

Introduction

Françoise Le Jeune et Michel Prum

En 2007, les Britanniques commémorèrent le deux centième anniversaire de la loi qui mettait fin au commerce des esclaves dans l'Empire britannique. Un service religieux fut tenu à l'abbaye de Westminster le 25 mars, en présence de la Reine, des dignitaires de l'Église anglicane et du Premier ministre. Selon Tony Blair, cette commémoration devait permettre aux Britanniques de se souvenir de la longue campagne qu'avaient menée des leaders religieux comme William Wilberforce auquel le service était dédié. Blair rappelait aussi le nom de quelques esclaves libres comme Olaudah Equiano et le rôle des hommes et des femmes de bonne volonté dans cette campagne pour l'abolition de la traite. C'est donc le peuple britannique et son engagement dans la campagne en faveur de l'abolition que le Premier ministre souhaitait féliciter en appelant leurs descendants à se souvenir de cet engagement humaniste, inscrit dans l'histoire des nations : « *Slavery's impact upon Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas and Europe was profound. Thankfully, Britain was the first country to abolish the trade.* »

Dans un deuxième temps, Blair rappelait qu'il fallait aussi prendre en compte le fait que la Grande-Bretagne avait construit sa richesse économique grâce à l'esclavage d'hommes et de femmes pendant plus de deux siècles. Puis, Blair s'exprima personnellement en tant que Chrétien en condamnant l'apport de l'esclavage dans la construction de l'Empire britannique, appelant les Britanniques à se souvenir de ce passé peu glorieux et du poids de cette culpabilité. Mais le discours politique prenait le pas sur l'emphase religieuse lorsque Blair, n'oubliant pas son projet de *New Britain*, invita les Britanniques à se réjouir de l'apport multiculturel de ce passé colonial.

Personally I believe the bicentenary offers us a chance not just to say how profoundly shameful the slave trade was—how we condemn its existence utterly and praise those who fought for its abolition, but also to express our deep sorrow that it ever happened, that it ever could have happened and to rejoice at the different and better times we live in today.

La presse dans les anciennes colonies des Caraïbes, en Jamaïque, à Trinidad et Tobago, et certains journaux africains, lui reprochèrent son refus de s'excuser plus clairement au nom de la nation britannique. Les excuses étaient faites à titre personnel, là où les descendants d'esclaves

attendaient des compensations¹. On reprocha à Tony Blair de choisir de commémorer une date qui n'avait pas marqué l'abolition de l'esclavage, qui n'était intervenu qu'en 1833. Cette même presse reprocha à la Reine son mutisme sur le passé peu glorieux de son peuple. On sait aussi que le service religieux fut interrompu par l'intervention d'un homme noir, aussitôt arrêté pour trouble de l'ordre public². Comme on peut le constater le moment était toujours pénible, et la réconciliation et l'oubli proposés par Tony Blair restaient une aspiration des Britanniques.

Dans cet ouvrage, il nous a paru important de revenir sur cette partie de l'histoire britannique contemporaine. Les chercheurs du présent volume se sont penchés sur les différents moments clés de l'histoire de l'esclavage et de son abolition en Grande-Bretagne entre 1787 et 1840. Les articles soulignent une réelle mobilisation de la population britannique autour de deux campagnes importantes tout en s'intéressant au contexte idéologique dans lequel ce débat s'était tenu.

Laurent Curelly étudie la mise en place et le développement de la Traite anglaise, depuis les premières expéditions du XVI^e siècle jusqu'à son essor final dans la seconde moitié du XVIII^e. Les proportions exceptionnelles que prend ce commerce dans cette dernière phase est une des raisons qui expliquent l'intérêt que suscite la question de la Traite et les polémiques qui font rage à cette époque. Mais ces polémiques sont précédées, un siècle plus tôt, par un autre débat tout aussi vif, portant non sur la légitimité morale d'une telle pratique, alors incontestée et appréciée pour sa forte rentabilité, mais sur son mode opératoire. À la logique protectionniste de l'État anglais, qui défend ses intérêts nationaux contre les Néerlandais, s'oppose la logique libérale, défendue entre autres par Adam Smith, qui critique les monopoles octroyés par la Couronne et défend la dérégulation du marché. S'il est difficile d'évaluer les bénéfices soutirés par le commerce négrier, on peut néanmoins affirmer qu'il a beaucoup contribué au développement des ports, comme Liverpool ou Bristol, et à la prospérité de nombreux secteurs économiques (banques, assurances, chantiers navals...). Cette prospérité va servir d'argument aux adversaires de l'abolition, qui prédirent non seulement la faillite des compagnies négrières, mais l'effondrement de l'ensemble de l'économie anglaise en cas de victoire de leurs adversaires.

1. Voir « Carribean Leaders do not Wish to Commemorate », *Jamaica Observer*, 1^{er} avril 2007.
« *The bicentennial events, mostly concentrated in Britain, stirred the first official support for reparations, says Aaron Larrier, a Christian minister and Black heritage activist. After the March 25 anniversary of the end of the British slave trade, the Barbadian Parliament passed a resolution acknowledging for the first time that slavery was a crime against humanity. Prime Minister Owen Arthur has expressed support for reparations, though he has urged those drafting the appeal to focus on educational exchanges and technology transfers rather than cash payments. Talk of reparations has been heard in the Caribbean since the islands began gaining their independence in the 1960s.* »
2. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6497935.stm.

Les thèses de ces antiabolitionnistes sont étudiées en détail par Eric Molina, qui distingue deux groupes d'auteurs : les chroniqueurs esclavagistes qui résident dans les colonies et les propriétaires d'esclaves demeurant en Grande-Bretagne. Les premiers (comme Beckford et Edwards), qui côtoient et connaissent les esclaves, sont souvent des pragmatiques qui considèrent l'esclavage comme allant de soi et ne cherchent pas à lui trouver une légitimation théorique. Ils sont certes convaincus de l'infériorité des Noirs et s'emploient à défendre la « suprématie blanche », mais ils rêvent de rapports apaisés entre maîtres et travailleurs asservis. Ils développent un discours « presque humaniste » et imaginent un système dont chacun, Noirs et Blancs, tirerait satisfaction.

