
The Abolition of the British Slave Trade

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2007 marks the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the British Empire. On 25 March 1807 Parliament passed an Act that put an end to the legal transportation of Africans across the Atlantic, and although the institution of slavery was not abolished until 1834, the 1807 Act itself was indeed a historic landmark. Conferences, exhibitions and educational projects are taking place in 2007 to commemorate the anniversary, and many different British institutions are getting involved in an array of events that bring to public view two hundred years later not only the parliamentary process whereby the trading in human flesh was made illegal (and the antislavery campaign that made it possible), but also what the Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition calls the “Uncomfortable Truths” of British involvement in the slave trade. Some of these events make an effort to qualify the celebratory mode and shift the focus from Britain’s enlightened role as beacon of the humanitarian defence of slaves’ rights to wider issues of past and present slavery as they confront “the irony that many of the museums and galleries marking the bicentenary have historically benefited from the wealth generated by slave trading” (Behrman).

The passing of the Abolition Act in Parliament in 1807 was the successful ending of a struggle that had started in the 1780s and had involved many different people, both well-known historical figures and anonymous individuals who published against slavery in the press, signed petitions, participated in boycotts of slave-produced sugar and attended crowded halls for events that made the abolition movement “soon renowned for the size and enthusiasm of its public meetings” (Walvin 155)—without forgetting the acts of resistance of the slaves themselves who in the colonies escaped, resisted and rebelled. The antislavery campaign in Britain was the first genuine mass movement in the country and its appeal crossed social and class boundaries. Among the

individual protagonists of the abolitionist cause, the most visible in the 2007 commemorations will probably be the Yorkshire MP William Wilberforce, whose heroic fight for abolition in Parliament is depicted in the film production of *Amazing Grace*, appropriately released in Britain on Friday, 23 March, the weekend of the bicentenary. The film reflects the traditional view that places Wilberforce at the centre of the antislavery process as “the man who came to personify the abolition campaign” (Walvin 157), to the detriment of other less visible but equally crucial figures in the abolitionist movement, such as Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp and many others, including the black voices who in their first-person accounts revealed to British readers the cruelty of the slave system. *Amazing Grace* captures the essential participation in the campaign of Quakers and abolitionists such as Clarkson, Olaudah Equiano, or the former slave ship captain John Newton, but because of its focus on the parliamentary fight the film presents the abolitionist struggle as resting fundamentally on the shoulders of William Wilberforce, the MP who started submitting bills against the slave trade in Parliament in 1791 and who, despite repeated defeats, maintained his focus against slavery until he died one month before Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.

The *Amazing Grace* website makes an effort to underline the role of the film as a springboard for wider engagement in contemporary issues of slavery and offers educational links on the topic of slavery as well as an outline of a project related to the abolition of modern-day slavery. Like most of the 2007 commemorations, the film attempts to widen its audience’s perspectives on slavery:

It was in 1807 that the long, arduous anti-slave trade campaign spearheaded by William Wilberforce resulted in the passing of the abolition bill in the British Parliament. The March 2007 release date of the film is purposeful, coinciding with the 200th anniversary of

the abolition of slave trade in Great Britain. In conjunction with the release of *Amazing Grace*, our Amazing Change campaign and partners, a campaign encouraging us all to take action on behalf of social justice throughout the world ... Through this film and campaign, we rekindle one luminous story of one "great soul" and the good he sought to do. We hope it leads to the telling and re-telling of many other stories for years to come (*Amazing Grace*: Educational Resource).

Although the promotion campaign for *Amazing Grace* adapts the wording of the famous hymn to summarize the production in the simple outline "A nation was blind until one man made them see", the film website acknowledges that the story of William Wilberforce is just one point of entry to many other stories with their different resonance and importance, and the many commemorations of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 2007 across the country will indeed provide varied perspectives into a complex past event whose reverberations continue in the present. The hymn "Amazing Grace" that has provided the title of the film was written by John Newton in 1772, a full twenty years

before he actually became involved in the abolition movement with the publication of a powerful pamphlet, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (1788), in which he gave an account of the institution from his first-hand perspective as a former slave ship captain. Newton, an Anglican clergyman since 1764, had remained silent in his sermons on the issue of slavery for many years, but seemed to have been shaken by the information campaign staged in the previous months by Thomas Clarkson and the Quakers, who certainly felt that "having a prominent Anglican clergyman like Newton on record was a coup for the committee" (Hochschild 131).

