

Fall 2007

Review of Peter Kitson and Debbie Lee, eds., Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period.

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Recommended Citation

Blackburn, Robin (2007). Review of "Review of Peter Kitson and Debbie Lee, eds., Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period.," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 6 : No. 2
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol6/iss2/7>

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Peter Kitson and Debbie Lee, eds., *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*. London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999. 8 Volume Set: 3664 pp. ISBN 1851965130.

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The Bicentenary of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade by Britain and the United States—the laws were passed in 1807 and came into force in 2008—makes it worth drawing attention to this valuable eight-volume edition illustrating the writings which accompanied the rise of abolitionism.

Much of the recent research and debate concerning the real scope and meaning of British abolitionism has taken place in the United States, with contributions from such scholars as David Brion Davis, Seymour Drescher and Adam Hochschild. Davis's great study, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, published in 1975, with its subtle analysis of the rhetoric of Wilberforce or Thomas Cowper, remains outstanding. And while there is historical scholarship of a high order on slavery, the crucial racial component of slavery has been illuminated as much by students of literature as by historians.

It is therefore unsurprising that the main editors of this ambitious project should be based in the United States, and are literary scholars rather than historians, though the publisher of the handsome facsimiles is the British reprint specialists, Chatto and Pickering. There is copious evidence here that debates around abolitionism were indeed central to British culture in the Romantic period, being taken up in a great variety of ways by poets, dramatists and novelists as well as statesmen and subversives.

The first volume comprises writings by black authors, usefully reminding us of the crucial ways in which Olaudah Equiano and other black writers helped to shape the anti-slavery cause. Equiano's own *Interesting Narrative* is only excerpted here and is best read in the helpfully-annotated Penguin edition edited by Vincent Carretta. But it is good to have several other narratives, poems and letters, especially Robert Wedderburn's *Axe Laid to the Root*, a radical call for emancipation published six years before Wilberforce and Clarkson founded the Society for Mitigating and Gradually Abolishing the State of Slavery in the British Empire (1823). Wedderburn, the son of a Jamaican slave woman and an English planter, was a leader of the so-called Spencer Philanthropists, an early socialist sect.

The subsequent volumes—each three or four hundred pages long—furnish a sample of the voluminous British controversy over slavery, with different volumes for verse, drama, novels, medical writing, theories of race and parliamentary speeches, each with separate introductions and helpful notes. One volume is devoted to abolition of the slave trade, initiated in the 1780s, frustrated in the 1790s by the Anti-Jacobin panic and eventually triumphant, after Trafalgar, in 1807 when Britain stood alone against Napoleon. Another focuses on the later campaign for slave emancipation, the fate of which was closely linked to the battle for a reformed Parliament in the 1830s. The "Abolition" volume contains Wordsworth's poems on Napoleon's attempt to restore slavery and on the death of Toussaint Louverture, leader of the "Black Jacobins" of Saint Domingue. The "Emancipation" collection contains Clarkson's account of the gains of slave

liberation in the former French colony, now renamed Haiti. These texts contrast with another by Edmund Burke, that implacable foe of anything to do with Jacobinism, in the shape of an elaborate proposal for a "Black Code" which would regulate the slave trade and slavery, with his letter to the minister concerned declaring that "the cause of humanity would be far more benefited by the continuance of the trade and servitude, reformed and regulated, than by the total destruction of both or either." The editors have included some of the often rather defensive pro-slavery arguments and the unfortunately not-so-defensive claims of white superiority.

The struggle over slavery had great resonance in the popular culture of Hanoverian Britain, with its cult of the "free-born Englishman" and proud boast that Britons would never be slaves. This certainly did not mean that participants in the Gordon riots, or followers of General Ludd or Captain Swing, were racially enlightened. The correspondence of the black writers testifies to the fact that they encountered racially motivated slurs and rebuffs while even the abolitionists were prone to patronize. Nevertheless Equiano and Wedderburn were accepted in leading roles and spoke from the platform. As William Cobbett disgracefully complains in a piece published here, many black men, Equiano among them, found English wives. And those novels and plays which do not opt for the pathos of the dying slave are quite likely to contrive a happy ending cemented by interracial nuptials—in one popular show playing the West End in 1814 the emancipated slave actually married the planter's daughter. The first version of Maria Edgeworth's novel, *Belinda*, reprinted here, allowed the heroine's black servant to marry an English farm girl. When Edgeworth's father objected, she deferred to what she described as his "great delicacies and scruples of conscience" and removed the incident from the third edition. In her story, "The Grateful Negro," reprinted in the fiction volume, the benevolence of the good master prompts his grateful servant to betray a slave plot but cannot prevent the cruel master from the destruction of his estate in a violent insurrection.

