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AND THE CHILDREN'S TEETH ARE SET ON EDGE

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•CHAPTER 7•

A Tale of Two Pamphlets.

*My ear is pained,
My soul is sick with every day's report
Of wrong and outrage with which Earth is filled.
There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart,
It does not feel for man; the natural bond
Of brotherhood is severed as the flax,
That falls asunder at the touch of fire.*

William Cowper

On his return to London Clarkson retired to begin a new pamphlet incorporating his recent findings on the nature of the slave-trade¹ – *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade*. The work, published in 1788, was relatively long, some 138 pages.² It began with a discussion of the natural productions of Africa, to promote the development of a trade to replace the trade in slaves, particularly in wood, gum, spice, tobacco, cotton, rice and indigo. The next section considered whether the trade was profitable and proposed that any successful trade should be of low risk and provide quick returns with high profits. Clarkson maintained that the slave trade had become glutted at both ends with high purchase costs, and reduced returns on sales, with further losses through mortality in the middle passage. In addition the length of time for a return on investment involving bills at 12, 18, 24 and even 36 months sight meant that although the merchant paid for his Africa Goods on short dated bills, anything from cash to not more than 14 months sight, his return could take up to three years.²

Clarkson compared the trade to a lottery, where adventurers might become rich on a sudden, or retrieve their affairs by a fortunate voyage. Clarkson noted the failure of the African company to return a profit, and the failure, in 1778, of Liverpool merchants to the tune of £700,000. This was roughly the time of Miles Barber's second bankruptcy when Samuel Hartley entered the trade. During the American War, the slave-trade was highly profitable because the price for slaves on the coast of Africa fell as low as £7 per head and the selling price in the Americas went as high as £45 but it had since become a losing trade. Men continued to engage in it for the same reasons that lottery tickets were bought.²

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Clarkson discussed the corrupt practices involved in enticing seamen into the trade and launched into a delineation of the cruel usage of the sailors. He first alleged that as soon as any Liverpool slave-ship cleared the Black Rock on its way out the master ordered the construction of a cat consisting of a rope 3½ inches in circumference with nine tails of knotted cord attached whose use was illegal in all but his Majesty's ships and unknown in any other trade but the East Indian.²

"From this period till their arrival upon the coast, they begin to use it upon the seamen though at first with moderation, or only so as to prepare the way for the severities that are to follow. In a certain time, however, they apply it without reserve."

Clarkson described one voyage of savage brutality in detail, whilst disguising any recognisable particulars. The voyage involved the continual abuse of all but three of a crew of 51 by a Captain who was not only vicious himself but who kept a similarly vicious dog which was set upon the men from time to time. Clarkson asserted that this was not a selective instance; not only could he give worse instances of brutality, but out of a random selection of the masters of twenty slave voyages he could find only three men of common humanity. Clarkson gave another six instances of brutality culminating in an account, in disguised form, of the murder of Peter Green.

"All on board is deliberate barbarity and oppression. An unfortunate sailor cannot speak or complain, but it is an offence against discipline, and an offence never to be forgiven."

Clarkson considered whether the trade could be said to be a nursery for seamen, first from the losses due to death in service, whether from disease, accident or the liberal application of the knotted rope.² He tabulated 88 voyages out of Liverpool to show that every vessel lost more than seven of her crew and that one fifth of all who sailed to Africa, were lost. The table in fact showed that some 60% of vessels lost fewer than seven sailors and 40% rather more than seven. 30% of voyages lost more than ten men and the highest loss was 24 on a single voyage. However, at no point did Clarkson mention the influence of tropical disease in bringing about this high mortality, even though it could not affect his aim, which was to challenge the idea that the slave trade was a nursery for seamen. It is hard to read the account without gaining the distinct impression that the enormous loss of sailors in the African trade was a direct result of having their brains beaten out by inhuman slave ship captains.

Clarkson then considered, whilst admitting that the muster rolls could shed no light on this, the discharge of sailors in the West Indies, from which, by argument, he attributed the loss of a further four seamen per vessel who never returned to their home port but died, destitute, in the West Indies. Furthermore of those who returned by "*the run*" so many died or went blind in the infirmaries that there was a further loss of three seamen per vessel. He concluded that on average each vessel lost no less than 15 seamen per voyage. Clarkson then compared the slave trade with the East India, West India and Newfoundland trades. Although almost as many seamen were lost in the East India trade, the other trades lost relatively few. Basing his comparison on the numbers of seamen employed in each trade, and factoring in the length of the voyages, he tried to show that the loss of seamen in the East India

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trade was not as bad as it appeared and he went on to assert that the slave trade lost more seamen per year than the rest of the shipping trade put together. He considered whether this loss would be sustained were alternative trades in natural produce substituted for the trade in slaves. It is only now that we learn more of the causes of this mortality; other dangers indeed existed in addition to the knotted rope, such as those attendant upon boating, which exposed the sailors to the climate, to insurrections, and to contagion, in particular the flux. Despite these obvious causes of high mortality Clarkson continued to emphasize the brutality of the slave ship captains.²

"It is a fact, that men have embarked upon it, who have been considered as men of humanity, and that the same people in a little time have been totally altered, and distinguished by the appellation brutes..."

The scenes too, which they must constantly be accustomed to behold, harden the heart, rob it of its finer feelings, and at length create a ferocity that, accompanied with the other effects, renders them rather monsters than men."

Part of this oppression was manifest in the lack of provisions and their unsuitability and he deplored the length of time during which they were forced to live on salt provisions. Clarkson pictured the sailors being forced to beg for food from the slaves through the gratings by which they were confined and forced to fetch a gun-barrel from the topmast-head before they could get a drink of water. This he attributed to rationing because of the great uncertainty in the time to be spent upon the coast and in the middle passage. Other losses he attributed to the sailors being forced to sleep on deck once the ship had loaded slaves, resulting in sickness and fevers. Clarkson thought such losses would not occur in trading for natural products for several reasons, including the length of time spent on the coast, the absence of any necessity for boating and so on. He maintained that in vessels trading for wood on the African coast mortality was much lower amounting to about one eighth of the sailors shipping out.²

He then discussed the impropriety of assisting Britain's enemies to obtain slaves, citing the Spanish ten year duty free status of its ports for landing slaves which had commenced in 1786, and the bounty offered by the French to import slaves into St. Domingo. Far from being to Britain's economic gain, it was to her loss. By subtly combining the losses of seamen, with the gain in sugar, which the slaves produced, he showed the great gains made by Britain's enemies.²

The second section discussed the objection that importation of slaves into the colonies was an absolute necessity for continued productivity. Clarkson cited numerous examples from different West Indian Islands where humane treatment had led to an increase in the number of slaves on the plantation obviating the need for importation. He quoted a mathematical rule; if the number of hogsheads of sugar produced per estate per year was greater than the number of slaves on the estate then importation would be necessary, if this number was lower, say 2 hogsheads per three slaves, increase in the slave population would occur. Clarkson asserted that once the slave trade was abolished the planters would be forced to adopt humane measures. He pointed out the expense and loss attendant on the purchase and

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seasoning of new slaves and the number of civil actions in the Jamaican courts, amounting to some three thousand per year for recovery on bonds, most of which were given to factors for the purchase of new slaves. His intention was to show how advantageous it would be to the planters to abolish the trade and institute more humane treatment.²

He discussed the effect of the trade with Africa on Britain's trade in manufactures. It was asserted that goods worth £2.5million were exported and each vessel carried £12,000 of goods to Africa. He considered this an inflated estimate. His figure was £800,000, and since a third of the goods were of East Indian or Venetian manufacture, the real value to Britain was only £500,000. He considered the effect of abolition on the towns of Manchester, cottons, and Birmingham, guns, would be small, particularly if a trade in natural products was substituted.²

Clarkson looked at the effects of abolition on the slaving ports. He considered the prosperity of Liverpool was due to the importance of the salt trade which had led to the rise of the West Indian and American trades. He recalled a meeting of a debating society in Liverpool held in the winter of 1786 devoted to a discussion of the causes of the present grandeur of the place which, despite an assertion that it was through the slave trade, had determined that it was the free admission of strangers and the salt trade that were the cause.² A further cause was the population growth of Lancashire and the growth of the cotton trade stimulating foreign trade. Clarkson cited the example of the American Revolutionary War when slaving fell to low levels, importation of sugar was not as greatly affected, and dock duties payable at the Port of Liverpool held up.² Finally Clarkson called for the immediate abolition of the trade but put forward no mechanism or any gradual adjustment, considering that abolition would produce no detrimental, but only beneficial, consequences.²

In the meantime, William Roscoe was working on his own pamphlet; *A General View of the African Slave Trade Demonstrating its injustice and impolity, with Hints toward a Bill for its Abolition*.³ It was sent to the London Committee in the New Year and 1000 copies were printed. Roscoe's pamphlet was much shorter than Clarkson's production. To say it was 38 pages long overemphasises its relative size since it was set in large type and laid out with considerable white space. It represented a sparse rationalist argument proceeding from considerations of the rights of man and from moral and political economy citing in particular Burke and Paley for its authority. Roscoe would be telling no sensational tales. He began by asserting that all men have by nature an equal right to personal liberty and security which could not be forfeit except for offences against society and that perpetual servitude could not be validated by purchase.

Roscoe considered slavery and the slave trade a crime against humanity with other crimes attendant upon it, including murder and the fraud of the slave's lifetime labour. However, the criminality of it could not be placed exclusively on any particular body of men but also affected the government which tolerated and approved it and the nation which had silently acquiesced in it.

“To endeavour to throw the reproach of national misconduct upon those individuals, who, from a variety of circumstances, and perhaps without peculiar

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depravity, may have been induced to become the more immediate instruments of it, seems therefore to be not only illiberal, but unjust."

