

THE ANTI-SLAVE TRADE MOVEMENT IN BRISTOL

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The part played by Bristolians in the slave trade has attracted a good deal of attention, but the contribution of the city to the anti-slave trade movement is not so well known. In this pamphlet, Professor Peter Marshall, who now holds a chair in McGill University, makes a study of the reactions of the people of Bristol to a movement which some supported with enthusiasm on humanitarian grounds but which others regarded as a serious threat to the prosperity of the port.

The Bristol Branch of the Historical Association wishes to express its thanks to the Publications Committee of the University of Bristol, to the Gane Trust and to the University of McGill for grants to assist in the cost of publication. The Cruickshank's cartoon is reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. Miss Ralph, the Bristol City Archivist, kindly supplied a photograph of the corporation minutes relating to a petition against abolition, and the photograph of the Seven Stars public house was taken by Mr. Reece Winstone.

The next pamphlet will be Professor David Quinn's *Sebastian Cabot*. This will be the twenty-first pamphlet in the series and will be published in the early autumn.

Other titles under consideration include Bristol Castle; the Blue Maids' Orphanage; the Bristol Corporation of the Poor; the Street Names of Bristol; the Medieval Churches of Bristol; the Railways of Bristol; and Public Health in Bristol. There will also be further pamphlets in the special series on the Port. Professor MacInnes's work on *Bristol and the Slave Trade* has now been reprinted.

The pamphlets can be obtained from most Bristol booksellers or direct from Mr. Peter Harris, 74, Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol, 9. The Branch hopes that readers will help its work by placing standing orders for future publications.

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PETER MARSHALL

BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



The American War of Independence sharply reduced the overseas trade of Bristol and almost entirely halted the traffic in African slaves conducted from the port.¹ After the restoration of peace in 1783, however, Bristol ships resumed voyages to West Africa in search of tropical woods for the English market and negroes to supply the needs of the New World slave plantations. The dominant position of Liverpool in the slave trade, secured before the war, was not remotely threatened, but clearances from Bristol for Africa became a regular occurrence, 16 being recorded in 1785, 20 in 1786, 31 in 1787 and 17 in 1788, of which between one-third and a half represented slaving voyages.² This present interest was but a pale reflection of past pre-eminence, but the reputation of Bristol as a slaving port, and its continued concern in West Indian trade and property, ensured that the city would not escape controversy if demands should arise for the suppression of the trade in negroes.

Agitation against the trade did not, in fact, await its resumption. Articles demonstrating its inhumanity, reprinted from American newspapers, had appeared in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* during the summer and autumn of 1783 in consequence of the determination of the Society of Friends to testify against slavery.³ This attitude was steadfastly maintained: in July 1785, the Bristol Men's Monthly Meeting directed six of its number to distribute 300 copies of Anthony Benezet's *Caution against the Slave Trade to Great Britain* "to every Person concerned in any respect in the Slave Trade", and ordered an inquiry whether any Friends were in any way involved.⁴ In November the committee reported to the Monthly Meeting that:

we find Friends are generally clear; not one person being engaged therein, or holding any one in slavery. Some few in the course of business furnish goods to merchants in that trade and only one family, who from principle have retired from the West Indies to this city and have not yet been able to withdraw their property, hold a mortgage on an estate whereon slaves are employed.⁵

1 John Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1893), p. 416.

2 *House of Commons Accounts and Papers* XXIV (1789), No. 631, XXXIV (1790-91), p. 278.

3 *FFBJ* 7 June, 4 Oct., 1 Nov., 8 Nov., 1783.

4 Men's Meeting Minutes 1779-1785. 1 July 1785. Bristol Record Office.

5 *Ibid.*, 28 Nov. 1785.

The Bristol Men's Meeting numbered only about fifty, but its members were to play a substantial part in the local protest against the slave trade.

In the summer of 1787 Thomas Clarkson was despatched by the committee, which had been established in London to secure the abolition of the slave trade, to investigate conditions in provincial seaports. He made first for Bristol, where he arrived on 27 June with a letter of introduction to Harry Gandy, a conveyancer in Castle-Green, who as a young man had sailed on two slave voyages, an experience which had later led him, afflicted by conscience, to join the Society of Friends. Gandy introduced Clarkson to seven other Quaker families: these, he later recalled, "were my first and only acquaintance at Bristol for some time. I derived assistance in the promotion of my objects from all of them . . ."⁶ Clarkson was seeking information on a number of questions; the state of the legitimate and slave trades of the city with Africa, conditions on the voyage to the West Indies, the danger to seamen of serving on slavers as compared with other vessels, and the general extent of the slave trade of Bristol.⁷

Clarkson did not find Bristolians to be proud of the trade: "every body seemed to execrate it, though no one thought of its abolition".⁸ A report that a Bristol slave ship, the *Brothers*, had been deserted by its crew on account of cruel treatment by the captain on the previous voyage and a high death rate, directed Clarkson to an aspect of the trade with which he had previously been unfamiliar: the unwillingness of seamen to engage and their bad treatment on slave ships.⁹ Through Truman Harford, a member of the Society of Merchant Venturers, he secured access to the muster rolls, which confirmed the death of 32 seamen on the *Brothers'* last voyage; evidence was obtained that John Dean, a free negro of the crew, had for a trifling offence been fastened to the deck, burned with hot pitch, and scarred with tongs. Appalled at these discoveries, Clarkson determined to continue his investigations, which were now becoming common knowledge and arousing both support and resentment. Clergymen came forward to assist him. From the Anglicans, Dr. Camplin and Dean Tucker provided help, and Clarkson secured access to the Customs House records with the Dean's aid. Henry Sulgar, the Moravian minister, produced documents relating to the killing of Africans at Calabar in

1767, of which Clarkson had previously received only vague reports.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the search for witnesses and victims of brutality proved difficult. The surgeon's mate of the *Alfred* was reported to have been driven to attempted suicide by the attacks of his captain. He was found by Clarkson, seemed delirious, and was shortly afterwards reported dead. Continuing his quest, Clarkson was again aided by the Quakers, one of whom now brought to him another member of the crew, who confirmed that the captain had been responsible for the death of the surgeon's mate and also of a seaman, whom he had brutally beaten with a rope. Clarkson wished to see the captain tried for murder, but on approaching Burges, the deputy town clerk, whom he knew to be privately sympathetic to his cause, was advised that the cost of maintaining the crew as witnesses and the likelihood that they would be bribed away before the case was heard, made failure and high expense the most probable outcome. Reluctantly, he abandoned the idea and returned to his investigations.¹¹ He had heard that seamen were lured into the trade. The landlord of a local tavern, the "Seven Stars", who boarded seamen but refused any association with the slavers, escorted the young Cambridge graduate round the Public Houses in Marsh Street where crews were recruited. On nineteen occasions, in the early morning hours, Clarkson observed how landlords and ships' mates plied and stupefied seamen with drink, or encouraged them to spend beyond their means until signing on for a slave voyage remained the only alternative to imprisonment for debt. Nominally, pay was higher on the slave ships, but Clarkson concluded that the practice of paying half their wages in the local currency on arrival in the West Indies cheated seamen of any financial advantage.¹²

Despite these observations and the evidence of the muster rolls, Clarkson was unable to find witnesses prepared to testify in public. His hopes of persuading former slave captains to do so proved quite futile: fearful of incriminating themselves or else still part owners of slavers, they refused to speak and shunned Clarkson as if he "had been a mad dog". Harry Gandy, his original friend in Bristol, offered to give evidence, but no one else came forward. The Quakers once more provided assistance, arranging a secret meeting at the house of one of their number between Clarkson and the surgeon of the slave ship *Pilgrim*, which was about to sail.

