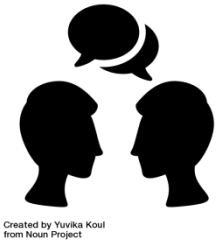
# THE DEBATE: ABOLITION




During the 19th century Britain portrayed itself as the major moral force in the world that started the century by bringing about the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. The great hero of that movement was the British politician William Wilberforce. This view of Britain's benevolence was strengthened in the second half of the century by the evidence of the missionary explorer David Livingstone who revealed in the 1850s that the slave trade was still thriving in central Africa. Subsequently, Britain was to use 'the abolition of the slave trade' as justification for its imperial intrusion into Africa at the end of the 19th century. George Macauley Trevelyan's classic *History of England*, first published in 1926, at the height of Britain's colonial empire in Africa, clearly assumed a direct connection between 1807 and the European 'scramble for Africa' when he wrote:

> "It was a turning-point in the history of the world when William Wilberforce and his friends succeeded in arousing the conscience of the British people to stop the slave trade in 1807, and to abolish slavery in the Empire in 1833, just before the development of the interior of Africa by the European races began." [Trevelyan, 2nd edn., 1942, p599]

Also published in the 1920s, Reginal Coupland's major biography, *Wilberforce: A Narrative* (OUP, Oxford, 1923), similarly assumed that the 1807 abolition of the trans-Atlantic trade in slaves in British ships was purely the product of a moral campaign organised by a group of philanthropic individuals, led by William Wilberforce.

The Second World War, that in many ways brought a general shock to imperial complacency, also produced a direct challenge to Britain's claims of moral superiority over the abolition of the slave trade. The challenge came from the radical Trinidadian historian and economist (and future Prime Minister of Trinidad) Eric Williams, who published *Capitalism and Slavery* in 1944. Williams claimed that the primary reason for Britain's anti-slavery conversion was economic. He argued that the British Caribbean plantation economy, based on slave labour, was in serious decline during the final quarter of the eighteenth century, partly as a result of the loss of markets due to the American War of Independence. At the same time, with the rapid rise in British industrialisation, Britain's economy was shifting from mercantilism to industrial capitalism. What

Britain needed now was 'free labour' in industrial factories. The Caribbean plantocracy were losing their influence in the banking and political circles of Britain, and hence, the British political establishment accepted the demands of the philanthropists, but for economic rather than for moral reasons.

Williams's interpretation fed into the anti-colonialism of the post-war period that was to lead to widespread African independence in the 1950s and 60s. It thus did not receive a serious challenge until the 1970s when two important books were published: Roger Anstey's *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition* (Macmillan, London, 1975) and Seymour Drescher's *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1977; 2nd edition, 2010). Anstey was to question some of Williams's economic statistics and to argue that the primary motivation in the abolition arguments in the British parliament were related to the Napoleonic Wars and Britain's desire to undermine its enemies by restricting the supply of slaves across the Atlantic. Drescher, on the other hand, kept the focus firmly upon the economics that Williams had raised and showed statistically that in fact the Caribbean slave plantations were not in economic decline at the turn of the century: indeed, they were highly profitable, even in the difficult circumstances of trans-oceanic warfare. Drescher concluded, therefore, that abolition was not for economic reasons; quite the opposite. It was, he argued, economic suicide, 'econocide', and that therefore the reason must be found elsewhere, namely in the arguments of the philanthropists. The second edition of Drescher's book, published in 2010, retains his arguments largely unchanged, although he does soften his approach slightly when he explains in his preface that 'econocide' can be defined as "the radical termination of a profitable trade by a newly empowered political movement."

These debates on the best balance of economic and philanthropic motivations for the British abolitionist movement have stimulated on-going work and the much more subtle emphasis upon the complexities of any such radical change in history.

Britain has appeared at the forefront in this, largely because Britain was the largest slave trading nation, by far, in the century leading up to abolition, and Britain subsequently played a leading part, for whatever strategic reason, in suppressing the trade out of Africa. The factor often not given sufficient attention is the extent and influence of slave resistance, and the threat of major slave rebellion, in leading slaving powers to consider curbing the trade (as discussed on pp.258-9). North American Quakers, who had been arguing against slavery and the slave trade since the seventeenth century, got much of their non-Quaker support from people who feared the increasing number of potential rebellious subjects being imported into the continent by the iniquitous trans-Atlantic slave trade.