

[S]eeing the dominance of particular African . . . ethnicities in most American settings . . . is at variance with the central forces shaping the early modern Atlantic world.

PHILIP D. MORGAN

Eric Williams

Slavery, Industrialization, and Abolition

In his classic study *Capitalism and Slavery*, Eric Williams argues vigorously that the industrial revolution in Britain was closely linked to profits from the trade in African slavery. He includes in his calculations revenues from all parts of the "triangle trade" in the Atlantic—that is, from the trade of goods to Africa, from the Middle Passage, and from the sugar production in the Caribbean brought back to Europe. He further ties the British abolitionist effort to the rise of the new industrial class.

Britain was accumulating great wealth from the triangular trade. The increase of consumption goods called forth by that trade inevitably drew in its train the development of the productive power of the country. This industrial expansion required finance. What man in the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century was better able to afford the ready capital than a West Indian sugar planter or a Liverpool slave trader? . . . [A]bsentee planters purchased land in England, where they were able to use their wealth to finance the great developments associated with the Agricultural Revolution. . . . [T]he investment of profits from the triangular trade in British industry . . . supplied part of the

From *Capitalism and Slavery* by Eric Williams. Copyright © 1944 by the University of North Carolina Press, renewed (with a new introduction by Colin A. Palmer) 1994. Used by permission of the publisher.

huge outlay for the construction of the vast plants to meet the needs of the new productive process and the new markets. . . .

. . . The triangular trade made an enormous contribution to Britain's industrial development. The profits from this trade fertilized the entire productive system of the country. . . . But it must not be inferred that the triangular trade was solely and entirely responsible for the economic development. The growth of the internal market in England, the ploughing-in of the profits from industry to generate still further capital and achieve still greater expansion, played a large part. But this industrial development, stimulated by mercantilism, later outgrew mercantilism and destroyed it.

In 1783 the shape of things to come was clearly visible. The steam engine's potentialities were not an academic question. Sixty-six engines were in operation, two-thirds of these in mines and foundries. Improved methods of coal mining, combined with the influence of steam, resulted in a great expansion of the iron industry. Production increased four times between 1740 and 1788, the number of furnaces rose by one-half. The iron bridge and the iron railroad had appeared; the Carron Works had been founded; and Wilkinson was already famous as "the father of the iron trade." Cotton, the queen of the Industrial Revolution, responded readily to the new inventions, unhampered as it was by the traditions and guild restrictions which impeded its older rival, wool. Laissez faire became a practice in the new industry long before it penetrated the text books as orthodox economic theory. The spinning jenny, the water frame, the mule, revolutionized the industry, which, as a result, showed a continuous upward trend. Between 1700 and 1780 imports of raw cotton increased more than three times, exports of cotton goods fifteen times. The population of Manchester increased by nearly one-half between 1757 and 1773, the numbers engaged in the cotton industry quadrupled between 1750 and 1785. Not only heavy industry, cotton, too—the two industries that were to dominate the period 1783–1850—was gathering strength for the assault on the system of monopoly which had for so long been deemed essential to the existence and prosperity of both.

The entire economy of England was stimulated by this beneficent breath of increased production. The output of the Staffordshire potteries increased fivefold in value between 1725 and 1777. The tonnage of shipping leaving English ports more than doubled between 1700 and 1781.

English imports increased fourfold between 1715 and 1775, exports trebled between 1700 and 1771. English industry in 1783 was like Gulliver, tied down by the Lilliputian restrictions of mercantilism. . . .

In June, 1783, the Prime Minister, Lord North, complimented the Quaker opponents of the slave trade on their humanity, but regretted that its abolition was an impossibility, as the trade had become necessary to almost every nation in Europe. Slave traders and sugar planters rubbed their hands in glee. The West Indian colonies were still the darlings of the empire, the most precious jewels in the British diadem.

But the rumblings of the inevitable storm were audible for those who had ears to hear. The year of Yorktown was the year of Watt's second patent, that for the rotary motion, which converted the steam engine into a source of motive power and made industrial England, in Matthew Boulton's phrase, "steam-mill mad." Rodney's victory over the French, which saved the sugar colonies, coincided with Watt's utilization of the expansive power of steam to obtain the double stroke for his pistons. The peace treaty of 1783 was being signed while Henry Cort was working on his puddling process which revolutionized the iron industry. The stage was set for that gigantic development of British capitalism which upset the political structure of the country in 1832 and thereby made possible the attack on monopoly in general and West Indian monopoly in particular. . . .

The attack on the West Indians was more than an attack on slavery. It was an attack on monopoly. Their opponents were not only the humanitarians but the capitalists. The reason for the attack was not only that the West Indian economic system was vicious but that it was also so unprofitable that for this reason alone its destruction was inevitable. The agent for Jamaica complained in 1827 that "the cause of the colonies altogether, but more especially that part of it which touches upon property in slaves, is so unattractive to florid orators and so unpopular with the public, that we have and must have very little protection from Parliamentary speaking." Hibbert was only half right. If West Indian slavery was detestable, West Indian monopoly was unpopular, and the united odium of both was more than the colonies could bear.

The attack falls into three phases: the attack on the slave trade, the attack on slavery, the attack on the preferential sugar duties. The slave trade was abolished in 1807, slavery in 1833, the sugar preference in

1846. The three events are inseparable. The very vested interests which had been built up by the slave system now turned and destroyed that system. The humanitarians, in attacking the system in its weakest and most indefensible spot, spoke a language that the masses could understand. They could never have succeeded a hundred years before when every important capitalist interest was on the side of the colonial system. "It was an arduous hill to climb," sang Wordsworth in praise of Clarkson. The top would never have been reached but for the defection of the capitalists from the ranks of the slave-owners and slave traders. The West Indians, pampered and petted and spoiled for a century and a half, made the mistake of elevating into a law of nature what was actually only a law of mercantilism. They thought themselves indispensable and carried over to an age of anti-imperialism the lessons they had been taught in an age of commercial imperialism. When, to their surprise, the "invisible hand" of Adam Smith turned against them, they could turn only to the invisible hand of God. The rise and fall of mercantilism is the rise and fall of slavery. . . .