Objections to the trade in Britain emerged first amongst the Quakers and in May 1783 Quakers in London presented a petition against the trade to the Houses of Parliament. That same year the shocking story of the Liverpool slaver *Zong* brought to public view one more horrifying aspect of the trade, the practice of throwing

live slaves overboard for commercial interests. The captain of the *Zong* had ordered the drowning of 133 slaves at sea to claim insurance for damaged goods upon his return, and the case was indeed presented in court as an insurance claim which the captain won. Throughout the years Quakers would remain prominent in the abolitionist battle, "possibly because many Quaker families had profited substantially from their involvement in the trade and considered their participation in the abolitionist campaign a means of alleviating their guilt" (Thomas 33). When the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded in 1787, nine out of its twelve committee



members were Quakers, who sensed that the advancement of the cause would depend to a great extent on their ability to bring the distant and rather vague reality of slavery closer to the British public. In order to achieve this they searched throughout of the country for relevant testimonies and physical evidence that could provide a more accurate vision of slavery, and indeed some of their findings such as the diagram of the slaver *Brookes* would become emblems of the fight against slavery. The person that travelled most in search of information and witnesses was Thomas Clarkson, the author of a 1786 essay on slavery that helped win over William Wilberforce to the antislavery cause.

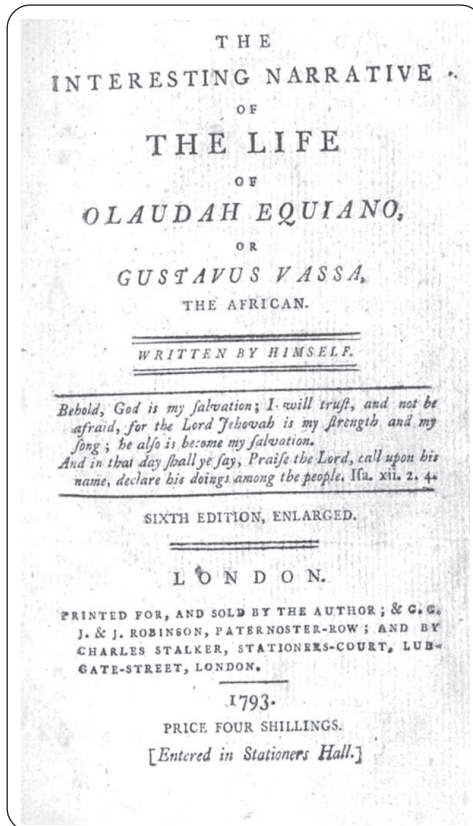
Clarkson became the movement's main researcher as he travelled 35,000 miles around Britain between 1787 and 1794, giving lectures and looking for testimonies and physical evidence that could be presented in Parliament in the case against the slave trade, such as chains, manacles, iron collars and branding irons. The final success of the movement hinged upon a number of "brilliant alliances [and] this between Clarkson and the Quakers was the first one" (Hochschild 95). William Wilberforce was the central parliamentary figure of the antislavery movement, but Clarkson was its main organiser, and indeed

the public campaign—the popular agitation in the country at large—was inspired and led by Thomas Clarkson, abolition's indefatigable foot soldier: lecturer, traveller and researcher. Clarkson was the man who helped to transform the public's vague sense that there was something wrong with the Atlantic slave trade into a powerful and focused national voice of wide-spread and strident opposition. Clarkson stirred up, and then channelled, this voice (Walvin 157-58).