These various documents convey a sense of pervasive racial sentiment, partially neutralized, in some cases, by sensibility, nonconformist religion, and shared hostility to the wealthy and powerful, who often had links to the plantations. The abolitionist campaigns brought forward much personal witness which itself helped to erode the distancing effect of racial stereotypes. There were the slave narratives but also narratives by former participants in the slave trade, such as the affecting memoir by John Newton, the slave trading captain turned evangelical clergyman, reprinted in volume 2. Newton, author of the hymn "Amazing Grace," had himself suffered kidnapping in the Caribbean and servitude on the African coast, experiences which opened him first to conversion and then to the plight of the black captives, and lent authority to his story. Many were insecure in the Atlantic world of this epoch because of war, harvest failure, the oscillations of the trade cycle or the introduction of machinery. Abolitionist literature reasserted the bonds of human solidarity and sought to prevent the undercutting of free and independent labor.

An American scholar, Charles Mills, has argued in *The Racial Contract* (Cornell UP, 1999) that New World slavery was a peculiarly intense version of a broader charter of white supremacy, constituted by implicit assumptions and "tacit consent" rather than acknowledged intention. Such assumptions among the mass of colonizers allowed blacks to be treated in ways which would be unconscionable for whites. But racial ideology helped to produce a slave system only in the colonies not in the metropolis, despite the shared inheritance of ideas. Many fanciful and

derogatory racial notions were entertained in both England and New England; but the real condition of the small number of slaves was often that of an exotic tied servant. Any attempt to assert slave owner powers, even if only against blacks, aroused disquiet among a layer of middle class humanitarians, artisans and laborers. By the mid eighteenth century there were a host of "freedom suits" in which individual slaves in these regions contested their status, a brave decision and one which could only be sustained with the support of friends and work mates both white and black. The freedom suits could succeed since juries disliked slavery and gentleman-magistrates did not like to offend a popular anti-slavery sentiment which trumped racial feeling. It's a pity that none of these volumes has a court report relating to one of these cases—the Somerset case is widely known only because, unlike so many others on both sides of the Atlantic, it furnished a general precedent.

In the plantation colonies, by contrast, racial ideology became an intense and violently policed regime of subordination. Of course the metropolis was responsible for the colonies. The fact that English consumers had money in their pocket, a sweet tooth and a taste for tobacco, furnished merchants and planters with the incentive to set up plantations. Moreover the racial code in Virginia and Barbados was endorsed by the Board of Trade at a time when the country's leading liberal philosopher, John Locke, was one of its most active members.

Mills's "racial contract" is a contract between whites and does not imply that the African captives, too, were in some way complicit in their enslavement. As Mills knows, the power structure of the plantation was built on unremitting coercion. But why were Africans vulnerable to this specific servitude and not, say, Irish or even Native Americans? The latter had the advantage of a group identity whereas the African captives, from many different peoples, had no common language or religion and did not, to begin with, think of themselves as Africans. Of course there was much scattered slave resistance. Yet the planters could also count on the African captives' tenacious spirit of individual survival, as they could not with Native Americans or white indentured servants. The latter found it much easier to escape and were anyway regarded as inferior workers.

As the slave community painfully discovered itself in New World conditions, racial ideology was, of course, first resisted by the very group it stigmatized. It is a weakness of these volumes that discussion of maroon communities and slave revolts does not figure prominently enough, though there are just enough references to make it clear that awareness of slave resistance did much to encourage early anti-slavery thought.

In the Atlantic sea-lanes and ports slavery proved very vulnerable and as the reader of Equiano learns, a camaraderie could develop between black and white—and, just as important, solidarity between black people in one place and those in another. From the 1770s the "freedom suits," and the eruption of colonial and slave revolt, stimulated a transatlantic class struggle, which allowed the racial contract of slavery to be seen as the creed of the most greedy and arrogant layer of the ruling elite.

The editors of these volumes, focussing as the subtitle explains on the "Romantic Period," do not include much of the political economy which explained why a type of social freedom thrived in some settings and was condemned in others. Yet it was the reasoning of the 'enlightened' Scottish

school of political economy and moral philosophy, echoed by some parliamentarians, which equipped the abolitionists to become the champions of sound policy and imperial wisdom, and to win votes in parliament as well as the support of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of men and women "out of doors." It is churlish to complain at the choices of the editors since they furnish so much, but it would also have been interesting to have available a few samples of what appeared in the *Manchester Guardian* and *Leeds Mercury*, since the Northern towns vied with one another to lead the campaign.