The strength of the British sugar islands before 1783 lay in the fact that as sugar producers they had few competitors. In so far as they could, they would permit none. They resisted the attempt to introduce the cultivation of sugar (and cotton) into Sierra Leone on the ground that it would be a precedent to "foreign nations, who have as yet no colonies anywhere," and might prove detrimental to those who possessed West Indian colonies; just as a century previously they had opposed the cultivation of indigo in Africa. Their chief competitors in the sugar trade were Brazil and the French islands, Cuba being hampered by the extreme exclusiveness of Spanish mercantilism. This situation was radically altered when Saint Domingue forged ahead in the years immediately following the secession of the mainland colonies. . . .

Whereas before, in the eighteenth century, every important vested interest in England was lined up on the side of monopoly and the colonial system; after 1783, one by one, every one of those interests came out against monopoly and the West Indian slave system. British exports to the world were in manufactured goods which could be paid for only in raw materials—the cotton of the United States, the cotton, coffee and sugar of Brazil, the sugar of Cuba, the sugar and cotton of India. The expansion of British exports depended on the capacity of Britain to absorb the raw material as payment. The British West Indian monopoly, prohibiting

the importation of non-British-plantation sugar for home consumption, stood in the way. Every important vested interest—the cotton manufacturers, the shipowners, the sugar refiners; every important industrial and commercial town—London, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Sheffield, the West Riding of Yorkshire, joined in the attack on West Indian slavery and West Indian monopoly. The abolitionists, significantly, concentrated their attack on the industrial centers.

The West Indian planters in the eighteenth century were both exporters of raw cotton and importers of cotton manufactures. In both respects, as we have seen, they had become increasingly negligible. The steam engine and the cotton gin changed Manchester's indifference into downright hostility. As early as 1788 Wilberforce exulted at the fact that a liberal subscription towards abolition had been raised at Manchester, "deeply interested in the African trade." Manchester was unrepresented in the House of Commons before 1832, so its parliamentary denunciation of the West Indian system comes only after that date. . . .

As early as 1788 an abolition society was started in Birmingham and a liberal subscription collected for the cause. In this society the ironmasters were prominent. Three of the Lloyd family, with their banking interests as well, were on the committee. The dominant figure, however, was Samuel Garbett. Garbett was an outstanding figure of the Industrial Revolution, more reminiscent of the twentieth than the eighteenth century. In his breadth of vision, the scope of his activities, the multiplicity of his interests, he reminds us of Samuel Touchet. Like Touchet a partner in the spinning enterprise of Wyatt and Paul, Garbett was an associate of Roebuck's in the Carron Works, a shareholder with Boulton and Watt in the Albion Mills and in the copper mines of Cornwall. "There were indeed," writes Ashton, "few sides of the industrial and commercial life of his day that he did not touch." In addition his energy was thrown into the politics of industry rather than into the details of administration. He became the ironmaster's spokesman to the government. This was a dangerous man indeed to have as an opponent, for Garbett, in the larger sense, was Birmingham.

At a meeting of many respectable inhabitants of Birmingham on January 28, 1788, Samuel Garbett presiding, it was decided to send a petition to Parliament. The petition stated, *inter alia*, that, "as inhabitants of a manufacturing town and neighbourhood your petitioners have the commercial interests of this kingdom very deeply at heart; but cannot

conceal their detestation of any commerce which always originates in violence, and too often terminates in cruelty." Gustavus Vasa, an African, visited Birmingham, and received a sympathetic welcome.

This was not to say that Birmingham was unanimous or single-minded on the issue of abolition. The manufacturers still interested in the slave trade held counter-meetings and sent counter-petitions to Parliament. But Samuel Garbett, the Lloyds and others of that caliber were, from the West Indian standpoint, on the wrong side of the fence. . . .

The capitalists had first encouraged West Indian slavery and then helped to destroy it. When British capitalism depended on the West Indies, they ignored slavery or defended it. When British capitalism found the West Indian monopoly a nuisance, they destroyed West Indian slavery as the first step in the destruction of West Indian monopoly. . . .

This study has deliberately subordinated the inhumanity of the slave system and the humanitarianism which destroyed that system. To disregard it completely, however, would be to commit a grave historical error and to ignore one of the greatest propaganda movements of all time. The humanitarians were the spearhead of the onslaught which destroyed the West Indian system and freed the Negro. But their importance has been seriously misunderstood and grossly exaggerated by men who have sacrificed scholarship to sentimentality and, like the scholastics of old, placed faith before reason and evidence. Professor Coupland, in an imaginary interview with Wilberforce, asks him: "What do you think, sir, is the primary significance of your work, the lesson of the abolition of the slave system?" The instant answer is: "It was God's work. It signifies the triumph of His will over human selfishness. It teaches that no obstacle of interest or prejudice is irremovable by faith and prayer."

This misunderstanding springs, in part, from a deliberate attempt by contemporaries to present a distorted view of the abolitionist movement. When the slave trade was abolished in 1807, the bill included a phrase to the effect that the trade was "contrary to the principles of justice, humanity and sound policy." Lord Hawkesbury objected; in his opinion the words "justice and humanity" reflected on the slave traders. He therefore moved an amendment excluding those words. In so doing he confined the necessity of abolition solely to expediency. The Lord Chancellor protested. The amendment would take away the only ground on which the other powers could be asked to co-operate in abolition. The Earl of

Lauderdale declared that the words omitted were the most essential in the bill. The omission would lend color to the suspicion in France that British abolition was dictated by the selfish motive that her colonies were well-stocked with Negroes. "How, in thus being supposed to make no sacrifice ourselves, could we call with any effect upon foreign powers to cooperate in the abolition?" The Lords voted for the original version.

The British humanitarians were a brilliant band. Clarkson personifies all the best in the humanitarianism of the age. One can appreciate even today his feelings when, in ruminating upon the subject of his prize-winning essay, he first awoke to the realization of the enormous injustice of slavery. Clarkson was an indefatigable worker, who conducted endless and dangerous researches into the conditions and consequences of the slave trade, a prolific pamphleteer whose history of the abolition movement is still a classic. His labors in the cause of justice to Africa were accomplished only at the cost of much personal discomfort, and imposed a severe strain on his scanty resources. In 1793 he wrote a letter to Josiah Wedgwood which contains some of the finest sentiments that motivated the humanitarians. He needed money and wished to sell two of his shares in the Sierra Leone Company, founded in 1791 to promote legitimate commerce with Africa. "But," he pointed out, "I should not chuse to permit anyone to become a purchaser, who would not be better pleased with the good resulting to Africa than from great commercial profits to himself; not that the latter may not be expected, but in case of a disappointment, I should wish his mind to be made easy by the assurance that he has been instrumental in introducing light and happiness into a country, where the mind was kept in darkness and the body nourished only for European chains." Too impetuous and enthusiastic for some of his colleagues, Clarkson was one of those friends of whom the Negro race has had unfortunately only too few.

