

# UK: Robin Blackburn interview: What really ended slavery?

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**Robin Blackburn, author of *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776-1848*, spoke to *International Socialism* on the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade**

**What was your reaction to the official commemoration of the banning of the slave trade, and what do you think was left out of this?**

When looking at the coverage of this commemoration, on the BBC and elsewhere, I was instantly reminded of the comment by Eric Williams, the great Trinidadian historian and nationalist leader, in an essay on the British historians and abolition. He said how incredible it was that they conveyed the view that Britain had only constructed the largest and most profitable slave system in the Americas in order to have the satisfaction of suppressing it.

One notes, for example, the coverage by Melvyn Bragg, ennobled by Tony Blair as a sort of outrider of New Labour. He has a programme, *In Our Time*, on Radio 4. It can be quite good because you have a number of people in the studio who are scholars who've really studied the topic. For some reason the question of abolition and Wilberforce is a sort of sacred heart of British nationalist mythology and it couldn't be subjected to this normal critical process. Instead of having a normal studio discussion with people who really knew about the subject, Lord Bragg ventured out and interviewed the great and the good. There was, I think, one interview with a West Indian historian, but Bragg didn't go to the West Indies or Africa. His star contributors were William Hague, the former leader of the Conservative Party, and John Prescott, the then deputy prime minister. Neither man was at all knowledgeable, but both were anxious to contribute to the national mythology in which Britain is portrayed as the abolitionist par excellence.

Wilberforce did not in fact lead emancipation, although he played a role in the campaign to end the Atlantic slave trade, which was successful in 1807. However, there is a continuing confusion here: slavery went on for more than 30 years. What the coverage failed to convey was the full shape and scale of the forces that did contribute to the suppression of the slave trade. There was no discussion of the Haitian Revolution, no discussion of the various black abolitionists. So my first feeling is that it was a very shallow commemoration, one that did not want to engage with the fact that anti-slavery developed as a significant force, had the guidance of some black abolitionists and African former slaves, and represented an upwelling of class consciousness.

**What were the key forces involved in this process?**

This was the first big issue that mobilised hundreds of thousands of people. In a city such as Manchester, a newly industrialised urban centre, you found almost every adult person subscribed to the petition to abolish the slave trade. This was a broad and important movement.

Of course, it must also be put in its wider Atlantic context. That is the context of the American Revolution that first created a deep sense of unease, the demand that democratic reforms were

needed in the 1780s. The Americans were fighting for English liberties against the Hanoverian oligarchy. In response, a wing of the oligarchy began to feel that it had to reform—reform the way the empire worked in India and suppress the Atlantic slave trade, which it saw as weakening the empire rather than strengthening it.

As well as this current within the ruling class, the Quakers played an important role, and later the Baptists and the Methodists—the Methodist leader John Wesley wrote on slavery in 1774, criticising the institution and calling on slave owners to give up their slaves. These represented religious currents that developed in the wake of the industrialisation of society, during which many people were uprooted and sought to re-establish their identity and sought self-help in difficult circumstances. There was definitely a rivalry between the evangelical Baptists and Methodists on the one hand and those who were inspired by radical democratic ideas on the other. The outstanding figure among the latter was Tom Paine, who published an attack on the slave trade in the early 1770s, and who inspired the emancipation law in Pennsylvania in 1780 and the 1777 Vermont constitution, when Vermont broke away from the colonial assembly in New York. The latter was the first occasion on which slavery was outlawed in a territory.

Both the radical democrats and the evangelicals found that this was a cause they had to support. Sometimes they were reluctant, but there was a hatred of the oligarchy and its privileges, and of what William Cobbett later called “old corruption” and the denial of political rights to those who were not members of the Church of England. For example, you couldn’t be an MP unless you were willing to swear a Church of England oath. So quite wide layers were drawn into political life at a time of imperial crisis. The middle classes and the rising bourgeoisie, the manufacturers and merchants in the industrialising regions, were beginning to demand a voice, and this offered openings to radical artisans and workers in the new factories. The great agitation around slavery was one of the first times there was a broad, popular canvassing of an issue. Women were widely involved in this agitation. It should be said that large numbers of women at this time were domestic servants—there were millions in the houses of the upper and middle classes—who faced abuse. The anti-slavery issue had great appeal for these layers, and they were also quite likely to have been drawn into the new evangelical religious movements.

