

# Britain Commemorates the 200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade

Dr. Christine Ayorinde  
Professor and Writer

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the Act passed by the British Parliament on March 25th, 1807, to abolish the slave trade. In a statement made in Parliament on November 27, 2006, Tony Blair, Prime Minister at the time, stated that the bicentenary 'offers us a chance not just to say how profoundly shameful the slave trade was - how we condemn its existence utterly and praise those who fought for its abolition - but also to express our deep sorrow that it ever happened and to rejoice at the different and better times we live in today'.<sup>1</sup>

Hundreds of events, including exhibitions, conferences, concerts and church services, are being held to commemorate those who suffered as a result of the slave trade and to recognize the efforts of those who struggled to abolish it. The main program runs until November 2007, with some events continuing into 2008. A new International Slavery Museum will open in Liverpool on August 23rd, 2007, the UNESCO International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition. Liverpool was the country's foremost slave trading port

in the 18th century. The museum lies beside a dry dock where slave trading ships were repaired. In Bristol nearly two thirds of the city's trade was formerly related to slavery. 'Breaking the Chains', an exhibition currently running at the city's British Empire and Commonwealth Museum commemorates abolition and is also a celebration of African culture. A permanent gallery called 'London, Sugar and Slavery' opens in November 2007 at the Museum in Docklands, East London. The exhibit, housed in a former sugar warehouse, will examine the city's involvement in transatlantic slavery and its legacy in the capital.

## *The odious trade*

The transatlantic slave trade began in the early 16th century when Europeans who settled in the Americas began to use enslaved Africans to work their mines and plantations. Over the next four hundred years many Africans were transported across the Atlantic. We will never know the exact figures but estimates range from over 12 million to 40 million.

British merchants quickly became involved in the trade and by the mid-18th century Britain had become the leading slaving nation. Overall, British ships made around 11,000 slaving voyages and around 95 per cent set off from the port cities of Liverpool, Bristol and London. The ships sailed to African ports where cargo was exchanged for slaves. On the infamous “middle passage”—the second leg of the triangular journey—Africans were packed into the holds of the ships on voyages lasting up to six weeks. At least ten per cent died from suffocation and from disease. In the Americas, the slaves would be sold and the ship loaded with sugar, rum, molasses and other goods for the return voyage to Britain. The huge profits from the triangular trade hugely increased the wealth of the nation and provided capital for the industrial revolution.

### *The abolition movement*

Enslaved Africans did not accept their terrible fate with resignation but found ways to resist. Uprisings and rebellions were a constant occurrence throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. In the British colonies frequent uprisings eventually made the islands ungovernable and were an important factor in the movement to abolish the slave trade and end slavery itself. In Britain the first protests against the slave trade were organized by the Quakers, or Society of Friends, a religious group. The campaign to end the trade gathered momentum in 1787 with the foundation of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The campaign included Africans, some of whom had first-hand experience of enslavement. The most prominent of these was Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), also known as Gustavus Vassa. Equiano was kidnapped and sold into slavery in West Africa at the age of eleven. He even-

tually bought his freedom. In Britain he became a respected figure and travelled round the country giving talks about his life and the horrors of the trade. His autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, published in 1789 became a best seller.

Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780) was born on a slave ship but was later brought to England and taken into domestic service. It was in the household of the Dukes of Montague that he was able to develop a taste for the arts. After retiring from service he set up a grocery shop in London which became a meeting point for abolitionists. Sancho became the first African writer to be published in England. His letters to the novelist Laurence Sterne and *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho*, an African, published two years after his death, were influential in bringing the issue of slavery to public attention.

British campaigners fought alongside African abolitionists to raise awareness of the inhumanity of the trade and to demand changes in the legal system. Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), a member of the Abolition Committee, gathered evidence in the slaving ports of Bristol and Liverpool. He commissioned a drawing of the slave ship *Brookes*. It illustrated how hundreds of Africans were chained on their backs in the suffocating holds with no room to stand, turn over or sit up. It became the most famous image of the abolitionist movement. William Wilberforce (1759-1833) was the parliamentary leader of the abolitionist campaign. He was elected an MP (Member of Parliament) in 1780. It was the evidence collected by Clarkson that persuaded him to make abolition of the immoral slavery system his life's work. He spoke out in parliament for abolition over many years.

The campaign had massive popular support. Thousands of ordinary working people sent petitions to Parliament and boycotted Caribbean sugar. Estimates suggest that sales dropped by up to a half.<sup>2</sup> The campaigners' efforts were rewarded when the Act for Abolition was passed in the House of Commons in 1807. The Act made it illegal for British ships to forcibly remove Africans from their homeland. Since 1662, British and British colonial ships had purchased some 3,415,000 Africans, of whom 2,964,800 had survived the "Middle Passage" to be sold into slavery in the Americas.<sup>3</sup> Now the major slave trading nation began to prevent others from continuing the trade. The Royal Navy's West Coast of Africa Squadron was set up to capture slave ships and arrest slavers of different nationalities.