6 Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament* (London, 1808), I. 294-295.

7 Clarkson, I. 295-296.

8 Clarkson, I. 297.

9 Clarkson, I. 297-298.

10 Clarkson, I. 298-310.

11 Clarkson, I. 310-319.

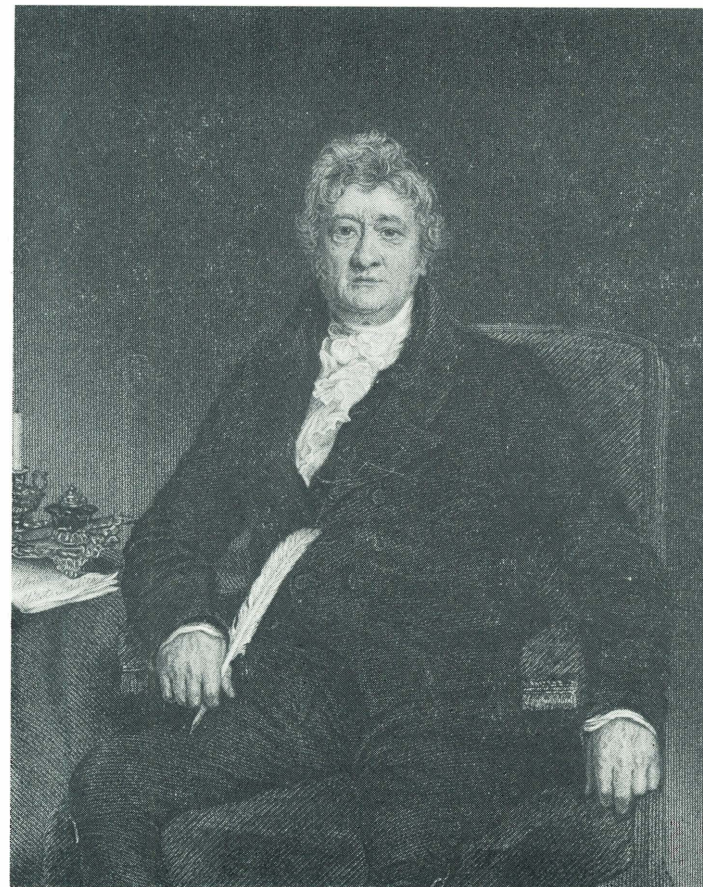
12 Clarkson, I. 322-325. Articles of Agreement for the Bristol slaver *Sally*, 22 July 1785, are printed by Elizabeth Donnan ed., *Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade to America* (Washington, 1931), II. 560-562.

Although he had been warned by the owner not to speak to Clarkson, the surgeon described the barbarities of the trade, claiming that he was only returning to it through inability to establish himself in his profession. Clarkson could not detain him as evidence: payment might be construed as bribery, and the committee had not yet determined when it would seek a hearing before Parliament. It was therefore agreed at a second meeting that surgeon Gardiner would testify when he returned from the voyage and would keep a journal for that purpose.¹³

The next opportunity was provided by a fragment of conversation overheard as Clarkson passed by the Exchange: a young man was speaking of his experiences on the Coast. Clarkson followed him and waited outside a house for three hours, to no purpose. He was subsequently identified as James Arnold and interviewed by Clarkson. Arnold had been on two voyages as surgeon's mate of the *Alexander* in 1785 and had recently returned from a further voyage as surgeon of the *Little Pearl*. He also had been warned to avoid Clarkson, but claimed that he opposed the trade and had therefore made no attempt at concealment. His description of the treatment of seamen on the *Alexander* was the most horrifying Clarkson had heard. Arnold was about to sail on the *Ruby*, but prior to this made depositions before the chief magistrate, George Daubeny. He also promised to keep a journal of the voyage.¹⁴

Clarkson had begun to suffer from physical exhaustion and emotional reaction to the evidence he had secured. Returning from a brief holiday in Monmouth he was introduced to another sympathetic surgeon, Alexander Falconbridge, who after four voyages had now abandoned the trade. He spoke with particular bitterness of the captain of the *Alexander*, and Clarkson then realized that Arnold had served on this vessel as mate to Falconbridge. A new point, to which Clarkson henceforth attached great importance, then emerged: although the muster rolls indicated a heavy mortality rate, the situation was in fact worse, since the trade was responsible for the subsequent death or permanent disablement of many seamen. Falconbridge declared himself willing to tell all he knew, either privately or in public. The dedicated investigator was quite overwhelmed by this belated success. "The joy I felt," he recalled, "rendered me quite useless, as to business, for the remainder of the day."¹⁵

Information was now becoming more plentiful. Thompson, the landlord of the "Seven Stars", kept him informed of the condition



THOMAS CLARKSON, 1760-1846

In the face of great difficulties Clarkson collected in Bristol a great deal of evidence in support of the case for the abolition of the slave trade. In 1808 he published in two volumes *A History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the Slave Trade by the British Parliament*.

¹³ Clarkson, I. 330-337.

¹⁴ Clarkson, I. 337-343.

¹⁵ Clarkson, I. 345-353.



Coloured engraving by Cruikshank, published 10 April, 1792, showing Captain Kimber on the deck of a slave ship with a negro girl suspended by an ankle from a rope. See catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the British Museum, vol. VI, 1784-1792, No. 8079, edit. Mary Dorothy George, 1938

of the seamen. Some, Clarkson learnt, had escaped ashore from the *Prince* before sailing; others on the *Africa*, including one of the mates, were alarmed at the demand that they should sign their articles of agreement unread. Sheriff, the mate, was terrified of his captain and appealed to Clarkson for help. Truman Harford agreed that the only possibility was to board the *Africa* in King-road and attempt to remove Sheriff on the grounds that the articles, being unseen, were invalid. Fortunately, the captain was not on board and Sheriff was brought ashore without incident. Clarkson made no secret of his responsibility, leaving his name as remover of the mate at the captain's house. He heard no more of the matter.¹⁶

Pursuing the line of inquiry suggested by Falconbridge, Clarkson visited three sick seamen who had never recovered from a trip, the previous year, on the *Thomas*. They expressed the hope that he would not leave Bristol before inquiring into the murder of their shipmate, William Lines. All believed that he had been killed by the chief mate, though they had not witnessed the crime. The next day he was visited by the mother of the dead man, in company with four other members of the crew. Clarkson was now convinced that murder had been committed, thought of consulting Burges, but remembering his advice on the previous occasion, determined to proceed directly with the laying of charges against the captain of the *Thomas*. When Clarkson appeared before the magistrates, he found the bench occupied by slave traders and West India merchants, to whom the mayor had passed on the warning given him by Clarkson the previous day of his intention to bring accusations. The abolitionist now encountered open hostility: "I shall never forget the savage looks which these people gave me," he wrote later, "which indeed were so remarkable as to occasion the eyes of the whole court to be turned upon me".¹⁷ The case was referred to the Admiralty court in London. Clarkson was now given an even wider berth by the slavers' officers but seamen from seven other ships applied to him for redress of wrongs. The quest for evidence had proved successful, but the accumulation of sickening details so preyed upon Clarkson's mind that he had come to feel that "to stay in Bristol a day longer than was necessary would be only an interruption for so much time both of my happiness and of my health . . ."¹⁸ Fortunately, he could now leave the campaign in local hands: the Quakers, Anglican and Dissenting clergy, and Joseph Harford, twice High Sheriff and a member of

¹⁶ Clarkson, I. 354-358.