Eventually a wide public came to feel that their own precarious ease of life was uncomfortably related to the depredations of the slave traffic and the remorseless driving of the slave gangs. A few lines by the seventeen-year-old Mary Birkett from a 1792 poem—"addressed to her own sex"—nicely captures the new spirit:

Sisters! Here—I must, I dare, I will be warm—
Shall we who dwell in pleasure, peace and ease,
Shall we who but in meekness, mildness please,
Shall we surrounded by each dear delight,
To soothe the heart, or gratify the sight,
Say, shall for us the sable sufferers sigh?
Say, shall for us so many victims die?

Say not that small's the sphere in which we move,
And our attempts would vain and fruitless prove;
Not so—we hold *a most important share*,
In all the evils—all the wrong they bear;
And tho' their woes *entire* we can't remove,
We may th' *increasing* mis'ries which they prove,
push far away the plant for which they die,
And in this one small thing our taste deny.'

("A Poem on the African Slave Trade" (2:196-217, 212-213))

The "Abolition" (volume 2) has a powerful early essay by Coleridge on the slave trade which, like Mary Birkett's poem, appeals for a consumer boycott as part of a wider anti-slavery campaign and as a way of rooting the cause in everyday life. Though endorsed by hundreds of thousands the boycott did not materially diminish the sugar trade, but it did stimulate domestic debate and allow women and young people to take a lead. It is a pity that volume 3 of *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* does not give any space to the partisans of immediate emancipation. A suitable text would have been Elizabeth Heyrick's *Immediate, not gradual abolition*, in which she observed: "men may propose only *gradually* to abolish the worst of crimes, and only mitigate the most evil bondage ... I trust no Ladies' Association will be found with such words attached to it." Her argument was heeded, and by 1830 the national Society changed both its name and its objectives.

The contribution of the cruelty of slavery to British wealth remains deeply controversial, though it is now more widely recognized that Britain's historic prosperity owed much to slavery and the

slave trade. We should, of course, beware the dubious notion of inherited guilt—itsself redolent of racist legends. But privilege can be, and has been, inherited and lessons can be learnt.

The culture of anti-slavery was instructive because it heralded the awakening of a popular understanding of the long-distance havoc that could be wreaked by the market, making it entirely appropriate that its themes should be echoed by Jubilee 2000 or the critics of the Bank of England's decision to dump gold regardless of its impact on South Africa and Russia. Anti-slavery was about making connections and piercing the veil which hides from consumers the human costs of production.

Abolitionism prompted social discovery and human solidarity rather than simple feeling, making the tie with Romanticism an unsure one. Some of the Romantic authors represented in these volumes lost sympathy for the ungrateful or rebellious slave. Their sentimental anti-slavery stance could be dissolved by racial fear or patriotic pride. The somewhat dour and disciplined Quakers and Methodists, on the one hand, and their unacknowledged allies, the rationalists and English Jacobins, on the other, were more reliable friends to the slave.

The most effective anti-slavery advocates had a zeal to discover the real workings of the slave system. Clarkson travelled thirty thousand miles researching the slave trade and succeeded in establishing, through the arduous and sometimes perilous compilation of information in the seaports, a fact that helped to clinch the case against the traffic, namely that the slave traffic was a "graveyard of British sailors," with a higher death toll than all other branches of trade combined. For a Cambridge-educated gentleman to take such pains over ordinary seamen stood in contrast to the gesture of novelists and poets whose cultivation of sentiment and sensibility was a manner of proclaiming themselves superior to ordinary folk, a sort of aesthetic social climbing.

In the sixties and seventies there was a tendency for historians to query the economic contribution of the slave plantations to British growth and to point to heavy offsetting military expenses. In recent years research has tended to confirm that slavery was profitable, and that colonial markets and supplies played a vital role in the period of industrialization. Slavery may not have given birth to capitalism, as Eric Williams was sometimes thought to claim, but the fact that capitalism and oblivious consumerism certainly gave rise to a vigorous and extensive slavery remains a sobering thought. For a contemporary parallel, a book by Kevin Bales is a great help. Today racial ideologies still play a part in obscuring the price of prosperity, but Bales's shocking study of *Disposable People*, published by the University of California Press, proves that super-exploitation can batten on sources of vulnerability other than race, with age and sex being highly significant. According to his careful accounting, there are today twenty seven million "new slaves," most of them children, in the world today—compared to six million slaves in all the Americas at the height of the New World systems. In a new epoch of *laissez faire* and rampant commodification, the insight and imagination of the abolitionists remains no less timely and instructive than it was in the Age of Romanticism.