

‘Several University Gentlemen, who have quite altered their Tone’: The Problem of the British Slave Trade

On 28 March 1798, Charles Farish, a Queens’ fellow, sent a dramatic petition to George III calling for the end of the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans. The Georgian King, it should be noted, had a complex personal relationship to enslavement. His grandfather, George I, had invested tens of thousands of pounds in the SSC, George II had served as its governor, and the latter’s son, Frederick Louis, owned stock too. Furthermore, George III’s son William, the Duke of Clarence (later William IV), was in the proslavery camp, principally because he claimed that abolishing the slave trade would greatly weaken Britain’s maritime strength, and the king himself was concerned during the American Revolutionary War with the defense of the British Caribbean, particularly Jamaica. On the other hand, George III’s nephew, the Duke of Gloucester, was an abolitionist voice in the House of Lords and the monarch had written in his youth between 1755 and 1758 “Of the Laws relative to the Nature of Climates.” In his antislavery commentary on the Baron Montesquieu, George attacked the notion, subscribed to by, among others, Thomas Rutherforth, that ‘a person rearing a poor helpless Infant acquires a dominion over him[.]’ In fact, the radical, youthful royal observed, ‘this can only hold while it [the enslaved child] is incapable of earning its own livelihood[.]’ Given these familial politics, Farish’s petition arrived at a critical moment because the royal family were torn on the problem of enslavement. Intent on converting the king to abolition, Farish wrote an extensive, yet long-ignored, remonstrance to convince him to pressure Parliament and end the slave trade.¹

Alongside the philosopher William Paley, whose ideas are alluded to in the petition, Farish had an intellectual debt to William Henry Coulthurst – and they travelled in the same evangelical circles at Cambridge. Coulthurst was the son and heir of a Barbadian merchant and he later appeared in the slave compensation records as the co-owner of a plantation in Demerara. An alumnus of St John’s and a tutor at Sidney Sussex from 1788 to 1791, Coulthurst was a committed opponent of the slave trade but a defender of enslavement writ-large. He argued that by a ‘humane Treatment and a well[-]regulated Police’ of the enslaved their ‘Population’ would ‘be sufficiently upheld and preserved without such Importations from Africa, and by Improvements in the Mode of

the Agriculture the Estates would to all intents and Purposes be equally as beneficial as at present'.²

Farish's petition echoed many of these statements. After a deferential preamble, the Queen's fellow highlighted the 'happy effects' which would follow the abolition of the slave trade. It is worth quoting this passage in full: 'War', he wrote to King George III, 'will be deprived of half its horrors, and peace of all its fears. Suspicion and the dread of captivity will no longer interrupt domestic quiet. Half the causes of contention and bloodshed will be done away. The voice of complaining will scarce be heard in the land. Commerce will spread her sails. The rude savage will by degrees learn the useful arts and mild manners of civilized life. And Religion will no longer hesitate to open her lips on that benighted shore, when there shall be no Christian Slave-merchants there to shame her cause'. 'When this stone of offence is removed', he concluded, 'the Ministers of the Gospel may hope to win over many souls... to their Master, and a people whom he hath not known shall serve him'. His long-ignored "Summary of the consequences of the abolition of the slave-trade" (see Figure 4.1) sought to promote a virtuous cycle where the end of the slave trade would lead, inexorably, to the gradual abolition of enslavement. Free Africans could then, he concluded, labour in the British Caribbean and transform the region into a new Eden – a Christian empire.³

'Like the touch of the son of Mary', Farish claimed in the petition, the abolition of the slave trade would achieve more than laws or regulations to ameliorate slavery. It would halt what Farish called 'those dreadful mutinies' – referring to slave revolts, such as in Haiti – because those uprisings were inspired by 'freshly-imported slaves'. Abolition, he maintained, would also 'make it the *unquestionable* interest of the Master not to be cruel to his slave, or to lay upon him a greater burthen than he can bear'. Without the incentive to starve, torture, or murder their replaceable enslaved labour force, Farish argued, the 'balance of profit' would favour the humane treatment of the enslaved and inspire enslavers to introduce the plow and other labour-saving technological innovations to their plantations. If abolition was enacted, West Africans would 'bear their lot with patience, and even with cheerfulness; till Government shall... reach out to them a protecting hand: and by wise provisions of law gradually accomplish their emancipation'. Abolition would reform the British Empire – it would be, in his hopeful words, an 'act of national justice and repentance' that would expunge the sin and guilt for enslavement and rescue Britain's traders in enslaved people from a 'baleful commerce, which destroys their health and taints their minds'. He pondered a horrifying alternative to abolition: letting enslaved Africans, if they survived the conditions of the Atlantic middle passage, 'loose on their country fleshed in blood, and prepared to do any deed of violence?'⁴

Cambridge abolitionism, therefore, was far more complicated than the conventional wisdom, usually promulgated in histories and public forums,

of university-educated abolitionists such as Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce striving for Black freedom. University fellows, students, alumni, and their interlocutors occupied a wide spectrum of opinions regarding the slave trade and the abolition of slavery writ large, with many arguing that if slavery was reformed then it would not have to be confronted directly, with the chattel economy dying over the course of one or two decades. At the same time, Stephen Fuller, a former Trinity fellow, was one of the leaders of the pro-slavery lobby and urged the universities to empathise with enslavers. Such complexities were particularly evident in African exploration and colonisation, which Cambridge men helped to support and fund. The following chapter discusses abolition, proslavery, and colonisation in turn, thereby showing how universities were neither abolitionist nor proslavery – Cambridge was, like the royal family, riven with intergenerational conflict and debate, with the opinions of undergraduates often outpacing those of the fellowship, many of whom remained committed to “moderation” in the debate over the potential end of the slave trade. Together, these men shared a higher goal and purpose in the renewal of a humiliated and divided empire following Britain’s disastrous defeat in the American Revolutionary War.

The politics of enslavement were personal to Cambridge men. Charles Farish’s maternal uncle was a doctor and plantation owner in Grenada, and – after schooling in Carlisle – Farish went to Hawkshead Grammar School in Lancashire, an institution frequented by the slave-trading and mercantile classes. While there he befriended William Wordsworth, the later poet laureate and abolitionist, and may have also stayed at Hugh and Ann Tyson’s boarding lodge. The Tyson boarding house was close to a Quaker meeting house where, given that the Society of Friends formed the vanguard of radical abolitionism, slavery would have almost certainly been discussed. Though no equal of Wordsworth, Farish wrote poetry – and it is from his early writings that we can see his opinions developing on the slave trade. In June 1784, whilst an eighteen-year-old student at Cambridge, he wrote a thoughtful poem on ‘Sunburnt Nation’s... Where direful Slav’ry with her ruffian bands Waves her black banners o’er the wretch’d land And drags the Captive [Slave] from afar: Plunging his Country in the woes of War[.]’ The undergraduates, not the fellows, it appears, were the more radical generational undercurrent for anti-slave-trade opinion. Although Charles matriculated at Trinity College in 1784, graduated as fifteenth wrangler in 1788, and held a fellowship at Queens’ from 1792 until his death in 1824, he remains more well-known for his opposition to the enforced celibacy of the fellowship than his antislavery activism. After his dramatic petition, the College’s records do not reveal any determined effort on his behalf concerning the slave trade within that institution but tell rather of his efforts as a fellow dealing with mundane activities such as debts, the purchase of coal, the appointment of chapel clerks, and an expulsion.⁵

N^o 1. 265.

*A summary of the consequences of the abolition
of the slave-trade.*

*It is urged that however distressful the slave-trade
may be, yet it is necessary. And after all what is
this great necessity. It is never contended that the
West Indies could not be cultivated by hired labourers,
(as the countries of Europe are) where there is a deficiency
of slaves, but only that it could not be cultivated to
so much advantage by freemen as by slaves. The
sugar, says an able author, which is now bought for
sixpence a pound, will perhaps when the slave-trade
is abolished cost sixpence halfpenny. And this
is the necessity.*

*The happy effects which will accrue to Africa
from the abolition of the slave-trade are manifest.
War will be deprived of half its horrors, and peace
of all its fears. Suspicion and the dread of captivity
will no longer interrupt domestic quiet. Half the*

Figure 4.1 Charles Farish, 'A Summary of the consequences of the abolition of the slave-trade', 1798, Letters, Papers, and Domestic Correspondence of George III. National Archives, Kew, London.

The American Revolution galvanised opinion on the slave trade, as British observers, such as the lexicographer Samuel Johnson, dismissed the revolutionaries for crying liberty when they were the 'drivers of negroes'. That was true amongst the wider Cambridge community, too, as the imperial crisis over "taxation without representation" shifted after American independence into a continental war. The Lieutenant General Sir William Draper won a scholarship and fellowship at King's College, later donating the colours he captured from the Siege of Manila in October 1763 to his alma mater – a donation 'hung up in that beautiful Chapel, with a proper solemnity, and the conqueror was rewarded

with a red ribband'. Draper, who had negotiated a sizeable ransom from the Spanish after the Siege, was similarly ruthless with the Americans – proposing in 1774 (at the height of the North American imperial crisis) that, in response to colonial resistance, the British should 'Proclame *Freedom* to their Negroes; then how long would they be a people? They would soon cry out for pardon, and *render unto CÆSAR the Things which are CÆSAR's*'. John Hinchcliffe, the Master of Trinity from 1768 to 1788 and Member of the House of Lords, commented on enslavement as well, but from a more moderate perspective than Draper's call for a British-inspired enslaved rebellion. A committed disciple of Granville Sharp's 'Spanish Regulations', Hinchcliffe wanted to 'soften and gradually reduce the Slavery in the West Indies' through similar policies to the Spanish colonies, where the enslaved were able to work one day a week besides Sundays to receive the '*wages of a freeman*' – an 'encouragement to industry' so that enslaved Africans could earn their freedom. Predicated on paternalistic assumptions of African indolence and aversion to family life, Hinchcliffe and Sharp's proposals were intended to provide 'strength' and 'security' to slave societies that were under threat from enslaved revolts.⁶

After the Revolution, antislavery ideas dominated debate at Cambridge, with Hinchcliffe and Richard Watson, a Trinity fellow, Regius Professor of Divinity, and Bishop of Llandaff, inviting Granville Sharp to the university to discuss the amelioration of slavery in the Spring of 1781. Amelioration – the reform of slavery, not its abolition – was the limit of much white antislavery thought, however. Often, Cambridge intellectuals were in like mind with men such as Edmund Keene, the Master of Peterhouse, who understood enslavement as an imperial opportunity. He had declared before the SPG in 1757 that 'Civil Authority' over the Americas had presented missionaries with an 'Opportunity of doing religious Service, by instructing the native Indians [Native Americans] and transplanted slaves' – a process further assisted by Europeans' 'Vicinity and Connection' with Native peoples and the 'Dependence and Subserviency' of Africans. If they intended on reforming slavery, many middling and elite Britons understood that issue as one amongst a host of social problems plaguing British society, including poverty, drunkenness, and the corruptions of commercial society.⁷