¹⁷ Clarkson, I. 359-361.

¹⁸ Clarkson, I. 363-365.

the Common Council, were committed to the cause. Having secured their promise to establish a committee to prepare a parliamentary petition against the trade, Clarkson departed for Liverpool.¹⁹

Although Clarkson's experiences in the major slave port of the country were far from uneventful, Bristol had provided his first and most disturbing impressions of the trade. His *History* devoted more space to his stay in Bristol than to his visit to Liverpool, which he was forced to break off on the receipt of alarming news that the case against the *Thomas* was about to collapse for the want of evidence. Two of the four witnesses had been bribed away to sea and the others were known only to be working in a mine between Neath and Swansea. Clarkson returned to Bristol to lead the search. The men were found and sent to London, but arrived just after the case had been dismissed by default.²⁰

The local committee had failed in this respect, but continued during the summer of 1787 to bring the abolitionist case to the notice of Bristolians. On 21 July both *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* and *Bonner and Middleton's Bristol Journal* printed "A summary View of the Slave Trade . . .", a concise statement of the case for abolition issued by the London committee, which had instructed its secretary on 17 July to send copies to James Harford, Richard Reynolds and Matthew Wright.²¹ In August letters supporting the cause appeared in *Bonner and Middleton* and in October Clarkson informed the London committee that, due to his efforts, places in the West of England, including Bristol, were ready to petition against the trade when the committee would give the signal to do so.²²

By the beginning of 1788 the abolitionists were ready to proceed with the preparation of petitions. The Bristol group held its first public meeting on 28 January at the Guildhall, and formed a committee to prepare a petition against the trade. Substantial support had been obtained: the meeting was called by the mayor, who was prevented by illness from taking the chair, and presided over by Joseph Harford. The list of prominent supporters included the Deans of Bristol and Gloucester, Caleb Evans and J. P. Estlin, prominent dissenting ministers, Aldermen George Daubeny and John Harris, together with doctors and merchants. It was resolved to establish a committee of correspondence, open a subscription, and place the petition in the Guildhall for signature during the

following week.²³ This show of strength was sufficient to disturb John Pinney, who wrote to his agent in Nevis that

The present alarming crisis, respecting the abolition of the African Trade, operates so strongly on my mind, that I am resolved to contract, with the utmost expedition all my concerns in the West Indies. Never again, upon my own private account, will I enter into a new engagement in that part of the world: therefore permit me, most earnestly to entreat you to act with great circumspection and to make me as large a remittance, in bills of exchange, as possible. Without which, I shall be in a situation truly unpleasant, and most mortifying . . .²⁴

Two days later the lords of the committee of the privy council were ordered to investigate the state of the slave trade and the conditions of the slaves in the West Indies.

Both sides were now anxious to present their cases. The Bristol newspapers printed correspondence attacking and defending the trade; during April and May 1788 *Bonner and Middleton* published Falconbridge's *Account of the Slave Trade* in serial form. By the end of March the Bristol committee was able to send a donation of one hundred guineas to London.²⁵ Meanwhile, the supporters of the trade were beginning to rally. A general meeting at Merchants' Hall on 6 March resolved that the privy council committee should be petitioned in support of the trade and requested to hear the evidence of the Society of Merchant Venturers. The support of Matthew Brickdale, one of the Members of Parliament for Bristol, was to be sought, and information and witnesses held ready.²⁶ The spirits of the West India interest began to revive at this sign of resistance. The house of Pinney and Tobin thought that the onslaught was declining: James Tobin, who had returned from Nevis in 1784, had plunged into an extended pamphlet controversy with James Ramsay, an Anglican clergyman who had lived in St. Kitts, debating the evils and comforts of slavery with his "reverent and virulent antagonist". The partnership was therefore in a situation from which it viewed the controversy with the keenest of both personal and commercial interests. For the moment, it was felt that "much of the spirit of enthusiasm seems to have evaporated and the minds of the generality of the nation

19 Clarkson, I. 366-367.

20 Clarkson, I. 427-435.

21 Proceedings of the Committee for Abolition of the Slave Trade, British Museum, Add. Mss. 21,254.

22 *Ibid.*, 16 October 1787.

23 *BMBJ* 2 Feb., 1788.

24 John Pinney to William Coker, 9 Feb. 1788. Pinney Letter Book 1788-1792, University of Bristol.

25 Abolition Committee Proceedings, 1 Apr. 1788. BM add. Mss. 21,255.

26 Society of Merchant Venturers, Book of Proceedings II (1782-1789) ff. 407-410. W. E. Minchinton ed., *Politics and the Port of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1963), pp. 161-162.

are much opened by the ample discussion this question has undergone . . .²⁷ A decline in interest offered the greatest hope to the opponents of abolition, since they shrank from supporting the slave trade as desirable in principle. Tobin had refused to argue the justice of slavery, declaring himself a "general enemy" of the institution and describing the trade as an "unnatural traffic". He freely admitted that

It has indeed ever been my opinion that neither the slavery of the West India colonies, or the commerce of the human species, are to be defended, except on political grounds, and the general practice of all the most enlightened nations.²⁸

The returning complacency of those who were hoping that the agitation would dwindle into insignificance was shattered by the unexpected introduction, late in the parliamentary year, of Sir William Dolben's bill to regulate conditions on the slave ships. Pinney relapsed into prophecies of financial disaster and gloom at the ineffectual opposition being offered to the measure. "We are sorry to say," a West Indian correspondent was informed, "the slave trade seems to have but weak advocates in the House of Commons or that the question is so unpopular that gentlemen do not choose to give their real sentiments in public."²⁹

Bristol interests were apparent in the opposition to the Dolben bill. In the motion for its second reading in the Commons, Gascoyne of Liverpool proposed a delay of three months, so that evidence could be heard and representations received from his constituents. Matthew Brickdale seconded the motion, but without much fervour. It was, he said, his duty to do so, though his private sentiments led him to wish for some regulation of the trade. This could not be achieved hastily and required "cool investigation".³⁰ The bill, which established maximum numbers of slaves to be carried in proportion to the tonnage of the ships, threatened the profitability of the trade: calculations demonstrated that the nine ships owned by James Jones, the largest Bristol trader, would be compelled to reduce their cargoes by almost a quarter.³¹ It was therefore not surprising that a Merchants' petition against regulation was sent to Stephen Fuller and transmitted to the Duke of Chandos for

27 Pinney & Tobin to Ulysses Lynch, 25 Apr. 1788. Pinney & Tobin Letter Book 1784-1789, University of Bristol.

28 James Tobin, *A Short Rejoinder* . . . (London, 1787), pp. 23-24.

29 Pinney & Tobin to Edward Brazier, 24 May 1788. Pinney & Tobin Letter Book 1784-1789.

30 *The Parliamentary History of England* . . . (London, 1816), 26 May 1788, XXVII. 576-579.

31 W. E. Minchinton ed., *The Trade of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1957), p. 173.

presentation to the House of Lords.³² It did not prevent enactment of the bill.

