

The British Abolitionist Movement and print culture: James Phillips, activist, printer and bookseller

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The impetus for this paper came about through exploring material held in the Bishop Porteus Library held within Senate House Library. The collection is composed of approximately 4,000 volumes, including 300 volumes of pamphlets covering a wide range of subjects such as slavery, the French Revolution, travel and topography, and ecclesiastical affairs, including sermons, mostly published between 1750 and 1809. As Bishop of Chester and then London, Porteus was an early abolitionist voice and the first Anglican in a position of authority to seriously challenge the Church's position on slavery.

The printer James Phillips soon came to my attention, as printer of the highest number of abolitionist works printed or sold in London during the height of the slave trade controversy. The Quaker's official printer, James Phillips worked closely with the first association formed in Britain in 1783 to work for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade, and was a founding member of the London Abolition Committee in 1787. An active member of the Committee until his death in 1799, Phillips hosted meetings in his home above his business, acted as a key contact with individuals within the movement within the UK, and was the Committee's liaison with abolitionists in France. Phillips also played an important role as printer for the Committee of its own publications and an increasing number of other works sought out to promote the abolitionist cause.

This paper presents part of an ongoing project investigating the role of print culture in the British Abolitionist movement. The paper will focus on the role of James Phillips as both activist and as the publisher of the greatest number of tracts and publications in the period. Research for the project concentrates on Phillips as printer, publisher and bookseller and the output of his publishing and

printing work for the Abolitionist movement, within a framework of understanding print cultures of the period.

From the early seventeenth century literacy in Britain grew rapidly and in the eighteenth century the daily habits of a modern print-centered culture were well on their way to being established, above all in a rising urban middle class. Print became an important way of mediating culture and the periodical and newspaper press grew at a fast pace and the pamphlet also flourished. During the reign of George III public propaganda on a large scale became possible for the first time in English history. New magazines and newspapers were founded to meet the needs of the growing body of readers or to champion a special cause.¹

In the latter part of the eighteenth century we can see the emergence of what has been described as a “war of ideas” in print format between radicals and conservatives in the wake of the American and French revolutions. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth century debates about slavery, abolition and emancipation undoubtedly belonged to this climate of radicalism and reaction. Both proslavery and antislavery activists used print to produce a series of debates in which writers from both camps engaged in an ongoing dialogue about competing versions of morality, Christianity, and national character.²

Despite his, I would argue, key role in the abolitionist movement Phillips is not a familiar name in much of abolitionist historiography, and often restricted to a brief mention as printer of Clarkson’s essay.

James Phillips was born in Cornwall in 1745, the son of a Quaker engaged in the copper and iron trade. He was schooled at a Quaker school in Rochester, Kent, and then moved to London. In 1768 he was described as a freeman and woolman of London. His entry into the world of printing came

¹ Klingberg, 25-26

² Carey and Salih, 3; Swaminathan, 41

about seven years later, with the retirement of a relative Mary Hinde (nee Phillips) who had taken over her husband's stationers business in George Yard, part of which business included printing and selling books for the London Quakers. By 1783 Phillips was conducting both a national and international business as a bookseller publishing a good number of work by Quaker authors, including French translations, educational works, Bibles, dictionaries, account books and general stationery, as well as being part of an active network of Quaker businesspeople within London.³

The Society of Friends, or Quakers, had a longstanding opposition to slavery, starting with the writings of George Fox of Barbados in 1671, though until 1783 confined themselves to keeping their own members unpolluted. The impetus for taking more public action seems to have been in part at least as a result of correspondence and travel between the Society in England and in America. In particular the role of William Dillwyn was important as a link between American and British movements.⁴

While Quaker abolitionists were debarred from taking part directly in politics, they were sufficiently wealthy and well-connected to begin the task of making converts to antislavery within the ruling classes.⁵ In 1783 the Quakers presented Parliament with the first ever petition for the abolition of the slave trade. James Phillips (along with a number of his business friends) was one of 23 people appointed in June 1783 to a formal committee to consider the slave trade. Phillips was not a member of the informal group of six that formed a few weeks later (being George Harrison, Samuel Hoare, Joseph Woods, William Dillwyn, John Lloyd and Dr Thomas Knowles) to "consider what steps could by them be taken for the Relief and Liberation of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies, and the Discouragement of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa". He was however known to be a close associate of members of this group, probably established outside of official Quaker structures to

³ Jennings, 6-8; Mortimer, 106

⁴ Davis, 218

⁵ Blackburn, 137

avoid the need to submit and have material reviewed by representatives of the central Quaker organisation, and thus work with more freedom.⁶