The antislavery campaign had nevertheless started in the English law courts twenty years earlier with Granville Sharp's efforts to bring cases against owners in Britain that forcefully wanted to remove slaves to the colonies. Sharp became best known after the famous Somerset case of 1772 and Lord Mansfield's subsequent ruling. James Somerset was a slave from Virginia that had come to England with his owner and had escaped; his owner claimed the right to send him to the West Indies after his recapture, and Granville Sharp brought the case to the court of King's Bench, Britain's highest criminal court, presided over by Lord Chief Justice Mansfield: "Sharp argued forcefully that the law allowed

no one to be a slave in England itself. Slave owners of course felt differently, but case law on the subject was scant and unclear, and there were simply no statutes allowing, forbidding or regulating slavery in the British Isles" (Hochschild 46). Lord Mansfield was careful to cast his decision in a way that allowed

Somerset to be freed without implying that all slaves in the country had the right to freedom. Although misinterpreted by many black and white contemporaries as a ruling against slavery, the decision in the Somerset case was that a slave could not be removed from England against his wishes—a ruling that despite its limitations has been seen by some historians as the first signal of the end of slavery in Britain. The case of Somerset was not the first one that Granville Sharp, initially an obscure clerk in the Ordnance Office, had fought in court in defence of slaves; it was nevertheless the one that made him more visible and brought some hope about freedom: "On the evening of the 22nd



of June 1772, blacks in London had no doubt at all that there was reason to celebrate, and they did so at a party at Dr Johnson's house organized by his servant Francis Barber" (Schama 63). Lord Mansfield's ruling of 1772 proved to be a momentous occasion precisely because it was misinterpreted by many as an indication that, as was often couched in the press of the time, the air of England was too pure for slaves to breathe.¹

It is significant that the Abolition members, who were gathering first-hand evidence on the slave trade from people directly involved in it, did not attempt to seek the voices of the African slaves who could certainly provide an insider's

perspective on the institution. As Hochschild points out, the campaign's paternalistic attitude so well summarized by Wedgwood's pottery image of a kneeling chained black with the motto "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" owes much to the fact that the campaigners' final target were the Members of Parliament, who "might be moved by pity, but certainly not by a passion for equality" (134). The voices of the almost half a million slaves in the British Caribbean plantations at the time may have been indeed too distant for British people to hear—except when they staged rebellions, in particular the revolt that would eventually lead to the independence of the French colony of Saint Dominique. There were, however, increasing numbers of both free and slave Africans in their midst, especially after 1783, when loyalist blacks who had been granted freedom by joining the British forces against the American rebels emigrated to Canada and London.² Owing to the scarcity of reliable data, what Norma Myers calls "the black numbers conundrum" (18) will probably never be solved, but at the time of the Somerset case in 1772 the usual estimated figure was 15,000 and recent calculations range between 10,000 (Folarin Shyllon, Peter Fryer and Norma Myers) and 14,000-20,000 (Vincent Carretta). There is agreement as to the significantly smaller numbers of females in the country—in Felicity Nussbaum's estimate as few as twenty percent of the total (167), and black men are much more conspicuous than black women in the artistic manifestations of the time, when the liveried pageboy of African origin became a fashionable possession to signal social status and as such "a motif in contemporary paintings, textiles, prints, porcelain, and poetry" (Molineux 498). Painters loved black pages for the visual contrast and drama they lent to portraits, and the subjects loved what their inclusion said about their own economic status (Gerzina 17). These boys were flaunted as prized ornaments by their masters and especially their mistresses and became highly-valued status symbols for the few who could afford them, fashionable exotic objects that were frequently associated in paintings with the consumption of foreign luxury good such as sugar, tea, tobacco, and coffee (Tobin 27).

These domestic servants of the upper classes were only the top of the social scale of blacks in the country, a population that included a few well-known figures, among them some free men. The numbers of deprived blacks in Britain at the end of the century were significantly larger and the situation of the black destitute in London was so extreme that in 1786 the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor was created to provide health care, clothing and jobs for needy black people. The Committee soon approved a plan to transport the black population of London to the coast of Africa, so that they could live as free men in a town to be founded in Sierra Leona which would be called Granville Town to honour Granville Sharp, an initiative that some historians have interpreted as "more like social convenience than utopian idealism" (Schama 185). The time of the transportation to Sierra Leone coincides with the beginning of the antislavery campaign in the 1780s, a movement that would eventually incorporate the voices of some former slaves.