Meanwhile, the privy council committee had been hearing evidence on the trade which, after arrangement under six subject headings, was published in 1789 as an extensive report. Bristol's concern in the trade was reflected in the number of both hostile and friendly witnesses provided by the city. The report first examined the present condition of the slave exporting regions of Africa. Evidence had been heard from Captain Thomas Deane, commander of a vessel owned by Mr. Biggs of Bristol. Deane had been engaged for the previous three years in the wood and ivory trade; he testified on the means by which slaves were obtained. John Anderson, representing the standing committee of the Merchant Venturers, emphasized the comparative humanity and order of the trade. Testimony from Bristol on the fraud and violence stemming from the trade demonstrated the value of Clarkson's visit: much of this evidence was delivered in writing by the abolitionist. Such was the case with the evidence of William James, now of the Royal Navy, who had undertaken three voyages from Bristol between 1764 and 1768; the more recent and impressive evidence of James Arnold was also submitted in this fashion. Arnold had honoured his pledge to keep an account of his third voyage, undertaken in the brig *Ruby*, which had sailed from Kingroad on 9 August 1787: his evidence related entirely to this trip. Captain Joseph Williams, he alleged, was notorious for his brutal treatment of the natives and unfair trading. Moreover, Arnold reached Bristol in time to learn that the hearings had not concluded, made his way to London, and supplemented the account in his journal by a graphic, damning, and fresh description to the committee of the evils of the trade. Gardiner, the surgeon who had also promised Clarkson to keep a journal, had died on his voyage: his notes had been found and buried with him.³³

Sydenham Teast gave evidence as a Bristol merchant engaged in the African, but not in the slave, trade. He was not prepared to admit that the legitimate trade was especially profitable or likely to become so. Captain Deane, however, thought that opportunities existed and declared that he had made a considerable profit.

The second heading under which the evidence was reported

32 Stephen Fuller to SMV 7 July 1788, Letters 1754 — Bundle 28, Merchants' House. Minchinton, *Politics*, p. 162.

33 Clarkson, II. 19. *Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council* (1789). Unpaginated copy, Bristol Central Reference Library.

concerned the manner in which slaves were carried to the West Indies. Falconbridge gave evidence on his four voyages, but his account seems far less damaging than that of Arnold, whose statement, sworn on 5 September, 1788, of conditions on the *Ruby*, described the distress of the seamen and the cruelties of the captain during the crossing. The crew was never addressed by name, being called "Red or Blue Villain", according to the colour of their jacket. Poor food, bad quarters, floggings for the least offence, explained why four out of a crew of nineteen had died on the voyage. When Arnold appeared personally before the committee, he testified on an earlier voyage with Williams in 1786 on the *Ruby*, then called the *Little Pearl*; he declared that the seamen were treated with almost as much cruelty as the slaves.

Clarkson's own evidence presented the results of his examination of the Bristol muster rolls; from them, he demonstrated that the city's crews had suffered even higher losses than those sailing from Liverpool. He dwelt particularly on the fate of the crew of the *Thomas* as an example of the dangers run by seamen in the slave trade, though he was compelled to admit that no particular resentment had been created, since they were "in general a thoughtless set of men".

The fourth section of the report, which sought to assess the extent of the slave trade, included figures provided by the representatives of Bristol. African commerce employed 30 ships totalling 4,195 tons, compared with 72 ships of 17,391 tons engaged in the West Indian trade and 7 ships of 1,571 tons carrying timber from Honduras. The relative unimportance of the slave trade was demonstrated by the employment of 119 ships of 15,454 tons in the remaining overseas commerce of Bristol. Calculated by value, the slave trade possessed somewhat greater significance. Legitimate trade from Africa provided imports worth only £15,000, equal with those from Honduras, but dwarfed by the West Indian figure of £774,000. On the other hand, the commercial value of all ships and exports to Africa amounted to £240,000, while the West Indian trade was estimated to be worth £459,000, representing a much less decisive degree of superiority. The gross commercial value of ships and cargoes assigned to other trade overseas was assessed at £900,000, so that the legitimate and slave trades of Bristol with Africa did not, even as calculated by representatives anxious to combat a threat to their interests, represent more than twelve per cent of the city's total overseas trade.³⁴ This would seem a stake

sufficiently substantial to be worth defending but not large enough to dictate local mercantile opinion, provided that the slave trade could be isolated from West Indian interests. The abolitionists, anxious to prevent a conjunction, denied that their ultimate aim was emancipation in the islands: their inability to gain acceptance of this assurance, coupled with the belief that West Indian prosperity depended upon the constant replenishment of the slave labour force from Africa, led to the strengthening of the limited slave trading interest of the city by the much larger and influential group which was now alarmed at the general threat to Bristol's commerce. The combined value of the Caribbean and African trades far exceeded that of the remaining overseas trade and the feeling grew that a limited evil must be tolerated in order to sustain a general prosperity.

Seen in this light, the privy council report appeared merely a preliminary to attempts to legislate for the suppression of the trade. In February 1789, the secretary of the African committee of Liverpool alerted the Bristol mercantile interest to this possibility, urging action to "prevent a blow, so fatal to the naval strength of Britain, and so destructive of the liberty and welfare of the human species, as the abolition of this branch of commerce would certainly prove . . ." ³⁵ The London West India committee of planters and merchants had established in February 1788 a standing committee to oppose abolition.³⁶ Now, in the face of imminent danger, the support of Bristol merchants was requested: on 3 April, 1789, the standing committee of the Merchant Venturers was informed that the House of Commons would in three weeks' time go into committee to consider petitions proposing total abolition of the slave trade. It was resolved that advertisements should be placed in the Bristol and Bath newspapers, requesting all parties "interested in the trade and manufactures and welfare of the West Indian islands" to attend a meeting at Merchants' Hall on 13 April.³⁷ The London West India interest met to express its opposition on 9 April and the proceedings were received in Bristol in time for their unanimous approval by "a very numerous and respectable body".³⁸ A committee was appointed, with no less than 47 members, and charged with the preparation of petitions opposing abolition, which would be subscribed by the city's West India

³⁵ Samuel Green to James Jones, 18 Feb. 1789. Letters 1754 — Bundle 29, Merchants' House.

³⁶ Elsa V. Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven and London, 1965), p. 23.

³⁷ SMV Book of Proceedings, 11. f. 498.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, f. 499.

³⁴ Values and tonnage from *Lords Report*. See also Minchinton, *Trade*, p. 181 for numbers of ships. A 1790 cargo for the Africa trade is printed p. 60.

merchants and planters, African merchants, manufacturers connected with these trades, and shipowners. The support and services of the Merchant Venturers and Members of Parliament were requested.³⁹ The shift of opinion in Bristol was clearly indicated by the presence on the committee of Aldermen Daubeney and Harris who had, in January 1788, supported the initial protest against the trade.