The difference to Clarkson's approach is striking, as is Roscoe's desire to make this clear. Roscoe continued by considering the trade from the point of view of political economy. Like Clarkson he pointed out the considerable loss of seamen in the trade, which he estimated at between 1000 and 1500 per annum. Again he followed some of Clarkson's arguments in that manufactures consumed in the trade were made by relatively few manufacturers and were coarse in nature and could be more advantageously exchanged for African commodities and thus demand for British manufactures would not diminish with the loss of the outlet to the slave trade. Roscoe asserted that the continued re-supply of slaves to the colonies was no political or economic necessity but an abuse.³ He attempted to show that the export of slaves to the colonies was of no benefit to the revenues of the country and, like Clarkson, he asked whether the trade was truly profitable. A trade that had existed for two centuries would have been abandoned long ago if it were not profitable. However it did not follow that it continued to be profitable. In support Roscoe asserted that over the last fifty years the cost of a slave on the African coast had doubled but in the colonies the price had hardly advanced at all. The long dates of the planters bills, as long as three years sight, reduced profits. In many cases they were returned unpaid. To this he added the losses due to sickness and insurrection, and the high cost of insurance all of which reduced profitability.³

Furthermore Roscoe said, citing *"the most authentic information the author has been enabled to obtain from many respectable inhabitants of the town of Liverpool. ..."* out of 30 houses that had carried on the trade since 1773, 12 had gone bankrupt. Many more had sustained considerable losses, *"whilst the number of those who are known to have enriched themselves by it is restricted to a narrow compass."* Only for the masters of the slave ships, whose profits arose from commissions on sales, had the trade been *"uniformly advantageous."*

Roscoe then cited some disguised examples of abuses of the trade, which he considered contrary to British interests and an affront to British honour.³ These were the contracts accepted by British Merchants to supply slaves to the plantations of foreign powers which injured the reputation of the country and caused the loss of so many British seamen in order to save those of her enemies. Finally Roscoe said;

"With respect to the private advantages which have been reaped from these foreign engagements, the recent fate of an eminent adventurer, who is generally allowed to be possessed of extraordinary mercantile talents, and the complaints of those industrious tradesmen who now, for the third time, lament the uncertain nature of the slave-trade, will be the most striking comment."

Though disguised, the references to Baker and Dawson who have a contract with the King of Spain, and to Miles Barber who has a contract with the French, are patent. The reference to the fate of the *"eminent adventurer"* and the *"industrious tradesmen who lament for the third time the uncertainties of the trade"* is clearly a thinly veiled reference to the third bankruptcy of Miles Barber, which had only very recently become apparent.

The pamphlet then continued with his *"Hints Towards A Bill For Abolishing The Trade For Slaves To The Coast Of Africa."* He observed that the demand for

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slaves was occasioned by their destruction and failure to propagate. This could be remedied by improving their conditions and their rights, by an imposition of import duties, and by promoting alternative trades to Africa. Finally Roscoe considered that the supply of slaves to foreign dominions should be banned outright. He further proposed establishing personal rights for the slave populations of the colonies, statutory provision of holidays and working hours, promotion of benefits to encourage family formation, and the establishment of hospitals.³

Roscoe suggested a duty on the importation of slaves, rising over time, with corresponding bounties payable out of this revenue to vessels trading to Africa for commodities other than slaves. He proposed a law to limit the number of slaves carried by slaving vessels, which would be enforced by the merchant lodging a bond repayable on production of a certificate of delivery in conformity with the law. Roscoe finally proposed restrictions to prevent the sale of slaves outside the colonies, i.e. import and re-export.³

The most important contrasts between Clarkson's and Roscoe's approaches were; Clarkson's appeal to the passions and his listing in almost wearying detail the abuses suffered by the seamen, almost to the point of obscuring the sufferings of the slaves. Clarkson's answer to this and to the depraved monsters who conducted the trade was a call for immediate abolition. Roscoe's approach was based on an appeal to reason avoiding any passion in the matter and deliberately absolving those who pursued a hitherto legal branch of trade from any more opprobrium than those who allowed it to continue – parliament and people. It was also in great contrast, gradualist in approach with steps propounded to get from the position then existing to the point where the trade would be at an end.^{1,3}

Letter to Wilberforce.

Whilst Roscoe was composing the Liverpool Abolitionists Anti-slavery tract, James Currie busied himself with trying to wrest back some influence over the course of events. On the last day of 1787 Currie composed a long and suitably unctuous letter to Wilberforce, whom he did not know, but cited for his character reference, Mr. Milne, the Member for York.⁴ The timing suggests a new year resolution and a determination that there will be no more important issue to confront in the coming year. Clarkson's visit had polarized the town, made rational debate almost impossible and by inflaming passions many sympathizers had been driven from the field. Congratulating Wilberforce on his pledge to bring forward a debate on the slave trade and, seeing little reason to doubt that Wilberforce had the best information available, he immediately casts that doubt by deploring the failure to consult the traders of the town.

"An inhabitant of Liverpool may, however, express some surprise that the merchants of this place, many of them concerned in the trade, and some of them for several years resident on the coast of Africa, should not have been consulted."

One such person, who had been resident on the coast of Africa, whom Currie undoubtedly knew, was Thomas Hodgson. Currie deplored the way in which the debate had been conducted and the way in which Clarkson and Falconbridge had set about collecting their information.

"Believing the African merchants and traders not only accountable for the consequences of this trade, but conscious of their guilt in conducting it, men,

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purposely employed in acquiring information concerning it, have shunned all intercourse with them, and drawn a great part of their intelligence from the lowest class of seamen. Nor is this all, conceiving that every enormity might be expected from the masters of vessels, who could conduct such a trade, they have listened eagerly to the accounts of their cruel usage of the seamen, and to the rumours of their dreadful barbarities of various kinds, with which the ears of the credulous have been abused."

The reference to Clarkson and Falconbridge and their methods is obvious but Currie admitted that he was not suggesting that abuses did not exist, indeed he was forced to admit, with some chagrin that he had been indulging in a little overenthusiastic merchant baiting himself.

*"One act of this kind, of a deeper dye than usual, and supported by general belief, has been imputed to Capt. H., of the **King Joe**, Guinea-man, a ship belonging to Mr. ---.*

I myself repeated this report, and, by some means or other, it reached the committee in London, of which Mr. G. Sharpe is president, with my authority for its truth. Application was made to me to authenticate it, but, after diligent enquiry, I could not find such evidence of the fact as was by any means equal to supporting it in a court of justice".

How this got to Granville Sharpe is unknown. Perhaps it was repeated by Rathbone or Roscoe and thereby reached the ears of John Barton after which the London Committee might have discussed it. Nor can the nature of this *"act of a deeper dye"* be determined except to say that Captain H. was Captain Josiah Hort, who had sailed several voyages to Africa out of Lancaster for James Sawrey & Co in the early 1780's. His last voyage for Sawrey was as master of the *Molly* which may have been involved in panyaring or other sharp practices. The *King Joe*, however, was operated by Miles Barber and left Liverpool on November 11th 1786 and was lost on the African Coast. Nothing further seems to be known about vessel or master; small wonder that evidence was in short supply.⁵ Currie noted with annoyance that prominent cases of abuse such as these were not resulting in successful prosecutions as they came before the courts,⁴ Of two similar cases one had ended in a nonsuit and the other was to be abandoned for lack of evidence.

"Such conduct is imprudent in the very last degree, and it grieves me extremely to see zeal and humanity so very ill directed. There is a strange disposition in human beings, when under the influence of passion, to impute bad motives to their fellow creatures; and hence it is that humanity itself, when it spurns the bounds of reason, may be the source of hatred and uncharitableness."

Currie knew all about the divisions and passions that can arise in political dispute having suffered considerable harassment and inconvenience at the outbreak of the American Revolution when he was a tobacco factor on the Virginia coast. Currie was adamantly opposed to Clarkson's pursuit of prosecutions. He believed that criminal proceedings, by their very nature, could not have the certainty of success their supporters anticipated. Specific allegations could always be challenged and had little to do with the real impolicy of the trade. Also, rightly or wrongly, Currie did not accept Clarkson's statistics on the mortality of the seamen involved in the Africa trade. To many, Clarkson's meticulous collection of statistics from the

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muster rolls meant that his estimates of the mortality of seamen could not be challenged. Currie did not concur with Clarkson's conclusions and he was certainly in a position to make his own judgment.⁴

"When they assert that the slave-trade is the destruction of two thousand seamen annually and that the masters of the ships employed are, in general, men of such barbarous dispositions as to inflict unprovoked cruelties on their crews, they bring forward positions, which, in my opinion, cannot be proved, and which, I doubt not, may be opposed by a reference to facts."

Currie proceeded to give the slave-merchants and ships' masters, or some of them at any rate, a character reference, men who have been caught seriously offside by the new spirit of the rights of man moving in the country.⁴

"It is a truth, that, in those of my acquaintance, who are and have been masters of Guinea-men, a great majority are men of general fair character, - that some of them are men of considerable improvement of mind, - and that I could point out amongst them more than one instance of uncommon integrity and kindness of heart. The same may be said of the body of the merchants concerned in the slave trade, who are, some of them, men of liberal education and enlightened understandings, and, for spirit and enterprise in commerce, very much distinguished."

It was after all Tom Paine's world now *"and, in truth, it is but lately that individuals in private life have begun to reason on the justice or injustice of national transactions."* Currie propounded some sound arguments concerning the social changes that had come about as a result of the American Revolutionary War. There was a new spirit abroad that no longer simply acquiesced in the status quo but was beginning to assert a desire to influence events.⁴

"The American war, which excited the spirit of party so keenly, and which involved the consideration of all those great points, on which the principles of liberty and legislation are founded, has produced a great improvement in the sentiments of mankind. The number of those who reason on political measures is astonishingly increased, as well as the ease with which their sentiments are communicated to each other, and hence public opinion has risen to the rank of a fourth estate in our constitution... That the spirit of discussion, excited by the Revolution of America, should take a direction to our commerce with Africa is what might be expected in the natural course of things."