The whole issue was made more dramatic still with the outbreak of the French Revolution, which initially encouraged the anti-slavery movement. Thomas Clarkson, who played a big role in organising the anti-slavery movement in the country as a whole, went over to France and supported the revolution. This greatly worried Wilberforce, who tried to caution him. However, after about 1792 and certainly by 1793, when Britain and France were at war, things changed. There was a general anti-Jacobin panic and radicals were greatly persecuted, even people such as Joseph Priestley were threatened, and many had to go into exile in the United States. The whole first phase of the anti-slavery movement was really brought to a close by the 1790s and it looked as if the great campaign had been completely blocked.

But then, once again, you have to put this into the context of Atlantic history, not just the history of individual nations beloved of nationalist mythology. In August 1791 a slave rebellion broke out in Saint Domingue, a French colony in the Caribbean and the richest slave colony in the Americas. Initially this involved 30,000 to 40,000 slaves, mainly in the northern plain, and as it spread it fused together with Jacobin demands. “Black Jacobins” emerge along with independent rebel groups in the hills. War was, by this time, raging between Britain and France. The British tried to seize French islands and tried to occupy Saint Domingue, but the slave rebels fought back. Eventually the French republic won over Toussaint L’Ouverture, one of the black generals, and he became lieutenant governor and then governor of French revolutionary Saint Domingue. He inflicted a historic defeat on the British who were forced to withdraw in 1798.

Unfortunately, by this time, things were not going so well in France itself. This period saw the emergence of restorationist currents and the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, who was eventually persuaded, partly by the British and American governments and partly by French colonialists, to take the disastrous step of trying to restore slavery. This led to further military struggle between the black rebels in Saint Domingue and Napoleon, who sent a huge army under his brother in law General Leclerc. Leclerc died and the French expedition was defeated, and in 1804 the republic of Haiti was declared.

I don't think there is any doubt that this was a huge event for the whole Atlantic world. It was not just an event in French history, but also in British and American history, and it gave a shot in the arm to the whole idea that the slave trade should be suppressed—not necessarily purely on idealistic grounds, but also on prudential grounds. One pamphlet by Lord Brougham in 1804 said it was crazy to import new African captives into such an unstable situation as the Caribbean. This was throwing fuel on the flames, he said, and it would be better to stop the Atlantic slave trade. This pamphlet was distributed to all MPs. By 1806-7 there was some recovery of the petitioning campaign, and in the election the abolitionists called for people to support only candidates committed to ending the Atlantic slave trade.

The slave trade was abolished in a context in which Britain was locked in battle against Napoleon, and Napoleon had defeated most of Britain's allies on the continent. It was an enormously difficult moment for the British ruling class, as difficult as 1940. The Hanoverian monarchy was obliged to enrol nearly a million soldiers and sailors, and had to give them something to fight for. The abolitionist cause had resonance among those excluded by the Hanoverian oligarchy. In this moment of great difficulty they offered a concession, which was above all symbolic. They were not prepared to abolish the basic structure of the oligarchy—that was a future battle—but they were prepared to symbolically deal a blow to slavery. The suppression of the British slave trade was not as important as the Haitian Revolution, and it was in large part a consequence of that revolution, but certainly it should be registered as a success, one that was forced on the British parliament and royal family, who had been great supporters of the slave trade.

It did represent an advance in the consciousness of millions in Britain and other parts of the Atlantic zone, but in the end it was an act of the British parliament, and these were hardhearted men, these Hanoverian oligarchs. They were deeply corrupt, and quite willing to see a trade in pauper apprentices, child labour which took place on a horrendous scale. But they needed to come up with a cause that would elevate the struggle against Napoleon. There is not some intrinsic virtue of British culture, as I think Simon Sharma is suggesting when he talks of "British freedom". Indeed Britain's abolitionist crusade was to animate the 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial Pax Britannica and to justify colonialism and the carve-up of Africa in the 1880s—supposedly this was all done with the aim of suppressing the slave trade! In fairness it should be said that some radical abolitionists, especially the pacifists, rejected this attempt to steal and distort their cause.