Peter Peckard, the Master of Magdalene, was one of the most significant and radical of these Cambridge antislavery polemicists. At St Mary's Church on 30 January 1784, he faced his congregation, many of whom probably had connections, both personal and financial, to enslavement – a context that made his words more significant. He attacked chattel slavery as an affront to humanity and the Christian God. 'The treatment which in general man experiences from man', he preached, 'is to the last degree ungenerous, oppressive, and cruel'. Giving his lesson from the Gospel of Peter, which encouraged Christians to 'honour all men', Peckard deplored the 'horrid instances of uncountrouled despotism exhibited in the overgrown empires of the world'. He condemned

the popular white belief that a 'great part of the human race' must be enslaved solely because their 'external complexion' was 'different from our own, but who are formed of the same blood with ourselves'. In his powerful invective against the slave trade (one of the first of his many forthright efforts), Peckard attempted to undermine the ideologies of race – particularly that of blood – that had enabled Thomas Townes and other enslavers to justify holding Black people in bondage for more than a century.⁸

One of Peckard's most momentous antislavery acts occurred three years earlier, however, when he set an essay question after conversations about the choice of topic with John Hinchcliffe. Following their discussions, Peckard acted. Prompted by the *Zong* massacre in 1781, where 133 Africans, en route from the Gold Coast to Jamaica, were thrown to their death from a slave ship to preserve supplies of drinking water (their murder compared to 'just as if horses were kill'd'), Peckard set an essay question in Cambridge's Latin dissertation competition in 1785. He chose '*Anne liceat invitos in servitutem dare?*' – "Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?" Thomas Clarkson was willing to take on Peckard's academic challenge. Born in nearby Wisbech in 1760, Clarkson was around twenty-five years old – and a recent graduate of St John's – when he entered the competition. Drawing upon first-hand accounts of the slave trade, the works of the Quaker activist Anthony Benezet, and travel narratives, Clarkson won the essay prize (with Robert Heslop of Sidney Sussex the runner-up). His academic successes (and a spiritual awakening on the arduous road from Cambridge to London) convinced Clarkson that abolitionism was a lifetime calling from God.⁹

After translating his Latin essay into English, Clarkson published the dissertation, *An essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species, particularly the African* in 1786. It was an almost instant success. He argued that the slave trade was not only immoral and an affront to a nation the 'basis of whose government is *liberty*' – enslavement was counterproductive because it undermined the political economy of the British Empire. 'Nothing can be more clearly shewn', he claimed in the *essay*'s preface, 'than that an inexhaustible mine of wealth is neglected in *Africa*, for the prosecution of this impious traffick'. If Britain developed colonies in West Africa, Clarkson wrote, 'the revenue of this country might be greatly improved, its naval strength increased, its colonies in a more flourishing situation, the planters richer, and a trade, which is now a scene of blood and devastation, converted into one, which might be prosecuted with *advantage* and *honour*'. For Clarkson, the end of the slave trade would be an avenue to create a more moral empire in Africa, based on "civilising" and Christianising Africans.¹⁰

Neither Clarkson nor Peckard should be seen in isolation though. Black Britons profoundly shaped Peckard's education in Britain's greatest moral, political, and social problem: the problem of slavery. As Michael E. Jirik has shown, Black British antislavery activists are conveniently forgotten in histories

of Cambridge abolitionism. Along with the growing influence of rational dissent at Cambridge stressing religious and civil liberty, Black Britons formed much of the vanguard against the slave trade. Born in 1745 in Eboe in Benin, Olaudah Equiano – who had been captured in Africa, purchased his freedom, and then published an influential autobiography detailing his experiences – was a key figure in the Cambridge antislavery movement. Equiano visited the town in July 1789 and there he met with Peckard and other local abolitionists, praising the ‘Gentlemen of the University’ who had shown him ‘true civility without respect to colour or complexion’. (Peckard even helped to advertise his *Interesting Narrative*.) Before his arrival, Clarkson introduced Equiano to Thomas Jones, a Trinity tutor, who volunteered to sell copies of his slave narrative to cover Equiano’s travel expenses – and this formerly enslaved man perhaps helped to radicalise Peckard’s abolitionism. Six months after Equiano’s visit, Peckard gave another sermon in January 1790, which extended his criticisms against the transatlantic trade to plantation slavery, calling for Britons ‘to give liberty to the captives, to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burthens, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke’. That was a radical argument for many white antislavery activists. Opposition to the slave trade did not, at this time, necessarily result in calls for the immediate abolition of enslavement.¹¹

Peckard may have gone further though in his anonymously-published 1788 treatise *Am I Not a Man? and a Brother?* – a document, often attributed to the Magdalene man, that drew its name from the modeller William Hackwood and ceramicist Josiah Wedgwood’s design for a kneeling enslaved man who would be emblazoned on a seal promoting the London-based Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. (The Master chose to remain anonymous even as he mentioned a ‘Dr Peckard’, and said that ‘I freely declare myself of the same opinion’.) Peckard objected that human law had to accord with the ‘Commands of God, and the Common Rights of Human Nature’ – with the ‘Traffick in the Human Species... destructive of the one, and contradictory to the other, and therefore... not justifiable by an Human Institution’. Labelling the enslaved as ‘Brutes’, the author informed his reader that ‘the benevolent spirit of religion teaches us that a truly righteous man is merciful to his beast’. Questioning the notion that Black people were an ‘inferior race’ (despite the writer’s equation of the enslaved with “beasts”), he pondered ‘how are we to determine with precision who is or is not black?’ given the ‘gradations in human complexions’, referring to Jefferson’s writings on the mythical ‘White Negroe’ (an African nation with white skins) in his 1787 *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Mocking Jefferson’s argument that Africans ‘secrete less by the Kidneys, and more by the skin, which gives them a disagreeable odour’, he called for some semblance of human equality and dismissed the natural scientific basis for racial enslavement.¹²

For this treatise and his powerful attacks against the slave trade, Peckard was admired in the local newspapers. In the *Cambridge Chronicle*, three poems appeared that implanted in readers' minds images of suffering Africans and children torn from their parents. The first, published in February 1788, asked 'Shall thus the Sons of Freedom's blithe domain, Thus barter man and Basely Rob for Gain?' The poet called for Britons, inhabiting a land for persons who would "never be slaves," to 'turn from rapine – see the patriot Band [of abolitionists] Arrest thy course, and seize thy guile – fraught hand'. The first poet lauded Peckard as the equal of Wilberforce and as a 'patriot of the world', yet the second poem was less emotional in tone. Though difficult to say for certain, the author may have been James Moore, a Magdalene undergraduate. If he did author the poem, Moore's approach to slavery focused – much in line with abolitionist thought at the time – on labelling traders in enslaved Africans as 'Christian butcher[s]' who 'laugh[ed]' at the 'groans' and 'shame' of enslaved people.¹³

Published in March that year, the third poem, "The Slaves: An Elegy," made pointed criticisms of both the slave trade and plantation slavery. Naming himself "Della Crusca," the poem may have been the work of Robert Merry, the grandson and son of highly influential members of the Hudson's Bay Company and an alumnus of Christ's, where he studied before living in Florence and joining the Florentine Academia della Crusca (founded in 1583 to guard the purity of the Italian language, and the source of his well-known epithet). 'Lo!', he declared, 'where to yon PLANTATION drooping goes The SABLE HERO of Human kind, while near Stalks a pale DESPOT, and around him throws The scourge that wakes – that punishes the tear'. Through vivid imagery, Merry asked his audience to consider whether 'Drops of Blood the HORRIBLE MANURE That fills with luscious Juice, the TEEMING CANE? And must our Fellow-Creatures thus endure, For Traffic vile, th' Indignity of Pain?' Merry, whose maternal grandfather was the beneficiary of a trust in an Antiguan plantation, viewed enslavement as an embarrassment for an empire that claimed that no Briton would be slaves.¹⁴

Academic support for abolition was also monetary in nature. After the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAT) was established in May 1787, the University of Cambridge occupied an entire section of donors. Four students subscribed to the Society: Robert Parker of Sidney Sussex, Richard Moore of Peterhouse, George J. Legh of Christ's, and James Scarlett of Trinity. The most prominent Cambridge colleges provided money to SEAT, too, including Caius, Catharine Hall (now St Catharine's), Corpus Christi, Christ's, Emmanuel, Magdalene, Peterhouse, Sidney Sussex, St John's, Trinity, and Trinity Hall. In total, Cambridge colleges, fellows, tutors, and students donated £137 and 10s in 1787, with that impressive figure increasing to around £161 and 19s in 1788, six per cent of SEAT's budget (due, in part, to a surge in donations from St John's).¹⁵

These sums were facilitated through correspondence networks between resident college fellows and the members of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, with William Frend of Jesus, James Lambert and Thomas Jones of Trinity, and the Reverend Coulthurst of Sidney Sussex sending letters of advice or support. Lambert communicated 'some important Questions relative to the slave trade' and the 'state of the unhappy slaves in the islands, which he had transmitted to a friend, who had resided in them, to answer'. The influence of Lambert and Jones was critical to the election of reformist fellows including John Tweddell (a student of the latter), who was appointed after a November 1790 address in Trinity Chapel supportive of the French Revolution and critical of the 'english barbarity' and 'legalized piracy' that had torn enslaved people from the 'sweets of life'. The strength of these networks ensured that Cambridge was the most prominent donor to the anti-slave-trade movement amongst the British universities.¹⁶

Some caution – and context – is required, however, when assessing the significance of these donations relative to Cambridge's other charitable endeavours. Since colleges were generous donors before the eighteenth century, a donation to a body such as SEAT was far from unusual. Three months after the first of their two donations to end the slave trade, Caius gave ten guineas – the same amount as both their anti-slave trade donations combined – 'to the Poor of the Town of Cambridge, viz. seven Guineas from the College, & three Guineas from the Allocation Fund, on Account of the Severity of the Weather'. Following the French Revolution and the Catholic Church's disestablishment, five guineas were provided for the 'relief of the French Refugee Clergy & laity'. Four fellows at Corpus Christi donated four pounds and four shillings to SEAT, but the College also provided five pounds and five shillings toward printing Arabic psalms and New Testaments for 'Eastern Christians', twenty-one pounds in 1759 for relieving the British army fighting France in Germany, and ten pounds to French emigrant clergymen fleeing the Revolution. When a French invasion seemed imminent in 1798, the university and its constituent colleges and members provided £7,000 for the war effort. The donations, then, suggest anti-slave-trade sympathies, but, as with most middling and elite Britons, the colleges did not consider enslavement worthy of special attention compared to other causes, such as poverty reduction, military support, and missionary Anglicanism.¹⁷