First-person narratives by Africans now living in Britain contributed to the abolition campaign by providing first-hand accounts of the harsh realities of slavery in the voices of individuals who had themselves undergone the Middle Passage and lived as slaves on plantations. These were the stories of former enslaved Africans such as Ottobah Cuogano, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw and Olaudah Equiano. In his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787) Ottobah Cuogano devoted only five pages of his invective against the trade to his life story, but his volume went through at least three printings in 1787, was translated into French and was revised for another edition four years later, when "Cuogano drops from sight [and] we know nothing of what happened to him" (Hochschild 136). Both Gronniosaw and Equiano provide fuller narratives of their personal experience of slavery prior to their settlement as free men in Britain. In *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, Written by Himself* (1772), Gronniosaw narrates his story from his capture in Africa

through slavery to a life of poverty as a free man with his English wife in Britain. In *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789) Equiano offers a detailed account of his life as a slave and becomes the first writer of African origin who tries to assert his identity as a Briton: “[H]e is British by acculturation and choice ... [H]e adopts the cultural, political, religious, and social values that enable him to be accepted as British” (Carretta xvii). Although in recent years there has been some speculation as to whether Equiano did indeed undergo the Middle Passage or was actually born in South Carolina,³ the version of his life that is generally accepted is the one provided in his autobiography: Equiano was enslaved at around the age of eleven in Africa and transported to the Americas but managed to buy his freedom after years serving a Royal Navy officer on various vessels and later working in commerce in the West Indies. As a free man in Britain he was very active in the antislavery movement, giving lectures, writing letters and collaborating with members of the Abolition committee. His major contribution to the fight against slavery was the publication of his extremely successful *Interesting Narrative*, a book that very quickly sold out its first edition of more than seven hundred copies. The book was translated into Dutch, German and Russian, and went through eight more editions within his lifetime, “each prefaced by an ever-lengthening list of subscribers—people who had ordered copies and paid half the book’s price in advance, thereby financing the printing costs” (Hochschild, 170). Rather visible in its own time were also the letters of Ignatius Sancho, a former slave who maintained a prolific correspondence with key artistic and intellectual figures and whose letters were an immediate best-seller when they were published two years after his death in 1782. Just as the *Interesting Narrative* presented an African as a man of considerable talent, Sancho’s letters helped circulate the image of another former slave as an intelligent and refined man of sentiment. Sancho’s circle of friends included eighteenth-century artists such as David Garrick, Laurence Sterne and

Joseph Nollekens, and his portrait was painted by Thomas Gainsborough, so that for many contemporaries Sancho became a symbol of the humanity and intellectual achievement of Africans.

Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho have been chosen by the Royal Mail for its series of six commemorative stamps featuring contemporary portraits of prominent abolitionists of the time, the others being William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson and Hannah More.⁴ The selection tries to grant visibility to the different forces working together in the antislavery campaign that finally brought the abolition of the slave trade to a successful conclusion in 1807, after a period in the 1790s when enthusiasm was low as a result of the war situation and the many obstacles to social reform. The stamps thus honour the black voices that contributed to the abolition movement, the many women who became involved in the campaign, as well as the movement’s three more emblematic figures: the forerunner of abolition in the courts of law Granville Sharp, the parliamentary leader William Wilberforce, and the movement’s main organiser and agitator Thomas Clarkson. Many relevant people participated in the process, and any single narrative of the fight for abolition can hardly hope to weave in all of their stories. Different events across the UK this year will provide an appropriately complex array of perspectives and angles on the commemoration as museums, archives, libraries and other cultural institutions across the country become involved in commemorative activities. As may be expected, given their major role in the slave trade, Liverpool, Bristol and London will host a great number of events this year, but activities related to the commemorations are found in almost every location in the UK, from Hull to Portsmouth, and from Glasgow to Birmingham. The events typically highlight the connections of each place with the abolition process or more generally with the slave trade and its consequences. The range of events is extraordinary, from the Portsmouth exhibition “Chasing Freedom: The Royal Navy and the Suppression of the Transatlantic Slave Trade” that presents the Royal Navy’s role in combating

the trade, to the reopening of William Wilberforce's House Museum in Hull with new exhibits showing his role in Parliament as well as contemporary slavery issues; from a series of lectures and exhibitions "Towards Understanding Slavery—Past and Present" in Glasgow museums to "The Equiano Project" in Birmingham celebrating his life and times with a multimedia and multidisciplinary programme of exhibitions, educational resources and events.