He reiterated his warnings that judicial processes and intemperate invective carried their own dangers and might have fatal results for the abolition movement.⁴

"I wish to use my humble endeavours in checking the influence of that intemperate zeal which may defeat its own purpose, by complicating a question of the clearest nature, and of the greatest magnitude, with other points, by no means clear points, which, in their nature, may excite the bitterness of party in their discussion, expose the friends of freedom to a defeat, and which, established, will not add a feather to the mighty weight by which the scales of truth preponderate."

"I seldom hear the justice or morality of the trade seriously defended," he went on to say, probably by now feeling the need to display his own abolitionist sentiments having criticized the London Committee's methods and pleaded for greater understanding of the character of the merchants. So he now rehearsed a few arguments in opposition to the trade. The continued need for imports into the West Indies to replace those consumed he considered to be the *argumentum crucis*. As far

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as the argument of economic necessity went; that the prosperity of the nation would be fatally affected if the trade were abandoned.⁴

“It ought not, however, to be forgot that the experiment of abandoning this trade has been already made, without fatal consequences, at a time when the kingdom laboured under all the calamities of a complicated war. At present, then, when the nation is blessed with peace and unlooked for prosperity, and when the helm of government is directed by a genius of the very first order, means may probably be found, not only to ward off any evil to the nation at large, from the desertion of the slave-trade, but even to satisfy the individuals more immediately concerned.”

Currie then adopted a curious position, even a subterfuge, when discussing Clarkson’s visit to Liverpool, pretending that he was far more distant from the events than he really was. He outlined to Wilberforce some of the wider effects of Clarkson’s visit, but strangely, rather than giving his own impressions of the visit, he gave, or pretended to give, the impression conveyed to him by a Liverpool merchant.⁴

“It has been lately mentioned to me, by a person deeply engaged in the slave trade, that when Mr. ---. came to Liverpool to obtain information concerning it, some of the merchants, himself among others, consulted together on the subject of meeting him, and giving him, openly and fairly, every assistance in their power, but, finding that he made no application to them, and that he went about in disguise, to collect intelligence among the lower class of seamen, they took the alarm, and began to discover that hostile notions were entertained of their conduct and sentiments, which they were not conscious that they deserved. Far be it from me to impute any blame to Mr. Clarkson, no person thinks more highly of the purity of his intentions, but facts, such as these, you ought to know, as they illustrate the temper and feelings of both of the parties concerned.”

Who this unnamed merchant was, and who the group of merchants may have been who were supportive of abolition, and how many there were, is quite unknown. Was there any connection with Robert Norris, who was introduced to Clarkson by Rathbone? Could it have been Edward Chaffers or Ambrose Lace? Chaffers had long been out of the trade, Lace had stepped down more recently, Norris was no longer involved, and in any case he had several meetings with Clarkson, and so, if Currie’s remarks are taken literally, none of these people fit the bill of someone deeply engaged in the trade and who did not, in the end, talk to Clarkson. After the interview with Ambrose Lace Clarkson admitted that the dye was cast and no further meetings with anyone of significant stature within the trade took place. So taking Currie at face value and accepting that there were merchants who at first wished to talk to Clarkson but who *“took alarm”*, their identity remains a mystery.

That Currie chose to distance himself from Clarkson, almost as if they had never met, is curious and his statement that *“he went about in disguise”*, attributed, not to himself, but to unnamed merchants, has inflamed a few recent commentators. Ellen Gibson Wilson denies the whole thing ever happened remarking that *“Clarkson never adopted a false identity in his life and was too well known for his own comfort”*.⁶ Whether a false identity is quite the same thing as a disguise can be

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passed over, but for good measure her footnote to this comment brackets Currie's remarks with those from an Anti-Abolitionist tract written under the name of Francklyn, "*An Answer to the Rev. Mr. Clarkson.*" In the introduction to his series of letters on the subject Francklyn observed;⁷

"Among others who are charged with such misbehaviour, is the Reverend author animadverted upon in the following letters, who in the different masks of an African sailor and pettifogging attorney, is said to have visited the alehouses and brothels of Liverpool, to find out witnesses to the enormities committed by the masters of Guinea ships."

This curious statement is not wholly impenetrable if it is allowed that the author of the tract misrepresents his informants, and that "*the different masks of an African sailor and pettifogging attorney*" refers not to Clarkson going about the town adopting two different disguises, but to the appearance of both Falconbridge and Clarkson going about together. The description is simply an unkind, but accurate, caricature of their appearance and behaviour in Liverpool.

Currie went on to discuss the way in which those merchants of the town sympathetic to reform were beginning to consider possible legislation in respect of the trade. Currie's rhetorical style, alluding to issues rather than openly stating them, makes interpretation difficult. When Currie referred to means of regulating the trade with a view to abolition was he hinting at positions that the Liverpool abolitionists had been developing, perhaps in conjunction with a group of African Merchants, or are they simply straws in the wind? Currie seemed to outline measures that prefigure the framing of the Dolben Act designed to limit the numbers of slaves carried in the slave vessels based upon the lading of troop transports. Like Roscoe, Currie proposed reforms in the colonies designed to undermine the demand for slaves in the plantations.⁴ There is no surprise in their unanimity of view of course; Currie and Roscoe are the closest of friends and pass their writings freely back and forth for comment and friendly criticism. Roscoe, apparently, revises little, preferring the first inspired draught to any laborious reworking, which is the opposite of Currie's rather pedantic but carefully crafted style.⁴

"In truth, many of the African merchants express themselves very willing that the slave trade should be investigated in parliament. ... From what I have heard, I think they would readily agree to any regulation for restricting the number of slaves taken on board, to a certain proportion with the tonnage of the ship, some thing of this kind is agreed to be necessary. At present, it is thought fair to ship two-Negroes for every ton: in the transport service, there are two tons allowed to every man. Some of the merchants seem to approve of measures for the gradual abolition of the trade, these, indeed, they commonly say, ought to consist in means for meliorating the condition of the slaves in the West Indies, which, by augmenting the numbers born there, would diminish the demand for those imported, and, at last, destroy it altogether. Others think the most certain method of securing better treatment to the West India Negroes, is to obstruct the supplies from Africa."

Currie floated an idea, expanding on a theme in Roscoe's pamphlet, for the establishment of an exclusive company trading to Africa which by means of various restrictions, taxes and bounties could gradually transform the slave trade into a trade based on natural commodities, especially if combined with gradual emancipation in the colonies. This was quite contrary to the position adopted by the London

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Committee who had already determined that emancipation would not be a goal in order to put planter and merchant at loggerheads.⁴

“I will suppose that your proposal in parliament may rather be for a gradual abolition of the trade in slaves (accompanied with some measure for their gradual emancipation in the islands), than for its entire stoppage at once. This, I think, will appear to you, not only the more practicable, but the better scheme. Should this be your plan, I would just hint that, for the remaining period during which the trade is to be carried on, it might be advisable to have an exclusive company of those now engaged in the trade, and the size of their vessels, and the proportion of slaves to each, may be regulated by law. At the same time, a diminution of the whole number of slaves transported from year to year may be secured either by a positive restriction, or a gradually increasing duty. Such a scheme might, perhaps, be attended with some direct encouragement of the trade for the other articles of export which Africa affords, and which, by this means, might be gradually increased to a degree that would more than compensate our merchants and manufacturers for the loss of the traffic in slaves.”

Currie closed his letter loftily urging Wilberforce to his task.⁴

“Go on then, -Sir, to this examination, with that magnanimity of mind and fearlessness of spirit, so consonant to your character and to the cause you have undertaken.”

Following his letter to Wilberforce, Currie wrote to Dr Percival of Manchester in mid January.⁴ Percival was a physician educated at Edinburgh and Leyden in the Netherlands, and a founder of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society.⁸ He is today considered a founder of modern “Medical Ethics”, and like Currie he was a Unitarian. They regularly exchanged letters on a wide range of topics including the progress of radical ideas and on medical and scientific matters. Currie thanked Percival for some papers he had sent him probably relating to the activities of the Philosophical Society. He had also sent notices about abolition meetings held in Manchester, one probably concerned the meeting of December 27th 1787. Currie expressed concern at their uncompromising nature, but agreed with their sentiments.⁴

“Your proceedings at Manchester on the subject of negro slavery are, on the whole, judicious and spirited. The papers which I have seen ... are not of a temporising nature, they speak a language that admits of no compromise - a language which, on any other subject, could scarcely be approved of. In general, however, they have my hearty approbation, both as to sentiment and style.”

Currie painted a picture of growing confusion and perhaps of rising intemperance among the merchant community stemming from Clarkson’s visit and the growing tempo of calls for reform.⁴

“The situation of a person of sense and feeling in society here is at present very distressing. Men of any enlargement of mind, who have been concerned in the slave-trade, begin to reflect on their situation; and the struggle between interest and principle, between a lucrative traffic and a sense of character, is productive of such embarrassment and contradiction, as fills one with sorrow. Others, again, talk a high language. - but I cannot go on - I am ready a thousand times to cry out, with Cowper,

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*O for a lodge in some dark wilderness,
Some boundless continuity of shade! &c”*

No doubt Percival could complete the thought;

*Where rumour of oppression and deceit,
Of unsuccessful or successful war,
Might never reach me more!*

and would recognise Cowper’s famous anti-slavery poem.⁹ Would he also notice the misquotation of “continuity” for “contiguity”; which is curiously the identical misquotation Roscoe made in his poem *The Wrongs of Africa*?¹⁰ Currie then discussed whether a petition to parliament on the subject of the slave trade would be raised in Liverpool. If Currie is to be believed, no petition had yet been raised against abolition in Liverpool, but, if one should be, he predicted trouble.