Subscriptions to pamphlets and dramatic plays provided another avenue for Cambridge men to highlight their abolitionist credentials. Equiano's publicization efforts depended upon subscription lists, which were a form of self-promotion for an author and an opportunity for publishers to inflate the 'number and status' of their supporters. Abolition presented some challenges to this model as subscribers, many of whom paid half in advance for book production costs and the other half on delivery, were perhaps fearful of their opinions becoming known on such a contentious subject, with one author noting

that the subscribers' names were 'omitted', in part, for 'other speculate' reasons. Weathering the potential storm of criticism, numerous Cambridge fellows subscribed to Thomas Harwood's 1788 play, *The Noble Slave: A Tragedy* – an example of the anti-slave trade literature that flourished at this time. (Indeed, James Plumptre, a Clare Hall fellow, later remarked that stage productions, such as Harwood's, had influenced 'the public mind with respect to the state of the *Negroes*, and the infamous traffic of the *Slave-trade*'.) The subscribers included twenty fellows and students from King's, thirteen from Jesus, and ten from Trinity. The most prominent men were the Reverend Francis Barnes, Vice-Provost at King's, and Sir Griffith Boynton, a Baronet from Trinity. Harwood, 'Late of University College, Oxford', followed the story of Alcander, a 'noble slave', who saved a woman, restored a king, and became a loyal counsellor to prove that whatever the 'laws of fate ordain', no one could 'encroach' on the 'rights of man'.¹⁸

Undergraduates at Cambridge, it appears, were particularly forthright in their attacks against the slave trade. From makeshift debating societies to Greek poetry, antislavery thought and activity was as rich in Cambridge as elsewhere in Britain. In December 1796, a Magdalene student's diary mentioned a meeting of a mock 'House of Commons', where he 'moved for the consideration of his Majesty's (Thomason's [Thomas Truebody Thomason, a Queens' student and later fellow and East India Company chaplain]) message about dissolving the House. He moved the abolition of the slave trade'. Six years earlier, Wilberforce's first abolition bill had been comprehensively defeated by 163 votes to 88 – and the student debate perhaps betrayed a sense of frustration at parliamentarians' conservatism, or a student politician's wily effort to head-off an effort to dissolve their makeshift chamber by introducing such a divisive measure.¹⁹

Away from such discussion groups, students devoted their pens and speeches to the abolition effort. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1792 Greek ode *Against the Slave Trade* was awarded a Gold Medal and recited 'publicly in the Senate House' on commencement day. As stipulated in the Medal's rules, Coleridge wrote in imitation of the Greek poet Sappho, denouncing 'slavery's evil', which was 'richly fed by the groans of the wretched'. Tripos verses, an antiquated tradition of two undergraduates constructing a Latin poem for various "Tripos days" during the year, also discussed enslavement, with one unfavourably comparing 'the labours of the Africans' to the mercy and clemency one usually expected upon being conquered.²⁰

Cambridge students soon entered the popular lecture circuit to make their voices heard. Following his graduation from Cambridge (and joining the example of other lecturers such as Thomas Clarkson, who travelled across Britain with his campaign chest of African crafts to convince Britons to support a free and commercial continent without enslaved people), Coleridge lectured his audience about the slave trade on 16 June 1795 at the Assembly Coffee House

on Bristol Quay. Costing one shilling for admission, Coleridge's talk was advertised as from a graduate of 'Jesus College, Cambridge' – an opportunity for his audience to hear from England's rising generation of cultural and political leaders. According to Coleridge, Britain's vices stemmed from its consumer economy – from the corrupt desire to cure 'artificial Wants' with the purchase of sugar, rum, cotton, coffee, and mahogany. Though perhaps a risky proposition at a coffee house, the Jesus alumnus argued that these goods were not 'useful' and were rather picked and produced under a brutal labour system that tortured the enslaved through 'savage Punishments', and that – far from the 'nursery for Seaman' – the slave trade condemned white sailors to death at sea or to become 'shadows in their appearance' after becoming embroiled in that commerce. Condemning both the Duke of Clarence for his 3 May 1792 maiden speech opposing abolition and William Pitt, the prime minister, for being recalcitrant and cautious in his efforts to abolish the trade, Coleridge declared that the enslaved, as in Tacky's April 1760 momentous revolt in Jamaica, were more than justified in rebelling against their white oppressors.²¹

Charles Farish was stirred by Cambridge's anti-slavery literary flair too. His petition to George III included a "Reverie on a Benguelinha or Angola Linnet, which was caught in Africa and carried successively to Brazil, to Botany-bay, to England, twice to the West-Indies, & finally to England again." Farish may have attached great meaning to this sentence: slavers usually dismissed anti-slavery pamphlets and ideas as reveries (or daydreams); the choice of bird, a Linnet, was perhaps symbolic as a finch from Angola was called a *Negral*, perhaps an allusion to enslaved "negroes" (who were captured and caged as animals); and the bird travelled to Brazil, the largest slave society, Botany Bay, a convict colony in Australia (or Van Diemen's land, as it was then known), and to the West Indies, plantation societies that required no introduction to the king. Farish's dreamscape was more of a nightmare, with the fictional enslaved dreamer imagining 'pleasant fields' and then waking to find 'his dead yoke-fellow chained to his side himself afflicted by a painful disease, his bruised and naked body lying on a bare and loathsome board: his allotted space not broader than a coffin'. The still night was punctuated with the 'noise of corpses plunging into the sea', perhaps an allusion to the *Zong* massacre. In criticising European colonisers as the 'depopulators of continents', Farish also observed – like Thomas Thompson – that Africans were partly responsible for these crimes, as 'it is not uncommon for a Chieftain, when oppressed with debts contracted for Gunpowder or destructive liquors, to betray a part of his people into the hands of their Oppressors, & this often not without bloodshed'. Furthermore, he distinguished between enslaved Africans born in the colonies, who could be held in bondage, and those kidnapped and trafficked to the Americas. 'Whatever right the West India Planters may have to the Slaves which they have bought with their money or which have been born under their roof and fostered by their care', he noted, 'they can have none to the people of

Africa'. Enslavers did not feed Africans 'with the milk of their bosom', 'tend him in the wayward freaks of childhood', or 'teach him to handle the javilin, and instruct him in the simple arts of savage life'. Enslaved people born on the plantations, he implied, owed some of their intellectual and physical development to the white enslaver class.²²

Most of their number had never visited a plantation, yet Farish and his fellow Cambridge men understood the stakes of the slavery struggle and the debates in Parliament. Andrew Burnaby, a Queens' alumnus and clergyman, had published his travels through North America in 1775 and again in 1798 (where he criticised the 'cruel and oppressive' system of enslavement); and several Cambridge men were listed as subscribers, including the Trinity fellow Henry Hinchliffe, to the former customs officer William Eddis's *Letters from America*, which informed interested British readers about the important geographical distinction between the relatively 'scarce' number of the enslaved in New England and the slave societies of the Carolinas where 'they [the enslaved] considerably exceed the number of white inhabitants'.²³

News concerning the (often vitriolic) antislavery debate was also spread through private correspondence networks. William Smyth, the son of a prominent Liverpool banker, a Peterhouse fellow (and later Regius Professor of Modern History), understood the significance of this historical moment, so he decided to travel to the House of Commons 'with an Intention of hearing the Debate on the Slave Trade' but was too late given the public's interest in 'this important subject'. He was unwilling to be defeated in his goal – he intended to 'retreat to Day' since the subject was adjourned, and he would make sure, he informed his correspondent, to be at Parliament by 10 o'clock sharp the next morning so that he could hear the speakers. Smyth's interest may have been further stimulated because Cambridge had joined the debate. The University had petitioned the House of Commons against the slave trade, arguing that 'A firm belief in the Providence of a benevolent Creator, assures them that no system founded on the oppression of one part of mankind, can be beneficial to another'.²⁴

College fellows ministered in urban centres that were dependent on the enslaved economy. That activism occurred in Liverpool, which, between 1801 and 1807, had invested perhaps £2.6 million in the trafficking of enslaved people, and further north in Hull, a site for the importation and re-exportation to the Baltic of American-grown tobacco and the production and distribution of cotton goods and wrought iron (of which the Caribbean took 63 per cent and mainland North America perhaps 34 per cent). Gilbert Wakefield, a Jesus fellow from 1776 to 1779 (and, at the same time, a Liverpool vicar), and Thomas Clarke, a former Clare fellow who returned to minister in his local Hull, attempted to guide their flocks to abolitionism.²⁵

Having hoped to establish a day-school in the area, Wakefield's congregation was thrown into a state of uproar as the American Revolutionary War, in which France intervened on the colonists' side, had led to hundreds of prisoners being

brought to Liverpool, the ‘grand mart’ and ‘*head-quarters*’ of the African slave trade. The Jesuan’s antislavery views crystallised in this three-year period as he observed the malnourished and ill-treated prisoners. Lecturing from the pulpit, he argued that the city’s residents were ‘aggravating the calamities of war by the rapine and injustice of private hostility’ to prisoners – an immunity to human suffering that they had developed because they were ‘so habitually immoral’ through their participation in the ‘*African* slave trade and privateering in that war!’ The ‘*thunder*’ of his lecture may have ‘agitated’ an attendee’s nerves; still, Wakefield argued that such an awakening was necessary after he heard from one captain that he had repeatedly ‘knockt’ the head of an enslaved infant against ‘the side of the ship, and threw it into the sea’.²⁶

The Reverend Thomas Clarke from Hull published his February 1792 sermon *On the Injustice of the Slave Trade*. The address was given in the Holy Trinity Church (or Hull Minster) before a congregation that may have included merchants and traders. Publishing as a ‘Late-Fellow of Clare-Hall’ (until 1856, Clare was known as “Clare Hall”), Clarke proclaimed that enslavement was contrary to the Christian golden rule: to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Dedicated to Granville Sharp and pleading the ‘Cause of Mercy and of Justice’, the Hull vicar understood that abolition was a ‘Test’ for the British nation – an assessment of that empire’s commitment to ‘Humanity and Justice’. Neither skin colour nor complexion, as he understood it, justified how Europeans treated the enslaved, even if ‘Labourers are wanted to cultivate the West India Islands, the Produce of which is consumed in this Land, and the Profit of that Produce enjoyed by Englishmen’. In an interesting passage (and perhaps in a nod to his audience), Clarke mentioned the inextricable ties between Britons and the slave-grown produce that was ‘moistened with Blood’. The former fellow stopped short of calling for a nonimportation and nonexportation movement of slave-grown produce, but he made several other proposals on the question of abolition: first, he argued that a Christian awakening in West Africa would draw out their ‘Seeds of Intelligence’ and thereby lead to a ‘rapid Improvement’ in their lives and conditions; and, second, he observed that the abolition of the transatlantic trade was but the first battleground in a wider offensive against the ‘glaring Evils’ at home and abroad, such as naval impressment (perhaps 250,000 British seamen were impressed over the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries), and in opposition to the ‘Ravager[s] of INDIA’. Unfortunately, Clarke’s ambitions were controversial. He recalled that many Hull residents had refused to sign the town’s abolition petition because ‘our domestic Evils ought first to be redressed’. The principle that enslavement was a “foreign” crime, out of sight and mind, was a constant source of contention for antislavery activists.²⁷

Newspapers were, of course, crucial to the propagation of information as well. Cambridge was home to Francis Hodson’s *Cambridge Chronicle* (which was strongly against the French Revolution and Parliamentary reform) and