**There is a background to all this of changing economic interests—slavery had been central to the first big expansion of wealth in Britain, but this began to change. Adam Smith turned against slavery and empire, reflecting a wider change in the bourgeoisie.**

Slavery was extremely important to Britain. Although Britain borrowed some techniques from Portugal and Spain, the British and Dutch were the main players. They completely revolutionised slave production on the plantations, making them far more productive. All of this was due to the fact that Britain and the Netherlands were already undergoing a transition to capitalism, with its origins as much in the countryside as in the towns. This transition meant there was a rise in wage labour, and farmers who owed rent to landlords and who had to hire lawyers, and so on. You had an economy where money was in great demand and of growing significance. The demand for plantation

products—above all tobacco and sugar in the 17<sup>th</sup> century—was a critical development.

The Spanish Americas, before 1650, imported something like 300,000 captive Africans, the Portuguese about the same number. The British, over the next century and a half, imported something like ten times that number of slaves. Capitalism was responsible for enlarging the internal market in ways that greatly stimulated plantation production. This created a critical labour shortage in the plantations. At first the labour force included white indentured servants, but soon the demand rose above levels that this could meet, and it was at this point that the slave trade was resorted to.

It is true that political economists such as Adam Smith said that the best way to develop an economy was on the basis of wage labour, not slavery: slave labour was not as productive as the labour of the free worker, and so on. But most capitalists and not a few economists believed that, as things actually were, slavery was necessary to the expansion of trade. After 1807 Britain greatly enlarged its trade with Brazil, Cuba and the United States. That trade, which was by this time especially in cotton, was important to the industrial growth of Britain, and the commodities were still produced by slave labour.

**When the British ruling class thought they could capture Saint Domingue (Haiti) they were strongly in favour of slavery. Pitt the Younger dropped all his support for anti-slavery when this was on the cards. They only returned to the question later.**

It's fascinating that Pitt changed his tune. He had encouraged Wilberforce to take up the issue of the slave trade. But once Britain was at war with France, Pitt became quite committed to a strategy of taking over the French islands, with the full collaboration with resident French planters and merchants. Most of these planters and merchants were inclined to monarchy and opposed to the French republic, especially when it issued the Jacobin decree of emancipation in 1794. A huge British army of about 90,000 soldiers was despatched. The loss of this great army, its defeat at Saint Domingue and heavy losses in eastern Caribbean, helped create the new context for 1807 and the abolition bill. It also draws our attention to the huge importance of exchanges with the slave zone.

Eric Williams, in *Capitalism and Slavery*, drew attention to the way British capitalists and merchants were linked to the "triangular trade"—trade with Africa, trade with the plantations and the trade in plantation goods, with the West Indies as a market as well as a source of coveted goods such as sugar and cotton. You get a whole nexus which helps explain both the British willingness to try to seize the French islands and their refusal in 1807 to do what the Jacobins had done, and issue a proclamation to abolish slavery itself. They maintained slavery for more than another generation.

**The actual abolition of slavery didn't take place until the 1830s. In your book you show how this took place against a background of revolts in Europe and further slave rebellions.**

The act was passed in 1833, and it came into force between 1834 and 1838. The slaves were not entirely freed: there was supposed to be an eight-year apprenticeship. One has to register that the more enlightened wing of the oligarchy, which had favoured the end of the slave trade, believed that this would improve the condition of slaves. In fact conditions got worse as prices of commodities went down and planters put slaves to work even more intensively.

After the rebellion in Haiti there was a string of rebellions of the new type—fully emancipationist. Of course there were still African memories and themes that played an important role here, but they were combined with aspirations that grew out of the conditions of the slaves themselves. Partly it was simply a demand for freedom. Often they claimed that the king had secretly passed a law emancipating them and that the colonial elite was hiding this information. You had the "free paper

come” movement, you had an uprising in Barbados in 1815, in Demerara, Guyana, in 1823. These involved thousands of slave rebels, sometimes demanding freedom and sometimes three free days in a week—changing the terms of slavery before questioning it entirely. Then from December 1831 until February 1832 there was a great uprising in Jamaica, sometimes called the Baptist War. In these cases, in Demerara and Jamaica, Baptist and Methodist missionaries seem to have proselytised among the slaves and seem to have given the black deacons some space to work out their own ideas, which added to the coordination and independent thinking among the slaves.

