’s anti-saccharism: ‘they do well to abstain from Sugar, it is giving them a habit of self denial & from the best motives.’<sup>66</sup> Sugar abstention was valued not simply as an abolitionist strategy, but also for inculcating morality and personal discipline.

That the children’s father was a prominent abolitionist further ensured that the affective culture of the family was intertwined with a commitment to the cause. Children had an emotional and psychological investment in identifying with the antislavery politics of their father. Autobiographers often referenced the significance of their fathers (rather than their mothers) in explaining their commitment to antislavery and other campaigning causes. This enabled them to align themselves with the social and cultural privileges accorded to fathers.<sup>67</sup> Within the Plymley family, the affective contours of the antislavery issue were reinforced through the children’s relationship with Clarkson, with whom they were encouraged to

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<sup>63</sup> George Bouloukos, *The Grateful Slave: The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture* (Cambridge, 2008), 201–232; Jamie Rosenthal, ‘The Contradictions of Racialized Sensibility: Gender, Slavery, and the Limits of Sympathy’, in Stephen Ahern (ed.), *Affect and Abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic, 1770–1830* (Farnham, 2013), 171–188; Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760–1807* (Basingstoke, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> See Stephen Ahern, ‘Introduction: The Bonds of Sentiment’, in Stephen Ahern (ed.), *Affect and Abolition*, especially 6–9; Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford, 2002), 23–86.

<sup>65</sup> SA 567/5/5/1/33, ‘Thoughts Written At Lyth’ (1792); Gleadle, ‘Gentry, Gender, and the Moral Economy’.

<sup>66</sup> SA 1066/9 (1792), f. 20.

<sup>67</sup> For example, Josephine E. Butler, *Memoir of John Grey of Dilston* (London, 1874), 127; Catherine Marsh, *The Life of the Rev. William Marsh, By His Daughter* (London, 1868), 72–73; Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, 101–3.

interact with great intimacy. Plymley wrote approvingly of his holding the children's hands and their readiness to kiss him. 'They seem'd to win his affection & whilst he was conversing yesterday & today he wou'd hold their hands & play with their hair.'<sup>68</sup> This affectionate relationship gave the children the confidence to converse with Clarkson on the antislavery question; 'they had all ask'd him when he thought the Slave Trade wou'd be put a stop to', Plymley noted approvingly in October 1791. In turn, Clarkson 'had condescendingly taken pains to answer them in such a manner as he thought they wou'd best understand.'<sup>69</sup> During his many visits to the household during the early 1790s, he continued to spend time with the children, combining child-centred activities with delivering the antislavery message. In the autumn of 1792, Plymley described him helping them with a jigsaw puzzle:

The children were putting a dissected map of Africa together. He [Clarkson] observ'd it, said it was not an accurate one, but that no accurate map of Africa cou'd be had. [...] He had the goodness to mark with a pen a dot for the [Sierra Leone] company's settlement & for the territories of Naimbana, Samie and Domingo which has render'd the map very valuable to us.<sup>70</sup>

While nominally educating the children about African geography, Clarkson could not help but campaign to them by centring the abolitionist-backed settlement at Sierra Leone (his brother John was at that time Governor of the settlement).<sup>71</sup> Later, he continued to engage the children in the project by sending them Sierra Leonean coins as gifts.<sup>72</sup> The Plymley children were therefore explicitly encouraged to learn more about the antislavery movement through their emotional connection to Clarkson. This is borne out by young Jane's well-informed declaration in 1792, when she was 4 or 5 years old, that she would cease to consume sugar until it came from Sierra Leone.<sup>73</sup> Later, her older sister Josepha, then aged 6 or 7, made a sweet bag for Clarkson, with Plymley emphasising this was 'at her own desire'.<sup>74</sup> Plymley's

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<sup>68</sup> SA 1066/13 (1792), f. 2

<sup>69</sup> SA 1066/2 (1791), ff. 22–23.

<sup>70</sup> SA 1066/13 (1792), ff. 2–3.

<sup>71</sup> See Pádraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolutions* (New Haven CT, 2017), chapter 1.