Au contraire les « *absentee landlords* », comme Holroyd, profitent financièrement de l'esclavage sans pour autant connaître de près cette institution, puisqu'ils résident en Angleterre. L'argument économique est bien sûr primordial à leurs yeux, mais c'est dans la Bible qu'ils cherchent, comme le Révérend Harris, leur légitimité morale. Même le publiciste William Cobbett, qui rejoindra plus tard le mouvement « radical », estime que l'esclavage est établi par la « loi divine ». À l'instar des autres antiabolitionnistes anglais, il croit en l'infériorité naturelle des Africains. On retrouve chez lui comme chez d'autres la comparaison entre l'esclavage colonial et l'« esclavage » des ouvriers anglais, celui-ci étant posé comme plus rude encore que celui-là. Reprenant cette comparaison, Flora Tristan écrira en 1840, à l'issue de sa visite à Londres : « L'esclavage n'est plus à mes yeux la plus grande des infortunes humaines depuis que je connais le prolétariat anglais¹. »

Le postulat de l'infériorité des Noirs, qui semble être le point commun de tous les antiabolitionnistes anglais, trouve curieusement une caution intellectuelle prestigieuse en la personne du philosophe David Hume, défenseur de la tolérance, pourfendeur des préjugés et illustre représentant des Lumières écossaises. Michel Prum revient sur la polémique qu'a suscitée une simple note de bas de page, ajoutée à l'essai *Of National Character*, dans laquelle Hume affirme qu'aucun Noir n'a jamais apporté de contribution intellectuelle, scientifique ou artistique, à l'histoire de l'humanité. Tous les contre-exemples proposés par James Beattie et d'autres n'y feront rien : il semble que l'empirisme de Hume se heurte ici à un *a priori* rédhibitoire : une aversion viscérale des Noirs, qui pousse le philosophe à contredire son propre credo universaliste. Paradoxalement, l'auteur du *Treatise of Human Nature* contribue ainsi à renforcer, par sa négrophobie, les intérêts des partisans de la traite négrière.

1. Flora Tristan, *Promenades dans Londres* (1840), Paris, Maspéro, 1978.

La première campagne britannique contre la traite et l'esclavage de 1787, n'aurait pas pu prendre forme idéologiquement sans le dynamisme du mouvement antiesclavagiste dans les colonies américaines. C'est ce que démontre Marie-Jeanne Rossignol en reprenant la chronologie du discours antiesclavagiste nord-américain depuis 1688. C'est l'influence des écrits Quakers publiés en Amérique du Nord, puis diffusés en Grande-Bretagne au sein de leur congrégation, qui convainc les Quakers britanniques de la nécessité de prendre position contre l'immoralité de la détention et de la vente d'esclaves. C'est aussi de l'Amérique du Nord que viennent les idées du Grand réveil religieux qui influencèrent le discours évangélique, au-delà des dénominations non-conformistes. Puis dans un troisième temps, Marie-Jeanne Rossignol revient sur le moment marquant de la guerre d'indépendance américaine (1775-1783) durant laquelle le débat d'idées porte sur les droits « naturels » des hommes, sur la nécessité de libérer les esclaves dans les colonies du nord pour des opérations militaires et la nécessité d'inscrire la fin de la traite dans le projet de la nouvelle République. Selon l'auteur, ces avancées américaines constituèrent un élément déterminant dans l'ouverture du débat britannique après 1783. Il fallait à la Grande-Bretagne désormais relever le défi de la « liberté », en cherchant à s'affranchir de la nation américaine et en prouvant au monde qu'elle restait une nation et un empire vertueux où les droits naturels étaient respectés.

L'implication des congrégations religieuses dans la campagne contre la traite et l'esclavage est essentielle au cours du XVIII^e siècle. Olivette Otele montre que l'engagement des Quakers américains marque la première étape de cette campagne. Leurs textes polémiques publiés en Grande-Bretagne dans la seconde moitié du XVIII^e siècle trouvent un écho parmi les Quakers britanniques et les Méthodistes. Ainsi, John Wesley fut influencé par sa visite dans les plantations esclavagistes dans les colonies américaines. Puis, sensibilisé à la cause des esclaves noirs sur le sol britannique, à la suite de la campagne juridique menée par Granville Sharp, le prédicateur méthodiste prit position dans un sermon, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, publié en 1774. Quant aux Quakers de Londres, ils fondèrent une société en 1783 pour mobiliser les membres de leur communauté et ainsi diffuser à travers leurs réseaux, les premiers textes polémiques contre l'esclavage. En dernier lieu, l'Église anglicane, peu sensible au discours antiesclavagiste au départ, se rallia aux mouvements des autres congrégations en 1787, influencée par le discours évangélique.

Parmi les principaux acteurs et entrepreneurs de cette première campagne contre l'abolition en Grande-Bretagne, Thomas Clarkson est

considéré comme un inlassable ambassadeur de la cause auprès des cercles Quakers et Anglicans, auprès des parlementaires et du grand public, ainsi qu'auprès des Français en 1789. Françoise Le Jeune analyse ses écrits les plus importants. Ses textes polémiques font appel aux arguments utilisés par le discours évangélique mais aussi par les économistes, juristes et philosophes du XVIII^e siècle. Maniant savamment discours humaniste, discours religieux et discours politique, Clarkson traverse le pays inlassablement pour convaincre les classes moyennes de signer les pétitions qui représenteront leurs idées antiesclavagistes auprès d'un Parlement très oligarchique en cette fin de XVIII^e siècle.

Si les femmes n'étaient pas très remarquées dans le mouvement lors de la première campagne de 1787 à 1792, car leur présence et leur participation étaient souvent occultées par l'implication très visible des acteurs principaux Clarkson, Sharp et Wilberforce, Véronique Molinari montre que leur engagement dans la seconde partie de la campagne pour l'abolition de l'esclavage fut essentiel. Grâce à l'activisme de quelques figures importantes comme Elizabeth Heyrick, le mouvement en faveur de l'abolition de l'esclavage reprit à partir des années 1820. Alors qu'une grande partie de la population ainsi que les activistes de la première campagne étaient en faveur d'une abolition progressive de l'esclavage dans les colonies britanniques, Elizabeth Heyrick s'engagea en publiant des textes polémiques rappelant au public l'urgence de l'émancipation des esclaves en raison des conditions inhumaines dans lesquelles ils étaient exploités dans les Antilles. À sa suite, plusieurs associations de femmes s'organisèrent à travers la Grande-Bretagne pour rallier les femmes de la classe moyenne à la cause. Elizabeth Heyrick préconisait la levée de fonds pour une campagne nationale, la circulation d'informations sur les conditions inhumaines de l'esclavage auprès du public pour obtenir des signatures aux pétitions et pour finir le boycott des produits en provenance des plantations esclavagistes. Bien que s'engageant pour une cause publique, les femmes devaient néanmoins prendre en compte leur domaine d'action qui restait limité à la « sphère » féminine. Après l'abolition de l'esclavage dans les colonies britanniques, obtenue en 1833, Véronique Molinari rappelle que les femmes s'engagèrent à nouveau dans le combat pour l'émancipation des esclaves du système des apprentis auquel les planteurs eurent recours après la fin de l'esclavage. C'est l'envoi au parlement d'une pétition massivement signée par les femmes qui fut décisif dans l'émancipation des esclaves dans les colonies.