“If no stir is made on one side, there will none be made on the other; but if the merchants step forward by petition in favour of the slave-trade, a counter petition will certainly be agitated, and a violent struggle must ensue.”

He then discussed the appearance of a pro-slavery letter signed by “Vindex” got up by some of the Liverpool Merchants.¹¹

“...which was written by a person who was first a surgeon, and afterwards a master of a Guinea ship, after this, a governor on the coast, a planter on the Mississippi, and, finally, from the misfortunes he sustained in the revolution of America, reduced to the station of a slave captain again. He is a gentle, moderate man, and of a good understanding. His MS. was reviewed by several merchants in the trade here, and, I have reason to believe, was altered. With all these advantages, it appears to me to be more fatal to the cause it proposes to support, than almost any thing that has appeared.”

Letters signed by Vindex appeared in the national and Liverpool press in December and early January attacking the abolitionists.^{11, 12} It is obvious, from the fairly malicious delight he takes in recounting the man’s colourful career, that Currie knew the writers identity and that he was working with the African Merchants to frame a response to the agitation for abolition. The man was Archibald Dalziel, who was selected as one of the Liverpool delegates to present evidence against abolition to the Privy Council. Dalziel trained as a surgeon and was an officer appointed by the Committee of Merchants Trading to Africa from 1763 to 1769 on the coast of Africa. This was where he first met Robert Norris who was then master of a slave ship.¹³ Dalziel went bankrupt in 1773 over a losing trade in slaves, but was soon to be found operating several slave ships, the *Little Archie*, the *Hannah* and the *Nancy* on African Voyages in 1773 and 1775. The *Nancy* made voyages in 1775, 1776, and 1778 under Dalziel’s ownership. In August 1778, on return to England, he was taken by a privateer and lost everything. In the early 1780’s he was master of slave ship’s operating out of London for the merchants James Mather and Robert Preston. In 1785 he took over as master of the *Tartar* out of Liverpool owned by the John and Thomas Backhouse.^{5, 14} The voyage, to Benin,

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was a fatal one;¹⁵ – “*I had a badly assorted cargo, great competition, few slaves in the country, provisions scarce in the country*” – One third of the 360 slaves perished along with 15 seamen out of a crew of 37. The vessel arrived back in Liverpool at the end of June shortly before Clarkson’s visit and was among his list of vessels used to estimate crew losses. It is said¹³ that Dalziel had worked for John & Thomas Hodgson, which is possible, for the *Tartar* was registered to John Backhouse and Garstang Bradstock in 1785 and in the new register of 1786 it was perhaps given a more complete registration to; John Backhouse, John Kilvington, John Hughes, William Rutson, Henry Gardner, Charles Pole, John Hodgson, and Thomas Hodgson (Jr.).¹⁴

So, not many months after his return, Dalziel was working with the merchants putting together their defence of the trade. Dalziel’s contributions under the pseudonym Vindex, were indeed a curious affair, which were ridiculed by subsequent correspondents. They were also rather similar to James Penny’s representations before parliament; the ridicule must really have gone over the merchants’ heads. On the slave ships he had this to say;

*“Whoever has been at Liverpool...must have been witness to the well adapted contrivances for the commodious reception of the Negroes, and for the ventilation and cleanliness of their apartments. And if the accommodations on board those ships in the dock be subject of general approbation, how much more would an observer be pleased to see with what attention and tenderness the Slaves are treated, and how conveniently they are lodged. The circulation of fresh air is carefully promoted, that the Negroes oftener complain of cold than of heat; frequently requesting that the air ports may be shut, the wind sails removed, and even that the tarpaulins may be laid over the gratings; and when they complain of being too much crowded, which rarely happens, a part of them is suffered to remain constantly upon deck, where being covered with awnings, they, and the ships company, are comfortably sheltered from the dews of the night, as well as from the scorching rays of the Sun in the day.”*¹¹

It was all too much for his critic Philo-Africanus.¹⁹

“Vindex then introduces a flowery and romantic description of the mode of living observed by the slaves during the voyage. His skill in their dishes seems so accurate and extensive, that the world, no doubt, looks up to him for a very speedy and instructive publication, under the title of “The Slave Feeder’s Complete Guide or VINDEXT’s Art of African Cookery” and I shall not be surprised, if by his interest among the people of the profession, he shall procure a contract for victualling all the slave ships, and he will, I cannot but suppose, make a very good bargain, as he will find HORSE BEANS no very expensive article.

To fill up the vacant hours, says VINDEXT, which would pass very heavily without amusement – in short I refer the reader to his own description. Good God how much the world have hitherto been deceived! How little they have imagined that a voyage to the coast of Africa was a party of pleasure! A perpetual round of fanciful amusement, and elegant recreation!”

The remainder of Currie’s letter to Percival discussed Roscoe’s pamphlet on the slave trade which was ready and hoped that Dr Percival could assist in raising

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the question in the universities, and a more general hope of more enlightened times to come. Finally he wrote of the difficulties he faced over the business and, not for the last time in his life, his concern about what he could safely commit to paper.⁴

“My situation, as you may imagine, is delicate. Every thing I would say, I cannot write. I have longed to converse with you, and if you can foresee any circumstance that may call you to Warrington for an evening, long enough to give me notice in time, I should have much satisfaction in meeting you there.”

Around the middle of January the Liverpool Abolitionists finally went public with an address and Roscoe’s pamphlet went on sale. In the same month the Reverend John Yates delivered a sermon highly critical of the slave trade at the Kaye Street Chapel, which was said to have caused great offense to some of his congregation and the wider town. His courage was widely praised at the time, however, both the text of the sermon, the date of its delivery, along with contemporary reaction to it seem to have been lost.¹⁵

The Liverpool Delegates.

Meanwhile the Liverpool merchants were beginning to organize and on February 5th 1788 John Tarleton, brother of the Liverpool hero and villain of the American Revolutionary War, Banastre ‘No Quarter’ Tarleton, wrote to his brother Clayton and to Thomas Earle, the Mayor of Liverpool and the merchant who signed the marriage register at Currie’s wedding. He discussed a 3½ hour interview with the Prime Minister, William Pitt in which he had told him that if Wilberforce’s plan to prevent further imports of slaves into the colonies succeeded the consequence would be total ruin. He told him that the African Merchants of Liverpool would prove *“to the satisfaction of every unprejudiced mind in the House of Commons, that so far from the African trade being founded in blood and a series of fraud, violence, and oppression on the coast of Africa”* and that they would show that *“the basis of it was founded in humanity, and justice to the Natives.”*¹²

Pitt informed Tarleton that his own sentiments were for abolition and he gave authority to communicate this to his friends in Liverpool. Tarleton concluded, *“... we shall have little chance of success, or that the African trade will remain on its present footing accept we could prove that it is not carried on with that shocking inhumanity that is imagined by all ranks of mankind out of doors.”*¹²

A week later Pitt announced the formation of a Committee of the Privy Council to look into the allegations against the slave trade.¹⁶ As a result of the London Committees activities a steady stream of petitions were being presented to parliament from all over the country. It seems that Wilberforce believed that unless there was an investigation and the evidence presented to parliament there might be an attempt to enact palliative legislation to draw the teeth of the opposition. The Committee began to meet on the 15th of February. The day before the Liverpool Common Council met to discuss raising a petition and the merchants held several meetings in the Exchange to plan their opposition to the attempts at abolition. A list of 12 gentlemen, merchants and captains in the trade was announced to attend the House of Commons and explain the advantages of *“this most valuable branch of commerce.”*

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The initial list comprised; John Tarleton, Esq., Benjamin Arthur Heywood, Esq., Lawrence Oliphant, Esq., Richard Wilding, Esq., and Captains; Norris, Penny, Seaman, Ross, Fayrer, Begg, Brancker and Matthews.¹⁷ For some reason at the end of February the merchants decided to reduce the delegation to just three men, John Tarleton and Captains Penny and Norris but at some point later they re-instated Captain John Matthews and added Archibald Dalziel.¹⁸

Quite why Benjamin Arthur Heywood (1755-1828) withdrew is unclear. Robert Norris, if he is to be believed, said he had been selected against his will.¹² and was not present when his selection took place. Perhaps some had a change of heart one way or another. Certainly Benjamin Heywood withdrew from the trade at about this time and went into banking in Manchester, his last voyage seems to have been in 1788 after being in the trade less than ten years.⁵ He was in the business in Liverpool but had interests, with Thomas Parke, in a Lancaster firm, Heywood and Parke.¹⁹ He was the son of Benjamin Heywood (1722-95) who had been in the trade with his brother Arthur (1719-1795) from about 1750 to 1775 when Arthur withdrew while he continued until 1785. His brother Arthur, after his withdrawal from the African Trade became a prominent Liverpool banker trading as Arthur Heywood Sons & Co.²⁰ Arthur Heywood was well known to James Currie who was probably his physician. He wrote to Hannah Greg shortly after the great man's funeral whilst the later war with France was raging.⁴

"One thing I did this morning, which I shall remember for some time- I witnessed the last melancholy duties performed to A---r H---d. I saw the good old man descend quietly into his silent vault, "where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest." One might reflect on this subject for many pages. What so common as death? yet what so deeply interesting?"

Of the other original delegates Lawrence Oliphant was in charge of the Customs House in Liverpool.²¹ Richard Wilding had invested in slaving voyages from Liverpool in the 1780's but he too seems to have withdrawn from the trade about this time,⁵ and as a delegate he may have been no better choice than Benjamin Heywood as a letter to Lord Hawkesbury discussed later seems to indicate.²² The suggestion that Robert Norris was appointed without his knowledge or even presence at the meeting may also have been a factor in some of the delegates being changed. If so, it seems a curious way of doing business.