Both official and unofficial groups used print. The unofficial committee began by circulating articles to London and provincial newspapers. The official committee decided a “short address to the publick on this important subject” was needed and William Dillwyn and John Lloyd prepared the 15 page pamphlet *The Case of our Fellow Creatures, the oppressed Africans, respectfully recommended to the serious Consideration of the Legislature of Great Britain by the people called Quakers*, of which Phillips initially printed 2,000 copies which were distributed to Members of Parliament, Cabinet leaders and members of the Royal family. The committee later ordered Phillips to print another 10,000 copies for wider distribution, largely via Quaker meetings across the country. For this committee Phillips also printed the Joseph Woods’ anonymous 32 page essay, *Thoughts on the Slavery of the Negroes*, producing 2,000 copies which were distributed to Friends and non-Friends including Granville Sharp, James Ramsay and Beilby Porteus, and then in 1785 reprinted Anthony Benezet’s *A Caution to Great Britain and her Colonies: in a short representation of the calamitous state of the enslaved Negroes in the British Dominions*.⁷

Moving beyond Quaker voices, the informal committee, having heard of Bishop Porteus’s sermon made to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, entitled “The civilization, improvement, and conversion of the Negroe-slaves in the British islands recommended”, sought permission to publish it, leading to a correspondence with Mr James Ramsay. Permission granted, the committee requested that Phillips print 1,000 copies of this sermon.

After publishing Bishop Porteus’s sermon the committee, through Phillips, published James Ramsay’s *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies*. The work had achieved publicity long before publication, with a preview given by Bishop Porteus in his above

⁶ Jennings, 24

⁷ Clarkson, vol 1, 122

mentioned sermon.⁸ Ramsay had spent eighteen years on the Caribbean island of St Christopher (St Kitts) as an Anglican minister and doctor, where he had set out to convert the slaves to Christianity, and had strongly criticised the planters for their cruel treatment of the slaves. Returning to Britain in 1781, he spent the following three years were spent writing the *Essay* which was published in the summer of 1784.

With the appearance of this book the British reading public were for the first time presented with an anti-slavery work by a mainstream Anglican writer who had personally witnessed slavery in the British Caribbean plantations. The book opened up controversy and drew a quick response from plantation owners. Ramsay was immediately embroiled in a pamphlet debate with various agents and supporters of the West-India Interest, including James Tobin, a planter from Nevis, who denounced Ramsay as a liar and worse. Ramsay contributed a further half-dozen publications to the campaign and various debates, all printed by Phillips. The bitter and acrimonious controversy attracted considerable interest in the British reading public and these various works were reported in and reviewed in the periodical press.⁹

Phillips also printed Thomas Clarkson's *An essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species, : particularly the African, translated from a Latin dissertation, which was honoured with the first prize in the University of Cambridge, for the year 1785.*

Clarkson had been looking for a publisher for this proposed work, and met a family friend, the Quaker Joseph Hancock, who reported to him that individuals in the Society were wishing to meet him, including James Phillips and William Dillwyn. "In a few minutes he took me to James Phillips, who was then the only one of them in town; by whose conversation I was so interested and encouraged, that without any further hesitation I offered him the publication of my work. This

⁸ Shyllon, 18

⁹ Shyllon, 66-69, 75

accidental introduction of me to James Phillips was, I found afterwards, a most happy circumstance for the promotion of the cause... as it led me to the knowledge of several of those, who became material coadjutors in it. It was also of great importance to me with respect to the work itself. For he possessed an acute penetration, a solid judgment, and a literary knowledge, which he proved by the many alterations and additions he proposed, and which I believe I uniformly adopted..."¹⁰

Phillips introduced Clarkson to William Dillwyn, and Clarkson there learnt of the work of Granville Sharp and the writings of Ramsay, both of whom Phillips arranged introductions to.¹¹ Phillips arranged a meeting between Clarkson and the informal London committee¹² who agreed to finance the printing of Clarkson's essay.¹³

On 22 May 1787, James Phillips became one of the twelve founding members of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, generally known as the London Abolition Committee, joining with the five surviving members of the informal Quaker committee, Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, Philip Sansom and three more Quakers, Joseph Hooper, John Barton and James Phillips' cousin, Richard Phillips. Two days later, at the Committee's second meeting, Phillips was directed to print 2,000 copies of Clarkson's *A Summary View of the Slave Trade*. The Committee also directed Phillips to draw up a circular letter "to be forwarded to the Country giving some Account of the Proceedings of the Committee" and to print 250 copies. Once a list of potential supporters was drawn up, Samuel Hoare, Joseph Woods and James Phillips were directed to revise this circular letter and distribute 5000 copies of Clarkson's *A Summary View*.¹⁴