Françoise Orazi poursuit l'analyse de l'implication des femmes de la classe moyenne dans la campagne contre l'esclavage, en examinant les

écrits d'Harriet Martineau, intellectuelle et écrivain britannique. Dans un premier texte de 1832, « Demerara » publié dans ses *Illustrations on Political Economy*, Martineau démontre par la « fiction » que l'esclavage est une pratique économiquement peu viable et, contrairement au discours des lobbies de planteurs, coûteuse à la métropole. Par ailleurs, lors de son voyage en Amérique en 1837-38, dont elle consigne les impressions dans *Society in America*, Martineau put observer les pratiques esclavagistes dans les colonies du Sud. Le système fut donc dénoncé par l'écrivain, ainsi que le lobby esclavagiste dont elle eut à subir les foudres après s'être exprimée dans la presse américaine avant son retour en Grande-Bretagne. Comme le montre Françoise Orazi, Martineau ne s'engage pas directement au sein d'une association de femmes militant pour l'émancipation des esclaves, sa santé le lui interdisait à cette époque, mais elle se sert de sa plume pour dénoncer l'inhumanité de l'esclavage et pour soutenir les diverses rébellions contre les planteurs à Demerara ou à Saint-Domingue. Ce soutien est au cœur de *The Hour and the Man*, un texte fictionnel de 1841 prenant Toussaint Louverture pour héros. Martineau n'oublie pas pour autant sa « cause », la condition des femmes de son époque, en suggérant une comparaison radicale entre la cause des esclaves dans les colonies et la cause des épouses dans les sociétés civilisées, et en prenant l'image du « *bondage* » pour illustrer son propos.

Les Irlandais font partie, à double titre, de l'histoire de l'esclavage des Îles Britanniques : en tant qu'esclaves et en tant que propriétaires d'esclaves. Joyce Fereres rappelle cette dimension peu connue de l'histoire qu'est l'esclavage blanc, en particulier durant la seconde partie du XVII^e siècle. Il ne s'agit pas ici de l'« esclavage » au sens métaphorique dont parleront, au début du XIX^e siècle, tous les radicaux et socialistes à propos du prolétaire anglais. Les esclaves irlandais sont embarqués de force, vendus et même parfois marqués au fer rouge. Et ils se révoltent aux côtés de leurs frères africains et sont comme eux réprimés dans le sang. Encore moins connue est la participation irlandaise au commerce négrier. Cette histoire-là dérange sans doute encore plus. Pourtant parmi les nombreux immigrés irlandais qui rejoignent l'Angleterre, les États-Unis, voire la France, quelques-uns parviennent à s'enrichir grâce à la traite. Outre l'attrait du gain, la brutalité envers les Noirs est pour ces immigrés de fraîche date un moyen de rejoindre la communauté *mainstream*, d'affirmer leur propre identité blanche. C'est en particulier le cas aux États-Unis, où le chemin de l'intégration irlandaise passe par l'oppression des Africains.

L'Écosse est, plus encore que l'Irlande, impliquée dans la question de l'esclavage, comme le montre William Findlay dans le dernier chapitre de

ce volume. Elle l'est d'abord par la vigueur de son combat pour l'abolition. Cette forte mobilisation est d'autant plus inattendue que les travailleurs serviles en Écosse sont loin de représenter des populations très nombreuses, mais ce qu'ils représentent, symboliquement, est d'un poids sans commune mesure avec la réalité sociologique. Si la hiérarchie de l'Église d'Écosse ne s'empresse pas de soutenir la cause abolitionniste, le clergé de base, lui, fait feu de tout bois pour défendre les esclaves fugitifs. La société civile, qu'il s'agisse du secteur éducatif ou du mouvement ouvrier, se mobilise aussi lors des batailles juridiques, et la branche écossaise de la *Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* n'a rien à envier à son homologue anglaise. Mais il ne faut pas voir pour autant l'Écosse comme unanimement abolitionniste. Certaines villes écossaises, comme Glasgow, doivent à l'époque une grande part de leur prospérité au commerce négrier. L'Écosse est donc présente, pour le meilleur comme pour le pire, dans les combats qui font rage autour de l'esclavage. Les débats qui opposent abolitionnistes et antiabolitionnistes ne peuvent certainement pas s'étudier dans un contexte simplement anglo-anglais.

The Origins of the British Transatlantic Slave Trade (1560s-1760s): a Survey and an Assessment

Laurent Curelly

The British came to dominate the transatlantic slave trade in the course of the eighteenth century; yet, they had been rather late comers compared with other European nations. While the Portuguese had embraced the trade as early as the 1470s, transporting shiploads of enslaved Africans first to Portugal and later to Brazil, and forging an enduring link between slave labour and sugar cultivation, the British did not enter the European competition for African slaves until the 1640s at a time when sugar and other commodities produced in the Americas were beginning to change consumer tastes in Europe, including Britain.¹ English merchants only began to take an active part in the transatlantic slave trade in the mid-seventeenth century; similarly, only in the 1650s did the English government pass a series of laws to gain control of what was to become a lucrative trade involving England, the West African coast and the newly-conquered territories in North America and the Caribbean Sea.²

