

Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic period

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It would seem that this weighty collection is part of an even larger project. Much of the preparatory work was carried out by Peter Kitson and his colleagues in the recent *Romanticism and Colonialism. Writing and empire, 1780 - 1830*, which he also co-edited.⁽¹⁾ Contributors here sought to extend debates on the Romantic movement by exploring a previously neglected aspect, namely, its specific relationship with colonialism. The Romantic period, they rightly argue, was one punctuated by momentous events. The loss of the Americas, the French Revolution, the abolition of slavery, and the turn to the east signalled what many have seen as the transition from the first to the second British Empire. Under such circumstances, it comes as no surprise to discover that the work of most writers within or on the fringes of the Romantic canon displayed a concern to understand hitherto unfamiliar cultures. Thus figures from Blake to Burke, Coleridge to Clarkson sought to represent individuals and societies found in corners of the empire, most especially in the vital areas of India and the Caribbean.

Furthermore, it was during the Romantic period that a fundamental shift occurred in the discourse of race. In the writings of people such as Edward Long, Charles White and Anthony Benezet, the idea of race was transformed from a system of arbitrary to natural signs, which were employed to arrange humanity into a hierarchical order at the foot of which stood the African. Even the great anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson could not avoid privileging the European in the perceived civilised order.

Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation focuses these concerns by exploring the unprecedented output of literature in its various forms that appeared in this period on the subject of slavery. How, the editors ask, can we explain the coincidence of the rise of antislavery sentiment, the peak of the slave trade and the intensification of Romanticism? How was it that at a time when much of the literature recorded the destruction of the enslaved African, British poets and novelists valorised an expansive selfhood through national and personal liberty? Answers are sought in a series of texts organised thematically - but not consistently - by genre or topic in eight volumes, each of which is edited and introduced by a member, or members of a team.

Volume 1 contains a general introduction to the anthology by Debbie Lee, and a collection edited by Sukdev Sandu and David Dabydeen of virtually the entire corpus of known black writings on slavery published in Britain during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Here the familiar texts of Mary Prince, Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho are supplemented by fragmentary writings of forgotten figures such as Julius Soubise and James Harris. Volume 2 edited by Kitson brings together extracts or complete texts from writings on the abolition debate, including amongst opponents James Ramsay, Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, and supporters William Beckford and Bryan Edwards. The debate on emancipation is covered in Volume 3 edited by Lee, which comprises five extensive texts published over 1823 - 26. The next three volumes are devoted to genre. Volume 4 edited by Alan Richardson includes a wide selection of verse representing the diverse, contradictory and complex response to slavery among well-known poets such as Blake, Cowper and Burns, and the lesser-known including Thomas Pringle and James Boswell. Drama is the subject of Volume 5. Edited by Jeffrey Cox it includes the work of playwrights such as Isaac Bickerstaff and John Fawcett in an attempt to challenge conventionally wisdom that drama was a genre that had no engagement with antislavery sentiment. To the contrary, the stage offered a highly suitable site for the depiction of the global scale of slavery. Volume 6, edited by Srivinas Aravamudan, covers fiction. Excerpts from the writings of Sterne, William Earle and others are used to demonstrate the significance of the form in projecting utopian visions of a future without slavery while simultaneously depicting the slave condition in stereotypical and sentimentalised ways. We return to themes with medicine edited by Alan Bewell in Volume 7, and theories of race edited by Kitson in the final volume. Here are represented the growing bodies of scientific, ethnological, geographical, epidemiological and anatomical research that sought to comprehend through classification the human condition, and so establish familiar racial hierarchies. Writers such as Thomas Clarkson, Edward Long, William Jones and James Prichard, it is argued, provided a ready source of ideas for the more imaginative appropriation of slaves and their experience.

Few could fail to be impressed by the 3,000 pages of writings, all of which are reproduced in facsimile, whenever possible in their entirety. The collection makes available many texts made familiar by frequent reference in secondary works, but much less frequent study of the originals. Each text has a brief and generally informative introduction, and is valuably annotated by extensive notes. I can only hope that these attractive volumes will encourage historians to recognise more fully the centrality of slavery to modern British experience rather than seeing it as a regrettable side issue, and so redress the damaging consequences of the longstanding historical amnesia on this question.