Seymour Drescher

The Williams Thesis After Fifty Years

Historian Seymour Drescher testifies to the importance of Eric Williams in shaping the debates about the importance of the slave trade, but the University of Pittsburgh historian finds that five decades of research have undermined the specific arguments and facts the West Indian historian advanced in support of his thesis. Notable among these works was Drescher's 1977 study *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*.

Ten years ago I began an assessment of *Capitalism and Slavery* with my understanding of a classic: "If one criterion of a classic is its ability to reorient our most basic way of viewing an object or a concept, Eric Williams's study supremely passes that test." The passage of a fifth decade has provided abundant evidence of the pivotal status of *Capitalism and Slavery*. The original publisher reprinted the book in 1994 with a new Introduction by Colin A. Palmer. Hilary Beckles, Selwyn Carrington, William Darity and Thomas Holt, among others, have assessed Eric Williams's impact upon, and inspiration for, West Indian scholars. Most recently, Walter Minchinton has demonstrated the sustained discussion of the Williams/Drescher debate among historians of Caribbean slavery. During the past decade Barbara Solow edited the results of two international conferences inspired by Williams's scholarship. And, on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of *Capitalism and Slavery*, Joseph Inikori delivered his Elsa Goveia Memorial Lecture on "Slavery and the Rise of Capitalism." . . .

A . . . central hypothesis of *Capitalism and Slavery* was Williams's dramatic reevaluation of the role of the slave trade and slavery in the rise of British capitalism and especially in the British industrial revolution. Williams's assertion of extraordinary profits for the slave trade was one of

his first empirical affirmations to come under attack. The slave trade's primacy in funding British growth now has few defenders, even among those who argue for high profits.

A more interesting question concerns the role of the British slave system as a whole in British metropolitan economic growth. There has been a double shift of historiographical emphasis in regard to the link between slavery and the rise of capitalism. The first relates to the rapid development of comparative analysis, well illustrated in Barbara Solow's second edited volume, *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System* (1991). One of its important and conclusive findings seems to be that the further one proceeds outside the British orbit, the greater is the evidence against a generic linkage between New World slavery and the rise of European industrial capitalism.

Perhaps the most spectacular negative example is Portugal, which sponsored slaving, slavery and coerced labour systems for well over four centuries in areas as diverse as Asia, Europe, the Atlantic islands, Africa and Brazil. Whatever Portuguese slavery may have contributed to British industrial expansion, it did little for the Portuguese themselves. At the end of its long legal toleration of chattel slavery, Portugal, as Eric Hobsbawm noted, "was small, feeble, backward by any contemporary standard . . . and only the eye of faith could detect much in the way of economic development." Pieter Emmer, a Dutch historian of European expansion, has recently concluded that Dutch investment in overseas slavery may well have considerably retarded industrial development in the Netherlands.

Such a devaluation of the generative role of slavery only impacts on the Williams thesis insofar as one extends the model to the Northern European colonies, as he did in *From Columbus to Castro* (1970). Ironically, the greatest contribution of the slave trade to industrialization within a Continental European economy may have occurred only after, and because of, the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807. A recent study of Spanish economic development concludes that the slave trade to Cuba, accelerated by the cessation of British Caribbean imports, became crucial for the formation of industrial capital in Spain. The Spanish industrialists were to be among the last in a long line of economic interests hostile to closing down the Atlantic slave system. For Continental Europe as a whole, the slave empires would seem to justify Patrick O'Brien's judgement about the impact of the overseas world on metropolitan economic development—"the periphery was peripheral."

William does he fail to take into account

Nevertheless, one of those unforeseen shifts of historiographical focus points to a new and significant shift in the evaluation of slavery's role in capitalist development, one that encompasses the Atlantic world rather than Europe alone. In Barbara Solow's second collection, O'Brien and Engerman conclude that slavery accelerated the "Americanization" of British imperial trade in the eighteenth century: "the development of an Atlantic economy is impossible to imagine without slavery and the slave trade." In drawing attention to the centrality of slavery in the British imperial economy of the eighteenth century, Williams was surely a harbinger of what recently seems to have been ratified as a paradigmatic shift. The concept of "Atlanticization" differs from the argument in *Capitalism and Slavery*. Even as regards the British case, O'Brien and Engerman appear carefully to avoid saying that it is impossible to imagine European *industrialization* without slavery and the slave trade. They do not argue that slavery played a major role even in British industrialization. Engerman further elaborates his reservations in an article on the Atlantic economy in relation to those of Britain, America, Africa and elsewhere. He remains exceedingly skeptical about the specific timing and mechanisms of Williams's account of slavery's contribution to British industrialization. The "necessary magnitudes" strike him as too small to bear the causal weight Williams assigned to them, "considering Britain's lack of uniqueness in regard to its slave systems and its uniqueness in regard to industrial development."

Moreover, one must bear in mind another challenge to the traditional concept of British economic development. Economic historians have radically challenged the very notion of a British industrial "revolution" in the period that was crucial to Williams's thesis. Complaints by some historians of slavery that *Capitalism and Slavery* has been neglected or even suppressed by economic historians of British industrialization, overlook this tendency to view metropolitan growth as more drawn out than it has been portrayed in the conventional account. One historian of slavery has gone even further in this direction than the most radical of "gradualists" in British economic history. Joseph Inikori has recently suggested that Great Britain, far from emerging as the leading "capitalist" nation of the period 1780-1830, did not become either capitalist or industrial until well after the British had already completely abolished their slave system. For most historians of slavery, however, capitalism is still considered to have been characteristic of at least some Northern European societies (such as England and the Netherlands) as early as the seventeenth century.