There was a rising crescendo of revolt, which inclined the planters towards compromise, and in particularly “compensated emancipation”. Slaveholding began to seem very unsafe. There was also the growth of a new movement in Britain itself. The Hanoverian oligarchy, “old corruption”, was still firmly in place and the numbers it sought to exclude, exploit and oppress were very great—in Ireland as well as England. It faced the new working class, radical artisans and the middle classes. Then there was the rural revolt of Captain Swing in 1832 in rural England, which was very similar in many ways to the slave uprisings of the Caribbean and which was harshly put down. An interesting feature of this period was how the oligarchy became extremely repressive. When it put down the slave rebellion in Demerara 250 slaves were killed outright.

The anti-slavery movement in Britain radicalised. Women played an important part in this radicalisation. The anti-slavery society was re-established in 1823, but called itself the Society for the Gradual Emancipation of the Slaves. The Birmingham Ladies Negroes Friends Society in 1825 published a pamphlet by Elizabeth Hayrick in which she said that she hoped that none of the ladies’ anti-slavery organisations would have the word “gradual” in their name.

News was also coming from South America that Simon Bolivar was issuing decrees against slavery, and in 1829 Mexico became the first Spanish American country to completely abolish slavery, the work of a president partly of African descent. There was the French Revolution of 1830. There was a feeling that the Hanoverian oligarchy in Britain was on its last legs. The narrow-minded middle class hoped to extend the vote, only to a narrow spectrum of property holders, and sought to dignify the reformed parliament with the 1833 act, which set the terms for the abolition of slavery.

This act did, however, massively compensate the slave owners, giving just a little less than £20 million, a huge sum in those days, and giving them, in theory, another eight years of service from their former slaves at nominal wage rates. Interestingly, at this point the battle moved back to the West Indies where in 1837-8 there were great protest actions and strikes for better wages. The final act of emancipation was in 1838, when the British parliament, realising that law and order had broken down in the West Indies, entirely suppressed the claims of the planters over their former slaves.

It is really important to see the whole cause of emancipation as the consequence of class struggle, both in the plantations and in the metropolitan zone, of the great distaste for slavery among common people, even those with some racist ideas in England or France who nonetheless hated the slave owners.

### **What was the cultural source of the black revolt?**

It’s important to see that African revolt played an important part, and historians increasingly accept that it did, even in the recent weak and misguided commemoration. I’m a great fan of C L R James’s work *The Black Jacobins*, and in a way the title of that book is trying to alert us to the fact that there is a new and surprising mixture going on—elements of Jacobinism questioning property and privilege, amalgamated with something new and different. Since James published his great book historians have been able to examine the African contribution to slave resistance.

James uses, as epigraphs to some of the chapters, chants of the slaves. This stands in for the fact that African themes were important. Sixty percent of the slaves were African born. The slavery of the new world was something vastly more intense, oppressive and racialised than slavery had been in Africa, the old world or ancient Rome. Africans played a significant role in the upsurges. There was a point when Toussaint L'Ouverture tried to do a deal with Napoleon, and at that point the resistance to Napoleon was maintained by the grassroots leaders. This resistance was far more consistent than the great leaders of the revolt. Many of the grassroots leaders were Africans and they were doing something of importance to the whole world—making the first slave revolt in modern history and helping give rise to the notion of freedom in the modern sense. There was something coming in from African ideas, and even from native American ideas—the name Haiti is actually native American—and something coming from the radicalised class struggle of the French Revolution and in Britain.