Benjamin Flower's more radical *Cambridge Intelligencer*, which, although it only lasted a decade (1793–1803), was nationally syndicated. Flower published debates and letters on the slave trade, examples of slave advertisements, and abolitionist literature. Gilbert Wakefield, the Jesus alumnus, had a letter published disputing whether the gospels permitted slavery. In another issue, Flower's featured a Jamaican slave advertisement from April 1796, with the first line reading: 'FOR SALE, 353 Choice young Angola NEGROES, Imported in the Ship Enterprize, Captain John Heron from the River Congo'. He distributed a poem, too, titled "The Willing Slave," which described the experiences of 'an AFRICAN WOMAN, whose favourite Boy was kidnapped by the Crew of a Boat'. It lamented 'OH! HENRY didst thou hear in vain, The moving tale the Captain told? – Go, then, and reap the sordid gain. And sell thy fellow Men for Gold!' Interestingly, the paper propagated fears about enslavers in local politics, reporting that John Tharp, a Jamaican proprietor (and Cambridge's High Sheriff), had subscribed £1,000 to the local militia movement. The paper noted that 'Gratitude to ministers for their encouragement of the *Slave Trade*, has doubtless influenced this gentleman [in his donation], who is well known for his large property in the West Indies, and his partiality to the above traffick'. Never before had slavery been so prominent in British provincial papers, and Cambridge was no different in that regard, with papers prosecuting their arguments to an eager and increasingly literate population (indeed, as early as the late seventeenth century, even poor Cambridgeshire children were being taught to read at home or by village school-dames).²⁸

Philosophical treatises taught at Cambridge, which students read (though perhaps less enthusiastically than the newspapers), voiced the complications and conflicts around slavery in the British Empire. William Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, though published in 1785, arose from a series of Cambridge lectures on the moral philosophy of Samuel Clarke, Joseph Butler, and John Locke conducted whilst he was a fellow at Christ's from 1766. A Christian utilitarian (an ethic that saw religion and religious belief as the surest path to individual and collective happiness), Paley's lectures, which were a set text at the University of Cambridge and elsewhere, defined enslavement as 'an obligation to labour for the benefit of the master, without the contract or consent of the servant'. Slavery, he believed, acted 'consistently with the law of nature' on three grounds: for crimes committed (though slavery had to be 'proportioned' to the crime), from captivity, and from debt (the second and third of which had to end as soon as 'the demand of the injured nation, or private creditor is satisfied'). Paley was a determined opponent of the slave trade, arguing that it 'excited' Africans to war, and slavery was exercised 'by the *English* slave holder... with rigour and brutality'. Rejecting the claim that enslavement was cheaper than free labourers working for wages or that the institution was founded in Christian scripture, Paley called for gradual abolition 'carried on by provisions of law, and under the protection of civil government'. Christianising the enslaved, he

maintained, and its 'mild diffusion of light and influence' was to be preferred over an immediate end to the system.²⁹

The Reverend Robert Robinson's 1788 sermon reveals the extent to which some Cambridge residents were prepared to attack Britain's connections to the slave trade and the companies that had profited from that traffic. Robinson, a steadfast supporter of religious freedom and toleration, was the most 'prominent' and popular dissenting preacher in Cambridge, and he often addressed 600-strong congregations. Preached at the Baptist Church and Congregation of Dissenters at Cambridge on 10 February, Robinson's sermon, *Slavery inconsistent with the Spirit of Christianity*, attacked the South Sea Company. Robinson had numerous friends at Cambridge, including John Randall, the Professor of Music, who would have been aware of South Sea investments at the University. As a result, his criticisms of the Company may have been personal to his listeners. Robinson implicated the SSC in contracting 'with foreigners for an annual supply of negro slaves to work their [the Spanish] gold and silver mines'. Calling for the use of free labour in the mines and plantations, Robinson argued that the Company had been engaged in gratifying 'the ambition and avarice of a few at the expence of the general prosperity of commercial kingdoms, and the natural rights of millions of the human species'. Addressing a captive audience, whose families and collegiate institutions had bought and profited from these securities, Robinson attacked Englishmen for propagating the Atlantic slave trade.³⁰

Forming the Cambridge Society for Constitutional Information, which, together with the *Cambridge Intelligencer*, was a lightning rod for dissenting and parliamentary reformist opinion in the town and University, Robinson wrote perhaps the first anti-slave-trade opinion that was presented to Parliament. Drawn up with the support of Cambridge freeholders and dissenters, the petition attacked the trade without disparaging the plantation system. Reform, not immediate abolition, was their tactic regarding racial chattel enslavement. 'Your petitioners are aware', the document read, 'that Britain derives innumerable benefits from her plantations, and that the plantations depend upon the labours of negroes; but they are not convinced, that a slave trade is necessary to a supply of labourers'. Claiming to 'abhor slavery in every form', they hoped that an abolition of that hated commerce would stop the 'cruelty necessary to the safety of the slaveholders'.³¹

Cambridge antislavery activists, such as Robinson, had friends in London, who congregated around Clapham Common. That community grew after the Reverend Henry Thornton purchased Battersea Rise near the homes of prominent banking families, including the Barclays and Deacons. 'Thornton's 'Clapham system', Roshan Allpress argues, 'was therefore ideally positioned to interact with and recruit from among Britain's commercial elites'. Aside from commercial interests, many Clapham men were from the ancient universities. The curate Henry Venn was educated at St John's and Jesus colleges,

and later became a Queens' fellow in 1749. (His grandson, also named Henry, lobbied Parliament to order the Royal Navy to patrol the coast of West Africa to stop the slave trade.) Still, the most famous Cambridge figure in London was William Wilberforce, the Member of Parliament for Yorkshire from 1784 until 1812. Despite being immortalised in statue at his former college, St John's, Wilberforce showed about as much interest in his Cambridge studies as Samuel Alpress – that is to say, little at all.³²

The friendships that Wilberforce made at the University, particularly with William Pitt the Younger, served him well in public life, however – and the social connections that he brought to the Clapham community ensured that the philanthropic sect had both 'credibility' and 'political influence'. One Cambridge man changed his life: Isaac Milner, the evangelical President of Queens' and the Lucasian Professor of Mathematics. Milner was pivotal to Wilberforce's conversion around 1784–1785, stirring the latter's opposition to the slave trade as an un-Christian and morally bankrupt activity. The Cambridge philanthropists, who had deep ties to the Clapham community, included the King's fellow Charles Simeon (Wilberforce's friend, a leading evangelical, and a donor to the African Institution, which administered the Sierra Leone colony) and the St John's fellow and missionary William Jowett. (Jowett would publish in favour of a bishopric in Sierra Leone and against the 'bodily sufferings' and 'spiritual violence' meted out to enslaved Africans.) Although abolition would take over twenty more years to accomplish, Cambridge fellows, students, and alumni with different moral perspectives and visions of how to create an empire without the slave trade were at the forefront of this movement.³³

Nevertheless, Wilberforce's opponents were wealthier, formidable, and equally committed to enforcing their vision of the British Empire. Stephen Fuller, the former Trinity fellow, was one of the most impactful proslavery activists. Historians call him 'the chief broker in orchestrating the West India interest', whose qualities included 'persistence and amenability' and a talent 'to argue a case and to avoid confrontation'. Fuller provided the movement with 'direction and energy' and, according to another scholar, 'much of the hard work' was done by him alone. In fact, Fuller complained that the Jamaica legislature had 'left him too much to himself'. The agent for Jamaica in London for thirty years (1764–1794), Fuller had free reign to conduct his lobbying efforts, amassing expenses of between £3,000 and £4,000 in 1779, almost the annual budget for a small Caribbean colony.

As with British abolitionism, the foundations for the proslavery lobby were established in the era of the American Revolution. The London Society of West India Planters and Merchants was founded in 1780 and Fuller was an enthusiastic early member of that powerful organisation. Throughout the Revolutionary War, he petitioned George III and Parliament to ensure that the British sugar islands remained defended upon the entry of Spain and France into the war with the United States, emphasising the importance of the sugar trade to the

nation's finances. Fuller, who had never visited Jamaica, manipulated patronage networks and his connections to the military, church, education, and politics throughout Britain to gain support for the proslavery cause. He recognised that emphasising the exorbitant wealth from the plantations would not stem the tide of antislavery's moral arguments alone; the enslavers had to communicate to their fellow Britons why it was both economically necessary and morally justifiable to enslave people on the basis of racial distinctions.³⁴

Fuller deployed several arguments to halt anti-slave trade opinion in Britain – and, as an agent, Fuller ensured that the people who spoke these words were British military heroes. Fuller was, of course, committed to proving that slavery was the basis of imperial economic strength. Reporting in February 1788 to the Jamaican Committee of Correspondence, Fuller recalled that three petitions had been sent from Bedford, Hull, and York calling for the end of the slave trade as 'contrary to the common Rights of Humanity'. Utilising his connections to Thomas Townshend, the 1st Viscount Sydney and the former Home Secretary, Fuller collected 'materials' to convince Parliament and these dissident urban areas of the 'impossibility of abolishing Slavery; and if we do not avail ourselves of the labour of Slaves, our Enemies will, to our own undoing'.³⁵

Collecting statistics and signed memoranda, Fuller assembled comrades to counter abolitionist opinion in the newspapers and in Parliament. George Brydges Rodney, 1st Baron Rodney, the hero of the naval Battle of the Saintes against France in 1782 (a battle which had saved Jamaica from French occupation), was an ally because of his years of service in the Caribbean. Rodney had rescued the Caribbean at the Saintes, and Fuller implored the celebrated admiral 'to do it a second time... by giving yourself the trouble of appearing for five minutes at the Plantation Office, and relating what your Lordship knows of the general behaviour of the Planters in that Island to their Negroe Slaves, and of the nature of their labour, compared with that of the Labourers in England'. Rodney did as he was told – leading a group of prominent men from the Royal Navy who supported the enslavers. Buoyed by the assistance of these men, Fuller argued that it was the abolitionists who were immoral since they ignored the suffering of the white labouring classes.³⁶

Enslavers had, they believed, a persuasive case, as they moulded a transatlantic, imperial version of Britishness that extended to the Caribbean. They ensured that Britons in the metropole defined abolitionism as the forced seizure of *British* property, rather than an action against an overseas-born enslaver class. Slaveholders appealed to anti-African racism, too, framing the transatlantic traffic in enslaved people as a liberation from 'tyrannic' and 'savage' West African chiefs, and enslavement as a positive good and civilising tool for African-descended peoples. Furthermore, enslavers also argued that antislavery activists were abridging their rights to due process as Britons, as outlined in Magna Carta, and thereby aligned abolitionists with subversive revolutionary forces in France – the women and men who stormed the Bastille on 14 July 1789,

who had confiscated estates and property in the name of their ideals, and executed suspected traitors in the Terror. In equating British antislavery activists with French radicals, enslavers understood Britain's prevailing Francophobic mood, as 412 recorded burnings of the republican polemicist Thomas Paine effigies took place across the country from 1792 to 1793, and William Pitt the Younger's government arrested thirty radicals for sedition.³⁷