Captain Seaman had been a master and occasional investor in the trade from about 1770 to 1783 largely working for William Boats and Gregson and Co. Captain Henry Ross too was a recently retired ships master and investor in the years 1761 to 1770 but who made two further voyages in 1783 and 1785. Captain Joseph Fayrer seems to have first attained the rank of master for Benjamin Arthur Heywood in 1782 and recent voyages had been for Baker and Dawson, his last completed in June 1787. He would not depart again until October of 1788 and so was certainly available but did not attend. Begg was an investor rather than a captain although he had risen to be master of one of the Gregson's vessels and thereafter invested steadily in their voyages. Peter Brancker had long experience as a slave ship captain and investor in voyages by Tarleton and Backhouse and Moses Benson.⁵ He would give evidence to parliament some ten years later.

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Of the delegates to the parliamentary enquiry who finally attended, John Tarleton was a partner in the firm of Tarleton & Backhouse, reputed to be the 3rd or 4th largest African House in the country. He was soon to replace Lord Penrhyn as MP for Liverpool and was perhaps the most effective of the delegates.¹³

Archibald Dalziel's career and parts, wryly summarized by Currie, have already been mentioned as also his letters under the pseudonym Vindex. He gave evidence to the Privy Council on the Gold Coast and on Wydah and Dahomey. He apparently wrote a book "*The History of Dahomey*" presumably much of it borrowed, or worse, from Norris's "*History of the King of Dahomey*" which had been shown to Clarkson on his visit to Liverpool. His evidence tried to show that the slave-trade saved the slaves from a much worse fate in Africa. Dalziel also gave evidence before the house in opposition to Sir William Dolben's bill to regulate the number of slaves that could be packed into the crowded vessels and worked with both Norris and Matthews during 1788 on a correspondence with Lord Hawkesbury over the bill. He did not believe crowding and stowage of Negroes were the causes of mortality, but thought some regulation, such as provision for distilling seawater, might be in order.¹³

On May 12th 1789, introducing his bill to abolish the African Slave Trade, Wilberforce said³¹ "*It is said, that Liverpool will be undone – the trade, says Mr Dalziel, at this time hangs upon a thread, and the smallest matter will overthrow it.*" However, by then Dalziel was not present to hear it, he was the master of the ***Gosport and Havre packet*** bound for Angola out of London.⁵ It has been said that after the 1788 parliamentary session he joined William and Thomas Earle sailing under Portuguese colours to furnish slaves for their ships on the African coast¹³ – this may be so but the former vessel was owned by William Collow and James Morrison of London, whatever that may mean in reality.

In 1791 40 Liverpool Merchants signed a letter to the African Company recommending Dalziel for a senior position and he was appointed governor of Cape Coast Castle which he retained until 1802. He apparently left a string of debts in Liverpool and Thomas Earle and John Hodgson stood surety for £5000. However, these were to cover debts to the company and not his private debts.¹³ When he surrendered to Bankruptcy proceedings in July of 1791 he was represented by the legal firm of Aspinwall, Roscoe and Lace.²⁴ During the time he was governor of Cape Coast Castle a vessel named ***Governor Dalziel*** traded regularly out of London with Cape Coast. On his return Dalziel operated a number of voyages between 1803 and 1807 out of London the majority trading with Cape Coast Castle.⁵ He is supposed to have died a bankrupt.

The delegate Robert Norris, whose career in the slave trade was reviewed earlier, seems to be little known after 1778. According to Clarkson, "*he was then a merchant in a different line of business.*" The Privy Council described him as a Carolina merchant and he described himself to Lord Hawkesbury as the Commercial Agent for Liverpool.¹³ Norris died in 1792 and there were some who said he had been hounded to death by the abolitionists. His interest in working for the slave merchants, having once expressed his opposition, is difficult to understand. Gomer Williams says his defection was due to pressure from the Corporation.³³ Norris told the commons he was appointed without his consent. Perhaps there was hounding on both sides, perhaps it was all too much for him.

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According to the Records of the Clerk of the Privy Council Matthews was formerly the agent of a London Merchant residing in Sierra Leone before he obtained a commission in the Navy.¹³ Golberry, a French traveler who visited Sierra Leone in 1786 reported that the chief factor of a Liverpool Company resided in Sierra Leone and his subordinate, Matthews, in the Isle de Los.²⁶ Matthews returned to Liverpool in 1787 and published an account of his travels.²⁷ It was said to have given Thomas Clarkson some concern and he asked his brother to verify its accuracy, for by this time Clarkson was heavily involved in the Sierra Leone Company set up by members of the Clapham Sect to trade on the coast of Africa in opposition to the slave trade.²⁸

His account was followed by a diatribe in favour of the trade, which was dated, in Liverpool February 20th 1788. Matthews claimed that in 1784 the French had adopted a bounty system of 40 shillings per ton and 8 pounds per slave to encourage the trade and that this had increased competition on the coast. He also claimed that regulation would merely induce the merchants to remove to countries favouring the trade.²⁷ It has been supposed that following his appearance for the Liverpool Delegation he re-entered the navy however there is a John Mathews who was part owner of at least six vessels operating out of Liverpool between 1790 and 1795.⁵

The remaining Liverpool delegate, James Penny, as noted earlier, was a captain in the trade during the American War and an owner thereafter. He had 2 years experience as a factor on the African coast around 1776. He remained committed to the trade until the early 1800's. Many investors took shares in voyages put together by Penny including John and Thomas Backhouse and John and Thomas Hodgson. Some of those involving the Hodgsons, such as *Hope*, *Madam Pookata* and *Shirburn Castle* were on the high seas as the slave trade enquiry commenced. Penny was not an effective witness giving highly coloured and at times utterly ridiculous evidence.¹³

At about this time (February 1788) a Liverpool merchant in Carlisle, on his way from Liverpool to Dumfries, wrote a remarkable letter to Lord Hawkesbury.²² The merchant was Edgar Corrie, and a connection with James Currie can now only be guessed at. However, Currie was from the Dumfries area, paid visits home on occasion, and had been educated at Dumfries Grammar School. Currie's childhood friend in Dumfries, Robert Macmurdo seems to have been sweet on Elizabeth Kennedy, the daughter of a Manchester fustian merchant, whom he may eventually have married. Curiously enough, a generation later, John Greg married Elizabeth Kennedy the daughter of a Manchester textile magnate, Isaac Hodgson married Emma Macmurdo and Thomas Pares married Octavia Macmurdo.²⁹ That aside, Corrie's business activities were not directly concerned with the slave trade; there is no evidence that he ever invested directly in slaving vessels. During the American Revolutionary War he had an interest in a number of privateers including *Old England*, *Loyalty* and *Enterprize*.¹⁴ The *Enterprize* was outfitted by a consortium of owners including Thomas and William Earle and Francis Ingram, all major investors in the slave-trade. Another investor in this vessel was Edward Chaffers, the friend and associate of Ambrose Lace. *Loyalty* was also owned by this consortium whereas *Old England's* investors included several slave-traders such as the Heywoods and Thomas Leyland. Of his business activities all that can be said is

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that he supplied the bottled beer for the cruises of the *Enterprize*.²⁵ Aspects of his letter suggest a considerable knowledge of the West India trade. Corrie sent Hawkesbury a detailed letter on the slave-trade with his name disguised. It was accompanied by a covering letter, which he signed in his own name explaining his motives and delicate position.

“I think it necessary to avow the sheets which accompany this letter, & to explain to Your Lordship the reasons why I must request my name to be concealed – I am a Merchant of Liverpool & it might be attended with irreparable prejudice to some branches of business in which I am engaged, that I stood forth with any opinion that could favour the abolition of the Slave Trade.”

Corrie suggested to Hawkesbury that the best evidence that could be obtained on the subject should be drawn from the Town of Liverpool itself in order to remove or neutralize the considerable prejudice that existed in the town. Avowing himself not competent to furnish this information he declared, *“I will point out those who can; & they are men of sufficient independence and intrepidity of mind, to combat the torrent of prejudice, if applied to in a proper manner for intelligence on subjects of which they have much experience.”*

These men included Richard Watt, *“long an eminent factor for the sale of Slaves at Jamaica, now deeply interested in the prosperity of that Island both as a Planter & a Merchant.”* Richard Watt was a merchant in the West India trade, trading as Watt and Walker, who made a large fortune from his plantations in Jamaica. Born in Standish he began life as a coachman before taking ship to the West Indies where he began to acquire plantations and slaves for the production of rum and sugar. In 1783 he bought the Bishop Burton Estate near Beverly in Yorkshire and in 1795 he bought Speke Hall, near Liverpool, and its 2,400 acre estate for £73,500. He died without issue in 1796 bequeathing his estates to his nephew.³⁷

Finally there was Richard Wilding of Llanrayder, the High Sherriff of Denbigh and formerly an agent on the Windward Coast for Miles Barber but now retired and Thomas Hodgson junior who was formerly an agent for Miles Barber at Gambia.

Corrie said that Watt could give information on whether the necessity for a supply of slaves to the islands was caused by their abuse and the availability of fresh supplies. The others could give information on whether the Africans needs would induce them *“to procure investments to be bartered for goods, by the culture of Cotton & other produce, if the Slave Trade should be gradually and entirely abolished at the end of twelve years, & whether the civilization of the Natives, ... would not open a source of wealth to the Kingdom greatly exceeding any Gains to be acquired by the Commerce for Slaves.”*

They would all, Corrie said, *“be very competent to give information on what duty the African Slave Trade would bear & what Bounty would be sufficient to push & explore a Trade to Africa for Merchandize.”* Finally he revealed that he had not communicated with these men for twelve months past but believed they would supply information that Hawkesbury and Pitt would find gratifying.