1. Spain followed the Portuguese lead as early as the 1490s, and its territories in the Americas were soon turned into slave-owning colonies. In the early sixteenth century, the Spanish Crown granted Portugal the *asiento*, a licence authorising it to enjoy a monopoly in the supply of enslaved Africans to Spanish colonies in America. The *asiento* changed hands in the next centuries until it was given to Britain following the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. Other European powers, like the Netherlands and France, broke into the market for African slaves in the seventeenth century, thus turning the transatlantic slave trade into a source of commercial and diplomatic rivalry. For more information on the very beginnings of European involvement in the slave trade with Africa, see James Walvin, *A Short History of Slavery* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp.37-49, and Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade. The History of the Transatlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870* (New York: Simon & Schuster; London: Picador, 1997), pp.68-86.
2. The transatlantic trade, which involved three continents—Europe, Africa and America—, is often referred to as the triangular trade, the first leg of the trade consisting in European manufactured goods being shipped to Africa and bartered for enslaved Africans while the second leg consisted in the slaves captured or bought in Africa being forcibly transported across the Atlantic to the Americas. There they were supplied to planters to grow crops which were in high demand in Europe, such as tobacco, cacao, coffee, and especially sugar, an increasingly popular product initially used as a sweetener for hot drinks. Hence the third leg of the triangular trade was the homeward-bound voyage to Europe, with English ships delivering their cargoes of tropical products to English ports typically one year or so after their departure. This paper covers both the periods prior to and after the 1707 Act of Union, which marked the official birth of Great Britain, although the realms of England and Scotland were associated through the so-called Union of the Crowns as early as 1603 when James VI of Scotland ascended the English throne. As a result, the words “England” and “English” will generally be used to refer to the period of time before the 1707 Act of Union while “Britain” and “British” will be used to refer to history after 1707. In addition, the slave trade itself essentially concerned England rather than Scotland even if, in the eighteenth century, Glasgow thrived on the tobacco trade from the Chesapeake region in North America.

The eighteenth century was unquestionably the heyday of the British slave trade. It was the time when Britain came to outstrip Portugal as the leading exporter of African slaves, with over three million of them shipped to the Americas compared with approximately two million transported in Portuguese ships. British exports of enslaved Africans throughout the eighteenth century accounted for slightly less than half of the total number of slaves removed from Africa.¹ Over the whole of its slave-trading history from the 1640s to 1807, when the slave trade was officially abolished, Britain exported some three and a half million enslaved Africans to the Americas, which shows how big a role Georgian Britain actually played in the transatlantic trade with no less than 40,000 slaves shipped annually in the 1740s.² Thus, the sheer size of the British slave trade in the eighteenth century may be one of the reasons why the abolitionist movement came into its own in the 1770s-1780s with written accounts of former slaves popularised in Britain and religious dissenters voicing their opposition to the slave traffic operated by British merchants.³ Although the impact of the transatlantic trade on the British economy is still a contentious issue among historians Britain's involvement was by no means marginal and may have caused the debate on the abolition of the trade to take a hold in Parliament and in the country at large.

The beginnings of the British slave trade

The British slave trade expanded steadily from the 1640s onwards; yet, there had been attempts before that time to secure African slaves, the first of which can be traced back to the 1560s. The first slaving voyage ever recorded in England was pioneered by John Hawkins in 1562. With the support of a syndicate including people who had traded with Africa

1. See David Richardson, "Slave exports from West and West-Central Africa, 1700-1810: new estimates of volume and distribution" (1988) in Jeremy Black ed., *The Atlantic Slave Trade. Volume III: Eighteenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd), pp.1-22. It should be noted that such estimates are merely educated guesses as there are no comprehensive records of the slave trade but only sketchy information, which is why slave trade figures are still a matter of debate among historians.
2. See Robin Law ed., *The British Transatlantic Trade. Vol.1: The Operation of the Slave Trade in Africa* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), pp.xxxii. According to Law, the British slave trade seems to have reached a peak in the 1740s while Richardson (*op.cit.*) argues that it peaked in the 1790s and Kenneth Morgan in *Slavery, Atlantic Trade and the British Economy, 1660-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) has the late 1760s as record high years for British slave exports. Numbers, therefore, provide a general view of trends and developments but should preferably be taken with a pinch of salt.
3. One such account was the autobiography of a former slave, Olaudah Equiano, published in 1789 under the title *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. As regards the role played by religious groups in the struggle against the slave trade, American Quakers were instrumental in influencing those in Britain—initially fellow-Quakers and then Evangelicals—who spearheaded the abolitionist campaign.

before—albeit not in slaves—Hawkins captured Africans on the Guinea Coast and delivered them to Hispaniola, present-day Haiti, six months later, to be sold to Spanish settlers. As a private merchant, he had clearly infringed Portuguese and Spanish slave-trading monopolies but, back in England, he had been able to persuade the government that there was good money to be made from the triangular trade and had even received Queen Elizabeth's backing for a second and a third voyage which he completed between 1564 and 1569. From then on, however, English slaving voyages became occasional private ventures, hardly an organised and state-sponsored form of trade, and remained so until the 1640s.

Hawkins's slaving enterprises are worth mentioning, though, because they gave rise to contrasting readings when the slave trade issue was hotly debated in the Westminster Parliament in the late eighteenth century. Thus, Hawkins went down in history, clearly enjoying a fair amount of posterity with a staunch slave trade supporter like the Duke of Clarence, the future William IV, who duly named him in a speech to the House of Lords in 1799:

That able navigator, Hawkins, in 1562, first sailed to Sierra Leone; and at that time the African Trade was considered of such importance in this country, that Queen Elizabeth, the ensuing year, sent Hawkins to trade there. He gives an account of their barbarity, and states, that the people were at that time mere slaves. He also mentions, that he found the French trading in that quarter of the world; so that your Lordships may perceive, that even so early as the latter part of the sixteenth century, the different nations of Europe that had possessions in the West Indies, considered the Slave Trade as absolutely necessary for the existence of those colonies. It is said, that Queen Elizabeth gave the first charter, and I believe the fact, as it comes from a very respectable channel.¹

Clarence's view of Hawkins was challenged by abolitionist Thomas Clarkson who, in his *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, belittles the Elizabethan seafarer portraying him as the unscrupulous father of the English slave trade, while denying Queen Elizabeth I any responsibility in it:

The first importation from Africa by our countrymen was in the reign of Elizabeth, in the year 1562. This great princess seems on the very