The storm of anti-radical reaction buffeted Cambridge. The outbreak of the French Revolutionary Wars in April 1792, which Britain entered a year later in April 1793 in opposition to the newly established French Republic, polarised town and gown politics. By December 1792, locals were attacking a dissenting meeting house – their efforts to ‘burst open the doors’ stopped thanks to the intervention of ‘some Masters of Arts’ from St John’s College. The Reverend George Whitmore of that College was unimpressed (with the dissenters and brave graduates, that is). The Riot Act was read to the locals, but he deemed the outburst of patriotic fervour ‘A Laudable Ebullition of Justifiable Zeal!!!’ Pitt, who had been a reluctant supporter of the war, counted on much support in the town. Associations were created that denigrated reformists and dissenters as dangerous and traitorous ‘Republicans and Levellers’ – terms that aligned reformists with English Civil War radicals. Sir Busick Harwood, then the Downing Professor of Medicine, had a creative response to the legal maxim of the presumption of innocence: ‘every Dissenter’, he noted, ‘should be considered a rogue, until he had proved himself to be an honest man’. The situation escalated further: a Paine effigy was burnt on Market Hill, and another effigy of a local grocer named Gazam, who had apparently uttered seditious comments, was carried around town – those who did not support this procession were considered disloyal. Gazam, it appears, could not count on the support of Emmanuel College – when the effigy was ‘exhibited’ at the college gate, Richard Farmer, the Master, gave the rioters five shillings as encouragement. Gazam fled to the United States, and some fellows likewise faced persecution and banishment from Cambridge. William Frend, who attacked the Anglican religious establishment, was exiled from the Jesus fellowship (despite the support of undergraduates, with graffiti appeared in town proclaiming ‘Frend for ever!!!’ and ‘LIBERTY’ and ‘EQUALITY’). Frend likened his persecution to the system of ‘outrageous violence... exercised on the coasts of Africa’, but he escaped the worst of these trials. The Queens’ fellow Thomas Fyshe Palmer, who supported universal suffrage, was expelled from the fellowship and transported across the world to Botany Bay. Palmer’s banishment led an incredulous George Dyer, publishing as a student “Late of Emmanuel College, Cambridge,” to declare ‘FAMINE AND SLAVERY, THE PUNISHMENT FOR SEDITION’.³⁸

With their opponents under political pressure, Fuller’s argument hinged on the Consolidated Slave Laws of 1788. Amelioration (the reform of enslavement, rather than its abolition) was a powerful weapon in the proslavery arsenal, and helped slavers identify as “moderates” compared to “radical” abolitionists.

Fuller's skill, however, was in codifying the reforms and spreading that message to Britons in the corridors of power. On 2 April 1788, he wrote to the Jamaica Committee, informing them that 'My *Code Noir* consists of a short abstract of all our Jamaica Laws relative to the Government of our Negroe Slaves, beginning with the Act of 1696 in the first column, and the melioration of that, and all the rest of our Laws'. His proposal to create an alternative to France's *code noir* (King Louis XIV's 1685 decree establishing the laws of enslavement) was enumerated in two pamphlets: the *Notes on the Two Reports from the Committee of the Honourable House of Assembly of Jamaica* and *The New Act of Assembly of the Island of Jamaica* (both published in 1789). In these volumes, Fuller contrasted the "isolated" instances of anti-Black violence with how the enslaved were treated following the Consolidated Law, which provided vague protections for the enslaved from extrajudicial murder, an annual clothing allowance, and additional time for Black families to work plots of land for food.³⁹

These laws had a monthly inspection process; that being said, Fuller was not particularly concerned about the enforcement of these regulations – his goal was to offer a philanthropic fig-leaf to Jamaican enslavers. The Consolidated Laws were his, rather successful, attempt to wrest the mantle of humanitarianism from the abolitionists. He made his intentions clear in the preface to the *New Act*, contrasting the 'theoretical philanthropy' of the antislavery cause with the 'present Act', which had 'exhibited a specimen of *real practical* philanthropy, as well as legislation, not to be paralleled perhaps upon the face of the globe'. Many white, elite Britons, it appears, fell for Fuller's bait as the proslavery lobby transformed the title of "abolitionist" into an epithet denoting fanaticism, 'theophilanthropic enthusiasm', and 'revolutionary' politics.⁴⁰

Aside from Parliamentarians, Fuller lobbied Oxford and Cambridge universities. After all, proslavery activists recognised that opinion-leaders, including fellows and professors, would help to sway the British populace and its youth. In 1610, Sir Edward Coke had declared that the universities (namely Oxford and Cambridge) were 'the eyes and soul of the realm, from whence religion, the humanities, and learning were richly diffused into all parts of the realm'. Eager to sway the souls of influential university men toward favouring his efforts at amelioration, in June 1788 Fuller proposed to Lord Hawkesbury, the President of the Board of Trade, that 'six or seven hundred' copies of the Consolidated Act be distributed to 'the Lords & Commons, and if your Lordship thought it proper, or worth while, to the two Universities, and such corporate bodies as have presented Petitions to Parliament'. Hawkesbury vetoed the idea, since he believed that the masters and fellows would 'all purchase it when it is published & will thereby be sufficiently known without the Formality of circulating to them, which might have a bad Appearance'.⁴¹

Fuller's lobbying continued for over a year, and, in May 1789, he wrote that he had met 'several University Gentlemen, who have quite altered their Tone, and upon the whole I think that the investigation, as far as it has gone at

present, has done us no sort of harm, but a great deal of good'. Who were these "Gentlemen"? It is significant that we need to ask that question given the close relationships between enslavers and the Cambridge fellowship. Regardless, both the *Notes* and *New Act of Assembly* can be found in Cambridge's Library as part of the collection bequeathed by the successors of the Reverend James Yorke, the Bishop of Ely (1781–1808), whose father Philip Yorke had in 1729 determined the legality of African slavery on the basis that they were pagans. If Fuller is to be believed, he convinced some university graduates and fellows to make his cause their own.⁴²

Abolition-era novels attest to the often-intense debates at the ancient universities concerning enslavement. Published in 1827, the Reverend John Riland's *Memoirs of a West-India Planter* was a fictional portrayal of a 'Jamaican creole', the son of a 'planter turned abolitionist' who attended Christ Church, Oxford. Riland was not an heir to a Jamaican fortune, but the Reverend and his fictional subject had begun their intellectual journeys at the same time: he had attended St Edmund Hall, graduating with a bachelor's degree in 1800. Novels should not be dismissed as historical sources, however – they were, the contemporary novelist Clare Reve argued, a 'picture of real life and manners' – and pictures, rather than revealing a whole story, provide a specific perspective on reality (a world where Oxford men debated enslavement in poems, histories, and public debates). After arriving at that university, Riland's fictional protagonist received a letter from his father ordering him to return to Jamaica via Liverpool and West Africa. His classmates were incensed, and one student argued 'that a planter's son was only a kind of domestic slave; and must expect to hear the whip crack even in orders signed by "I am your most affectionate father."' To Riland, Black enslavement undermined sentimental white familial relationships. Consoling himself with a copy of Bryan Edwards's *History of Jamaica*, which the Bodleian librarian had pulled as a 'special favour' to remind the fictional student of his colonial home, the young prodigal found a network of support amongst his Oxford friends. Hearing that he was travelling abroad on a slave ship, the fictional Jamaican's friends, referring to him as 'massa George', declared that 'the accounts of the middle passage have been villa[i]nously exaggerated – in fact, it is quite a party business – and as to the whistling of Granville Sharp and Clarkson, and fifty such fellows, why it might be as well if they would lay aside a little of their transatlantic charity, and practice some at home: for, to my certain knowledge, there are some of your philanthropists among us, who will absolutely turn a beggar from the door, and deny even a poor man his evening comforts at the alehouse, and then give their ten guineas each' to the antislavery cause.⁴³

That conversation, which the narrator records occurred while Cambridge petitioned against the transatlantic trade, continued between fellows and students who were relatives (such relationships being common, of course, at Cambridge). The novel described a conversation between a Magdalene fellow

and the Jamaica-born student, with the former being a 'maternal relation'. The college fellow worried that the 'fanatical' antislavery activists had convinced the public that 'slavery is not sanctioned by the sacred writings'. The Magdalene man claimed that enslavement was familiar to Jesus of Nazareth, and that 'slaves, agricultural and domestic, surrounded him wherever he went'. In the novel, a Pembroke student also appealed to commerce, reminding the protagonist that enslavement was 'so necessary a branch of commercial interest', and that to 'abolish a *status* which in all ages God has sanctioned and man has continued' would be an act of 'robbery' against British subjects and of 'extreme cruelty to the African savages' who, as a result of their enslavement, had been saved from 'massacre' and 'intolerable bondage' in West Africa. Riland's Oxford was a site of profound debate and contestation over Black enslavement.⁴⁴

Francis Randolph was one non-fictional Cantabrigian who supported the continuation of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. Having resigned his King's College fellowship barely a year earlier, Randolph's 1788 published letter to then-Prime Minister William Pitt – a pamphlet which advertised his credentials on the title page as a 'Late Fellow of King's College, *Cambridge*' – defended the trade on the grounds of pragmatism. Regarding African enslavement, reformation, not revolution, was his mantra. As the son of a Bristol doctor who had extolled the 'Medicinal Virtues of Bristol Waters' and a relation of Thomas Randolph, the former President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and Vice-Chancellor, the young Francis's upbringing in Bristol, a slave entrepôt, may have reinforced his attitudes concerning slavery. Acknowledging that Britain's 'Exigencies' were 'so dependent upon the Planters Wealth', Randolph suggested that 'Undoubtedly there would be no Difficulty in cutting off the Abuse at once by an immediate Abolition of the African Trade, but I am afraid such a Law would have an Operation widely different from the End proposed. – To restrain and to amend seems to be all that can be done at present, and the Difficulty will lie in the Mode and Manner of it, so as to render it at the same Time humane and salutary'. He accepted the cruelties of enslavement but pondered whether 'the Disposition of the Planter may sweeten the Bitterness of Servitude' and he observed that the Africans' 'Condition' was 'in general much more eligible, it is said, than their own Country'. To this Cambridge man, Randolph supported the enslavers' claim that bondage in the Caribbean was to be preferred over freedom in West Africa.⁴⁵

Debating James Tobin, the Nevis proslaver, Ramsay, and the Reverend John Newton (a slave-trader turned abolitionist), Randolph set out towards the end of the pamphlet several ameliorative policies. The clauses included: that transatlantic traders had to sell to the British colonies; that Africans should be purchased after a certain age (perhaps with a 'free Negro' working on the slave ship to explain 'to them the Nature and Terms of their Captivity, and so render the servitude wholly voluntary'); the enslaved would work fixed hours and take

Sundays off except if punished for misdemeanours; and emancipated slaves would have their freedom 'suspended' if they had committed a crime.⁴⁶