Corrie’s position on the slave trade and the means for its abolition bears striking similarities to the plans of the Liverpool abolitionists. Robert Norris, William Roscoe and James Currie, all propounded views in favour of a gradual abolition of the trade by the use of taxes to discourage slaving and bounties to encourage a trade in African goods.

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That Thomas Hodgson is present in a list of men who had “*sufficient independence and intrepidity of mind, to combat the torrent of prejudice*” Corrie perceived as existing in Liverpool is of obvious interest. One can only wonder at Corrie’s plea for anonymity to protect his reputation whilst at the same time freely giving the names of others with whom he has not communicated in a twelve month. At face value the letter appears to document the discussion of the evils of the slave trade and the formation of a policy of reform among this group of people which precedes Clarkson’s visit and the promotion of the subject by the London Committee by some six months.

What may have prompted such discussions is hard to say. Clarkson’s prize winning essay had been published by James Phillips and was repeatedly advertised in the press in September 1786, along with numerous other anti-slavery tracts.³⁸ The Society for Free Debate held a series of crowded meetings at the Mitre Tavern in Fleet Street in November of that year on whether the slave trade could be justified on principles of equity, policy or Christianity which attracted over 400 people, so many that many were turned away. These meetings were also advertised in the national press along with advice to ladies to come early to avoid being excluded.³² Clarkson also mentioned a debate in Liverpool in the winter of 1786 in which a proposal that the slave trade was the cause of the town’s prosperity had been defeated.¹ Perhaps this increased interest in the question had prompted discussions between Corrie and these Liverpool merchants.

Corrie enclosed with his covering letter a further letter in which his identity was concealed under the initials W.J. The long and detailed letter began by adverting to the many parliamentary petitions raised all over the country in favour of the abolition of the slave-trade and the counter petition from Liverpool in its support. Corrie then discussed the trade in slaves for the supply of the British sugar colonies. Britain was superior to the rest of Europe in the trade and supplied slaves to the Empire and to France and Spain. The benefits to the country were, however, not evident. Prior to the War of the Spanish Succession Britain exported 18,000 hogsheads of sugar annually. The colonies now only supplied the home market and the European trade was wholly engrossed by France. Even so the planters demanded a subsidy and predicted ruin in the face of suggestions of a free market. If the colonies could only supply the home market by the imposition of protective duties what exactly was the benefit to the country of the slave trade?

Corrie discussed the application of a bounty on vessels trading in commodities to Africa and a tax on vessels trading in slaves to gradually transform the trade in slaves to a trade in African goods. The similarity of his ideas to those Currie expressed to Wilberforce, Roscoe gave in his pamphlet and Norris expressed in his conversations with Clarkson is evident; though evidence linking them together as a concerted strand of Liverpool opinion is tenuous. Corrie, however, was wasting his time. Hawkesbury was not in the business of investigating the trade himself but merely in collating evidence for the Privy Council, indeed his sympathies were largely with the trade and town of Liverpool.¹³ He was presented with the Freedom of the Borough for his exertions on June 20th 1788 and was later created Earl of Liverpool.³³

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The Gustavus Letter.

It is widely believed that James Currie wrote a letter published in the Gentleman's Magazine in March 1788 under the pseudonym Gustavus, although it was never acknowledged by Currie himself.^{6,34} The letter extolled the virtues of Howard; the proponent of penal reform, praising his rational approach to the question and the practicality of his ideas. John Howard, a wealthy Calvinist and cousin of Samuel Whitbread was appointed High Sheriff of Bedfordshire in 1773. His tours of inspection of British prisons resulted in penal reform acts in 1774. He published *The State of the Prisons* in 1777 and was awarded an LLD by Dublin University.³⁵ Gustavus recommended Howard's example to the campaigners against the slave trade. The use of Howard as a starting point suggests the influence of Roscoe rather than Currie, since this was a lifelong interest. However Currie and Roscoe worked together hand in glove, making easy attribution difficult and the remainder of the letter concentrating on the need to curb personal invective against the slave traders certainly suggests the hand of Currie. The letter was a critique of the London Abolitionists, with their tendency to indulge their contempt for the slave traders, and it attacked their design on sudden abolition as Quixotism. Gustavus declared this prejudicial approach would have a result opposite to that intended. Whilst the letter contained some applause for Clarkson's motives it warned "*... but let zeal be tempered by discretion, attended with candid construction upon the conduct of others, and freed from personal and scurrilous invective..*"

As in Currie's letter to Wilberforce, Gustavus accused the abolitionists of falsely exaggerating the cruelties practiced by the traders and similarly defended their characters.

"But it would appear, from the conduct of some of the principal movers in this good work, that it cannot be done without painting falsely, and exaggerating these cruelties ... Is not possible a really good and benevolent man may be bred up in this commerce from his earliest youth, and become concerned in it, before he has ability or resolution to think in opposition..."

Gustavus criticized Quixotic nature of sudden abolition approach, ascribed a gradualist approach to certain Liverpool merchants, and condemned the way they had been treated by Clarkson.

"That there are such characters I can venture to assert, and greatly lament they are precluded from rendering assistance to Mr. Clarkson and his friends, from the uncandid manner in which they have been treated, and are spoken of. One active gentleman when at Liverpool, is said not only to have declared the most violent prejudice against their characters and to have treated their attentions with neglect, but to have employed himself in obtaining materials to criminate them, from the most unprincipled common sailors and dock landladies."

The exaggerated facts produced by Clarkson were being used as an authoritative source for the whole movement but were likely, in Gustavus' opinion to bring about its failure.

".... as it is now before the publick in such violent and prejudiced representations a great and good work may fail, from unworthy and unnecessary endeavours to assist it."

The activities of Falconbridge and Clarkson are unmistakable. If the writer was Currie, the pretended distance between himself and Clarkson is striking, but hardly

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different from his pose in writing to Wilberforce. Perhaps it was Falconbridge whom Currie could not stomach. He was trained as a ship's surgeon, with little in the way of a classical education, and, no doubt as a result of his maritime life, pretty intemperate in both senses of the term. In the public press the distance is perhaps more comprehensible than in a private letter.

In March 1788 Currie sent a song, *Maraton*, for publication in the London newspapers. It was jointly written with Roscoe in imitation of the popular style of Charles Dibdin, and of which he said;⁴ *"has already been of service in diverting a stream of indignation, that a certain heart could hardly contain."*

Currie explained the origin of the song, as an amalgamation of two productions, one by himself and one by Roscoe and the reasons behind its hurried and anonymous publication in London.⁴

"I gave it to Dibdin to set, under promise of secrecy, and I find rumours have gone out that there is such a poem, which our polite negro-dealers would impute to the author as an unpardonable offence, therefore I wished it printed in London without delay, that its origin may be traced no higher than the paper in which it appears."

Currie also described the consternation that the anti-slave trade agitation had produced among the merchants and their families in Liverpool.

"The general discussion of the slavery of the negroes has produced much unhappiness in Liverpool. Men are awaking to their situation, and the struggle between interest and humanity has made great havoc in the happiness of many families. If I were to attempt to tell you the history of my own transactions in this business, I should consume more time than I can spare. The attempts that are continually made to justify this gross violation of the principles of justice, one cannot help repelling, and at the same time it is dreadful to hold an argument, where, if your opponent is convinced, he must be made miserable."

Currie also discussed a pamphlet by the Reverend Raymond Harris *"Scriptural Researches on the Licitness of the Slave Trade"*. Raymond Harris, real name Don Raymondo Hormoza, from Bilboa, was expelled from Spain along with other Jesuits. Winding up in Liverpool he seems to have run a Gentleman's school but was widely believed to have been enlisted by the Spanish to gather information on the the slave trade.³⁶ A Spanish delegation had been in Liverpool from Havana and Santo Domingo.⁴⁶ The trade in slaves to the Spanish colonies was believed to be highly profitable since it was paid for in Spanish bullion. The principal firm involved was that of Baker and Dawson but Tarleton and Backhouse may also have been involved. They reputedly purchased four fifths of the slaves at Bonny and New Calabar for this purpose. By contrast the trade with the French was believed to be less profitable as the slaves were delivered to the French on the African coast and transported in French bottoms. The principle firm involved in this trade was of course that of Miles Barber. Harris was rewarded with the sum of £100 by the Liverpool council for his production, which attempted to justify the trade by showing from Biblical quotation that it was in conformity with Old Testament law.

"A little scoundrel, a Spanish Jesuit, has advanced to the assistance of the slave-merchants, and has published a vindication of this traffic from the Old Testament. His work is extolled as a prodigy by these judges of composition, and is,

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in truth, no bad specimen of his talents, though egregiously false and sophistical, as all justifications of slavery must be. I have prompted a clergyman, a friend of mine, to answer him, by telling him that if such be religion, I would none on 't."

Logically the clergyman ought to have been John Yates, however, it was Roscoe and the Reverend Henry Dannet of St John's Liverpool, who eventually published replies. In April Currie wrote to Dr Percival in Manchester congratulating him on persuading the Scottish Universities to petition against the trade and on drawing attention to the subject in France. He was concerned however to hear that the debate might not take place that parliamentary session.⁴

"It is asserted here, ... that the subject of the slave-trade is not to come before the House the present session. The illness of Mr. Wilberforce, it is said, has kept it back. Report says that he is not likely to recover. The loss of such a man will be a cause of deep sorrow ... but I cannot for a moment believe it will prove fatal to the cause The spirit that is kindled in society will not die away; and though I am not so sanguine as to believe it will triumph immediately, I have no doubt it will in the end."