The committee wasted no time: it met on 15 April, arranging for news of the first meeting to be printed in Bristol, Bath and London newspapers, and naming supporters who would secure signatures to three petitions against abolition. The relative importance of the interests now roused to resistance may be indicated by the numbers charged with this task: the African committee was ten strong, the West India merchants totalled 23, while the manufacturers required 34 representatives. The framing of the petitions began on 20 April; they were despatched by mail coach to London six days later. The work was completed so speedily that copies of the London petitions were received too late to be used in Bristol.⁴⁰

Matthew Brickdale had been approached to take charge of the petitions, but declined because of illness; he reiterated his belief that the trade should be maintained under regulation.⁴¹ Bristol's other Member of Parliament, Henry Cruger, was happy to undertake the task and reported the safe receipt of the petitions on 28 April. Their presentation was then deferred, since the slave trade interest had agreed to arrange for a joint delivery of the seaports' protests, which would take place when William Wilberforce introduced his motion for abolition. This would create the strongest possible impression and also prevent Wilberforce from using the petitions to further his attacks.⁴²

Wilberforce opened his parliamentary campaign on 12 May. In the course of his speech he referred to the trade in Irish children, which he alleged had been carried on through Bristol in the reign of Henry VII until its abolition by the conscience-stricken Irish. "All I ask, therefore, of the people of Bristol," was his appeal, "is, that they would become as civilized now, as Irishmen were

four hundred years ago . . ."⁴³ On this same day, as had been planned, the Bristol petitions were presented. They now numbered six: besides the three prepared by the committee, protests against the abolition of the trade were submitted by the Corporation, the Merchant Venturers, and the Newfoundland merchants.⁴⁴ Their objections were similar and stressed the general consequences of abolition. The petition of the West India interest declared that recent inquiries had shown that the African and Caribbean trade accounted for at least three-fifths of Bristol's commerce; passage of the bill would therefore bring inevitable decline and ruin to thousands. Abolition would reduce British West Indian planters to an impossible position of inferiority when compared with other European colonists, halt any expansion, and destroy the carrying trade, the nursery of British seamen and seapower. Investments and investors would receive a fatal blow. The closing of Bristol sugar refineries would throw many hundreds of labourers out of work. It was admitted that the Dolben Act contained desirable regulations, which could perhaps be extended, but in any event the colonial assemblies were now considering ameliorative measures. If, however, the demand for abolition prevailed, those who suffered losses should receive compensation. All the petitions stressed that the consequences of abolition would combine grave dangers to British prosperity and no improvement of the negro's lot; cautious regulation of the trade was the only practical step. The organizers of the petitions were pleased with the support they had obtained: despite the need for rapid circulation and limitation to those materially concerned, nearly fifty signatures had been obtained from the African trade, about one hundred from the manufacturers, and 127 from those connected with the West Indies and sugar refining. It was felt that this show of strength, together with the backing of the Corporation, the Merchant Venturers, and the Newfoundland interest, demonstrated conclusively "how large a part of the people of property in the city are enemies to the proposed abolition . . ."⁴⁵

Throughout the parliamentary debate, Cruger kept in touch with the Bristol opponents of Wilberforce. He also played an active part in resisting the abolitionist case: on 21 May, when Wilberforce proposed that the house go into committee, Cruger spoke in support, but as a means of proceeding to a refutation of the

39 These and subsequent proceedings were entered in the later pages of the West India New Society minute book, preserved in Merchants' House. The committee, though provided with accommodation and clerical assistance by SMV, enjoyed a separate if temporary existence from the Society and the much smaller Bristol West India club.

40 Committee minutes, 15, 20, 22, 25 Apr. 1789.

41 Brickdale to Jeremiah Osborne, 26 Apr. 1789. African Trade Box 'G', Merchants' House.

42 Cruger to Osborne, 28 April 1789, *ibid.*

43 *Parliamentary History* XXVIII. 60-61.

44 Donnan, II. 602-612. Minchinton. *Politics*, pp. 165-166 Common Council Proceedings, 1783-1790, ff. 285, 289-290. Bristol Record Office.

45 Osborne to Cruger, 26 Apr. 1789. Letters Outward 1781-1810, Merchants' House.

arguments for abolition. Declaring himself to be a supporter of humanitarian causes and an opponent of oppression, he proceeded to demand that the cost of ending the trade should fall not on individuals but on the nation. This required the raising of a fund amounting to at least £60 or £70 millions. He asked if emancipation formed part of the project. Nothing but evil was believed of the condition of the slave trade, but he "could venture to pronounce the picture over-charged". He therefore argued for gradual regulation leading to abolition, rather than for a "precipitate amputation". The bringing to Africa of internal peace and industry would do more than international agreement to abolish the trade. Other nations were most unlikely to join in a decision which would therefore only serve to benefit foreign slave traders. For these reasons Cruger proclaimed his support of the petitions he had presented and his intention to vote against Wilberforce's propositions.⁴⁶

This oblique and apologetic rejection of abolition represented Cruger's public pronouncement of an already determined private agreement to work with the main body of the West India parliamentary interest for the defeat of the bill. He had reported on 18 May to the Bristol committee, in a letter to Merchants Hall:

I am just returned from a meeting of W.I. planters—Lord Penrhyn in the chair. The business was to consult on the *mode* of proceedings in the House next Thursday. Some were for adducing *evidence* to refute all the *12 Propositions*, others for moving them to be "false, insidious, and replete with misrepresentation." A third opinion was for trying our strength by a *short* question. This was thought dangerous, 'till something was said to remove the *impressions* of Wilberforce's speech. After two hours' discussion, Lord Maitland hit upon the middle line, which met the approbation of all parties, which was, when Wilberforce moved the *first* Proposition, to oppose it upon its being ill founded and not supported by evidence. He will naturally say the evidence was given before the privy council. The answer will be, "that is no evidence for the House of Commons to proceed upon." Pitt will refuse to bring his evidence again, upon which Lord Penrhyn will move that "Sir William Dolben leave the Chair". Here a division will *try our numbers*, which we are impatient to do as soon as possible, as so many of our friends *are going out of Town*. If we are beat, as I

46 *Parliamentary History* XXVIII. 95-96.

fear we shall be, then we shall think of bringing evidence to the Bar to *disprove* many of the allegations contained in the 12 Propositions, also to correct the misrepresentations with which they are said to abound. This will be a tedious piece of work, tho' highly proper, and will of course *oblige* the ministers to postpone the business until next year. It was said that our Court have made overtures to every court in Europe to unite with us in abolishing the slave trade.

You will do me the favor to show *these hasty lines* to Mr. Miles the chairman and as many other gentlemen as are interested in this very important business, but do not let my letter be published, it is not fit, nor intended for that . . .⁴⁷

Once roused, the Bristol opposition to abolition remained firm in its determination to resist: on 3 June the West India merchants resolved that the treasurer of the Bristol West India Society should be paid "sixpence per hogshead and puncheon and so in proportion for all other articles on our imports into this port from the sugar colonies from the 24 April 1789 to the 24 April 1790".⁴⁸ The levy was intended to finance the costs of opposing abolition. The Merchant Venturers, learning that a further reduction was proposed in the number of slaves permitted to be carried in each ship, ordered the preparation of a petition of protest.⁴⁹ Further immediate action was, however, rendered unnecessary by the success of the West Indian interest in persuading the House of Commons to declare in favour of undertaking its own inquiry into the slave trade. The select committee did not begin to hear evidence until 29 January 1790.