However, the 1807 Act only abolished the transatlantic slave trade, not the institution of slavery. There were still hundreds of thousands of slaves in the British colonies. A new Anti-Slavery Society was formed and Wilberforce, Clarkson and others became involved in a new campaign. Many women also took part. Mary Prince, a former slave, was helped by the Society when she came to England in 1828. Her experiences were written down by Susanna Strickland, a Quaker. The *History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave made her the first black woman to publish an autobiography in England* and the book became an important part of the campaign. Prince was also the first woman to present an anti-slavery petition to Parliament.

Finally in 1833 the Emancipation Act was passed. This abolished slavery throughout the British Empire and, in 1838, nearly 800,000 enslaved Africans in the Caribbean were freed. However, their owners were given

compensation totalling £20 million (equal to £2.2 billion today). Eric Williams, the historian and first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago suggested in his book *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) that economic motives rather than philanthropic or humanitarian ones drove the British abolition of the slave trade, emancipation of the slaves in the British West Indies and the fight against trading in slaves by other nations. The profitability of slavery and the slave trade in the Caribbean colonies had declined after the American Revolution, causing their importance to Britain's economy wane.

### *The legacy*

Some Black British community activists regard the 2007 events as nothing more than a public relations exercise. There is concern that the celebrations focus too much on the role of one white man - William Wilberforce - and not enough on the black resistance movement. The seal designed for the original anti-slavery campaign in 1787 by Josiah Wedgwood shows an image of an African man kneeling in supplication under the slogan 'Am I not a man and a brother?'.<sup>4</sup> This image has reappeared in some of the publicity for the 2007 commemorations. It portrays Africans as passive victims rather than as actively engaged in challenging the system of slavery through rebellion, acts of resistance and as abolitionists.

It is also felt that Tony Blair should have gone a step further and apologized for this crime against humanity. This opinion is apparently shared by Lady Davson, a descendant of William Wilberforce. Blair apparently decided against an unreserved apology for fear that it would lead to claims for reparations from descendants of Africans sold into slavery.<sup>5</sup> Though such claims are often swift-

ly dismissed because it is argued that slavery was legal in its time.

The bicentenary has also led to comparisons with the situation of ethnic minorities in Britain today. Dr Lez Henry, a historian and director of Nubeyond Ltd in London, a black education, development and learning organization, observed that unless there is truth to counter the misinformation surrounding abolition and its resulting legacies, society will continue to be oblivious of how racial disadvantage and discrimination in the UK are consequences of that period in history.<sup>6</sup> There are fears that slavery and criminality are defined as the totality of the African contribution to Britain. In fact, earlier this year, the Prime Minister labelled violent crime as a problem 'specific' to the 'black community'.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the commemorative magazine produced by the British government notes that the bicentenary is an opportunity to link struggles for justice past and present.<sup>8</sup> The legacy of slavery continues in the form of poverty and inequality on the African continent, and in the Caribbean, with contemporary forms of slavery that include human trafficking and child labor. The government states its commitment to tackling these issues as well as the ongoing inequality, discrimination and racism experienced by people of African and Caribbean origin in the UK. These initiatives, if they extend beyond 2007 and produce real results, will be a fitting commemoration and continuation of the struggle of those original abolitionists, both black and white.

## Notes and Bibliography

- 1- David Smith, 'Blair: Britain's 'sorrow' for shame of slave trade', *The Observer*, Sunday November 26, 2006 <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/politics/story/0,,1957278,00.html>
- 2- Mike Kaye, 'The Tools of the Abolitionists', [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/abolition\\_tools\\_gallery\\_06.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/abolition_tools_gallery_06.shtml)
- 3- Ben MacIntyre, 'Blood and thunder', *The Times*, March 23, 2007. [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading\\_article/article1554783.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading_article/article1554783.ece)
- 4- Mike Kaye, 'The Tools of the Abolitionists', [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/abolition\\_tools\\_gallery\\_06.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/abolition_tools_gallery_06.shtml)
- 5- Patrick Wintour, 'Blair fights shy of full apology for slave trade', *The Guardian*, Monday November 27, 2006; <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/politicspast/story/0,,1957743,00.html> David Smith, 'Blair: Britain's 'sorrow' for shame of slave trade', *The Observer*, Sunday November 26, 2006. <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/politics/story/0,,1957278,00.html>
- 6- Abolition 200 event on March 25 to turn "Wilberfest" into education and healing agenda', <http://www.blackbritain.co.uk/news/details.aspx?i=2408&c=uk&h=Abolition+200+event+on+March+25+to+turn+%E2%80%98Wilberfest%E2%80%99+into+education+and+healing+agenda>
- 7- Patrick Wintour and Vikram Dodd, 'Blair blames spate of murders on black culture', *The Guardian*, Thursday April 12, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/frontpage/story/0,,2055148,00.htm>.
- 8- 'Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007', [www.direct.gov.uk/s-slavery](http://www.direct.gov.uk/s-slavery).