The presumption is that the British didn't benefit from the "industrial revolution" until after they

Although Williams did not specifically frame his account of early modern slavery in terms of the whole Atlantic economy, his story of eighteenth-century slavery is consistent with some recent efforts to analyse the impact of Atlanticization on British economic growth and policy. In place of Williams's own emphasis on the overall profits of the slave trade and the British-protected tropical slave economy, for example, historians have turned their attention to the role of overseas slavery in stimulating British capitalist networks and institutional developments, in providing a major growth sector for British overseas exports, and in constituting a market for British goods in periods of major political and military threat—brought to a climax by Napoleon's Continental Blockade.

The broadening consensus on slavery's decisive role in the creation of the Atlantic economic system has therefore continued to stimulate the more unresolved debate over slavery's precise contribution to British industrialization. In the most recent summary of that debate, Robin Blackburn reaffirms the conclusion that Britain's surge ahead of its Continental rivals during the half century or so before Waterloo occurred when, and because, the economic contribution of the British slave sector to British growth was at its peak. Correspondingly, the ending of the slave trade decelerated the "resource increment" of that sector to metropolitan growth. To that extent, Williams's strategy of linking slavery to shifting patterns of British overseas capitalism remains fruitful.

However, this new and more rigorous assertion of slavery's effects on the rise of British capitalism has effectively undermined the central chronology of *Capitalism and Slavery's* second major economic thesis. Williams asserted that, following the American Revolution, the economic decline of [the] British Caribbean stimulated the destruction of British slavery by British industrial capitalists. Williams's thesis rested upon a dramatic reversal of the power between two major class actors: "old" planters and "new" capitalists. Williams's account therefore depended crucially upon the timing of British slavery's economic decline and the triumph of industrial free trade capitalism. This has produced a profound disjunction in the historiography of *Capitalism and Slavery*. Many of those who have recently argued in favour of a strong positive contribution of "rising slavery" to British economic development (*inter alia* O'Brien, Engerman, Solow, Crouzet, Inikori, Cuenca-Esteban and Blackburn) have explicitly or implicitly undermined Williams's "decline thesis." For all of these historians there was simply no late

eighteenth-century reversal of the economic role of the slave Americas. They have all demonstrated the continuity of slavery's contribution to British trade at least into the early nineteenth century. As Robin Blackburn succinctly concludes, "[T]he slave systems of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century New World had far outstripped those of the earlier mercantilist epoch. Although New World slavery now confronted mortal antagonists, it had yet to reach its apogee." The implications of their collective economic finding is unavoidable: If the slave colonies made a significant contribution to British economic growth in the generations before 1783 they were as or more significant in the generation after 1783, the "take-off" period in the conventional Industrial Revolution. Although still vigorously disputed by one historian, the New World foundations of the decline thesis in Williams's own terms has thus been undermined. . . .

Another important component of the Williams decline thesis has undergone a similar major challenge, the metropolitan side of his original equation. Williams's principal metropolitan actor in slavery's destruction was a grand coalition of British industrialists, East India investors and free traders, coalescing in the wake of the American and industrial revolutions. It is now widely noted that Britain's "swing" towards both free trade and India did not seriously begin until more than four decades after peace with America, and a generation after abolitionists had their initial victories in parliament. Moreover, the pioneering industrial bourgeoisie was divided over abolitionist policies from the outset. The cotton interest of Manchester, the site of Britain's first mass abolitionist mobilization, was less united against the slave trade than almost every other occupational group in that city. Economic interests, even when they had specific conflicts with those invested in slavery, usually had no desire whatever to undermine the foundations of what they considered as a legal form of property and trade.

The industrial bourgeoisie as a collectivity is, therefore, no longer allotted more than a peripheral and often a negative role in the crucial turn against the British slave trade. Cain and Hopkins's recent major overview of British imperialism emphasizes the continued policy preponderance of the gentlemanly capitalism of landowner mercantile interests in the formulation of early nineteenth-century imperial policy and the insignificance of an industrialist interest in abolition in particular: "[T]he important point is that it [abolition] was not promoted by a rising industrial bourgeoisie seeking to reach the goals of liberty and

19th-Century Church of Eng
Whigs - Noble Houses, moneyed interest,
religious dissent

free trade set for it by a later generations of Whig historians," among whom one may, in this regard, number Eric Williams.

In the absence of a capitalist economic bloc, some historians have invoked the emergence of an ideology rather than an interest. They posit a "mentality" of bourgeois industrial hostility to slavery in the late eighteenth century. The substitution of an intangible capitalist spirit or ideology for tangible capitalist interests, has actually tended to drive *Capitalism and Slavery* to the historiographic periphery. The outstanding recent example of this approach is *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation*, edited by Thomas Bender. . . .

If economic historians have slowly created a new framework for relating capitalism to slavery, social historians and social scientists have developed a corresponding challenge to Williams's assumptions about the transition to free labour. For Williams, as for most of his contemporaries, the story of abolition was primarily a history of elites. The major actors were "class" actors: slavers, planters, merchants, bankers, industrialists and politicians. The novelty of *Capitalism and Slavery* lay above all in the dominant causal role it accorded to what have come to be called "hegemonic" interests. In *Capitalism and Slavery*, slave resistance finally undermined the system, but only a generation after the metropolitan capitalists had turned against it. Slave resistance became historiographically significant only after a new generation of scholarship on culture, resistance and gender had transformed the social history of slavery. Thereafter, Williams's own bipolar model of slaves and capitalists was replaced by a complex mosaic of slaves as autonomous individual agents and social actors. Significantly, two Marxist-oriented historians who have stressed the key role of slaves in the ending of slavery turn to C.L.R. James's *Black Jacobins* for inspiration. Eugene Genovese and Robin Blackburn both view the Haitian (not the American or Industrial) Revolution as the turning point in the history of slavery. Thus, Blackburn's *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* (1988) judged Williams[s] capitalist-driven model to be "mechanical and unsatisfactory," while Genovese's *From Rebellion to Revolution* simply relegated *Capitalism and Slavery* to the "other works" section of his bibliographical essay. . . .