The first witness to be called by counsel for the Liverpool petition in support of the continuation of the trade was a Bristol slave captain. Curiously, no Liverpool commander was called, and the choice of James Fraser was obviously not accidental. He had been engaged in the trade for twenty years but, as even Clarkson was prepared to admit, was the sole captain of good reputation in Bristol: during his stay in Bristol he had been told by Burges, the sympathetic deputy town clerk, that he knew of "only one captain from the port in the slave-trade, who did not deserve long ago to be hanged"⁵⁰ — meaning Fraser — and this opinion had

47 Cruger to Osborne 18 May 1789, African Trade Box 'G', Merchants' House.

48 Committee minutes, 3 June, 1789, Merchants' House.

49 Book of Proceedings II, 3 July 1789, f.516.

50 Clarkson, I. 313.

been confirmed by Alexander Falconbridge, who had served with him, and by Thompson, Clarkson's guide through the taverns of Bristol.⁵¹ It is obvious that the choice of Fraser was designed to present the trade in the best possible light. His evidence emphasized the natural existence, given the current condition of Africa, of the trade; the generally low mortality among slaves during the voyage, and the good treatment of seamen whom he admitted were often half-trained and, in the case of Bristol, "in general inferior in capacity to what they are in other ports", so that their wages were no higher than those paid in the normal West India trade. Fraser was the only witness brought forward by Liverpool to testify on the state of Africa and conditions in the Middle Passage.⁵²

When the committee turned its attention to the condition of the slaves in the West Indies, James Tobin was called in evidence on 25 February. In anticipation of this step, Tobin's name had been erased from the Bristol West India petition before its presentation to the House.⁵³ He asserted the necessity of maintaining the importation of slaves into the islands, defended their treatment by the planters, and deplored the damage already done by the campaign to the credit facilities on which the Caribbean economy depended.⁵⁴ In March, witnesses hostile to the trade began to be heard. Alexander Falconbridge gave evidence: he agreed that Captain Fraser treated his seamen well, but insisted that on other ships the situation was quite different. He was subjected to hostile questioning, being accused of having, after the period in which he now claimed to have abandoned the trade in disgust, sought a command from a Bristol slave trader. The charge was not beyond the bounds of possibility. Falconbridge was not a man of strong character, as his later career demonstrated. After 1791 he was employed by the Sierra Leone Company, who found him unreliable and addicted to drink. He was dismissed from his appointment as commercial agent and succumbed within a short time to alcohol and the climate of the colony.⁵⁵ Later witnesses who had sailed from Bristol could report on only the more distant past. James Morley, now a naval gunner, had undertaken six voyages from Bristol between 1760 and 1776, while John Marshall had sailed on three or more occasions — his memory was uncertain — after

1762.⁵⁶ So the parliamentary inquiry dragged on, accumulating a store of information for historians of West Indian slavery and the slave trade, but for the moment effectively checking the abolitionist attempt to secure a rapid and decisive end to the trade.

The general election of 1790 saw the retirement of Bristol's members of parliament. After a poll displaying a dramatic decline from the very high vote of 1784, Brickdale was replaced by the Marquis of Worcester, son and heir of the Duke of Beaufort, and Cruger by John Baker Holroyd, Lord Sheffield. Worcester is not reported as taking part in parliamentary debates during his six years as a member for Bristol, but Sheffield spoke frequently, particularly in defence of the slave trade. Nominally a Whig, Sheffield had achieved prominence after 1783 as a continued advocate of the maintenance of the Old Colonial System: his *Observations on the Commerce of the American States with Europe and the West Indies* was regarded by many, both at home and abroad, as a major influence on the decision to exclude American shipping from the trade of the British Empire. Sheffield entered the slave trade controversy in the spring of 1790, publishing a substantial pamphlet which was reprinted, with additions and an open admission of authorship, in the following year. *Observations on the Project for Abolishing the Slave Trade* argued that it was neither practicable nor advantageous, even to the slaves, for the trade to be abolished. Sheffield denied any financial interests in the plantations or the trade and admitted that the institution of slavery had been marked by abuses and cruelty. He was not opposed to ameliorative reforms: both slaves and seamen would benefit from parliamentary regulation of shipping conditions; the West Indian Assemblies should be encouraged to pass legislation which would improve the lot of the slave in the islands. Tariffs and bounties could be employed to reduce slave imports, and the prospect was held out that, under kind but firm supervision, the slaves might progress towards a status of perpetual apprenticeship. Emancipation was rejected since the negro could not survive without the aid of white domination, and agreement between all the powers of Europe interested in the trade would not be obtainable. Sheffield's arguments were based on fervent beliefs in the sanctity of property and the necessity of maintaining a policy of enlightened paternalism. It was a clear reflection of a changed political situation that the Bristol Whigs had offered a candidacy free of financial obligation and had arranged a triumphal entry into the city for a politician renowned for his conservatism. The

51 Clarkson, I. 349-350.

52. *House of Commons Accounts and Papers* XXIX (1790) No. 698, 1-59.

53 Osborne to Cruger, 1 May 1789. Letters Outward 1781-1810, f. 80, Merchants' House.

54 *House of Commons Accounts and Papers* XXIX (1790) No. 698, 260-287.

55 *Ibid.*, 581-632. Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London, 1962), pp. 29-47.

56 *House of Commons Accounts and Papers* XXX (1790) No. 699, 149-161, 380-381.

constituency which had elected Burke now chose as a representative a man famous for his part in excluding Americans from participation in the benefits of the British commercial system. Once returned, Sheffield spoke in the Commons of the impracticability of abolition and the need to improve conditions in the islands by working through the Assemblies.⁵⁷

The first attempt of the abolitionists to secure suppression of the trade had failed to secure a parliamentary decision, but the cause was not abandoned: Wilberforce and his colleagues devoted much of 1791 to study of the evidence produced at the parliamentary hearings as preparation for a further attempt to secure legislation. During March 1792 *Felix Farley* reported that abolitionist petitions had been widely supported in Bath, with more than a thousand signatures, and in the Wiltshire cloth towns, where 700 names were secured: clergy and laity of both the Anglican and Nonconformist churches were prominent in the lists.⁵⁸ The Bristol press published letters supporting and opposing the trade, but there appears to have been no flurry of organization, comparable with that of 1789, to resist abolition. This was not indicative of apathy but rather of a situation in which both sides were now advancing their cases from well-established positions: the surprise onslaught of 1789 had by 1792 become a phase in a protracted struggle.

On 2 April 1792 Wilberforce delivered his major speech on the motion for abolition and involved Bristol ships in a description of recent brutality which, he claimed, demonstrated that the pursuit of slaves entailed the complete loss of humane feelings. He declared that only the previous August, six slave ships, infuriated at an attempt to raise prices at Calabar, had bombarded the town for three hours, and had later resumed the attack until the captains' offer was accepted. The House indignantly demanded the names of the ships: three were from Liverpool and three — the *Thomas*, *Recovery* and *Wasp* — from Bristol. Finally, Wilberforce horrified the House by an account of how a girl of 15 had died as the result of barbarous maltreatment in the course of a voyage, and named a Captain Kimber as responsible.⁵⁹

In Bristol, this speech aroused the greatest possible interest. The entire front and back pages of *Felix Farley's* issue of 7 April

were devoted to an account of the debate, even though this involved postponing the printing of advertisements. The excitement was understandable in view of the mention of Bristol ships and, in particular, the singling out of John Kimber for condemnation. Kimber was captain of the *Recovery*, a slaver of 189 tons owned by four Bristol merchants, with a shore address at 27 Redcross Street, near Old Market. It was alleged that the girl had died of injuries received on board his ship. Kimber immediately denied the charge, inserting a notice in the same issue of the paper that he was preparing a narrative which would show the charges to be false and unjust. It was not surprising that, the following week, a local bookseller announced that his supply of an account of the debate had been sold out, but that he expected a further large number of copies to arrive that day from London.