1. The Duke of Clarence's speech was incorporated under the auspices of the West India lobby and Liverpool merchants into a pamphlet entitled *Substance of the Speech of His Royal Highness The Duke of Clarence in The House of Lords on the Motion for the Recommitment of the Slave Trade Limitation Bill on the Fifth Day of July, 1799*. See John Pinfold, ed. *The Slave Trade Debate. Contemporary Writings For and Against* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2007) pp.331-366. Interestingly, the Duke of Clarence draws upon English history to put forward two major arguments consistently used by anti-abolitionists, the first being that enslaved Africans were no worse off working on plantations than they would be in Africa and the second being that abolishing the slave trade would mean undermining Britain's economy beyond repair.

commencement of the trade to have questioned its lawfulness. She seems to have entertained a religious scruple concerning it, and indeed, to have revolted at the very thought of it. [...] When Captain Hawkins (afterwards Sir John) Hawkins returned from his first voyage to Africa and Hispaniola, whither he had carried slaves, she sent for him, and, as we learn from Hill's *Natural History*, expressed her concern lest any of the Africans should be carried off without their free consent. [...] Captain Hawkins promised to comply with the injunctions of Elizabeth in this respect. But he did not keep his word; for when he went to Africa again, he seized many of the inhabitants and carried them off as slaves.¹

These two contrasting visions of England's past clearly serve two different purposes but the very reconstruction of history is intended by both men as a way to reach out to their respective audiences more effectively. It is doubtful whether Hawkins's slaving voyages played a major role in the actual development of the English transatlantic trade but they certainly contributed to building up a shared slaving past which would be either revered or rejected.

It is a fact, though, that until the mid-seventeenth century English merchants traded in Africa for other commodities than slaves, mainly gold. Official voyages to Africa under the early Stuarts were the sole responsibility of the Guinea Company, a joint-stock organisation which was set up in 1618 and was granted by King James I a monopoly over trade in that part of the world. Private merchants also joined in, in breach of the Guinea Company's monopoly, acting as interlopers. Meanwhile, England was keen to expand its empire in North America, with the foundation of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, and St Mary's, Maryland, in 1634 as well as in the Caribbean, with the establishment of colonies in St Kitts in 1623, Barbados in 1625, Nevis in 1628 and Montserrat and Antigua in 1632. These territories became the backbone of the British Empire in the west when it was discovered that the Chesapeake region in North America and the Caribbean islands could accommodate cash crops, respectively tobacco and sugar. In the 1640s, there was a high demand for labourers who would be physically able to grow the crops, which is why thousands of indentured servants² ended up working on plantations in the Americas. But the need

1. Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade, by the British Parliament* (London, 1808), volume I, chapter II.
2. Indentured servants were white immigrants who bought themselves to a planter for a certain period of time after which they were released from their servitude. During the Interregnum (1649-1660) they were typically paupers, convicts and political opponents who were thus kept away from Britain. They accounted for roughly 40 per cent of all whites in Britain's transatlantic colonies. Their numbers gradually declined as more and more African slaves were shipped across the Atlantic. See Hillary McD. Beckles, "The 'Hub of Empire': The Caribbean and Britain in the Seventeenth Century" in Nicholas Canny, ed. *The Origins of Empire. Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1998) pp.222-4.

for labourers in the American colonies, especially in the sugar islands, was so great that England soon turned to African slaves to keep production going.

Barbados shifted its production to sugar in the mid-1640s, thus becoming the richest of all British colonies, but it soon lost the lead it held because of sugar production to Jamaica. 1655 marked a watershed in the expansion of England's commercial empire. A few months after Cromwell had launched his "Western Design", Jamaica was captured from the Spanish and was subsequently peopled by English settlers who turned the island into a major sugar production centre. Ultimately, but for the conquest of Jamaica, Cromwell's plan to secure the much-coveted island of Hispaniola and thus to undermine the Spanish economic dominance in the Caribbean failed. Yet, building on Cromwell's political vision and economic ambitions for England the English state was committed to asserting its transatlantic presence on an unprecedented scale, which was all the more crucial as the Dutch were also showing a keen interest in the region.¹

From the 1660 Restoration until the late eighteenth century, when opponents began to call for its abolition, the British transatlantic trade continued unabated. Between the 1660s and the 1760s the number of slaves shipped from Africa to the Americas per decade increased almost tenfold. Over their slave trading period the British undertook 12,000 slaving voyages out of a total of 34,000 with 5,000 of them originating in Liverpool. Due to mass-imports, the slave population in Barbados soared from a little over 5,500 in 1645 to 20,000 in 1651 and 50,000 in 1700. In the early 1700s Jamaica took over from Barbados as the major destination for African slaves in the British Americas and, by 1750, it was home to nearly 120,000 enslaved Africans. Compared with the Caribbean islands, British settlements in North America imported fewer African slaves as the fertility rate among slaves became higher there and fewer supplies were needed as a result. The staggeringly large number of slave imports to the British Caribbean resulted in shifting population patterns among blacks and whites on those

1. Cromwell's political vision consisted in keeping Spain in check which, after a fair amount of dithering, was branded as England's arch-enemy. Cromwell's "Western Design" was presented by the propagandists of the regime as a spiritual crusade led by a Protestant nation against a Catholic power—a "popish state" as Spain was called in those days—although the rationale behind this plan was certainly much more mundane. Its essential aim was clearly to challenge the power of Spain overseas. England's commercial expansion was aided by the passing of protectionist laws, the so-called Navigation Acts (see further down). For a discussion of why, quite ironically, the slave trade was boosted during the Interregnum, an age when the English had broken free from the tyranny of the Stuart monarchs, see Carla Gardina Pestana, *The English Atlantic in an Age of Revolution, 1640-1661* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 2004) pp.177-180.

islands: by the 1670s, indeed, black slaves had outnumbered white people with over 75 per cent of blacks in 1700 and 90 per cent in 1780.¹

All these figures are an obvious sign that, shortly after joining in the slave trade, England acquired a leading position, which it retained until the 1807 Abolition Act. By the mid-seventeenth century it had emerged as the main rival of the Netherlands, which eventually led to the second Anglo-Dutch War of 1665-67, and the English soon outran the Dutch in the fierce competition for African slaves. British hegemony over the transatlantic trade was further consolidated by the fact that in 1713 Britain was able to secure the *asiento* as a result of the Treaty of Utrecht which ended the Spanish War of Succession. The *asiento* meant that, from then on, the British South Sea Company was granted a monopoly right to ship enslaved Africans to Spanish colonies in America², so that by the early eighteenth century Britain clearly dwarfed its European competitors in terms of slave exports to the Americas.