Finally, the abolitionists. In its designation of the abolitionists as but one more elite (a "brilliant band"), *Capitalism and Slavery* remained entirely conventional. Williams not only confirmed abolitionism as a top

A march of progress view with all events leading to, contributing to or at least to obstruct the eventual (inevitable) outcome
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down operation but sharply devalued its causal role. Even more belatedly than in the case of the slaves, the metropolitan masses have begun to find their place in the historiographies of both British slavery and of British metropolitan development. As recently as ten years ago, abolitionists had not been integrated into the history of the modern social movement. The abolitionist rank-and-file were decontextualized by "Whig" historiography into altruistic but passive respondents to an elite-led crusade. This perspective obtained whether those elites were portrayed, by the "imperial school," as altruistic agents of moral progress, or, by the anti-colonial school, as agents of capitalist industrialization.

Recently, and for the first time, the political power of popular anti-slavery is therefore being analysed as an independent variable, rather than subsumed as a chorus responding to elite propaganda. Even those who continue to focus on the role of elites in the implementation of British emancipation now sharply distinguish between popular and elite roles in the process. Most importantly, it is now widely recognized that popular abolitionism was a principal transformer of the changing attitude toward slavery from the 1780s.

The abolitionist breakthrough has, for the first time, become the object of separate analysis in historical monographs. The recognition of this popular dimension of anti-slavery is also changing scholarly views of the general relationship between religious and economic change in Britain. The most recent historian of popular Methodism concludes that

the abolition of slavery in the British colonies was neither an economic necessity whose time had come nor a disinterested political gesture from an established political elite, but was, to a considerable extent, a victory for new religious and political forces unleashed both by evangelical enthusiasm and by the structural changes in British society in the period of the Industrial Revolution.

Historians are recognizing the implications of fifty years' futile prospecting for a grand coalition of economically-based antislavery elites and their ideologies. Scholars now routinely investigate the cumulative impact of changing patterns of demography, migration, organization, culture and communication; of political agitation, shared beliefs and social interaction on both sides of, and across, the Atlantic.

Is there an emergent perspective on *Capitalism and Slavery* after half a century? The debates of the past decade seem to have vindicated

Williams's insistence upon, if not his precise formulations of, the significance of slavery in the formation of the modern world economy. The narrow grounds of his own arguments have been discarded or deepened in ways that neither his earliest enthusiasts nor detractors could have anticipated. Historians who once treated the overseas tropics as conceptually and empirically marginal to the long march of European development have grown used to treating the world beyond the line as a significant variable in their causal networks. This is as true for the new Marxist as for the New Economic History. Even those who systematically discount the paramountcy of New World "primitive accumulation" in the economic transformation of the industrial world regard the concept as within the pale of causal plausibility.

On the other hand, there is widespread recognition that, however suggestive it remains, *Capitalism and Slavery* is also a work of its time. David Brion Davis appropriately identified Williams's approach as a variant of the "economistic" school, dating back to the Enlightenment. He endorsed a materialist philosophy of history, and a view of history as a progression of stages of society. Less consciously Williams also shared, with his more "idealist" historiographical predecessors, a sense of British global expansion as a world-historical master narrative. The Industrial and the American revolutions were the twin turning points in that narrative. Those turning points were denoted by a series of transformations: in economic organization, from agriculture to industry; in political economy, from mercantilism to free trade; and, above all, in social relations, from slave to free labour. These metamorphoses were the conceptual building blocks of *Capitalism and Slavery*.

Each one of these pivotal benchmarks has been reassessed over the past half century. The very idea of history as a series of discreet stages of interlocking economic, social, political and ideological orders has been eroded. We are now more acutely aware that New World slavery was, economically, superbly equipped to cross the great divide between the "first" and "second" British empires, between mercantilism and laissez-faire, between commercial and industrial capitalism, between the windmill and the steam engine, between the horsecart and the railroad. Capitalism was supremely agnostic and pluralistic in its ability to coexist, and to thrive, with a whole range of labour systems right through the abolitionist century after 1780: with slavery; with indentured servitude; with sharecropping; with penal labour; with seasonal contract labour and with day labour; with penally constrained or unconstrained free labour.

In the longer run, we can see more clearly than Williams's generation that the "rise of free labour" during [the] conventional age of industrialization was, in some respects, a myth. . . .

As with every attempt to make sense of human experience *Capitalism and Slavery* will in some respects seem increasingly dated. Indeed, any effort to turn *Capitalism and Slavery* into a sacred text, and to measure orthodoxies, apostasies and heresies by it, remains a risk for the future. Eric Williams was, after all, the founding father of a nation, and the intellectual voice of a region as well as a historian. The literary and the mass media may well enshrine his most striking formulations long after they no longer command the assent of professional historians, who spend their analytic lives uncovering new data and revising theories. In this regard, the appeal of *Capitalism and Slavery* may be enhanced by what one historian has called "history-as-rhetoric" rather than history-as-scholarship. Those inclined to proffer *Capitalism and Slavery* as worthy of scholarly inspiration would do well to remind their readers that Williams's book became a classic because it challenged the heirs of a complacent historiography to take note of neglected dimensions of the story. Fifty years later Williams's message of the need to challenge is as worth repeating as his challenging message.

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall

An African Nation in Colonial Louisiana

In her prize-winning study of black culture in colonial Louisiana, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall argues that the Bambara people of West Africa retained a close national identity under both French and Spanish rule. This Rutgers University professor's evidence of Bambara cultural unity

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The resistance of the slaves unequivocally contributed . . . to the fact that the slave system was increasingly seen in Britain to be not only morally wrong and economically inefficient, but also politically unwise.

MICHAEL CRATON

Adrian Hastings

Abolitionists Black and White

The movement to end the slave trade began in Europe, not in Africa, but, as the following piece reminds us, Africans and African Americans played important roles in that movement. British historian Adrian Hastings explains the roles blacks played in the campaign that turned the British from being the Atlantic's biggest slave traders to being the slave trade's biggest opponents. Prominent among them was the former captive Olaudah Equiano, whose account of the Middle Passage appears in Part III.

On 19 March 1783 a young Christian Igbo in his late thirties called on Granville Sharp, the anti-slavery agitator, at his London home, to bring to his attention a report of how 130 Africans had been thrown into the sea off a slave-ship for the sake of the insurance money. The Igbo was Olaudah Equiano, and Sharp in consequence began another of his campaigns to bring the perpetrators to justice. He was not successful. It was the first recorded appearance of Equiano upon the public stage.