In consequence of Wilberforce's charges, action was quickly taken against Kimber. He was arrested in Bristol on 8 April, and taken to London the following day, to await trial before the High Court of Admiralty.⁶⁰ When the parliamentary debate continued on 23 April, Lord Sheffield rose to deny that abolition was desired by a great majority, but declared that

his chief motive for rising was, to notice a new and very unjustifiable style of accusation which had been lately adopted in that House. Some gentlemen, in the most concealed manner, scraped together, from any quarter, miserable stories, and, without the least notice to the parties, brought the astonished person accused before the public, in a manner that made it impossible for him to justify himself. If, however, a prosecution took place, the efforts of eloquence they had heard were like greatly to prejudice a jury, and prevent a fair trial. Nothing could be more inexcusable than to enrage the public against a man before trial. In Captain Kimber's case, we had a melancholy instance of malice and credulity. He was almost ashamed of the impression the story had made on him. It was his duty to inquire; he had gone into a complete investigation of the matter; and it was as clear as demonstration to him, that there was not the least foundation for a criminal prosecution against Captain Kimber; and it was also the opinion of men more capable of judging than himself. However, that cruelly injured man was in Newgate, and in irons,

57 *Parliamentary History* XXIX (1791-1792), 19 Apr. 1791, 358-359.

58 *FFBJ* 24, 31 Mar. 1792.

59 *Parliamentary History*, XXIX. 1068-1071. Either the parliamentary report or Wilberforce's informant erred. The *Anatree* is reported as a Bristol ship, which was not the case. On the other hand the *Wasp*, given without port, was a Bristol slaver at this time.

60 *FFBJ* 16 June 1792. Previous accounts of the Kimber incident have not indicated its Bristol origins

and could not have the advantage of a trial sooner than 7th of June. If any more of those unfair attacks were made in that House, that he should insist on bringing evidence to the bar, that the innocent might have an immediate opportunity of exculpation.⁶¹

On 21 April Kimber had announced that he had been advised by Counsel not to publish a defence until after his trial. *Felix Farley* continued to give great prominence to the parliamentary debate and on 28 April again deferred advertisements for this purpose. When Kimber's trial took place, full accounts of the proceedings were given. Two members of the crew of the *Recovery*, William Dowling, the surgeon, and Stephen Devereux, comprised the witnesses for the prosecution. They fared badly under cross-examination, in which, it was reported, "their inconsistency, prevarication, and contradictions were . . . notorious". There was no lack of testimony in support of Kimber: Walter Jacks, one of the four Bristol owners, spoke in his favour, as did Thomas Phillips, who had commanded the *Thomas* during the Calabar incident; the surgeon of the *Thomas* declared that a feud had existed between Dowling and Kimber, while the second mate of the *Wasp*, the third Bristol ship involved, spoke highly of Kimber and slightly of Devereux as a man of mutinous disposition. The defence claimed to have called not one-tenth of those willing to testify for Kimber, while the prosecution was restricted to its two witnesses. The jury acquitted Kimber without retiring; Dowling and Devereux were committed to Newgate on charges of perjury. *Felix Farley* reported these proceedings at length and accepted the truth of Kimber's story. The girl had died of disease, not maltreatment; the bombardment of Calabar had caused no casualties; Kimber was not a vindictive man and had returned home with 22 of his original crew of 25, not only six or seven as had been alleged.⁶²

It is impossible to say whether the acquittal was justified. The evidence in Kimber's favour would seem to have been given by directly interested parties, and it may be significant that it was again a surgeon who laid the charges of brutality. The abolitionists seem to have mismanaged the accusation, perhaps relying on the crown to prosecute vigorously. Wilberforce did not disclose the source of his information — Clarkson makes only a passing reference to the affair — but he seems to have been encouraged in his attack by Sir James Stonhouse, the Anglican clergyman resident at Hotwells and a prominent supporter of abolition. He

61 *Parliamentary History* XXIX 23 Apr. 1792, 1225-1226.

62 *FFBJ* 9, 16 June 1792.



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The Seven Stars public house in the lane leading from St. Thomas Street to Redcliff Street in which Clarkson collected evidence from seamen in support of the case for abolishing the slave trade.

Photograph by Reece Winstone

290
 of taking into Consideration the Report of the Committee to whom
 the expediency of petitioning the House of Commons and if tho
 necessary to prepare a Petition against the Abolition of the Slave
 Trade, and said Report being read, and the Draft of a Petition
 being produced and also read and some alterations being
 made therein by the House of Commons agreed to, and was
 ordered to be Engrossed, That the City Sen^r be assured thereto
 and that it be presented to Parliament by the Members for
 this City to whom Mr Town Clerk is requested to write now
 requesting their support.

On 22 April 1789 the Mayor asked the Common Council to consider a report of a committee which had been drawing up a petition to the House of Commons against abolition of the slave trade (Bristol Archives Office: Common Council Proceedings, 1783-90, pp. 289-290).

Photograph by Photo Prints (Bristol) Ltd.

had assured Wilberforce that Kimber "is a very bad man, a great spendthrift; one who would swear to any falsehood, and who is linked with a set of rascals like himself."⁶³ Wilberforce and his friends remained convinced of Kimber's guilt. Although recognizing that their witnesses had not proved convincing, they stressed the "shameful remissness of the Crown lawyers, and the indecent behaviour of the judge. Wilberforce considered Kimber "in no degree acquitted *in foro conscientiae*, of the cruelties with which he is charged". His friend Lord Muncaster agreed; even in the version of the trial published by the captain's friends he detected "conscious guilt throughout".⁶⁴

After his release, Kimber proceeded to harass Wilberforce, who received a letter on 11 July demanding a public apology, payment of £5,000, and a governmental post. After consulting Pitt, Wilberforce rejected the demands. Kimber then called on several occasions, becoming more menacing at each visit. Wilberforce's friends became alarmed for his safety; Lord Muncaster implored him to take care and Lord Rokeby, armed against attack, insisted on accompanying Wilberforce on a journey to Yorkshire. Lord Sheffield brought an end to the threats — Wilberforce's sons and biographers term him "an honourable opponent"⁶⁵ — but the episode was not forgotten. The subsequent trials of the witnesses for perjury involved Wilberforce in considerable expense, and in later years he noted in his diary that the Kimber incident was one of the two events in his campaign for abolition that had caused him great alarm and distress.⁶⁶

For Bristol, the Kimber case marked the climax of the 1792 campaign. The House of Commons' acceptance of Dundas's amendment, proposing abolition of the slave trade to the British West Indies in 1796, may have been regarded with justified suspicion by committed abolitionists, since the delay in enforcement proved to be fatal to their hopes, but combined with the Kimber fiasco probably proved sufficient to quieten general opposition to the trade in Bristol. In any event, slaving from the port now entered a rapid and final decline. In the summer of 1791 Wilberforce had paid a brief visit to Bristol, where Harford had told him over breakfast that "the slave trade is growing disgraceful".⁶⁷ Matthew's *Directory* for 1793-4 observed that "the ardor for trade to Africa for men and women, our fellow creatures and

63 Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce* (London, 1838), I. 356-357.

64 *Ibid.*, 357-358.

65 *Ibid.*, 358-359.