The Slave Transportation Bill.

In early March Liverpool's petition in support of the slave trade, signed by 13,500 people, was presented to Parliament; other press reports had it that it contained 23,500 signatures, an improbably large number, but perhaps because of this overwhelming support there was no sign of the violent struggle which Currie had predicted.³⁷ Meanwhile petitions in favour of abolition from all over the country were being presented to Parliament on a daily basis.

By March 20th the press confidently expected that the Privy Council's report would be published in days.³⁸ However, by the 26th it was clear the council was still meeting and would sit at least once a week until finished.³⁹ With the report incomplete and Wilberforce ill, Pitt announced at the beginning of May that Wilberforce was not in a position to bring forward his bill and that a subject of such importance should not be debated so late in the session.⁴⁰ He promised to present a motion pledging consideration of the issue next session which he moved on May 9th. In reply Fox lamented that the House had heard no evidence and that the Privy Council had received no petitions. It should be up to the house to decide upon the evidence and as far as he was concerned he wished to see the traffic utterly destroyed. Later in the short debate Sir William Dolben spoke of the wretched condition of the slaves in the middle passage. They were so crowded they had less than two feet and a half each. Every morning some were found dead and others were infected with pestilential disorders. Lord Penrhyn pointed out that it was not the intention of the merchants to treat the slaves cruelly as their profits depended on their number. The M.P. Bamber Gascoyne wished to know when the report of the Privy Council would be printed and indicated that petitions against abolition from Bristol, Liverpool and Lancaster had not been presented to parliament but to the Privy Council. Abolition was visionary, unnecessary and impracticable but some alteration and modification might be desirable. Pitt's motion was adopted.⁴¹

On May 19th Sir William Dolben gave notice that he would next day move for leave to bring a bill regulating the stowing of slaves on board the ships. Gascoyne said he would oppose the measure as premature unless very substantial evidence

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was given. Dolben replied he would bring forth both reasons and evidence enough to satisfy the house.⁴² Dolben moved for the right to bring in his bill the following week to give time for his opponents to consult their constituents and for the formation of a pro forma committee to consider what regulations were necessary. Gascoyne had no particular objection but thought it would lead to a premature discussion of the trade, which had been postponed, and if the bill contained more than stated he would oppose it. There were also those who opposed the proposal as seeming to recognize the legitimacy of the trade. Pitt thought that it might be useful, given the possibility of abolition next session, to prevent the merchants increasing the crowding of slave vessels in the mean time. Leave was given to bring it in.

There are those who have seen Curries hand behind the regulations governing the transport of slaves introduced by Sir William Dolben.⁴³ Several clues have been adduced in favour of this. Firstly remarks in his letter quoted to Wilberforce on what the slave traders might accept in the way of transport regulations. Secondly, the fact that the legislation required the carriage of a qualified surgeon on each vessel, a matter in which Currie might have been expected to be interested. However, a letter written by Currie to Miss Cropper in May 1788 makes this doubtful.⁴

“We are all up in arms here about Sir William Dolben's motion, which pretends to say, that we shall only put one slave on board our ships to every two tons, whereas we have been used to put two men and a half to every single ton. We contend that this attempt is a most daring infringement of our privileges; that, as we may stow rum and sugar as close as we can, so likewise ought we to be at liberty to stow human life, which is equally a commodity with the others, though somewhat more perishable. To be serious. -- I am very sorry that this motion is made, because it will tend to divert into different channels that stream of virtuous enthusiasm whose undivided strength might have swept the whole fabric of this villainous traffic from the surface of the earth.”

The following Monday Bamber Gascoyne presented the Liverpool petition to the house. Dolben presented his bill and the substance of the clauses was read out and the speaker moved the second reading. Gascoyne opposed saying they would need to hear witnesses at the bar of the house, the bill would not address the grievances complained of and he proposed postponing discussion for 3 months. However not even forty members were present and the house had to be adjourned.⁴⁴

On Wednesday May 28th Lord Penrhyn presented a petition for the Liverpool merchants against Dolben's bill as did Mr. Ewer on behalf of London asking that counsel be heard before the second reading. This was ordered. Dolben did not oppose it but accused those opposed to his bill of trying to defeat it by delay and he did not mince his words in ridiculing his opponents.⁴⁵

“He had no reason to believe the people of Liverpool were illiberal – He had personally been treated very liberally by them. He had eaten more turtle with them in one week than he had ever done in his life beside, but would rather sit down with them to mock turtle and plain port, than to real turtle and Burgundy, if such delicacies were to be procured at such a price as he feared was sometimes paid for them. ... It was asserted by some, that the greater the number of Negroes that were crowded into one ship, the more healthy they were, and by others that the passage from Africa to the West Indies was the happiest part of a Negroes life. He wished

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that some of the gentlemen concerned in the trade would, in the course of the summer, make a voyage of that sort for the sake of pleasure. Let them be crowded as close together as the Negroes were, chained two and two, hand to hand and foot to foot, and left to roll in sickness and in concomitants, in fluxes and other pestilential diseases – let them try this experiment, and if on their return they should call it pleasure, he would give up the point.”

Dolben extended his ridicule to the evidence James Penny had given the Privy Council, which at times had verged on the farcical; *“If the weather is sultry, and there appears the least perspiration upon their skins, when they come upon deck, there are two men attending with cloths to rub them perfectly dry, and another to give them a little cordial.”*⁴⁶

Lord Penrhyn, for the opposition, argued that it was too late in the session for the bill because two thirds of the ships employed had already sailed. Pitt told him he could only make objection to the provisions of the bill, not the principle. Even if no abuses could be proved, while there were grounds to believe the trade might be abolished, those engaged in it might try to make the most of it while it lasted, and thus temporary regulation was necessary to prevent any aggravation of the situation. Despite the opposition a motion to hold a second reading and a committee stage was put and carried. Pitt's point had been an important one, citing the possibility of greater abuses and overcrowding whilst the debate on abolition itself was in abeyance. Those historians who argue that Dolben's bill made little difference to the packing of the slave vessels miss the point.

On Monday June 2nd the bill received its second reading and the house went into committee to hear counsel and evidence. Robert Norris was interviewed for four hours and attempted to paint the pretty picture of the slave trade that he had given in committee.⁴⁷ On Wednesday after a conference between Pitt and Sir Charles Middleton, controller of the navy, Captain Parry was dispatched to Liverpool and Bristol to measure the dimensions of the slave ships.⁴⁸

On June 10th Penrhyn asked for a count whilst the evidence was being heard and the house was again found to be in error.⁴⁹ On June 12th evidence of the measurements of the slave ships was presented and Middleton attacked the packing of the slave vessels, stating that a vessel of 200 tons burthen had had 550 slaves on board, giving only ten inches space to each slave, in temperatures of certainly eighty, and mostly ninety degrees, which regularly resulted in a mortality of 8 percent.⁵⁰ He denounced cramming so many people into so small a space as *“downright Murder.”* The regulation for transporting Felons was one felon for every two tons but he was willing to propose that ships in the slave trade should be allowed three Negroes for every four tons.

Sir William Dolben attacked Penrhyn and Gascoyne for their tactics in trying to delay the bill by counting out the house and by multiplying the evidence to protract proceedings and render passage impossible in the remainder of the session. The MP William Smith produced evidence from the survey, showing the space between decks of the ships was not, as their opponents stated, between five feet and five feet eight inches. From Parry's evidence, one vessel was only four feet four between decks and contained platforms dividing the space even further.

On June 16th James Penny and John Matthews gave evidence to the Committee of the House. Penny revealed that *“intercourse between the Mariners and Female Slaves was very general and unreserved, but though there was sometimes violence*

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used, it was seldom necessary, each sailor being allowed a wife, and the continency of the Slaves seldom preventing an acceptance of the situation.” Whilst most of the evidence given to the committee did not make the press, a revelation of this sort was startling enough to be reported in at least one newspaper. Following the evidence of Penny and Matthews an attempt was made to call further evidence in support of the London petition. The abolitionists successfully opposed this as unnecessary; unless the trades’ supporters could show the interests of the London petitioners were different from those of Liverpool.⁵¹

On June 17th the house finished hearing evidence and proceeded to fill up the blanks in the bill. One of the first blanks was the date of commencement, which Pitt proposed as the 10th of June making it retrospective. Naturally Bamber Gascoyne objected to the passing of an ex post facto law. Pitt replied that *“nothing could be more fair ... the merchants on the first agitation of this business had sent out ships, in order to catch an eager market for their fellow creatures. They knew what they were about; they were, with their eyes open, attempting to elude an expected law; but feeble must be the Legislature, which would suffer its laws to be so eluded.”* Dolben moved that the blanks for proportioning the number of slaves to the tonnage of the vessel be filled up. Vessels of 150 tons or more with five feet between decks to carry 5 slaves per 3 tons; similar vessels under 150 tons to carry 3 slaves per two tons and all vessels with less deck space to carry one slave per ton. Penrhyn and Gascoyne declared this would completely annihilate the trade. Gascoyne moved for 2 slaves per ton, which was opposed by Pitt and others, and rejected by the house by 56 votes to 5. The numbers settled on were 3 slaves per 2 tons for smaller vessels and 5 slaves per 4 tons for the larger. Pitt spoke with passion and indignation in favour of the passage of the bill and made clear he did not believe it would result in the annihilation of the trade. Though the bill limited the numbers that could be shipped it would not limit the numbers actually landed. If he accepted what Penrhyn and Gascoyne said and these were the terms of our trade he would be ready *“at this moment, to give a peremptory voice for the annihilation of the trade....”* Pitt proposed that every ship, now on the coast of Africa be served with a notice by an admiralty vessel dispatched for the purpose. He also proposed indemnifying those merchants who had sent out vessels carrying more goods than they could now dispose of by purchase; a sum estimated at £12-15,000. There was a general cry of hear, hear and the house divided 56 to 5 in favour of the act.