<sup>72</sup> SA 1066/21 (1793), 19.

<sup>73</sup> SA 1066/9 (1792), ff. 10–11.

<sup>74</sup> SA 1066/21 (1793), ff. 18–19. A sweet bag is a small cloth bag containing herbs.



endorsement of Josepha's wish to please Clarkson, and to make an affective gesture of her own accord, speaks to the emotional dynamics of Clarkson's presence in the house.

The creation of an atmosphere in which the children were eager to gratify Clarkson provides a vital context in understanding their responses to antislavery messages. In a diary entry dating from 1801, Plymley looked back on Panton's childhood reading habits, noting that 'in consequence of a conversation with Mr. Clarkson he wish'd to read his prize essay, & he did read it in the Decr. before he was seven years old'.<sup>75</sup> However, at the time in 1792, Plymley's account was more precise as to the nature of Clarkson's influence:

He ask'd Panton yesterday what he wou'd do to put a stop to the slave trade & he prettily answer'd, I wou'd do anything I cou'd. Mr. C told him as he was so young the best thing he cou'd do was to read on the subject that he may grow up with a just detestation of it. Panton was eager to begin & this morning by his own desire began Mr. Clarkson's first Essay. When Mr. C returned from Coalbrooke Dale he ran to him eager to tell him of it.<sup>76</sup>

In this instance, observe the pressure that was put upon the child to respond, with Clarkson asking the six-year-old how he proposed to stop the slave trade. Panton's keen reaction did not reflect simply a desire to assist the movement, but was a juvenile decision to conform to a specific interpersonal dynamic. Pleasing Clarkson and responding to him with alacrity gained him praise in this environment.

Plymley's narrative concerning the children's abolitionism was also the product of a highly gendered form of female life writing. Plymley appeared unwilling to position herself as an antislavery advocate in her own right. She did not present the sugar boycott of the early 1790s as a woman-centred discourse, but drew attention to the response of her nieces and nephew, as well as continuing to reference the lead taken by her brother. In a later summary of Jane's biography, Plymley established a narrative arc between Jane's life and that of the antislavery movement. Jane, she asserted, had known of the antislavery cause all her life, adding that she was born 19 November 1787, and that the first committee for abolition had

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<sup>75</sup> SA 1066/56 (1800-1801), ff. 4-5. Clarkson's prize-winning student dissertation was translated from Latin into English as *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African* (London: J. Phillips, 1788), and marketed extensively by SEAST.

<sup>76</sup> SA, 1066/2 (1791), f. 22

been formed earlier that year.<sup>77</sup> Situating the children within the antislavery movement was, for Plymley, a way of validating the family identity. She conveyed developments in the antislavery movement through the lens of the children in her care, erasing her own voice.

Nonetheless, she did have strongly-held views on the importance of the domestic environment for children's moral development. This had significant implications for her representation of their antislavery sentiments. In 1797, Plymley noted a discussion arising from William Wilberforce's latest publication, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians*.<sup>78</sup> Wilberforce contended that people were born sinful and that only strict moral education could lead to grace. He brought attention to 'the perverse and froward disposition perceivable in children, which it is the business and sometimes the ineffectual attempt of education to reform.'<sup>79</sup> In the margin beside this passage in the household's copy of Wilberforce's tract, Plymley's brother wrote,

the easy reception that good sentiments find in children not taught evil, shows how much man is formed for virtue tho' he may have, or rather has some contrary propensities; but these, as education is managed, are the seeds that are nurtured into action ninety nine times out of an hundred.<sup>80</sup>

While Wilberforce and Joseph Corbett shared an emphasis on the importance of education, they evidently differed on children's natural propensity towards good or evil. Ideological views on children do not necessarily relate simply to practice and the Plymley family later commented approvingly on child-rearing within the Wilberforce family.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, these contrasting perspectives exemplify divisions in late Georgian attitudes towards childhood. The evangelical precepts of children's original sin contrasted with two distinct enlightenment perspectives: firstly, John Locke's view of the child as a blank slate, and hence the power of the environment to shape the individual; and secondly Rousseau's emphasis upon human's natural state of innocence and the importance of allowing children to develop without constraint. From the end of the eighteenth century, the latter perspective gained in credence

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<sup>77</sup> SA 1066/147 (n.d.), ff. 34–35.