The organisation of the British transatlantic slave trade

In 1713, the South Sea Company was by no means the only slaving operator in Britain. It actually partnered up with the Royal African Company (R.A.C.) which, until the 1690s, had been a key-player in the transatlantic trade although by the early eighteenth century it was overshadowed by private merchants who competed ferociously for the provision of slaves to British colonies in the Americas. A successor to the Company of Royal Adventurers into Africa which received a royal charter in 1660, the Royal African Company was established in 1672 and granted by King Charles II a monopoly right over English trade with Africa. This meant that private merchants, who had been in favour during the Interregnum while the trade was still in its infancy but was beginning to grow, were officially denied any participation in the supplying of slaves to English colonies in the Americas.

Setting up monopoly companies to conduct trade overseas was far from uncommon in early modern times. No later than 1618 was the Company of Adventurers of London Trading to the Parts of Africa founded, whose remit was to trade with Africa, albeit not in slaves. This company, better known as the "Guinea Company", was granted a royal charter by James I.

1. For these figures and more, see James Walvin, *A Short History of Slavery*, *op.cit.*; Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and the British Empire from Africa to America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); David Richardson, "The British Empire and the Transatlantic Slave Trade 1660-1807" in P.J. Marshall, *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Vol.II: The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
2. The *asiento* was in fact discontinued when Britain and Spain were in conflict, in 1718-21, 1727-29 and 1739-48, and it ended in 1748.

It was reorganised in 1631 and continued to enjoy royal patronage as a fresh charter was issued by Charles I but lost its monopoly in the wake of the Civil War and the abolition of monarchy in 1649, when private companies were encouraged to enter the African trade. It was a period of time when England was beginning to deal in African slaves on a much larger scale than the occasional ventures of the previous decades. Private merchants rushed in to enter the trade and began to tap the slave market. Soon after the Restoration, however, Charles II made private trading to Africa illegal by granting a charter to the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading to Africa, the first joint-stock company of its kind to pursue the slave trade, among other activities. The Company of Royal Adventurers sustained financial losses and went bust in the late 1660s before being replaced by the Royal African Company in 1672. British monarchs at that time were keen to endorse monopoly companies which they assumed would boost trade and thus bolster the economy. The R.A.C. could rely on the king's protection and was instrumental in the development of England's transatlantic trade in the late seventeenth century.¹ This, however, did not stop interlopers from trading illegally and increasingly challenging the R.A.C.'s leadership.

With the demise of royal absolutism in 1688 and the rise of parliamentary monarchy, the Royal African Company's monopolistic position came under constant criticism from private traders who pushed for a more open trade to Africa in order to further their interests. Private merchants especially combated the R.A.C. in Parliament by continuously petitioning MPs and conducting intense lobbying. This power struggle was successful, for they were able to have a law passed in 1698 which rescinded the R.A.C.'s monopoly and henceforth opened the transatlantic trade to competitors. However, the latter had to pay a 10 per cent duty on their outward cargoes to Africa towards maintenance costs for the forts operated by the R.A.C. on the African coast.²

Such a guarantee was only short-lived as the 10 per cent tax provision included in the 1698 act was due to be scrapped in 1712. Private merchants, thus, had dealt the R.A.C. a severe blow from which it never recovered and, from 1712 onwards, the British slave trade became deregulated with private traders vying for market shares. In the early eighteenth century the R.A.C. was almost extinct; in 1730 its market share accounted for a mere

1. The R.A.C. often minted gold coins featuring an elephant's head, the company's emblem; these coins came to be known as "guineas".

2. Forts looking out to sea were operated on the African coast in order to protect British interests from onslaughts by other European vessels, thus facilitating the embarkation of enslaved Africans onto British ships. Maintenance costs for these forts were high and, to make matters worse, the R.A.C. was often accused of mismanagement.

1 per cent of Britain's total slave trade while in its glory days in the 1680s it had secured over 85 per cent of the trade as other companies operated illegally.¹ The R.A.C. was dissolved by parliamentary act in 1821 but by the 1720s it had already reached its nadir.

Interestingly, the battle between the R.A.C. and its private opponents was first and foremost waged in Parliament with the R.A.C. launching the first attack in 1690 in order to have its monopoly guaranteed by law. This move initiated protracted parliamentary debates on the organisation of the slave trade which were to last for nearly twenty-five years. In 1690 a committee of the House of Commons was appointed to look into the organisation of the African trade and decide whether it could be deregulated. Both camps engaged in a fair amount of petitioning and pamphleteering in order to win MPs over to their cause. Daniel Defoe, for instance, wrote in defence of the R.A.C. Separate traders did their utmost to convince Parliament that statutory protection for the R.A.C. would not serve the interests of the nation and pushed for unregulated trade to Africa instead. They also used the press in an effort to persuade public opinion to back their endeavours to liberalise the British transatlantic trade. Critics argued that the R.A.C. lacked efficiency as, among other things, it failed to meet the growing demand for enslaved Africans in the British Americas; the same sort of criticism Adam Smith later levelled at the very principle of monopoly which he dismissed as "a great enemy to good management".² Supporters of the R.A.C. countered that the maintenance of forts on the African coast was bound to be a drain on their finances but added that it was the only way of protecting the African trade from foreign intrusion. They also claimed that public interest was best served by a joint-stock company while separate traders would only advance their own interests.³

1. For more details on the Royal African Company, see William Pettigrew, "Parliament and the Escalation of the Slave Trade 1690-1714" in *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People*, ed. by Stephen Farrell, Melanie Uwin and James Walvin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) pp.12-26; Kenneth Morgan, ed. *The British Transatlantic Trade. Vol.2: The Royal African Company* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), pp.xi-xxi.
2. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), 5th ed., 1789 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) Book I, chapter 11, p.251.
3. The author of an anonymous pamphlet in support of the R.A.C., for example, insists that "Trade and Commerce cannot be maintained or increased without Government, Order and regular Discipline; for in all confused Traffique it must necessarily happen, that while every single person pursued his own particular Interest, the Publique is deserted by All, and consequently must fall to Ruine. For which reason, the Crowne has Erected and Established Fraternities or Companies of Merchants, with Grant of Privileges exclusive to all others, as his Majesties Ancestors and Himself by their Royal Charters have been graciously pleased to do to the Royal African, East-India, Turkey, Hamburg, Eastland and Muscovia Companies". *Certain Considerations Relating to the Royal African Company of England. In which, the Original Growth, and National Advantages of the Guiney Trade, are Demonstrated: As Also That the Same Trade cannot be*