In August 2007 the International Slavery Museum will open in Liverpool to replace the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery at Merseyside Maritime Museum. It will be located close to the dry docks where slave trading ships were repaired and fitted out in the eighteenth century, and it will be devoted to the history of slavery and its forms in the contemporary world. The International Slavery Museum plans to collaborate with other museums and institutions to provide greater awareness and understanding of the legacy of slavery today. Liverpool became Europe's capital of the transatlantic slave trade, and at the end of the eighteenth century it controlled up to 60 per cent of the British slave trade. The city is hosting many other activities related to the trade and its abolition, including a lecture programme to be held at Merseyside Maritime Museum throughout the year and a multi-faith Service of Penitence at Liverpool Cathedral in March. Another city directly involved in the slave trade, Bristol, prepares a series of events for 2007 called 'Abolition 200' in which the university plays a major part. Among them we find an exhibition, "Documenting Slavery and the Abolition Controversy", a display of original manuscript and printed material from the University Library, including the correspondence of a slave-trading captain and the administrative records of plantations, and a series of lectures jointly convened by historians and human rights experts at the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England, not only on the history of the transatlantic slave trade but also on present-day forms of social injustice, such as human trafficking, forced labour, debt bondage and trade inequity. "The Bristol Slave Trade Walks" guide visitors through the shipyards, docks and houses involved in the

trading of slaves and in the abolition movement, and the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in the city opens an exhibition entitled "Breaking the Chains" to remember and commemorate the events, people and actions that made the 1807 Act so significant a part of British history.

In London the British Museum has prepared "The Atlantic Trade and Identity Season" featuring a series of exhibitions, displays and events that explore transatlantic trade and its relationship to slavery, resistance and diasporas, and Museum in Docklands has received funds from the Heritage Lottery Fund to open in October the only permanent museum gallery to explore London's relationship with the transatlantic slave trade. The new gallery will be called London, Sugar and Slavery and will show how the slave trade has shaped the capital since the seventeenth century and funded much of the city's industrial and financial success. The gallery will emphasise the role of the slaves themselves and the grass-root efforts of many people in the process that led to the abolition of the slave trade. The historian Steve Martin has devised a walk around Westminster that highlights events and individuals involved in the campaign to abolish the slave trade. This map has been jointly produced by the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, Parliament, Tate Britain, Westminster City Archives, and Westminster City Council, all of whom are hosting exhibitions and programmes of events linked to the Bicentenary, such as the "Portraits, People and Abolition" exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, a trail that highlights some of the individuals in the collection who in different ways were associated with the slave trade.

An exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum is significantly entitled "Uncomfortable Truths: Traces of the Trade" and is part of a series of events including talks and debates, dance, music, theatre performances, and film that will be staged at the museum throughout the year to remember slavery. The exhibition takes visitors through the permanent collections in what the leaflet describes as discovery trails that explore the links between art, design and the transatlantic slave trade. The tours pass run through the collections to highlight objects

related to slavery in five different itineraries: “Consuming the Black Atlantic”, “Black Servants in British Homes”, “Britain and the West Indies”, “Representing Slavery and Abolitionism”, and “Gold and Slaves: Transnational Trade Links”. The trails are not easy to follow, their objects at times deeply buried in the very rich museum collections (sometimes almost hidden in unnumbered cases). The difficulties in following the trails can be perceived as an unintended metaphor for the difficulties that contemporaries using the exhibited objects may have had in finding images of slavery in their comfortable everyday lives, as, for instance, in the delicate porcelain and silverware related to the consumption of coffee, chocolate, sugar, tobacco and rum.

Among the institutions that are taking part in the commemorations of the abolition of the slave trade are several British universities that are organizing different events around the bicentenary with different approaches and emphases, including conferences related to the commemoration. In March the University of Southampton and the Chawton House Library co-sponsored “Imagining Transatlantic Slavery and Abolition”, a conference exploring cultural and historical representations of slavery and abolition from the eighteenth century through the present and the relationship between history, cultural memory and transatlantic slavery. In April the University of York organised the conference “Abolitions 1807-2007: Ending the Slave Trade in the Transatlantic World”, looking at the impact of the formal abolition in 1807 of the slave trade in the Atlantic world. The conference was also designed to reconsider the voices of abolition and to explore the longer-term meaning and legacy of abolition in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For July the Centre for Romantic Studies at Bristol University is preparing “Emancipation, Liberation, Freedom”, linking the bicentenary to the significant resonances of those three concepts in the Romantic period. And also in July, in a very different context, the Centre for Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick hosts an interdisciplinary conference with the title “Free At Last? An Interdisciplinary Conference to Commemorate The Bicentennial