On June 18th the Bill got its third reading and was straightaway sent up to the Lords where it got an immediate first reading.⁵¹ On June 19th the Slave Transportation Bill was given its second reading in Lords.⁵² On the Saturday the Lords heard witnesses including John Tarleton who declared he had nine ships in the trade six of which would be ruined if the bill passed.⁵³ Mr. Miles, Mr. King and Mr. Penny were also heard; Mr. Miles caused some risibility when he stated that the slaves were not chained but only hand cuffed. The debate was adjourned until the Monday. Throughout these debates the free black, and Reverend Minister, Gustavus Vasa was in the gallery. In the Lords debate of Wednesday June 25th Hawkesbury proposed changing the date of commencement of the act to the 10th of July which was accepted by the Lords and Lord Stanhope declared that further amendments could be anticipated particularly over the numbers carried.⁵⁴ The Morning Herald

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observed that the play Oroonoko had not been performed in Liverpool for thirty years for fear of giving offense.⁵⁵

Meanwhile on the 24th of June James Currie was writing again to Miss Cropper about further horrors emerging from the Liverpool slave trade.⁴

“Messrs Gregson, Case & co, the owners of the ship commanded by the famous Luke Collingwood, sent another ship to the coast of Africa lately, commanded by a man by the name of (name crossed out). This person in defiance of faith & custom, after he had slaved his ship, brought off the coast thirty free men who had been on board his ship as hostages or pawns, to sell for slaves in the West Indies. The natives were enraged at this outrage, and to revenge it, attacked the three next Liverpool ships that came in all belonging to John Fisher, took them, and carried the Captains and crews into captivity where it is supposed they will be cut off by poison. – One of the ships they however enlarged and gave to a part of the white men who if they could recover and bring back the pawns were to have their countrymen delivered up to them – they overtook Bibby at Barbadoes but the savage refused to give up the pawns...”

The accounts from the West Indies only arrived yesterday. Two days before, ten thousand names in Liverpool had attested to the Lords that no regulations in the trade were necessary, but today they say some regulations are necessary.”

Luke Collingwood was the master of the ship *Zong* which, in 1781, became the subject of a notorious legal dispute on marine insurance. Collingwood lost, during the middle passage, some 60 slaves from his cargo of over 400 and, claiming shortage of water, had some 133 slaves thrown over the side as jetsam believing that if this were done their loss would be a cost to the underwriters whereas if they died a natural death it would be a cost to the owners.⁵⁶ The new case to which Currie refers was that of Captain Robert Bibby master of the *Molly* for the firm of Case and Gregson which took 320 slaves from the Cameroons to Dominica.⁵

Back in the Lords on the 26th of June the opposition unsuccessfully attempted to amend the clause on the number of slaves to be carried to allow accommodation of more slaves on vessels under one hundred tons burthen.⁵⁴ On Friday 27th the Lords amended the allowed height between decks from five feet to four feet ten inches and amendments were made to the matter of captains reporting to their nearest customs house the number of slaves and the burthen of the vessel under a penalty £50. False accounts would render them guilty of perjury, which, potentially, was punishable by hanging.⁵⁷

On July 2nd the merchants' shop clause was amended so that the stowage of merchandise below decks was allowed until the vessel sailed or received its full complement of slaves. Lord Hawkesbury added several more amendments; No captains could serve in the African Trade who had not served two voyages as chief mate, no vessel to clear without a surgeon, it would be unlawful to insure the lives of the slaves except for hazards of the sea, a bounty of £100 to the captain and £50 to the surgeon was proposed if the vessel lost no more than two in a hundred slaves. Hawkesbury believed the trade should be preserved and with that in view every regulation should answer the aim of humanity as far as possible.⁵⁸

On July 3rd the third reading took place, and Lord Hawkesbury presented a petition on behalf of Baker and Dawson.⁵⁹ *“That by a former contract with the King of Spain for importing Slaves into the Spanish West-India Islands they had received £300,000 in specie; that by a contract now existing they were bound, under heavy*

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penalties to import into the same lands not less than 3000 slaves annually, in ships containing not less than 600 slaves each; that they had provided ships for fulfilling their contract but found that by amendments in the bill they could not carry more than 400 Slaves in each of those ships and praying ...that a clause might be introduced to exempt the said ships from the regulations enacted in the bill.” Hawkesbury said that if counsel were heard the bill would be delayed, however, he had prepared a general clause, to the effect that the bill would not extend to any contract already made to any foreign prince or state; the Lords agreed.

Lord Rodney presented a petition from Tarleton saying he had letters from Havre de Grace and Bordeaux, (where of course Miles Barber was operating) with proposals of considerable advantage for Merchants clearing out from those ports, to carry slaves to the French West-Indies. The letters turned out to contain no mention of the bill but merely mentioned the high price of Slaves in St. Domingo. The bill was passed 19 to 11 as the Slave Transportation Regulation Bill

Meanwhile there had been no attendance in the Commons since passage of the original bill. Each day the speaker entered to find only a handful of MPs, waited awhile and then left. However, on July 4th the amended bill arrived back in the Commons where it was read again for the first time. Dolben said he concurred with the amendments made but asked for an adjournment so that he could bring in a verbatim bill to preserve the privileges of the house with regard to granting of public monies for those parts of the bill which regulated bounties and compensation. This was agreed. Pitt moved that the regulation of bounties for captain and surgeon for less than two in 100 slaves dying be extended to one half the bounty being payable if only 3 in 100 die. This was also agreed; Tarleton and Fuller, the agent for Jamaica, prayed to be heard.⁶⁰ This was denied, Pitt observing that every amendment made was more favourable to the petitioners than the bill sent up to the lords. The only clause they objected to was that related to the supply of slaves for the King of Spain, he observed, *“but how the merchants of Liverpool could contend that their interests were affected by the clause relative to the persons under contract, he was at a loss to imagine.”*

The commons went into committee to discuss the bounties and the bill quickly received its third reading. It was then carried up to the Lords by Dolben. On Saturday July 5th the Lords met again to hear the bill. Counsel for the Merchants prayed to be heard again, in general against the bill and in particular against the Baker and Dawson clause. They were denied in general, but were heard against the clause, but to no effect. The bill was read a second time and ordered to be printed and committed on Monday.⁶¹ One paper observed that in their petition the merchants stated that they have ever deemed private property to be sacred. The paper asked, *“Query – what are the gentlemen’s notions on liberty?”*⁶²

On Monday July 7th consideration of the bill was adjourned for a week as it contained many errors and, as it was a money bill, it could not be amended without being automatically rejected by the commons.⁶¹ Unless a third bill was submitted quickly it would be lost. So on Tuesday July 8th a new bill was presented in the commons and given its first reading; a motion to have it read a second time was passed 55 to 2 – only the tellers for the noes, Gascoyne and Gamon, voted against.⁶³ It was read a second time when Brinsley Sheridan moved an amendment of the

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surgeons clause that surgeons should have passed an examination at Surgeons Hall which was adopted. The bill was read a third time and sent up to the lords. In the lords it was read for the first time and ordered to be printed.

On July 11th it was read in the Lords for the third time and passed without opposition, sent to the commons, returned and given the royal assent by his majesty sitting on the throne after which parliament was prorogued.⁶⁴ It had been a close run thing with both houses very thinly attended, which though the opposition attempted to use this to count out the House, probably played into the hands of those in favour of regulation.

Currie remained in Liverpool and devoted one Tuesday each month at the Liverpool Infirmary to the examination of surgeon candidates entering the slave trade under the Dolben Act. Over the years in which the slave trade question was agitated in and out of parliament Currie maintained his interest in abolition and continued to write letters on the subject, in particular to Wilberforce. In the end his life was cut short by tuberculosis before the trade was abolished. His position in Liverpool during this period was described in the biography written by his son William Wallace Currie.⁴

“His position in Liverpool, was one of extreme difficulty and delicacy. He was in the midst of many friends, who were embarked in the slave-trade, with whom he was in habits of daily intercourse and intimacy, and from whom he experienced much kindness. ... he had an opportunity of knowing that to be in the African trade did not necessarily render a man either unfeeling or dishonest. He knew that many of them (his own friends) were generous, affectionate, and humane, in private life; liberal, enterprising, and intelligent, in public, and it did not escape his observation, that the general indignation against the trade itself was equally directed against the individuals concerned in it, without allowance for the circumstances in which they might be placed. He abhorred the slave trade; but he was anxious that excess of enthusiasm and ardent feeling (where, indeed, it was scarcely possible to be calm,) should not injure the cause, which they were striving to promote.”

His political testament, written towards the end of his life summed up the political situation faced by the movement first in, and peculiar to, Liverpool, but eventually by the whole country.⁴

“Liverpool, from the nature of its commerce, was more than usually interested in those eloquent agitations on the subject of the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which took place ... under auspices so apparently favourable. Habit and interest more than counteracted the spirit of abolition in Liverpool, but we were by no means unanimous on the question. Perhaps, ... the numbers were on the side of the Abolition, and property and influence on the other.

I lived in a small circle of literary friends in Liverpool, ..., and, ..., almost all these had declared themselves in favour of the Abolition. ... Unfortunately the great questions of political happiness agitated in those days were all in one way or other swallowed up in the volcano of the French Revolution.”

The volcano was already smouldering⁶⁵ when, on August 13th 1788 the 28 gun frigate **Pomona**, Captain Donnett, sailed from Portsmouth for the African coast bearing copies of the Dolben Act. Captain Parry of the **Adventure**, 44 guns, was ordered to the same station carrying a chest of rough jewelry and trinkets of various kinds as presents for the Africans.⁶⁶