Sixteen years after this pamphlet's publication (and three years before the abolition of the slave trade), Randolph's proslavery attitudes had deepened. Writing as "Britannicus," he hoped that Pitt would not accede to the demands of anti-slave-trade "fanatics" who aimed to destroy 'perhaps the very *political existence* of this country'. Noting that he was neither a slaveholder nor a slave-trader, Randolph criticised abolitionists for misusing religion to attack the nation's economic foundations. He asked: 'Must Great Britain, then, be essentially injured in order to *improve Africa, and prevent the negroes from gratifying their taste for eating each other?*' He argued that the Bible justified enslavement because Abraham, the 'father of the faithful', had 318 enslaved people. More to the point, he claimed that the 'toleration and use of slavery is a *principle implanted in our nature*, as is evident from its maintaining throughout mankind in all ages, in all countries, in every stage of barbarity or refinement'. Narrating the history of slavery through the Bible, Greek epics, and Roman law, Randolph refuted the claim that '*to Europeans only, the African slave trade is indebted for existence*'. This argument underpinned much of the pamphlet. If Britain was to give up this 'beneficial commerce', then they would merely open the door to other European and North American empires, including the United States, to lay a further financial claim to the enormous profits due from the 'Slave Commerce'. In fact, he made the astonishing calculation that 18 million pounds in revenue from slavery-related activities annually 'go into the pockets of Englishmen, and circulate in the country'.⁴⁷

Some Cambridge men were more torn about the continued existence of the slave trade and plantation slavery. The son of an apothecary who was the future physician to George IV, Samuel Hallifax had a distinguished career – attaining a fellowship at Trinity Hall in April 1760, a professorship in Arabic, and then a Regius Professorship of Civil Law for twelve years from 1770 to 1782. In a course of his Cambridge lectures on Roman law, Hallifax claimed that the 'Revival of Domestic Slavery in America affords no proof, that the introduction of a new Slavery into England is now lawful' – in other words, he supported Lord Mansfield's finding in *Somerset vs. Stewart* that enslaved people could not be removed from England. Assuming his new position as the Bishop of St Asaph, Hallifax's 28 May 1789 sermon before the SPG, however, detailed his approach to domestic slavery in the Americas. To him, conversion had two interrelated goals: '*civilizing and saving*' – and the Codrington plantations had failed to 'propose an example of lenity to the owners of other plantations, and to shew to them and to the world, by the manner of providing for the accommodation of our own slaves, that we are not unmindful of the equality of our common condition'. For Hallifax, the Codrington estates had the potential to become a shining beacon to other enslavers on how to run a plantation on the grounds of amelioration, cultural refinement, and religious conversion.⁴⁸

Consequently, Hallifax agreed with Charles Farish and, to some extent, Fuller's policies on slavery: that amelioration and 'Mitigation' were the soundest course of action. Although Hallifax did not foresee the slave system continuing (as Fuller had proposed), he argued that there was a possibility for reform – and Fuller and his allies may have exploited this middle ground in convincing college fellows that moderation was a legitimate third option to resolve the problem of slavery. Reading his sermon, Hallifax subscribed to much of the SPG's gospel on enslavement: like Thomas Thompson, he wrote that 'no sober believer' accepted the proposition that 'Christianity and Slavery are incompatible' because that was 'more than the authority of Scripture will warrant us to affirm'; as with Thomas Sherlock, he minimised the violence of Caribbean slavery, claiming that 'the very worst and most arbitrary system that ever was practiced in any one of the European Colonies, has never exceeded, or even equalled, in severity that established by the Roman Code'; and, akin to William Fleetwood, he proclaimed that it was critical that, in order to Christianise enslaved Africans and 'gain an entrance into any plantation but our own', the Society build alliances with enslavers and ensure that they understood that baptism was not a 'virtual Manumission'. Finishing this line of argument, the Bishop maintained that the Society should acquiesce to the colonial legislatures, who, he hoped, would accept 'the rights of human nature, to the interests of the planter and of the slaves, to the national commerce, and the national honour'. He prayed that the laws governing slave societies would be 'altered or annulled', thereby paving the way for 'its future and complete Abolition'. No avid defender of Britain's slave empire, Hallifax's writings were further proof of the significant influence of ameliorative policies, particularly for middling and elite Cambridge, that perpetuated the plantation economy.⁴⁹

Away from the pulpit, the abolition debate also played out in the courtroom – and a Cambridge man was a significant actor in that drama: Sir James Marriott, a fellow (1756–1764) and, subsequently, the Master of Trinity Hall (1764–1803). Sir James accrued numerous positions during his career: Vice-Chancellor, King's Advocate, Judge of the Admiralty Court, and MP for Sudbury on two occasions (where he supported Pitt's faction). The decorated jurist, as was the case with Sir Nathaniel Lloyd, had engaged in multiple discussions and cases regarding the empire, from issues as mundane as over whether to enforce a residence requirement on a Barbadian clergyman to the much more gripping topic of taxing the American colonists without their consent, which he supported because (in a speech that was greeted with 'much merriment') the Americans were represented in Parliament 'by the knights of the shire for the county of Kent'. Marriott's interest in North American affairs also extended to Québec, where he devised a plan of a code of laws in 1774.⁵⁰

The issue of the slave trade placed his name in the public spotlight, however. In October 1791, a Bristol captain named John Kimber was master of the *Recovery*, which had been sailing for over a month on route from New Calabar

in West Africa to Grenada in the British Caribbean. His original cargo included 300 enslaved people, of which twenty-seven died from the horrendous conditions on board. The ship and its captain would be little remarked upon if not for what happened next. Six months later, the *Recovery* became a cause célèbre after William Wilberforce mentioned in a parliamentary speech that Kimber had whipped, suspended by one leg, and, as a result of this torture, had caused the death of a fifteen-year-old enslaved girl because she had refused to dance on deck (the enslaved were often forced to dance, under threat of being lashed, in a futile effort to keep the captives healthy on the disease-ridden ships). Though Kimber refuted the charges in the newspapers (and had the support of the Bristol mercantile community), the Scottish satirist Isaac Cruikshank depicted the Bristolian slave-trader as a gluttonous, immoral, and inhuman figure – an exemplar of the ‘Dealers in human flesh’ – who abused the African woman because of her ‘virjen modesty’.⁵¹

In June 1792, Kimber was tried in London for the murder of two enslaved women, with Marriott the presiding judge (and with notable figures in attendance, including the future William IV). The trial lasted five hours, with the defence quickly gaining the upper hand after it was discovered that of the five witnesses, two were prejudiced against Kimber and three were supportive of the captain. In his instructions to the jury, Marriott also reminded them that a ‘ship is a little government’ and that, as a result, there could be no ‘hope of security’ on board without ‘absolute power, placed in one man’ – in fact, he argued, the ‘passions of human nature operate there in their full violence, and all on board of a ship is too often nothing but one scene of misery and terror, disorder, disobedience, confederacy, resentment and revenge’. These statements, Nicholas Rogers suggests, appealed to a ‘propertied jury’ that viewed the revolutions in France and Saint-Domingue with a mixture of suspicion and terror. Marriott soon stopped the trial as it became evident that the witnesses had been discredited, and, having urged the jury to find Kimber not guilty, the captain’s peers agreed. The trial was a setback for Wilberforce, who was accused of misleading Parliament – though the abolitionist and his supporters were convinced that Marriott and his peers had merely questioned the veracity of the witnesses rather than the merits of the case.⁵²

Sir James’s legal work continued, however. He presided over another slave ship case that same month after the mariner George Hindmarsh repeatedly clubbed the captain Samuel Burnie Cowie to death on board the *Eolus*, which was ‘one league from Annamboe, on the Coast of Africa’, and then threw the body overboard. (Hindmarsh was convicted and executed.) Marriott’s will showed that he was clearly intimate with the colonial enslaver class. He provided £5,000 in three per cent consolidated annuities in the Bank of England to Sophia Ricketts, the ‘widow of the late George Poyntz Ricketts late Governor of Barbados’ along with a set of valuables including a ‘blood stone Box’. Sir James also made bequests to Sophia’s daughter and son (Marriott’s godson),

which included his prints and book of prints to the former and 100 pounds to purchase a sword sabre for the latter if he joined the army or navy. Governor Ricketts was born on Jamaica and had inherited Midgham plantation from his father Jacob (who had sired a 'free Mulatto James' and had a child expected with another enslaved woman named Ancilla).⁵³

Cambridge men enthusiastically assisted the West India Lobby too. Altogether, twenty members of both Houses of Parliament, who were actively involved in the proslavery lobby between 1780 and 1796, were educated in whole or part at Cambridge, including Sir Patrick Blake (St John's), Sir Charles Davers (Trinity), Sir William Young (Clare), Brownlow Cust (Corpus Christi), and John Warren, the Bishop of Bangor (Caius). Proslavery activists mentioned Cambridge in their writings too. Gilbert Franklyn, a partner with Anthony Bacon in a slave-trading firm and the owner of three plantations in Tobago, was one such author. In attacking Clarkson for his writings, Franklyn did not blame Cambridge for the campaigner's arguments. Like Fuller, his 1789 pamphlet contrasted the practicality of the enslavers' approach to amelioration with the utopianism of abolition. Dismissing Clarkson's pamphlet as an 'academical exercise', Franklyn argued that the Cambridge 'judges' of such a competition were not 'competent to decide upon' whether 'Mr. Clarkson's pen was guided by truth or fiction', and that such a concern 'did not necessarily enter into their consideration' because 'the members of the University of Cambridge possessed no such ocular evidence of African or West Indian slavery'. Given the involvement of Thomas Thompson and other former and current fellows in North America, India, and West Africa, this was an erroneous assertion; nevertheless, Franklyn suggested that the enslavers' superior educations – their 'minds more enlarged, and manners more refined' by the 'education which their youth receive in England' – had 'softened' their approach to enslavement.⁵⁴

The economic and moral arguments put forward by men such as Randolph and the legislative wrangling of Fuller through the Consolidated Slave Laws ensured that, from the creation of SEAT in 1787 until the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the antislavery struggle took two long, bitter decades. Witnessing the British public's response to the Laws, Fuller was jubilant. In December 1788, he reported to John Grant, the Chief Justice of Jamaica, that 'the Consolidated Act, has done more towards the opening of the Eyes of this country, than every thing that has been hitherto written or said upon the subject of Slavery, and it will convince the whole world that you neither stand in need of the instruction of the mother country, nor the stimulation of an impertinent set of Fanatics to do, what your own humanity & feeling has prompted you to do already'. Fuller was certain (incorrectly, as it turned out) that the enslavers had won the battle to defend the transatlantic slave trade.⁵⁵

Over the following years, Fuller propagated the news about Jamaica's amelioration measures to the British public. He printed 1,200 copies of the policies to send to the press, both Houses of Parliament, the cabinet, prominent Church figures, including the Archbishop of Canterbury and Bishop of London, and to

the towns petitioning for the end of the slave trade (Cambridge included). The Saint-Domingue revolt inspired Fuller to increase his lobbying efforts to avoid enslaved uprisings in the British colonies. Fuller wrote that he was 'struck with Horror at the accounts of the insurrections of the Negroes in St Domingo', and believed that the 'seeds of the rebellion' had germinated in London's antislavery community. These anti-Haitian claims had both adherents and opponents at Cambridge. In 1800, Herbert Marsh, a St John's fellow, had discussed the 'insurrection... among the negroes' there, which had been 'so dreadful in its effects' that the French colonists were 'reduced to a state of despair'. On the other hand, William Burdon, a radical Emmanuel fellow and Newcastle coal mine owner, celebrated the Haitian leader Toussaint Louverture for 'nobly' defending the island from France – indeed, the 'black General', though 'bred a slave', had 'put to shame the most enlightened Europeans' and the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, who, in his efforts to reconquer and re-enslave Saint-Domingue, was a 'bloody tyrant' and a 'disgrace on human nature'.⁵⁶