Thus, less than a century before it debated the abolition of the slave trade, Parliament became a forum for discussion as to how the trade should be organised. The *modus operandi* was much the same as it would be in the 1780s; there was active lobbying from both sides with petitions circulating at Westminster and a considerable amount of propaganda, even if public opinion was not whipped up to the extent it would be when an abolitionist like Thomas Clarkson toured Britain in order to collect signatures for petitions to be presented to the House of Commons. The major difference between the way the slave trade was debated in the 1690s and in the 1780s concerns the nature of the debates themselves. In the late seventeenth century the transatlantic trade was taken for granted as it was said to generate profits which, it was assumed, were conducive to England's prosperity and grandeur in the face of international competition. The parliamentary debates did not seize the moral high ground as was the case some hundred years later but revolved around financial arguments such as how England would best benefit from the slave trade. Over the seventeenth century and well into the next century state institutions—Parliament and monarchs alike—had a vested interest in promoting the British transatlantic trade, a fact which is particularly revealing of the mercantilist approach to economic issues prevalent in those days.

The British transatlantic trade and mercantilist economics

The fact that the British transatlantic trade was gradually opened up to separate traders is seen by some historians as a spin-off of the government's efforts to provide it with external protection. Thus, Parliament passed a host of Navigation Acts between 1651 and 1696 in an attempt to regulate English trade, especially shipping, and preclude foreign interference with English commerce.¹ These were clearly protectionist barriers aimed at defending national interest. The first Navigation Act, which came into force in 1651, was especially targeted at the Netherlands, the then leading commercial power in Europe. It provided that:

No goods or commodities whatsoever of the growth, production or manufacture of Asia, Africa or any part thereof; or of any islands belonging to them, [...] shall be imported or brought into this Commonwealth of England, or into Ireland, or any other lands, islands, plantations, or territories to this Commonwealth belonging, or in their possession, in any other ship or ships,

carried on, but by a Company and Joint Stock (London, 1680) published in Kenneth Morgan ed., *The British Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Vol.2: *The Royal African Company, op.cit.*, pp.5-14. One of the arguments put forward in support of the R.A.C. was that royal patronage legitimised its very existence.

1. Scotland had trade laws of its own passed by the Scottish Parliament. Not until the 1707 Act of Union, in fact, did Scotland enjoy commercial access to English colonies.

vessel or vessels whatsoever, but only in such as do truly and without fraud belong only to the people of this Commonwealth, or of the plantations thereof, as the proprietors or right owners thereof.¹

By and large, the 1651 Navigation Act failed to achieve its intended aim, for it was often circumvented; nevertheless it initiated similar pieces of legislation which helped to consolidate English trade.

The 1660 Navigation Act was passed after the Restoration but it re-enacted the 1651 act as it included the same provisions while adding to it significantly. Thus, it required that vessels should be manned by overwhelmingly British crews and it enumerated commodities produced in English colonies which could only be shipped to England or English possessions. For instance, sugar produced in the West Indies thanks to slave labour was to be transported in English ships to an English port from where it could be re-exported to other European countries. The 1663 Staple Act provided that all goods bound for English colonies had to go through an English port. As a result, the Dutch were eliminated from the English carrying trade and London soon overtook Amsterdam as Europe's largest warehouse. By the 1670s, with the help of protectionist legislation, England had secured a leading commercial position which it retained throughout the eighteenth century, and the slave trade was provided with a legislative framework that allowed it to thrive. Another three acts, respectively passed in 1673, 1696 and 1733, complemented the series of Navigation Acts and further codified trade. In addition to regulatory measures, the 1696 act included a provision for the establishment of a Board of Trade to enforce the law. The 1733 Molasses Act significantly placed heavy duties on molasses and sugar shipped from the French West Indies to British colonies in North America in support of the British sugar trade. The Navigation Acts were renewed and extended in 1786 and persisted well into the age of abolitionism, as they were not repealed until 1849. Since whole sectors of the British economy came to depend on overseas trade, it was felt that a battery of laws was needed to preserve the national interest.²

1. Reproduced in Samuel Gardiner, ed. *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution 1625-1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906) p.468. Other reasons than purely commercial concerns seem to have prompted the government to come up with the Navigation Act. The act was first passed in retaliation for the refusal of the Dutch government to negotiate an alliance with England, a move which the English regarded as an affront. Domestic and international events therefore resulted in the passing of the 1651 Navigation Act.
2. For further information on the Navigation Acts, see Nuala Zahedieh, "Overseas Expansion and Trade in the Seventeenth Century" in Nicholas Canny, ed. *The Origins of Empire. Oxford History of the British Empire, op.cit.*, pp.405-7; David Ormrod, *The Rise of Commercial Empires. England and the Netherlands in the Age of Mercantilism, 1650-1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp.31-37, 44-48, 309-311.

It is no accident that British trade, of which the transatlantic trade was a pillar, should have been thus regulated even when existing monopoly companies were dying out. State interference with overseas trade, which expressed itself through protectionist laws, was dictated by a mercantilist approach to the economy which had developed since the late sixteenth century and prevailed in the seventeenth century. The label “mercantilism” was used in retrospect to refer to those economic policies pursued by European nations, especially Britain and France, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. It was thought then that a nation’s prosperity depended on the wealth it was able to accumulate; thus, in an effort to achieve a favourable balance of trade, the British government sought to produce wealth by promoting exports and limiting imports. Commercial policies were implemented which made it possible for Britain to produce a favourable balance of trade and thereby amass bullion: colonies became exclusive markets for their mother countries, trade monopolies were set up, Navigation Acts were passed, customs duties were levied on foreign goods entering British territory, whether on the mainland or in the colonies. All these measures contributed to Britain developing a competitive edge over its European rivals in international trade.¹ The mercantile system was meant to favour the interests of British merchants and producers against foreign competition but soon came under fierce criticism from such prominent thinkers as Adam Smith who, in his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, debunked it point by point.²

The British transatlantic trade clearly fed into the British economy. Historians, however, disagree as to how much money the slave trade generated, who really benefited from it and to what extent it stimulated the British economy in the eighteenth century. Some scholars argue that it