66 Wilberforce, II. 29, 51, 166, 305.

67 Diary, 5 July 1791, Wilberforce I. 305.

equals, is much abated among the humane and benevolent merchants of Bristol".⁶⁸ Between 1795 and 1804 only 29 slaving voyages are recorded from Bristol, and these vessels carried only 10,718 of the 380,893 slaves transported in these years by ships sailing from Bristol, London and Liverpool.⁶⁹ The last decade of the slave trade was therefore marked by a dwindling to insignificance of Bristol's share of African commerce: to what was this due?

The collapse of the Bristol trade was not brought about primarily by the abolitionist agitation, since there were no signs of decline in the period of most intense local protest. In 1792 Parliament was provided with official figures of the numbers, names, owners and capacity of ships engaged in the slave trade between 1789 and May 1792. Bristol ships had carried 2,691 slaves in 15 voyages during 1789, 4,968 slaves in 27 voyages in 1790, 4,069 slaves in 22 voyages in 1791, and 2,180 slaves in 11 voyages during the first five months of 1792. Throughout this period Bristol had replaced London as the second slave port of the country, and although Liverpool easily retained its premier position, Bristol voyages and cargoes were only outnumbered by one to four, compared with a ratio of one to thirty eight in the decade from 1795.⁷⁰ The outbreak of war with France had made the trade more hazardous but Liverpool was evidently able to surmount difficulties which Bristol found insuperable.

Abolitionist agitation may have aroused moral distaste for the traffic, but the Bristol slave trade was gravely affected in material matters by the economic crisis of 1793. This followed a period of confident growth in which credit had been easily obtainable. Alarm at the prospect of a war with France brought an end to financial optimism; there followed a collapse of over-extended country banks and a disastrous contraction of mercantile credit.⁷¹ Bristol was particularly vulnerable in this crisis, since its banking, mercantile and shipping interests were closely linked. Most of the Bristol banks contained partners with mercantile interests; unlike London, Bristol merchants owned their ships.⁷² There was therefore no possibility of unaffected sections of the community assisting the afflicted: all were involved. On 7 March 1793 Henry

Thornton, the London banker, prepared an estimate of the bankruptcy brought about by the crisis. Noting that he had omitted many Bristol failures, his list of the more prominent showed bankruptcies in the city for an estimated £1,100,000 out of a possible national deficiency of some six million pounds. The names of many of the bankrupts are to be found in the parliamentary list of slave ship owners: Rogers and Fydell, Walter Jacks, J. Gordon, Patrick Fitz Henry are all noted by Thornton to have failed for large sums. Of the sixty voyages undertaken from Bristol between the beginning of 1790 and May 1792, twenty seven were supported in part or in whole by those reported bankrupt in 1793.⁷³ Unlike Liverpool, which rallied promptly and effectively to restore its trade and finances by civic action,⁷⁴ Bristol seems to have accepted the situation. Consequently, Liverpool prevailed not only in the slave trade but in the general West Indian commerce. The West India convoys of 1796 to 1798 contained only a small proportion of Bristol ships, and local sugar refineries were reduced to obtaining supplies from Liverpool.⁷⁵

The reduction of the West India interest by economic crisis and war meant an abrupt curb of material support for a trade that was considered beyond defence on moral grounds. The slavers' ranks were further thinned by the death in 1795 of James Jones, who a decade earlier had owned nine ships, but had escaped bankruptcy. The last years of the slave trade were therefore largely a period which displayed the indifference of the much lessened mercantile and shipping interests of the city. Lord Sheffield continued to the last, though from the House of Lords, to maintain his opposition to abolition, and Charles Bathurst, who had succeeded the Marquis of Worcester as member in 1796, urged that abolition be gradual in order to preserve the value of West Indian property,⁷⁶ but these were isolated gestures of protest. When in 1806 the ministry and Parliament finally resolved to abolish the trade, Bristol newspapers reported favourably but cursorily on the event. Looking back on the year, *Felix Farley* hailed the abolition of a trade "so long the disgrace of a civilized

68 W. Matthews, *The New History . . . of Bristol* (Bristol, 1794), p. 38.

69 Gomer Williams, *History of the Liverpool Privateers . . .* (London, 1897), Appendix XI.

70 *House of Commons Accounts and Papers XXXV* (1792), Nos. 768 (1) 768 (2).

71 T. S. Ashton, *Economic Fluctuations in England 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 132-134, 166-169. L. S. Pressnell, *Country Banking in the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 49-50, 458.

72 Richard Pares, *A West India Fortune* (London, 1950), p. 209.

73 Thornton's list is printed by Pressnell, Appendix 28, pp. 546-547. See also Minchinton, *Trade*, p. 190, for additional bankrupts and a correction of Pressnell.

74 Francis E. Hyde, Bradbury B. Parkinson and Sheila Marriner, "The Port of Liverpool and the Crisis of 1793", *Economica* N.S. XVIII (1951), 363-377.

75 John Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1893), p. 519.

76 *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* VII. 235-236, VIII. 972-973, 1050, IX. 62.

nation".⁷⁷ Relief was doubtless general in Bristol at the passing of a trade which had once seemed both indefensible and essential: the abolitionists had done much to stir consciences, but the economic crisis of 1793 had fatally sapped the material strength of the slave trade from Bristol.

⁷⁷ FFBJ 3 Jan. 1807, 14 June 1806.

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Materials relating to the last years of the Bristol slave trade and to the movements which sought to defend or extinguish it are substantial in bulk but scattered in distribution. One may best begin with the major secondary works bearing on this period of the city's history; John Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1893), for modern accounts of Bristol trade, C. M. MacInnes, *A Gateway of Empire* (Bristol, 1939) and Richard Pares, *A West India Fortune* (London, 1950), and for conditions in the Caribbean, L. J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean 1763-1833* (New York, 1928) and Elsa V. Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven and London, 1965). Valuable though these accounts are, it is necessary to return to the sources on which they were based: the Bristol newspapers, all of which commented on the question and printed correspondence from both sides, the Pinney papers deposited in the University of Bristol, pamphlet controversies, and parliamentary reports and papers. Much documentary evidence is, however, more accessible. Volume II of Elizabeth Donnan's *Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade to America* (Washington, 1931), and, in particular, Volumes XX and XXIII of the Bristol Record Society's *Publications*, edited by W. E. Minchinton, contain essential materials and commentary. It has been possible, through the courtesy of the Society of Merchant Venturers, to obtain further evidence from their archives of the growth of local resistance to abolition. The establishment of a Bristol opposition to the slave trade has been incomparably described by Thomas Clarkson in the first volume of his *History*, which remains a major source. Secondary works on abolition contain only passing reference to Bristol, though something may be gleaned from R. Coupland, *Wilberforce. A Narrative* (Oxford, 1923), and the Wilberforces' *Life* of their father. Although the Privy Council Report of 1789 has been frequently drawn upon, insufficient use has been made of the volumes of the *House of Commons Accounts and Papers* containing official returns on the activities, slave capacity and ownership of Bristol ships. Further details on some of these ships can be found in J. W. Damer Powell, *Bristol Privateers and Ships of War* (Bristol, 1930) and Grahame E. Farr ed., *Records of Bristol Ships 1800-1838* (Bristol Record Society, 1950). The effect on Bristol commerce in general, and the slave trade in particular, of the economic crisis of 1793, requires further investigation: the circumstances attending the bankruptcy of

James Rogers, one of the largest slave merchants of this period, will be illuminated by the research of Mr. A. F. Day, to whom I am obliged for many references to local materials bearing on the trade.

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