Using the fear of a servile insurrection to weaken anti-slave-trade resolve, Fuller successfully transformed proslavery campaigners into the victimised party, not enslaved Africans. In May 1791, Fuller claimed, with some justification, that his success in defeating Wilberforce's motion against the slave trade was owed, in part, to 'the weight & solidity of our Consolidated Act'. Fuller's final written effort in support of proslavery, his *Colonisation of the Island of Jamaica*, published in 1792, was again intended to illuminate the reciprocal benefits of slavery. Accumulating statistics from Jamaican districts on enslaved births and deaths, he argued that the colonies had founded a 'grand system' of reciprocal 'benefits' and 'privileges and restraints' – and the 'mother-country' had drawn numerous 'advantages' from its western empire, 'advantages so various, and so important to her navy, her manufactures, trade, commerce and active industry, of every species (to say nothing of revenue), as [to] surpass all the powers of calculation'.⁵⁷

Nearing the end of his colourful life, Fuller's personal copy of Robert Norris's 1789 memoirs of the King of Dahomey contained detailed calculations of the numbers of enslaved people required to "stock" the Caribbean plantations. As he observed, 'Jamaica requires a supply of 12,000 slaves annually' to complete its cultivation of sugar. Calculating Africa's population at 106 million people, or "Negroland" as it was called in the pamphlet, Fuller estimated that slavers could transport, at minimum, 26,500 Africans annually to the plantations. He also highlighted Norris's estimate that the export of British manufactures to Africa and the Caribbean colonies amounted to 3 million pounds – a figure that would be 'reduced to nothing' if the abolitionists succeeded in Parliament. Fuller died in 1808, but the former Cambridge fellow had helped to stall abolition for a decade – and his commitment to the cause had few equals.⁵⁸

Moving from the metropole to West Africa, the exploration and colonisation of that continent illustrates the immense challenges of converting abolitionist

discourse into reality. In 1786, Londoners believed action was required to alleviate the numbers of “Black Poor” in the East End who had been brought to Britain through the Atlantic slave trade. Following the American Revolutionary War, in which thousands of free and enslaved Black people fought with the British to attain their freedom, the population of these refugees swelled. On 5 January 1786, a baker named Mr Brown advertised that he would provide ‘a Quartern Loaf to every Black in Distress, who will apply on Saturday next between the Hours of Twelve and Two’, including a subscription form at the end of the piece so that Black Londoners could sign up for assistance. These individual, localised efforts grew into a popular movement, with the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor identifying ‘250 Persons, who are objects of the Charity’.⁵⁹

With prominent financial supporters including Samuel Thornton, a director of the Bank of England, the Committee financed a settlement in Sierra Leone called Granville Town, but the enterprise was a failure – with some colonists captured and enslaved – so the eager antislavery activists founded St George’s Bay Company in 1790 and then the Sierra Leone Company on 11 March 1792. Inspired by Granville Sharp’s call for a *Free English Territory in Africa*, numerous Cambridge fellows and professors invested in 1792. These men included: the Reverend William Farish (£100 investment); the Reverend William Frend, the former Jesus fellow (£50); Henry Greene, a former Peterhouse fellow (£200); Arthur Atherley Hammond of St John’s (£50); the Reverend Thomas Jones, Equiano’s publicist, Trinity’s junior dean from 1787–1789, and a college tutor (£100); the Reverend Dr Joseph Jowett, the Professor of Civil Law at Cambridge and Trinity Hall fellow (£200); Beilby Porteus, a former Christ’s fellow and the Bishop of London (£50); Peter Peckard (£100); the Reverend Thomas Postlethwaite, the Master of Trinity (£300); and Francis Wollaston, the Jacksonian Professor of Natural Philosophy (£100). From the beginning, the Company, Bronwen Everill argues, was predicated on a ‘desire for humanitarian intervention’, which ‘promoted an “imperialistic” expansion of colonial and metropolitan resources in West Africa’.⁶⁰

The prophesised free utopia in Sierra Leone was an illusion, however. Whilst the second influx of 1,190 colonists, most of them Britain’s Black allies during the American Revolution, arrived from Canada on 15 January 1792, the third group of arrivals were the 99,000 men, women, and children that the Royal Navy’s anti-slavery squadron captured at sea and transported to Freetown between 1808 and 1863. According to the 1807 abolition act, enslaved people were entered ‘into His Majesty’s Land or Sea Service, as Soldiers, Seamen, or Marines’ or bound ‘whether of full Age or not, as Apprentices, for any Term not exceeding Fourteen Years[.]’ Abolitionists proposed apprenticeship for the 35,000 Black children who arrived in Sierra Leone, precipitating an ‘age of child enslavement’. The unpaid labour of Black children was supported by colonial officials, such as Zachary Macaulay, the Governor, as it “trained” liberated

Africans to become free labourers – those who tried to escape their newfound “freedom” were clapped in irons.

Thomas Perronet Thompson, a twenty-five-year-old Lieutenant and Queens' College alumnus and fellow, was appalled and launched an investigation after succeeding Macaulay as Sierra Leone's Governor in Spring 1808. Upon his arrival, he discovered that Africans were ‘sold within the colony’ from a cattle pen, and that a gaoler had announced to spectators that ‘no person is to take away any of the slaves without paying the sum of twenty Dollars[.]’ In August 1808, he was recalled – with Wilberforce's acquiescence – after attempting to outlaw apprenticeships. Thompson accepted Wilberforce's excuses (the latter did not want to jeopardise the fight against plantation slavery when apprenticeship was on the table), but he implored the Directors of the African Institution, which helped to run the colony until 1823, that ‘slaves are *apprentices*. Their purchases redemptions. Surely this contemptible system needs only to be exposed to cease to exist’.⁶¹

West Africans would, in time, endure the arrival of other European abolitionist and colonising projects. The Bulama (or Bolama) Association was one of the lesser well-known projects on the coast, but it equalled some of the more disastrous aborted efforts at British colonisation in that region. Led by Philip Beaver, the President of the Association's council, and Richard Hancorn, the 275 colonists were inspired by the ideas of Malachy Postlethwayt and John Fothergill, who argued that British imperialism on the African continent was a humanitarian solution to the transatlantic slave trade. Hoping to promulgate ‘humane, civilized commerce’ on the continent, the original memorandum of the association offered sixty pounds per 500 acres for absentee colonists and thirty pounds for the same arrangement for subscribers who braved the journey to the African continent. The Association enjoyed the beneficence of numerous Manchester merchants, and university alumni and officials such as Sir John Riggs-Miller, who attended Trinity Hall (though he did not graduate), and Adam Afzelius, a SLC-supporting Botany Demonstrator at Uppsala University in Sweden and a donor to its ethnographical collections. Though the Association was quite radical in its ideals – establishing freedom of religion and prohibiting enslavement – the plan was unrealistic from the start, and the ships did not even know where the island that they intended to colonise was located. First arriving in May 1792, injuries, deaths, and diseases ensured that – a year later – six survivors including Beaver were left as a grim testament to the difficulties of transforming abolition rhetoric into a colonial reality in another new world.⁶²

Seeking to avoid death from disease and misadventure, Europeans realised that greater knowledge was required about West Africa and the continental interior. The Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa hoped to end white colonisers' ignorance about the continent. Founded by Sir Joseph Banks, one of the foremost naturalists of the eighteenth century (and a man famed for travelling with Captain James Cook on the *Endeavour* to

Australia), the African Association benefitted from the support of metropolitan elites, including Richard Watson (the Bishop of Llandaff and the Cambridge Regius Professor of Divinity), Sir Busick Harwood, William Wilberforce, Dr Thomas Gisborne (a three-time President of the Royal College of Physicians and senior fellow who donated much of his library to St John's College), Thomas Gray Comings, a Trinity fellow, Dr Luttrell Winne and Brownlow North (both of whom were fellows of All Souls), and George Cecil Renouard, the Almoner's Professor of Arabic at Cambridge.⁶³

The Association was another example of a centuries-long interest in geography at the University, which had excited the minds of students and fellows about the potential profits and obvious horrors of a commercial empire. St John's College Library stocked Samuel Purchas's *His Pilgrimage*, which was published from 1613 and deemed Virginia 'the fittest place for an earthly Paradise', and the Welsh Reverend Griffith Hughes's *Natural History of Barbados*, a 1750 work that justified the slave trade because Africans were 'little better than Slaves in their own Country'. Cambridge locals were involved in these geographical discussions and debates too. Thomas Salmon, who had run a coffeehouse in Cambridge and compiled much of his work there (some of which was recommended to undergraduates), published a popular work of descriptive geography in 1739, entitled the *Modern History, or Present State of all Nations*.⁶⁴

Salmon was a vehement critic of slave-trading more than four decades before that attitude was fashionable in Britain. He wrote that 'Young Blacks at full growth and in their prime, under three pounds a head, and boys and women in proportion; and these poor creatures are pack'd as close as Herrings, 7 or 800 of them in a ship, where they are forced to lie double, almost the whole voyage, and kept with no better food than horse-beans'. Salmon appealed to the merchants and their pocketbooks. The 'profit, one would think', the coffeehouse owner complained, 'should induce the Merchants to use them well; for a slave, that is purchased for three or four pounds at Angola, is worth twenty or five and twenty in America'. The *Modern History* detailed the horrors of the middle passage and how the enslaved 'jumped overboard, rather trusting to the mercy of the sea, than their white masters, from an apprehension... that they are to be fatted for slaughter, and devoured by white men'. The fear of white cannibalism – of European enslavers killing and consuming their captives – was a common feature of enslaved testimony, including Equiano's *Narrative*, and such stories convinced Salmon that, given the choice between the 'cruel Spaniard' and their silver mines or the 'English Planters' who 'don't use their slaves much better', there was little wonder that enslaved Africans chose death rather than bondage.⁶⁵

Though abolitionist in principle, the Association utilised the trans-Saharan trade routes or the Gambia River to send explorers into the interior. The underlying motivations for this mission shifted as much as the arduous terrain that these explorers aimed to navigate. At the Association's inception on 9 June