**There have been attempts to share the responsibility for slavery with African ruling elites and Arab traders who participated in the slave trade. What was specific about the British role?**

Slavery was always objectionable and oppressive, but there was something peculiarly oppressive and intense about slavery in the New World. The slavery of the African kings had something in common with that of the New World—the idea that someone could be bought and sold—but the fate of the former slave in Africa or the Middle East was not to become a plantation worker. The women might become recognised concubines and eventually wives. The men, in Africa or Egypt, might become soldiers; some might even eventually become rulers. In the ancient world in Europe slavery encompassed the enslavement of Greek tutors or the civil servants of the Roman empire. So slavery was quite a diverse and by no means intensely racialised institution. Slaves in ancient Rome were from a wide variety of backgrounds and were not for the most part black Africans. In Africa slavery was a fate most likely to befall the stranger, but it was not a permanent institution in the sense that after a generation or two descendants might aspire to manumission. In the New World the racialised nature of slavery meant the great majority of the descendants of slaves were also condemned to bondage.

So this line of thought does not soften the nature of this great historical tragedy, the enslavement of 12 million taken in captives, and maybe as many again killed in slave raiding wars. The slave trade with the Middle East was, year by year, much smaller than the Atlantic slave trade, even if it went on much longer. The Atlantic slave trade took off at a modest rate in the 1520s, but it really became intense from 1650. From 1700 to 1850 you had tens or hundreds of thousands a year—it was intensely concentrated in time and its impact was therefore very great.

It also encouraged a predatory involution of society in Africa, putting modern weaponry and industrialised goods in the hands of the slave raiders. You had the rise of some kingdoms dedicated to slave raiding. You had some kingdoms that also tried to withdraw from the trade. There was a Jihadi movement in West Africa around 1776 (which we think of as the year of the American Revolution), which historians think represented an attempt to restrain the slave trade. The Jihadis would not enslave fellow Muslims, although they might enslave people they saw as infidels. It was not a purely abolitionist movement, but it certainly had some anti-imperial meaning.

**How did slavery help lead to a system of racist ideology and how much purchase did it have in Europe?**

There were some forms of ethnic particularism, which we might view as the source of racism, even at the time the slave plantations were being set up. There was a lot of harsh work to be done and European workers coming out to the plantations could find convenient a system of white skin

privilege which exempted them from this toil. But this didn't make these workers like the plantation owners any more, and the whites tended to get out of the Caribbean plantations. The systems, once they were up and running, did encourage a hardening of racism. What had been a form of aversive racism, hating people not like ourselves, became a sort of dominating racism, which was mobilised to keep down a particular population. That's what the planters encouraged, and they were able to enlist a fear among poor whites of slave revolt.

As for people back in Britain and France, I find it difficult to say how much racism there was. They were not being asked to vote on whether slave plantations should exist—the elites were making the key decisions. I'm sure people had prejudices against Papists, the Irish, the Spanish and probably against Africans too. But in the rough and tumble of life aboard ships and in port towns you also had real friendships formed between whites and those of African origin. If you read Equiano's narrative you'll find some racial rebuffs, but these tended to be in the slave zone itself, and much less so in England, where he eventually married an English woman and where he became a popular speaker up and down the country.

We shouldn't project back the racism of the high colonial era of the 1880s on the England of the 1780s or even the early 1800s. The first steps of the anti-slavery movement were the freedom lawsuits like the Somerset freedom suit in the 1770s brought before Lord Mansfield, or in the American ports, which usually relied on a white free person helping to champion a courageous slave, or perhaps someone who had been wrongfully enslaved. This does show, not modern standards of multiculturalism, but a willingness to resist racialised stereotypes.

### **What books would you recommend?**

The most recent book on the British abolition movement is Adam Hothschild's *Bury the Chains*. This is a pretty good book. It doesn't scrutinise the motives of the Hanoverian ruling class, but it does try to put abolition in a wider context of the French and American revolutions. There is David Brian Davis's *Slavery in the Age of Revolution*. This is a tremendous book of the 1970s by the leading American historian of slavery. He tried to understand why even some of the oligarchy adopted anti-slavery, reflected in huge votes in parliament. He argued this was a reflection of how the wage system was justified and universalised, and the cause of anti-slavery was about establishing a hegemony of bourgeoisie society. My only quarrel with him would be that black resistance is not foregrounded. Seymour Drescher, who I've quarrelled with in the past because he doesn't give its due to the Haitian Revolution, reveals the depth of abolitionism as a movement in newly industrialising areas in a series of books and essays.

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