Permit me, however, to sound one or two critical notes. I found the putative links between abolition and Romanticism unconvincing. There can be little doubt that the period witnessed a momentous shift in human consciousness - what David Brion Davis has described in his magisterial *Slavery and Human Progress* from 'progressive enslavement to 'progressive emancipation'.⁽²⁾ Under such circumstances figures within the Romantic movement were almost inevitably engaged by the moral and philosophic debates that resounded throughout the west. Abolitionism and Romanticism then could both be viewed as products of the 'changing

sensibility that marked late eighteenth-century culture', and it is a matter of demonstrating their interplay.⁽³⁾

The difficulties in exploring these links, however, are not addressed; indeed, most of the introductions to individual volumes make no reference to Romanticism. Perhaps they felt it impossible to embrace the sheer variety of authors within such a framework. How could the likes of Phillis Wheatley, Robert Wedderburn, Thomas Clarkson, Edmund Burke, Hannah More, William Wilberforce, Lord Kames, William Cobbett and Sir William Jones be thought as part of the same movement? The problem is compounded by a failure to examine in detail the precise ways in which key Romantic figures engaged with slavery beyond their role as mere contributors to antislavery literature. To do so would have required more thought on the imaginative articulation of themes such as selfhood, progress, unity and redemption⁽⁴⁾ to the experience of slavery and its abolition.

I remain sceptical, therefore, about the extent to which these writings can be framed by Romanticism, even in its widest sense. I am more persuaded by the argument that they 'defy over-arching theories', and the suggestion that 'imaginative texts influenced political, medical, religious and anatomical texts, and that these in turn shaped imaginative literature'.⁽⁵⁾ This more modest claim better describes the ambition of the collection (in this respect its texts are in rather than *of* the period known to us as the Romantic age). And although it may not be particularly original or startling, the precept is one that can and does open up some neglected lines of inquiry.

In these terms the collection works well, sometimes exceptionally so. Take, for example, the volume devoted to fictional writings edited by Srinivas Aravamudan. In the excellent introduction Aravamudan goes beyond the sterile debates that have tended to feature in critical studies of the extent to which, say, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* expresses antislavery sentiments. Isolated references to the source of Bertram's wealth in Antigua, and speculations on the allusions to Mansfield in the Somerset case, help little in understanding how imaginative literature came to be seen as a valuable vehicle with which to explore the moral and philosophic issues surrounding slavery. Nor can a study of radicalised stereotypes seen out of context reveal adequately ways in which literature sought to represent the slave. Instead, he argues, it is necessary to examine the complex modes adopted by writers in their attempts to apprehend the condition and experience of slavery.

Most fiction proved inadequate to the task, treating slaves as 'objects of analysis, pathos, and amelioration rather than as full-blooded sociological and moral beings of the sort encountered in staple versions of novelistic realism'.⁽⁶⁾ Thus sentimentalism, which until the end of the eighteenth century dominated antislavery fiction and poetry, engendered tear-jerking responses to depictions of individual slaves rather than outrage at the system, so sustaining an implicit conservatism. The genre eventually declined as it lapsed into bathetic romance, to be replaced by didactic fiction which, although open to the charge of sociological inadequacy, did have imaginative potential, and presented opportunities for moulding opinion. In this light, the literature on slavery represented in this volume can be seen to possess all those ambivalent and contradictory powers characteristic of fictional interventions more generally.

Similar misgivings about artistic potential are aired by Sukdev Sandhu and David Dabydeen in their fine introduction to the volume on black writers. Confronting previous studies that have claimed optimistically to unearth in these texts evidence of 'disruptive strategies, counter-hegemonic discourses and acts of epistemic violence', they point to the manifold structural and artistic inadequacies in the writers' attempts to express black sensibility. While not denying the considerable achievements of black authors in publishing under difficult circumstances, Sandhu and Dabydeen thus provide a refreshing and necessary corrective to the well-intentioned but zealous radicalism that has hindered a better understanding of the historical significance of these works. The sad but telling conclusion is that none of these texts advanced the cause of antislavery.

To say that such high levels of scholarship are not sustained throughout the anthology is not to be unduly critical for an enterprise of this nature is bound to be uneven. Some of the other volumes could not quite match this standard. Despite meticulous efforts in tracing the histories of obscure plays, I did find, for example, that Cox's introduction to the volume on drama a less than powerful challenge to previous claims

that there was no drama of antislavery. 'Black' characters had featured on the English stage since medieval times, and so it must have come as no surprise to the eighteenth-century theatre-going public to encounter plays that included dramatic representations of slaves. Such plays, however, in tending to present slavery in the abstract as a universal condition masked its historical realities, and the role of England in its perpetuation. Many spoke rather more about the conventions of representing blacks than slavery itself.