<sup>78</sup> William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity* (London, 1797).

<sup>79</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, 34.

<sup>80</sup> SA, 1066/46 (1797), f. 9.

<sup>81</sup> SA 1066/90 (1812), ff. 10–12.

due to an emergent, romantic ideal of childhood innocence.<sup>82</sup> One of Plymley's closest friends, Archibald Alison, who mixed in radical Edinburgh circles, insisted to her that children would be 'naturally good' providing they were not exposed to evil examples. Plymley appeared to align with her brother in generally preferring a slightly different emphasis – suggesting the key to moral education was to 'form the disposition' in children to do good.<sup>83</sup> In so doing, she emphasised the importance of the domestic sphere as a site for the training of moral citizens. As a result, she was firmly of the view that boys should be educated at home. In this she was joined by Clarkson who, she reported, proclaimed that Parliament would have voted to abolish the slave trade had not most of its members been educated in a public school.<sup>84</sup> Her brother, like many contemporaries, was increasingly concerned that a home-based education might expose boys to too great a female influence.<sup>85</sup> Not so Plymley. Her glowing appraisal of Panton as a young adult emphasised his upbringing at home, 'at a distance from all the vices and follies too often acquired at great schools'.<sup>86</sup> Her accounts of children's antislavery sensibilities were part of a rich interplay of discourses concerning juvenile development. An affection towards her charges combined with a sentimentalism towards the nature of childhood meant that the figure of the innocent child held considerable traction for her. As such, she did not adhere to a strict, Lockean or associationist view of the child; yet she did believe that children's potential for moral purity could be carefully cultivated by the adults, including by implication the women, around them.<sup>87</sup>

The antislavery cause was therefore not an isolated campaign to which the children were exposed, but part of a deeper, multifaceted nexus of messages and practices. As a result, it

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<sup>82</sup> Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (London, 1995), 61–72; Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780–1832* (Cambridge, 1994), chapter 1.

<sup>83</sup> SA 1066/46 (1797), ff. 9–10.

<sup>84</sup> SA 1066/3 (1791), ff. 5–6.

<sup>85</sup> SA 1066/58, f. 19. Michèle Cohen, 'Gender and the Private/Public Debate on Education in the Long Eighteenth Century', in Richard Aldrich (ed.), *Public or Private Education? Lessons from History* (London, 2004), 2–24.

<sup>86</sup> SA 1066/53, f. 15.

<sup>87</sup> Christoph Houswitschka, 'Locke's Education or Rousseau's Freedom: Alternative Socializations in Modern Societies', in Müller (ed.), *Fashioning Childhood*, 81–88; Mary Hilton, *Women and the Shaping of the Nation's Young: Education and Public Doctrine in Britain, 1750–1850* (Aldershot, 2007), chapters 1–4.

was more likely to gain credence for children as it affirmed other aspects of their education and upbringing. The additional emotional pressures placed upon the young to react in specific ways to the antislavery message and its campaigners created a highly charged environment in which dissent from abolitionism would have been experienced as dissent from the family's affective culture. Given this, it is hardly surprising that children chose to positively endorse the antislavery line. But this does not mean to say that the children were passive pawns of an intense socialisation process. As Susan Miller has observed, juvenile agency can be located in the historical record on a 'continuum' of relations to parental wishes, and could incorporate elements of compliance or assent as well as resistance.<sup>88</sup>

The Plymley notebooks provide an insightful commentary upon the ways in which the children reimagined the ideas and wishes of their father and aunts. Plymley later recalled that when Jane was a little girl, her father so enjoyed hearing her attempts to reason that he would often venture unexpected remarks to see what she would make of them.<sup>89</sup> This warns against conceptualising the influence of adults upon children in simple, direct terms. Rather, we might conceive of domestic relations consisting of a 'recursive loop' in which parental and juvenile interventions were continually responding to and building upon each other dialogically.<sup>90</sup> There are many instances in the Plymley archive in which the children reinterpreted the ideas to which they were exposed. For example, Plymley recorded of her teenaged niece Jane that her religious sensibilities became so finely developed that not only would she not read novels or plays – a common evangelical position – but that she 'carries it to such an extreme that the interesting moral stories of which there are now so many for young people, she objects to'.<sup>91</sup> Such decisions served to enhance the family's mythology of Jane as a uniquely godly young woman. Jane died in her twenty-first year, following a prolonged period of obsessive fasting which had originated in a decision to support the

