

# Why was the slave trade abolished?

◆ In 1750 only a few people in England thought that the slave trade was wrong. However, in 1807 it was possible for parliament to pass a law abolishing

the slave trade. How did this change happen? During the twentieth century historians have come up with several different explanations.

'We will abolish the slave trade because it is wicked.'

William Wilberforce



## Explanation No 1

*A few good men?*

In 1933 Reginald Coupland wrote a book called *The British Anti-Slavery Movement*.

This is the story that it tells: In 1787 a few men formed a society to campaign for the ending of the slave trade. They were all strongly affected by their religious views. They tried to persuade people that slavery was evil. Thomas Clarkson worked tirelessly to gather evidence about the cruelty of the trade. He interviewed 20,000 sailors.

William Wilberforce was a Member of Parliament. He made many speeches about the injustice of the trade. Attempts to abolish the trade failed many times, but Wilberforce and his friends carried on. These abolitionists believed that their work was of enormous importance. A friend of Wilberforce said: 'This measure, to which he has devoted his life, will spread happiness among millions now in existence, and his memory will be blessed by millions yet unborn.'

Many British historians, such as Coupland, have shared this admiration and this view of the abolitionists' importance.

'We're making too much sugar so we don't need the slave trade any more.'

White merchant about 1800



## Explanation No 2

*Economic changes?*

In 1944, a West Indian historian, Eric Williams, wrote a book called *Capitalism and Slavery*. He said that the campaign of the abolitionists was not the main reason for the ending of the slave trade. He argued that by 1807 the slave trade was no longer needed. The plantations of the West Indies were producing more sugar than could be sold. With too much sugar already being grown, there was no need to bring in more slaves. Also, new areas in the Caribbean were beginning to be used to grow sugar. If they were allowed to start using slaves they might put the old plantations out of business.

Williams therefore said that people like Clarkson and Wilberforce were not so important after all. The slave trade would have been abolished anyway.

'Our fight for freedom has ended the slave trade.'

Black woman in 1807



## Explanation No 3

*The slaves themselves?*

More recently, the earlier historians have been criticised for leaving out the most important people of all. This explanation is summed up in the title of a book by another West Indian historian, Richard Hart, who wrote *Slaves who Abolished Slavery* in 1980.

He says that earlier historians have studied people like Wilberforce and investigated the views of the plantation owners, but they have not tried to find out about the rôle of the slaves themselves. The slaves were frequently carrying out rebellions against their owners and these were increasing in the second half of the eighteenth century. These rebellions created such fear amongst the heavily outnumbered whites, and put such pressure on the plantation owners that many tried to sell up and go back to England. News of the rebellions also made some British people decide that slavery and the slave trade must be ended.