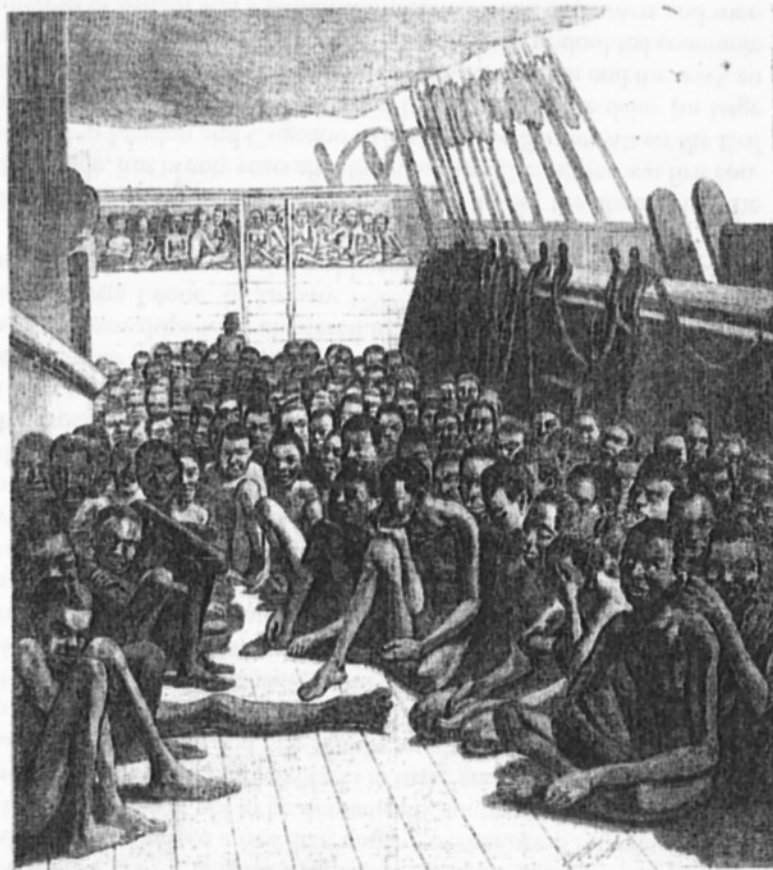
Captured by African traders from his home village at the age of 10 and sold to British traders, he was carried across the Atlantic, first to Barbados and then to Virginia. Here a British captain took a liking to the boy, bought him, and took him to England, renaming him Gustavus

From Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa: 1450-1950*, pp. 173-175, 179-180, 182-184. Copyright © 1994 by Adrian Hastings. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

Vassa. He received some education, sailed in many ships, and acquired a good deal of experience of both the West Indies and North America. He was baptized while still a boy in 1759 and later had an experience of conviction of salvation by faith in Christ alone while on a ship in Cadiz harbour in 1774. His pocket Bible, he could write, "was my only companion and comfort." In 1779 he had applied to the Bishop of London to be ordained and sent as a missionary to Africa, but this petition was not accepted. In the following years he emerged as a leader of London Africans, a considerable little community, and active in the struggle against slavery. It was as such that he approached Sharp in the spring of 1783.

One of Equiano's friends, Ottobah Cugoano, a Fanti with the English name of John Stuart, published in 1787 a book entitled *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evils of Slavery*. It included the fiercest of denunciations of "abominable, mean, beastly, cruel, bloody slavery carried on by the inhuman, barbarous Europeans against the poor unfortunate Black Africans," "an injury and robbery contrary to all law, civilization, reason, justice, equity and charity." Writing in a Protestant country, the author appropriately insisted that "Protestants, as they are called, are the most barbarous slave-holders, there are none can equal the Scottish floggers and negroe-drivers, and the barbarous Dutch cruelties." This book was rapidly translated into French and appeared in Paris the following year.

Equiano and Cugoano were at once the intellectuals and the campaigners within the new African diaspora. It is true that there is some evidence that Cugoano's book may be the product in part of hands other than his own. One of them, indeed, may have been Equiano's. Two years later Equiano published a further book of his own which, while still being very much a piece of anti-slavery literature, was more naturally enthralling in being first and foremost an account of his life and adventures, including a quite lengthy description of his African childhood. There is no reason to think that Equiano did not write it. He was clearly a man of remarkable intelligence, versatility, and forcefulness, and his mastery of English is shown by letters surviving in his own hand. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa*, as he entitled it, was indeed a very interesting book and it is not surprising that it went into eight British editions in his lifetime and ten posthumously. But Equiano's considerable contribution to the anti-slavery battle was not confined to his books and discreet interventions with Granville Sharp. He was a campaigner all over Britain, for some years, travelling almost incessantly to speak and sell his book in the principal



Crowded slave deck, 1860. From an actual photograph of the bark *Wildfire*, captured and brought into Key West, Florida. (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library/Art Resource, NY)

towns of the United Kingdom. Thus in 1791 he spent eight and a half months in Ireland, selling 1,900 copies of his narrative and being particularly well received in Belfast. The thought of this Igbo carrying on his campaign for the hearts and minds of the citizens of Birmingham, Manchester, and Sheffield in the late eighteenth century in favour (as he put it in a petition of 1788 addressed to the Queen) of "millions of my fellow African countrymen, who groan under the lash of tyranny" is as impressive as the book itself. Two points may especially be noted. The first is that it was not ineffective. Equiano died before Parliament

declared the trade illegal in 1807 but it only did so because opinion in the country against the trade had steadily hardened, and Equiano would appear to have been one of the abolition lobby's most persistent and convincing public speakers. It is odd that his name does not appear in most accounts of the movement. The second is that Equiano represented at its most articulate a new social reality: a black, Protestant, English-speaking world which had grown up in the course of the eighteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic in the wake of the slave trade. A dozen of its leaders, "Sons of Africa," including Equiano and Cugoana, addressed a special memorial of thanks to Granville Sharp in December 1787. They had all been given, and willingly employed, European names, but it is noticeable that both Equiano and Cugoana chose to stress their African names on the title-pages of their published works, and Cugoana remarked insistently that "Christianity does not require that we should be deprived of our own personal name or the name of our ancestors." They had no problem in using both. . . .