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<sup>88</sup> Susan A. Miller, 'Assent as Agency in the Early Years of the Children of the American Revolution', *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 9:1 (2016), 48–65.

<sup>89</sup> SA, 1066/148 (n.d.), ff. 5–6.

<sup>90</sup> We follow Karen Sánchez-Eppler in adopting Elizabeth Maddock Dillon's formulation. Karen Sánchez-Eppler, 'Practicing for Print: The Hale Children's Manuscript Libraries', *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 1:2 (2008), 188–209; Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere* (Stanford, 2004), 35–36.

<sup>91</sup> SA 1066/56 (1800–1801), f. 18.

family's attempts to ensure greater foodstuffs for the poor.<sup>92</sup> Despite her fast's broad alignment with the family's stated values, their heartbreak at Jane's actions means that it can hardly be interpreted straightforwardly as compliance.

Similarly, notwithstanding Corbett and Plymley's encouragement of the children's antislavery activities, they were still occasionally surprised by unexpected responses. In April 1792, shortly after the children had begun to abstain from West India sugar, Plymley noticed that seven-year-old Panton's shoes looked 'very brown' and had not been polished. Upon enquiring with the servants, she found that 'he had given orders that they shou'd not be black'd because he understood sugar was used in the composition'.<sup>93</sup> This was an unusual form of abstention, not mentioned in any of the prominent campaigning literature. Thus, the children sometimes responded to the question of transatlantic slavery in ways that, while in broad accordance with their father and aunt's wishes, were nevertheless unanticipated and not explicitly encouraged. Young people could be innovative in participating in popular antislavery, in ways that navigated the tensions between obeisance to parental authority and their own intentionality.

This negotiation was at the heart of an exchange between the children and another famous abolitionist. Gustavus Vassa, better known today by his pen-name Olaudah Equiano, dined at the Plymley house during one of his national 'book tours' in June 1793.<sup>94</sup> Equiano had been looking to meet with Corbett, to whom he had been introduced in London, but he was not home at the time of the visit and so he dined instead with Corbett's sister Ann. He stayed to talk with the children afterwards. As Plymley recorded it,

the little people, though they had not been accustomed to blacks, immediately went to him, offered their hands & behaved in their pretty friendly way. Whilst my sister was out of the room he gave Panton one of the little pamphlets against the use of sugar. When Ann return'd & Panton said, see what this gentleman has given me, she told him what warm friends they were to the abolition, & that they had long left off sugar. He gave Panton one of his memoirs & wrote his name in it himself, & desired him to remember him. He asked Panton if he should like to

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<sup>92</sup> Gleadle, 'Gender, Gentry and the Moral Economy', 30.

<sup>93</sup> SA, 1066/9 (1792), f. 10

<sup>94</sup> Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (London, 2005), 355.

travel. P— said he did not know — Should he like to go to Africa — Yes — Will you go with me — just as my Papa pleases — Josepha on being asked made the same answer & he made many professions of the care he would take of them. Ann, Mrs. Plymley and the little people were much pleased with him.<sup>95</sup>

Having given Panton an antislavery pamphlet while his aunt was out of the room, Equiano may have inadvertently committed a minor social infraction by circumventing familial authority, precipitating Ann's gentle response that they had *already* educated their children about the horrors of slavery, and abstained from sugar consumption. The subsequent discussion about travelling to Africa was also seemingly a tense exchange in which Equiano solicited an independent response directly from Panton (then eight years old) and Josepha (six or seven years old), who in reply—perhaps uncertain of what he wanted to hear—attested to their own deference to their father's authority. In a sense, Equiano had challenged them to exceed the agreed limits of their independence by signing up to an imagined trip to Africa without their father's assent. They chose instead to stand firm to their established boundaries; an act that nonetheless required an active decision about which adult's expectations to frustrate.<sup>96</sup> This once again emphasizes that, at least for the Plymley children, adherence to parental authority on the question of different forms of antislavery activity represented a *negotiated* form of juvenile agency.