1788, which Watson served on as a committee member until 1805, the founders planned to enlighten Europeans' geographical understanding of the interior – an area of the map that remained a 'wide extended blank' – and utilise that stock of "useful" information on the Niger, Senegal, and Gambia rivers to enlarge the 'fund of human knowledge'. Pleading for government assistance and funds after one of their members, the Irish former army officer Daniel Houghton, was robbed and perished before he reached the Niger (further than any European had travelled before), the Association argued that such "useful" geographical knowledge could be gained through another avenue: an 'extensive and lucrative Trade' in 'European goods' to the interior – a trade that might net Britain 'a Million Sterling per annum', and perhaps open another imperial frontier that could be as lucrative as the 'East Indies'. Planning a consulship and 'Fort and Settlement' in Senegambia, these metropolitan elites hoped to establish a bridgehead for London's 'Mercantile Houses' in gold, which the Association argued had been inefficiently harvested by 'ignorant Savages'. The commercial intercourse and planned fort would 'assert by arms' Britain's right to possession of this territory over 'Rival Nation[s]' in West Africa and Europe.⁶⁶

The Association's potential success was predicated on collaborations with European enslavers. Houghton, who had been unsuccessfully employed to find the cities of Timbuktu and "Houssa" (the equivalent, for misinformed Europeans in West Africa, of the magical El Dorado), had been the fort-major of Île de Gorée in Senegal, which traded around 500 enslaved per year alongside peanuts, gum, and ivory. That military position and his experience as an adventurer, the Association acknowledged, had provided the Irishman with 'knowledge of the [Gambian] Negro Nations'. Following his death, the Association relied on the expert geographical knowledge of military men and the slave forts that they commanded – outposts which acted as 'conduits' for European goods and enslavement, and as regional hubs of commercial activity for African mercantile elites who transported goods (including cloth, metals, beads, and weapons) and people to the slave ships and from fort to fort. With Houghton's approval, Fattatenda was considered an ideal location for the establishment of a base of operations on the Gambia, due to it being 'free' from 'noxious effluvia and stagnant air' and thus 'formerly occupied by a British factory'. The Association maintained close ties to the African Company of Merchants and the governors of slave forts in Calabar, who were contacted to see 'whether any of them have the reputation of being curious and likely to promote the wishes of the Society'. From its dealings, the Association's 'Geographical Missionary' expeditions were beholden to both white and African enslavers – in fact, the Society acknowledged that an explorer who 'wish[es] to make friends with the... Traders as well as the great Men [is] obliged to be very profuse with my Rum as this class of men are those who go farthest up the Country and can give me the most information'.⁶⁷

European universities were integral to the Association's mission in the African interior. After Houghton's death, the Association, with Watson on the

committee, searched for and found a new enthusiastic potential recruit named Friedrich Conrad Hornemann, a native of Hildesheim in Lower Saxony. On 4 May 1796, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, an expert in comparative anatomy who argued that all ethnicities had originated from a single ancestor (a theory known as monogenism), forwarded Hornemann's proposal to the Association and recommended that he attend the University of Gottingen in Hanover for instruction in natural history, mineralogy, geography, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and Arabic.⁶⁸

At Gottingen, Hornemann enjoyed the tutelage of Europe's finest professors: Christian Gottlob Heyne, the First Librarian; Blumenbach, who was a professor of medicine and natural science; the historian Arnold Hermann Ludwig Heeren; and Thomas Christian Tyschen, who was later celebrated for his 1823 *Grammatik Der Arabischen*. Blumenbach despised enslavement because it limited the capacity for Africans to achieve their full potential, and Heeren also critiqued the "peculiar institution," pondering whether ancient slavery, in raising free Greeks to a 'sort of nobility' where they could live 'by the labors of the other' and produce cultural achievements, had been a price 'too dearly purchased by the introduction of slavery'. Regardless, the months of academic instruction at Gottingen did not spare Hornemann on his ill-fated voyage, and he died in Niger after delivering information from the western Sahara and central Sudan.⁶⁹

Hornemann perished on his travels; still, the Association did not fail for want of trying – they enlisted powerful African traffickers in enslaved people, who were called "slatees," to aid white explorers. Europeans utilised slavers to collect intelligence, send post, and for transport and guidance. The merchants were particularly powerful on a continent that, in parts, was characterised by 'warlordism' and the inability of states – including Muslim polities, who had long debated the efficacy of enslaving the subjects of Islamic states – to maintain monopolies of governance over large extended territories, ensuring that such authorities were often unable to safeguard personal liberties or property. From 1600 to 1800, the five Hausa states of Gobir, Kano, Katsina, Zamfara, and Zassau fought almost as many conflicts as they made alliances, and mass kidnappings and enslavement were the consequences of that power vacuum, leading to close to 20 million Africans being trafficked west to the Americas and east to the Islamic lands.⁷⁰

Before his untimely death, Hornemann was instructed to inquire into the 'Slave Trade' on his travels, and the Association soon received detailed reports concerning how local warlords and sultans alike earned bribes and taxes from raids to enslave captives – indeed, for some leaders in the interior the revenue from these expeditions rivalled land taxes (gold that was then used to finance the purchase of firearms and weaponry from European empires). The Association were candid about their reliance on African slave-traders, and the Committee in June 1797 hoped that Gambian 'Slave Dealers' would 'render opportunities frequent of receiving Letters or Dispatches from' Hornemann. Later, the Treasurer

and Secretary contacted the African Company of Merchants to ascertain the goods that would be required for 'remuneration of any Slattee or Slave Merchant who should be induced to conduct and safely reconvey from the interior' their adventurers. The personal associations between Company traders and African merchants were well known as some Calabar traders had travelled to Liverpool to 'learn English' (in fact, it was suggested that the Association's explorers leave that English port for Calabar because of these economic networks). Three years before the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, the Committee agreed to 'conciliate' Calabar's 'three principal Slattees or Negroes traders'.⁷¹

European explorers also purchased enslaved people, thereby participating in the African and trans-Saharan slave trading economies. Both the Swiss traveller Johann Ludwig Burckhardt and Edward Daniel Clarke shared a close friendship, Cambridge educations, and a spirit for adventure. Burckhardt was celebrated for becoming the first European to see Petra, Jordan, since the Crusades and the temples of Abu Simbel in Egypt. Clarke's adventures began at Jesus College – launching a balloon from the college grounds – and his more earthly travels took the Jesuan alumnus through Northern and Eastern Europe, and Africa. Arriving in Shendi in the Sudan, Burckhardt recollected that he sold his 'merchandize' and 'bought a slave boy about fourteen years of age', in part to have a 'useful and constant companion', but also because he 'afford[ed] me an ostensible reason for going in the direction of the Red Sea, where I might sell him with profit'. The Swiss adventurer traded enslaved people in the port city of Suakin on the Red Sea. Slave sales helped him afford his expenses there and Burckhardt, then in Jeddah, complained that he was forced to 'sell my slave' for forty-eight dollars – a 'faithful and useful companion' – to 'defray my daily expenses'. He lamented that, 'although I have since had several other slaves in my possession', he had 'never found one equal to him'. Clarke, who became the first Professor of Mineralogy at Cambridge, also travelled through Suakin, where he persuaded a customs officer that he was not a Mamluk (former slaves who had become a powerful military class) so that he would not lose a 'faithful slave, the only thing of value left to me'. These transactions took place at a moment when Europeans were beginning to highlight and oppose the purchase and treatment of the enslaved in Egypt and the Sudan. After their travels, Clarke and Burckhardt donated to Cambridge: the former his minerals and a series of ancient Greek sculptures which he had "removed" and transported to the University (the statues forming one of the 'two principal divisions' of the Fitzwilliam's antiquities collection), and the latter bequeathed more than 300 Arabic manuscripts.⁷²

Bryan Edwards succeeded Sir Joseph Banks as the Association's leader in 1797, and that powerful slaveholder – with Watson, a Cambridge Professor, on the Committee – shaped the group's publications. That influence was particularly felt in the case of the Scottish explorer Mungo Park, the Association's most successful adventurer, who, on his first trip from 1795–1797 along with

six African assistants, travelled to Ségou in the Bamana Empire and then, on his second expedition, reached Timbuktu, one of the Association's long-term goals. Park was close associates with Edwards, yet the intrepid Scotsman despised the transatlantic trade – and it could not be otherwise considering he met with one group of enslaved who had asked, such was the Europeans' desire for African labourers, whether their countrymen would be eaten once they crossed the 'salt water'. (After all, almost none of their countrymen or women had ever returned from the Americas.) The bestselling work extended to three editions and was translated into German and French; however, Edwards, the MP for Grampound, took advantage of Park's silence on the morality of the slave trade to revise the manuscript before it hit the printing press, leading the enslaver George Hibbert to argue that the 'tenor' of the *Travels* did 'not lead to a conviction that we shall better their condition by abandoning the trade'. The government's takeover of the Association's functions and the final merger with the Royal Geographical Society in 1831 ended another chapter in the long association of European explorers with enslavement.⁷³

One year after the publication of Park's *Travels*, Watson advocated the amelioration and gradual abolition of the transatlantic traffic, arguing that enslaving a family in perpetuity (in essence, from childhood) was more of a crime than slavery for an individual. The professor contacted Pitt to consider how the slave trade could be abolished – and the profit motive was central to his argument. The Cambridge man argued that a duty on the importations of all enslaved persons would make it cheaper for slavers to 'rear slaves than to buy slaves, and the trade will in a few years cease of itself'. Favouring the emancipation of enslaved people at a certain age, he noted – in reference to an unnamed slaveholder associate – that if they lowered the mortality rate the enslavers would have more enslaved labourers than if they worked them to death on their sugar, rice, and coffee estates. The reform of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which Watson referred to in an 1807 address, echoed the Virginian planter and William and Mary professor St. George Tucker's proposals for a gradual abolition where the enslaved worked to compensate enslavers for their freedom. As Watson argued, 'the labour of the man should recompense the master of his parents for the maintenance of the child, is a just principle' – and once the enslaved had reached the age of 'twenty-one, of twenty-five, or thirty years' it may 'be reasonably calculated that by their labour, as adults, they have repaid the masters of their parents, for the risk and expertise attending their rearing and education'. Slavery had become an election issue (a reality which Wilberforce exploited in 1806 to bring abolitionist MPs into politics), and Watson's opinions showed that as the slave trade bill passed 283 votes to 16 – in part because the suppression of that traffic would serve the war effort against France – the people's pens had turned to abolition writ-large.⁷⁴

The curtain had come down on the first act in a long war over enslavement at Cambridge, yet the slave trade debate had exposed fissures within the

universities concerning how to end, reform, or protect the slave trafficking and plantation systems. Though historians focus on the antislavery activities of Peckard, Clarkson, and Wilberforce, this chapter has shown that, in truth, men such as Charles Farish were more illustrative of the ameliorative nature of much anti-slave trade thought. If Cambridge fellows were willing to consider ending the slave trade, then those beliefs did not necessarily constitute an attack on slave societies or the planter class. From the slave trade onwards, undergraduates, to a certain degree, appeared far more radical than the fellowship on these issues and debates – and there is therefore a case to be made for historians to see universities, like so many other British towns and communities, as divided on the question of slavery. On the other end of the spectrum, Stephen Fuller and the proslavery activists have received growing attention from historians, but these men lobbied beyond Parliament – turning their attention to thought-leaders in the universities. Fuller calculated that, by influencing the eyes and soul of the kingdom, slavers could impose their power on all sectors of British society. Their power would then be unassailable. As a new century dawned, the second act of the antislavery struggle began: a debate on how to end African enslavement.