And yet we are told little about this tradition, or the constraints under which playwrights and managers operated. Most of the plays enjoyed only short runs. Mrs Weddell's *Inkle and Yarico* was never performed, while George Colman's musical drama *Inkle and Yarico* had as many performances as Hamlet in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, but it not included in the collection. Nor are any stage adaptations of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, arguably one of the most popular tales of the eighteenth century, and whose influence can be detected in virtually all plays depicting the noble slave. Finally, I was disappointed by the lack of historical awareness. The plays included cover a period from 1742 to 1816 - one that witnessed profound changes in both antislavery sentiment and the English stage. Did none of this impact on the dramatic forms themselves, or the ways in which they were received?

To take one more example, Kitson's volume on theories of race is in many respects a worthy inclusion in the anthology. Many of the texts selected for inclusion were influential in contemporary thinking about the nature of the human order and racial taxonomies. Thus we have extracts from Edward Long's infamous *History of Jamaica*. Drawing upon the notion of the great chain of being as evidenced in earlier work of the French enlightenment natural historian Buffon, Long employed a pseudo-scientific, polygenist approach to argue that Negroes were a separate species, occupying an intermediate position between humans and apes. This particularly vicious fantasy was to be taken up in future decades by Charles White and Josiah Knott, so laying the foundation for the scientific racism of the nineteenth century.

Johann Blumenbach was also indebted to Buffon, but in contrast to Long maintained that humans were part of a single species. This did not prevent differentiation, however. Relying on detailed measurements of physical characteristics, most notably those of the skull, Blumenbach was able to separate humans into five racial varieties, at the apex of which stood the Caucasian, thereby establishing a typology that is still commonly in use. Although he continued to argue for the full humanity of other groups, the notion of a nexus between race and anatomy was open to abuse by racial theorists, the logic of which came to be realised with horrific consequences in the twentieth century. Sir William Jones is a more surprising inclusion, but given his influential work on relationships between race and language entirely defensible. For Jones also classified the human race, identifying the common origin of Indo-Europeans. James Prichard later combined the physical anthropology of Blumenbach with linguistic work of Jones to produce a cultural anthropology, on the basis of which the tradition of British ethnography was built.

Kitson's introduction is measured, striking a nice balance between the content of this literature and its historical context. And yet the critical questions on its relationship to slavery and Romanticism are not addressed. If anything, the thrust of the argument is that any relationship is difficult to detect. As he points out, Long's racial theory did not influence pro-slavery writers, the majority of whom denied that racial inferiority was an issue. Furthermore, racial theorists such as White and William Lawrence rejected slavery. The links with Romanticism are even more tenuous. While it is evident that writers such as Coleridge and Blake knew these works, in no sense were they used to construct racial hierarchies. Overall, few Romantics 'engaged directly with these works of natural philosophy'.⁽⁷⁾ 'Much work still needs to be done on the ways in which race theory of the period relates to the artistic productions of the time,' Kitson concludes.⁽⁸⁾ Well, yes, but we might have hoped that such an anthology would begin to answer these questions.

If natural philosophy and a nascent cultural anthropology were not the principal sources of racial imagery in this period, then what were? Christian cosmology and travel writings must figure prominently. From the early modern period when a global consciousness was forged Europe came to know 'the Other' through travel and exploration. The accounts published, fantastic though they might have been, were informed by older discourses subordinating the heathen, the savage, and the black to the white, the Christian, and the civilised. Evangelical and travel writings on Africa, India and the Caribbean, which were much more widely

read, cannot be fully understood unless as part of this paradigm. To have included some in the anthology would therefore have strengthened it as a whole, and made some of the arguments more telling.

These reservations aside, the eight volumes in this collection represent an ambitious and enterprising project to make available key texts from one of the most significant episodes in British history. If, as I believe, they now make it virtually impossible both to ignore slavery in thinking about the emergence of Britain as a world power, and to deny that a consciousness of it entered into the very fabric of the nation's culture, then their publication is vindicated. Indeed, our thanks are due to everyone involved, including the publishers whose reputation for such bold ventures will be enhanced.

Notes

1. Kitson, P.J. And Fulford, T. (eds.), *Romanticism and Colonialism. Writing and empire, 1780 - 1830*, Cambridge University Press (1998).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, New York, Oxford University Press (1986), p. xvii.
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation*, Vol. 2, p. xxv.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See the classic study of M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism. Tradition and revolution in Romantic literature*, New York, Norton (1971).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation*, Vol. 1, p. xxii.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Ibid*, Vol. 6, p. xi.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *Ibid*, Vol. 8, p. xxv.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. *Ibid*, Vol. 8, p. xxvi.[Back to \(8\)](#)

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