#### IV

In 2002 political scientists Michael McDevitt and Steven Chaffee formulated a revisionist model of 'trickle up influence' perceiving children as acting agents, whose views and actions were capable of affecting the outlook of their parents. Family interactions and the responses to ongoing political events could lead to the re-evaluation of political positions. As they explain, 'the intrinsic forces of family adaptation [...] can make the home a powerful

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<sup>95</sup> SA 1066/17 (1793), ff. 5–7.

<sup>96</sup> For socialisation as a dialogical process in this period see Mary Hilton and Jill Shefrin, 'Introduction', in Mary Hilton and Jill Shefrin (eds.), *Educating the Child in Enlightenment Britain: Beliefs, Cultures, Practices* (Farnham, 2009), 6–8.

incubator of citizenship'.<sup>97</sup> The history of children's involvement in the antislavery cause exemplifies how intergenerational transmission of political and moral judgements could be dialogic as well as straightforwardly pedagogic. Affective relationships and dynamics of authority inflected juvenile anti-saccharism in complex ways and post-hoc claims of uninfluenced juvenile leadership tended towards idealising constructions in service to personal or family identity narratives. While the notion of antislavery activism as an unmediated form of juvenile political expression may be compelling, agency manifested most often as a result of recursive negotiation with adults' expectations and demands. Put another way, emotional pressures and family dynamics were crucial influences on children's agency, but they did not in any simple sense override it.

The evidence of the Plymley archive demonstrates how children's activities in the cause of antislavery positively affirmed adult positions. In her study of American girls' diaries from this period, Martha Blauvelt has drawn attention to the 'emotional labour' required of her young subjects.<sup>98</sup> Such an observation appears apposite to the Plymley children. They had significant expectations placed upon them to demonstrate particular emotional responses, especially to the suffering of enslaved people, in ways that would validate the adults' sense of their individual and family identities. Nevertheless, just as Blauvelt observes that 'emotion work' could function as a 'vehicle through which women create a negotiated self', so too could this be a means through which the Plymley siblings defined themselves.<sup>99</sup>

Historical discussion of the sugar boycotts has tended to present them as female-led, and as giving particular expression to female sensibilities.<sup>100</sup> The Plymley archive indicates that family interactions were more complex, and that greater attention needs to be paid to intergenerational dynamics. Mona Gleason has challenged historians to comprehend 'children's compliance with adult dictates from their own perspectives'.<sup>101</sup> This article suggests some of the ways in which this might be attempted, even in the absence of child-authored sources. However, we argue this needs to be within a framework which identifies

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<sup>97</sup> Michael McDevitt and Steven Chaffee, 'From Top-Down to Trickle-Up Influence: Revisiting Assumptions about the Family in Political Socialization', *Political Communication*, 19:3 (2002), 281–301.

<sup>98</sup> Martha Blauvelt, *The Work of the Heart: Young Women and Emotion, 1780–1830* (Charlottesville, 2007).

<sup>99</sup> Blauvelt, *The Work of the Heart*, 198.

<sup>100</sup> See above footnotes 7 and 8.

<sup>101</sup> Gleason, 'Avoiding the Agency Trap', 457.

contemporary attitudes towards, and facilitation of, juvenile initiative. Extant family papers such as the Plymley diaries elucidate how children's activism could be solicited within the home by indicating family practices designed to facilitate particular forms of juvenile response. They are suggestive of why children's agency might have been especially valorised in certain fora, nuancing our picture of the role played by young people in the antislavery movements. Above all, they provide insights into how children responded independently – often in ways that were neither anticipated nor explicitly sanctioned, but nonetheless approved of. As such they illustrate the complex interactions between children and adults – and the highly intricate dynamics within which juvenile political agency needs to be situated.