There were at this time far more African Protestants west of the Atlantic than east of it, but it was appropriate that Equiano and Cugoana, the most vocal among them, should be based in London. London, one may well say, was not only the capital of the empire in which most of them lived (including, until the 1780s, the North American colonies), it was just at this point becoming a sort of capital of Africa itself. . . . No European state possessed more forts along the African coast; no nation carried in its ships more African slaves across the Atlantic; nowhere else in the world was there such knowledge or such concern for Africa, a concern demonstrated by the formal establishment in 1787 of the Committee for the abolition of the slave trade. It was essentially a British, and a London-centred movement. . . .

From the late 1780s Protestant Christianity would impinge upon Africa in a new and far more dynamic way. Granville Sharp, the charming, determined, but slightly eccentric protagonist of African freedom in London, was persuaded that it would be a real step forward if some of the black people in London, many of whom were penniless and in trouble, could be resettled on the coast of Africa. The "Black Poor" of London could be transformed into a flourishing, free agricultural community, an example of the way things could be without the slave trade. There was, in Sharp's vision, to be no governor. They would rule themselves according to the ancient Anglo-Saxon principles of the Frankpledge, as understood in eighteenth-century England. The government agreed to ship them out, and a first settlement was made in this "Province of

Freedom" as Sharp liked to describe it, in 1787. The settlers were, for the most part, from among the dregs of London society with seventy white prostitutes thrown in, while the problems even a very well-managed enterprise was bound to encounter were huge. Unsurprisingly, it was not a success. Some of the settlers were quickly re-enslaved; some turned slavers; many died; quarrels with the local inhabitants mounted until in December 1789 a neighbouring ruler burnt the settlement down. Reinforcements, indeed a new start and a governor, were imperative if the whole exercise was not to be dramatically counter-productive: apparent proof of the inability of freed blacks to make good. A Sierra Leone Company was established and new settlers sought. At that point Sharp seems to have received a letter from Cugoana suggesting that there were plenty of suitable blacks in Canada, formerly British servicemen, who would like to go to Sierra Leone and might even pay their way: "They are consisting of Different Macanicks such as Carpenters, Smiths, Masons and farmers, this are the people that we have immediate use for in the Province of freedom." Cugoana had been visited by Thomas Peters, a millwright, formerly a slave in North Carolina, then a sergeant in the Guides and Pioneers, now settled in Nova Scotia. Sharp met Peters, the director of the Company accepted the plan, and the Treasury agreed to cover the expenses of shipping. Thomas Clarkson, a leading abolitionist and a director of the Company, had a younger brother John, a navy lieutenant, who was willing to superintend the operation and did so very well. Fifteen ships were chartered to carry 1,100 emigrants from Halifax to Sierra Leone. In January 1792 they sailed; six weeks later they arrived in Freetown and the real history of Sierra Leone began. . . .

In 1807, however, a far more important development took place, the passing by the British Parliament of the bill for the abolition of the slave-trade, just twenty years after the Abolition Committee was first constituted in London and Cugoana's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* had been published there. It was, despite the delay (in large part due to the counter-effect of the French Revolution and the war), an impressive achievement, going as it did against the undoubted economic interests of Britain and a powerful interested lobby of planters and merchants. It legally placed the interests of public morality above profit and market forces. It was in no way at the time a necessary achievement. It was managed by the combination of an efficient "moderate" leadership, at once religious and political, with a nation-wide public opinion produced by a great deal of campaigning. The sustained parliamentary

spokesmanship of the morally impeccable Tory Wilberforce, personal friend for so many years of the Prime Minister, was invaluable, though the true architects of abolition were Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson, not Wilberforce. A cause which in the early 1780s still seemed eccentric was rendered respectable by the underlying support of the two greatest parliamentarians of the age—Pitt and Fox—and by its coherence with the best in contemporary thought, philosophical and religious. It would certainly not have been carried through without very powerful religious convictions at work which, starting from the Quakers, took hold of an exceptionally able group of upper-class Anglican Evangelicals, but it was by no means an inevitable consequence of the Evangelical Movement, and indeed its movers, Sharp and Clarkson, were far from typical Evangelicals. In America Evangelicalism brought no comparable conclusion. In Holland and France religion remained little affected by such concerns. Only in England did things take this course at the start of the nineteenth century, and it seems hard to deny that it was due to the persevering commitment to the abolitionist cause of a quite small group of men whose separate abilities and positions were knitted together to form a lobby of exceptional effectiveness.

Its effects upon Sierra Leone were to be momentous. The Act of Parliament sanctioned the stationing off the West African coast of ships of the Royal Navy charged with the interception of slavers. It was agreed that the cargo should be landed at Freetown, thus giving the tiny colony a new *raison d'être*. It badly needed one. The Sierra Leone Company's original aim of establishing a thriving settlement on the shores of Africa which would demonstrate by the success of legitimate commerce the economic pointlessness of the trade in slaves had wholly failed. The Company had never made any profits and its resources were exhausted. The British government had needed to subsidize it increasingly heavily just to keep Sierra Leone going at all. The unanticipated circumstances of a long war with France had destroyed any chance of realizing the original commercial aim, but there was, and long remained, only one really profitable trade on the West African coast and that was the slave trade, though a worthwhile timber trade was beginning to develop at this time. Inhabitants of Freetown, black as well as white, often abandoned the town, whose economy was negligible, to set up elsewhere along the coast as profit-making slavers.

From 1 January 1808 Sierra Leone became a Crown Colony, the authority of the Company being taken over by Parliament. It had a mere

2,000 inhabitants, the survivors and offspring of various groups of settlers brought there from Britain, Canada, or the West Indies. Reformers and parliamentarians in England had thought little about the consequences of intercepting slave ships or what to do with their liberated cargo. They will not have imagined how many they soon would be. Certainly the blockade was far from fully effective; indeed the majority of slavers—in southern waters the vast majority—evaded capture, and the total number of slaves reaching the Americas in the first half of the nineteenth century was not so much less than the total number in the second half of the eighteenth. Not until the middle of the century was the trade effectively crippled, and only in 1864 was the last load of a captured ship landed in Freetown. Nevertheless, if many still got through, many were captured, and Sierra Leone was transformed as a result. By 1814 there were 10,000 “recaptives,” Liberated Africans, in the colony, more than three-fifths of the total population. With the ending of the Napoleonic War the trade increased and recaptives reaching Sierra Leone could number 3,000 a year. The original idea that they be apprenticed to existing citizens or enlisted in the army could never work with many of the people arriving, women above all, but the numbers were anyway far too great. Subsidized for years by the British government, most inevitably settled, officially or unofficially, in villages beyond the town.