1. It should be noted that Britain imported a great many commodities from overseas, either from its colonies or from other countries; for the latter, customs duties were levied. Besides, a significant number of goods entering Britain were re-exported to foreign markets. The profits derived from trade were channelled into an ever-expanding economy, with manufactured goods churned out both for the domestic market and for export.
2. The mercantile system remained the driving force behind British colonial trade until at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, though, laissez-faire economics, as advocated by Adam Smith, had taken hold of foreign exchanges. The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and of the Navigation Acts in 1849 completed the dismantling of the mercantile system at home and abroad. Some historians like Seymour Drescher in his *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1977) deny that there is a correlation between the abolition of slavery and the emergence of a new economic system. Drescher’s intended aim was to refute a thesis propounded by Eric Williams in a groundbreaking book, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944). Williams’s “decline” thesis had it that the abolition of slavery was linked to the economic decline of British Caribbean colonies and to the demise of the old mercantile system. A new economic system was coming into existence, Williams argued, which ultimately made the slave trade and slavery obsolete.

set off the Industrial Revolution and, as a result, altered Britain's economic landscape while others play down its alleged impact on the industrialisation process that was to transform Britain beyond recognition. Historians seem to have reached consensus on the fact that the expansion of colonial trade did impact the British economy, even if their estimates of the profits accruing from it vary considerably.¹ If the effect of slave trade profits on the British national income cannot be measured with uncontroversial precision, the transatlantic trade clearly contributed to the prosperity of British merchants, the rise of financial institutions and the growth of British ports from an early period onwards. Bills of exchange allowing planters to pay for slaves were used extensively from the 1670s; they were sometimes presented by traders to banks where they could be cashed in but could also be submitted to other middlemen like private brokers. Marine insurance companies also benefited from the trade.²

Above all, the transatlantic trade fostered the growth of ports. As soon as the trade took off London played a crucial role in the shipment of manufactured goods to Africa and the import of staple crops from English colonies in the Americas. England's capital city became Europe's leading commercial hub with a large number of re-exports to European countries originating on its docks. It retained its dominance until the mid-1720s but the London-based Royal African Company was in sharp decline by then and the transatlantic trade moved to Bristol whose private traders had been instrumental in bringing about the R.A.C.'s demise. Bristol prospered on the sugar trade with the West Indies from the 1720s to the 1740s at which time Liverpool took over as the leading slave-trading outpost. Liverpool maintained its supremacy through to the end of the slave trade in 1807. Thus, almost half of all British slaving voyages departed from Liverpool, mostly in the eighteenth century. It was not just British ports that thrived on the slave trade but the hinterland also reaped significant benefits. A case in point is Manchester whose cotton industry experienced dramatic growth in less than twenty years with most of its items exported to Africa via Liverpool and exchanged for slaves.³ It is no accident therefore that Bristol

1. It is estimated that profit levels in the slave trade were no higher than 7.5 per cent in the latter half of the eighteenth century; source material is lacking to calculate profit levels prior to 1750 with any acceptable degree of accuracy. For a detailed presentation of the debates on the profits of the slave trade see Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery, Atlantic Trade and the British Economy, 1600-1800*, *op.cit.*, pp.24-48.
2. See Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery, Atlantic Trade and the British Economy, 1600-1800*, *op.cit.*, pp.74-79.
3. With its port making money from the tobacco and sugar trades Glasgow also became a great commercial city in the course of the eighteenth century, on a par with Bristol and Liverpool; yet, it did not participate directly in the slave trade the way its English counterparts did. For further information on the contribution of the slave trade to the economic activity of British ports, see Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and the British Empire from Africa to America*, *op.cit.*, pp.61-66;

and Liverpool MPs should have been at the forefront of the opposition to the abolition of the slave trade when the issue was raised and debated in the British Parliament. They felt that the economic interests of their constituencies were at stake and that abolition would inevitably entail a severe crisis.

From Hawkins's exploratory slaving voyages to Liverpool's commitment to the slave trade, nearly two centuries elapsed during which the British transatlantic trade rose to dizzy heights. From a fledgling practice the slave trade turned into a flourishing business which buttressed Britain's commercial empire. From an organisational perspective, it was once a state-sponsored activity with monopoly companies trading on behalf of the monarch but it gradually became an arena for free internal competition, which attracted private merchants hankering after money. Almost from the outset, it was often high on the British political agenda, although in a more subdued way than when the abolition issue moved centre stage. Thus, it attracted attention on a number of occasions, especially when its organisation gave rise to heated debates in Parliament and when British governments adopted protectionist measures in an effort to outshine European rivals.

The economics of the transatlantic trade are a vexed issue. Arguably, the slave trade was central to the economic development of British colonies in the Americas and to the growing prosperity of their slave-holding plantocracy. Besides, it provided a significant impetus to the economic and financial activities most closely associated with it—the merchant corporation itself but also the banking and insurance sectors as well as the shipbuilding industry and a few other manufacturing industries. Ports like Bristol and Liverpool greatly benefited from it. Whether the slave trade had far-reaching repercussions on the British economy as a whole cannot be ascertained. To the anti-abolitionists of the late eighteenth century, however, there was not the least doubt about this, hence their repeated claims that abolition would not only bring about a slump in the economy of the West-Indies but would also damage Britain's economic activity, as this extract from an anonymous trade pamphlet testifies:

That this [the slave trade] is as lucrative a branch of Commerce as any our Merchants are engaged in, the Wealth of Liverpool, Bristol, etc; whose principal Merchants are embarked in that Trade will confirm. [...] With Respect to our Country, it will not be difficult to point out the numerous Evils which

must arise to our Commerce, from the Annihilation of Trade so peculiarly Advantageous to it and our Colonies.¹

The author's vindication of the slave trade rests on the assumption that in the eighteenth century Britain's economic strength went hand in hand with its colonial empire, which it had taken one century and a half to build. This may explain why many years of passionate debates were needed before the British transatlantic trade eventually became a thing of the past.

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1. *Commercial Reasons for the Non-Abolition of the Slave Trade in the West-Indian Islands* (London: W. Lane, 1789) in David Ryden ed., *The British Transatlantic Trade*. Vol.4: *The Abolitionist Struggle; Promoters of the Slave Trade* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003) p.10.