Anniversary of the End of the British Atlantic Slave Trade”, which will reflect on the struggles of enslaved peoples and abolitionists to end the British slave trade, as well as the impact of emancipation on Caribbean societies and the legacies of slavery in the postcolonial world. A complete list of academic events would be very much longer, but even a sample such as this demonstrates how the bicentenary commemorations resonate differently in their different contexts.

A number of journals such as *EnterText* or *Patterns of Prejudice* are producing special issues devoted to the 200th anniversary, and several books related to the issue of abolition and slavery have been published in this bicentenary year, in which a few bookshops have allotted special window and shop space to the display of volumes related to the commemoration. *EnterText* will publish two special issues, “Abolition’s Bicentenary: The Black Atlantic Then and Now” and “Human Rights, Human Wrongs: Slavery and Freedoms Today”. *Patterns of Prejudice* will publish *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery and Abolition*, an issue that explores the relationship between history, memory and transatlantic slavery, with articles covering historical and contemporary examples in all the geographical areas involved in the transatlantic trade. Among the volumes on slavery and abolition published in the bicentenary year we have James Walvin’s *A Short History of Slavery* and *The Trader, the Owner, the Slave: Parallel Lives in the Age of Slavery*, Richard S. Reddie’s *Abolition! The Struggle to Abolish Slavery in the British Colonies*, and Marika Sherwood’s *After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade since 1807*. Like the abolition commemorations, each one has a different resonance and import: one of Walvin’s volumes offers a very general survey of world slavery, while the other brings together the experiences of John Newton, Thomas Thistlewood and Olaudah Equiano, Reddie’s book focuses on the contributions of Africans themselves to their liberation and the ambivalent role played by the Christian churches, while Sherwood’s work concentrates on the continuation of British involvement in slavery and the slave trade after the formal

abolition of 1807, which she insists is an overlooked aspect in historical accounts:

British merchants, shipbuilders, insurers, bankers, manufacturers and many workers as well as investors profited from this trade and the use of slaves on plantations, farms and mines until the final abolition of slavery, in 1880 in Cuba and in 1888 in Brazil (3).

The slave trade that had begun during the reign of Elizabeth I when John Hawkins led the first slaving expedition in 1562 was formally abolished in 1807. The Abolition of the Slave Trade Act did not end slavery in the British Empire, nor did it mean the definite conclusion of British involvement in the slave trade, but the formal ending of legal transportation is indeed a historic landmark worth commemorating. Museums, libraries, universities and other cultural institutions mark the occasion with specific displays and events that try to

acknowledge the many possible accounts of a very complex story involving many lives and many efforts. The different events highlight varied aspects of this historic landmark and resonate in different ways as they try to avoid unqualified celebrations. The overall impression is that the commemorations will provide a sufficiently rounded picture of abolition and the British involvement in the slave trade, so that we can be satisfied that “the bicentenary does not privilege abolition at the expense of the horrors that occurred” (Thieme 3). As Behrman indicates,

the bicentenary could easily be seen as a chance for celebration and national redemption, a salve by which a traumatic episode can be safely confined to yesteryear. Thankfully many of the exhibitions commemorating the event have recognised it as an opportunity for continuing debate about an issue that is, unfortunately, very much alive (14).

Notes

1. “Almost everyone believed that Mansfield had indeed outlawed slavery in England, including many lower-court judges who subsequently ruled against more than a dozen masters trying to assert ownership over slaves on English soil” (Hochschild 50).
2. For an excellent account of the role of black loyalists in the American Revolution, see Simon Schama.
3. See Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2005. Against Carretta’s argumentation see Paul E. Lovejoy, “Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African”. *Slavery and Abolition* 27.3 (2006): 317-47.
4. The Royal Mint is producing a £2 coin featuring on the reverse a design of chains with one link broken and the edge inscription “Am I not a Man and a Brother?”, the anti-slavery motto of Josiah Wedgwood’s seal.

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