Osei Bonsu and Eyo Honesty II

African Opponents of Abolition

British moves to end the slave trade were not immediately welcomed by those Africans who had profited from selling slaves. In 1820, Osei Bonsu, king of the powerful Asante empire behind the Gold Coast, expressed puzzlement to British representative Joseph Dupuis at why Britain had suddenly ceased purchasing slaves, and also justified a king's role in selling

From Joseph Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Asantee* (London, 1824), pp. 162–164; from Hope Masterton Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa* (London, 1863), p. 429.

slaves. Thirty years later, King Eyo Honesty II, the most powerful man in the trading communities known to Europeans as Old Calabar, voiced similar views to a Scottish missionary. Fully aware of the horrors of the strong preying on the weak, Eyo argued that the continuation of slavery was unavoidable.

A. Views of Osei Bonsu, 1820

“Now,” said the king, after a pause, “I have another palaver, and you must help me to talk it. A long time ago the great king [of England] liked plenty of trade, more than now; then many ships came, and they bought ivory, gold, and slaves; but now he will not let the ships come as before, and the people buy gold and ivory only. This is what I have in my head, so now tell me truly, like a friend, why does the king do so?” “His majesty's question,” I replied, “was connected with a great palaver, which my instructions did not authorise me to discuss. I had nothing to say regarding the slave trade.” “I know that too,” retorted the king; “because, if my master liked that trade, you would have told me so before. I only want to hear what you think as a friend: this is not like the other palavers.” I was confessedly at a loss for an argument that might pass as a satisfactory reason, and the sequel proved that my doubts were not groundless. The king did not deem it plausible, that this obnoxious traffic should have been abolished from motives of humanity alone; neither would he admit that it lessened the number either of domestic or foreign wars.

Taking up one of my observations, he remarked, “the white men who go to council with your master, and pray to the great God for him, do not understand my country, or they would not say the slave trade was bad. But if they think it bad now, why did they think it good before. Is not your law an old law, the same as the Crammo [Muslim] law? Do you not both serve the same God, only you have different fashions and customs? Crammos are strong people in fetische, and they say the law is good, because the great God made the book; so they buy slaves, and teach them good things, which they knew not before. This makes every body love the Crammos, and they go every where up and down, and the people give them food when they want it. Then these men come all the way from the great water [the river Niger], and from Manding, and Dagomba, and Killinga; they stop and trade for slaves, and then go

home. If the great king would like to restore this trade, it would be good for the white men and for me too, because Ashantee is a country for war, and the people are strong; so if you talk that palaver for me properly, in the white country, if you go there, I will give you plenty of gold, and I will make you richer than all the white men."

I urged the impossibility of the king's request, promising, however, to record his sentiments faithfully. "Well then," said the king,

you must put down in my master's book all I shall say, and then he will look to it, now he is my friend. And when he sees what is true, he will surely restore that trade. I cannot make war to catch slaves in the bush, like a thief. My ancestors never did so. But if I fight a king, and kill him when he is insolent, then certainly I must have his gold, and his slaves, and the people are mine too. Do not the white kings act like this? Because I hear the old men say, that before I conquered Fantee and killed the Braffoes and the kings, that white men came in great ships, and fought and killed many people; and then they took the gold and slaves to the white country: and sometimes they fought together. That is all the same as these black countries. The great God and the fetische made war for strong men every where, because then they can pay plenty of gold and proper sacrifice. When I fought Gaman, I did not make war for slaves, but because Dinkera (the king) sent me an arrogant message and killed my people, and refused to pay me gold as his father did. Then my fetische made me strong like my ancestors, and I killed Dinkera, and took his gold, and brought more than 20,000 slaves to Coomassy. Some of these people being bad men, I washed my stool in their blood for the fetische. But then some were good people, and these I sold or gave to my captains; many, moreover, died, because this country does not grow too much corn like Sarem, and what can I do? Unless I kill or sell them, they will grow strong and kill my people. Now you must tell my master that these slaves can work for him, and if he wants 10,000 he can have them. And if he wants fine handsome girls and women to give his captains, I can send him great numbers.

B. Views of Eyo Honesty II, 1850

The king maintained the utmost composure, paid respectful attention while we spoke, and then answered calmly in his own defence. He wished that he could do without slaves—it would be better for him; but, as the country stood, that was impossible. He did not employ men to steal slaves for him; nor would he knowingly buy those which were

stolen. He bought them in the market, at market price, without being able to know how they were procured; and would let no man steal them from him. He admitted that they were obtained in various objectionable ways, and even expatiated on the subject. They came from different countries, and were sold for different reasons—some as prisoners of war, some for debt, some for breaking their country's laws, and some by great men, who hated them. The king of a town sells whom he dislikes or fears; his wives and children are sold in turn by his successor. A man inveigles his brother's children to his house, and sells them. The brother says nothing, but watches his opportunity, and sells the children of the other. He admitted that they were kidnapped also; but said that they came from different far countries, of which he knew nothing, and in which they had no other trade. Calabar people did not steal, but only bought, slaves. He concluded by saying, that he had so many, that his new people, if he did not protect them with a strong hand, would be constantly sold away again by the old ones, and reported to him as dead.

Howard Temperley

The Idea of Progress

In the excerpt from *Capitalism and Slavery* in Part V, Eric Williams argued that major economic changes lay behind Britain's sudden turning against the slave trade, although he acknowledged the importance of abolitionists, black and white. Howard Temperley assesses the merits of Williams's thesis and the opposing humanitarian explanation of British abolitionism. The University of East Anglia (U.K.) historian suggests that neither thesis—nor any blending of them—is satisfactory. Instead, he argues, British and American abolitionists gained confidence that moral progress was possible from the sustained economic growth without slavery in their countries.

From Howard Temperley, "The Ideology of Antislavery," in *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, ed. David Eltis and James Walvin (1981), pp. 21–30. Reprinted by permission of the University of Wisconsin Press.