In late 1787 and early 1788 Phillips prepared a second edition of Clarkson's *Essay* and another edition of Anthony Benezet's *Some Historical Account of Guinea*. More publications were needed in order to satisfy what was seen as a frequent demand for information on the subject and to help in

¹⁰ Clarkson, vol 1, 212-213

¹¹ Shyllon, 83

¹² Clarkson, vol 1, 214-216, 245

¹³ Jennings, 34

¹⁴ Jennings, 34-38

raising subscriptions for the Committee.¹⁵ This was a very large scale project in terms of the amount of money the committee spent in first 15 months of its existence (more than one thousand pounds) and quantities produced and distributed.¹⁶ By late 1787 “the knowledge... of the institution of the society had spread to such an extent, and the eagerness among individuals to see the publications of the committee had been so great, that the press was kept almost constantly going”.¹⁷ Alexander Falconbridge, a ships surgeon, interviewed by Clarkson, was prevailed upon to write an account of what he had seen during the four voyages he had made to the continent. 3,000 copies of *An account of the slave trade on the coast of Africa* were printed.¹⁸ The Reverend William Leigh of Little Plumstead, Norfolk, had published several letters in the public papers under the signature of Africanus. These were collected into publication. The committee ordered a new edition of 3000 of the Dean of Middleham’s *Letters*, approved a manuscript written by James Field Stanfield, a mariner, containing observations upon a voyage which he had lately made to the coast of Africa for slaves, and ordered 3000 of these to be printed, along with 3000 copies of Ramsay’s response to *The Scriptural Researches in the Licitness of the Slave-trade*.¹⁹ At the same time the Committee was translating selected essays into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and Danish, and Phillips was sending books across Europe and to America.

Phillips also printed poems, including the 1788 poem by William Cowper “The Negro’s Complaint”—printed on finest hot-pressed paper and folded up in a small and neat form, with printed title *A Subject for Conversation at the Tea Table* (note – copy at BL only one recorded on COPAC) and sent many thousands of copies into the country.²⁰ Early in 1789 Phillips began printing a (now famous) broadside developed by the Plymouth abolition committee showing a cross-section of a slave ship,²¹ “which was designed to give the spectator an idea of the sufferings of the Africans in the Middle

¹⁵ Jennings, 42

¹⁶ Craton, 104

¹⁷ Swaminathan, 459

¹⁸ Jennings, 46

¹⁹ Swaminathan, 459-499

²⁰ Clarkson, vol 2, 188-191

²¹ Jennings, 53

Passage, and this so familiarly, that he might instantly pronounce upon the miseries experienced there.”²²

The Committee relied heavily on the financial support of their fellow Quakers to fund independent printings, which were heavily distributed to and by that community. The Society of Friends had a communications network “unparalleled in the eighteenth century”, which was partly the cause and partly the result of the success of Quakers involved in enterprise and trade in a range of sectors. In contrast, while proslavery publication did increase significantly, it could not match the number and diversity of abolitionist publications, or the organised printing and distribution networks developed by the abolitionists. While the majority of their publications were printed by J. Debrett or John Stockdale these printers do not appear to have used their own funds for publication, and many authors funded their own publications, with resulting smaller print runs.²³

Phillips was not the only printer used by the Committee or its members. At times other printers were used for reasons of limits of capacity with the huge amount of publishing taking place²⁴, the desire at times for anonymity of publishing²⁵, and for some individual works by members, as the more radical views expressed were not necessarily shared by the Committee.²⁶ Phillips role was more than a mere printer, recognised by both Clarkson and Ramsay as an active editor and collaborator, providing feedback on the detail of proposed publications, as well as an active commissioner of authors.

²² Clarkson, vol 2, 111

²³ Swaminathan, 178, 192; Davis, 226

²⁴ In April 1791 Phillips reported he was unable to complete the printing of the Abstract of Evidence submitted to the House of Commons investigation in time, so another printer was employed (Swaminathan, 459)

²⁵ In May 1788 the committee ordered 10,000 copies of the discussion on petitions to Parliament not by Phillips, but by Woodfall “with no marks of origin... without stamps or any articles of Intelligence”

²⁶ George Harrison wrote a strongly worded but anonymous *Address to the Right Reverend the Prelates of England and Wales on the Subject of the Slave Trade*, not published by James Phillips and distributed by the Committee, but printed by J. Parson, Paternoster Row and Ridgway in York Street, a well known radical printer, and sold for three pence.

Phillips was an active member of the Committee and served as the London contact for Clarkson and other anti-slave trade writers, and provided contact with allies in France.²⁷

Alongside this print campaign other activities including petitions, lectures and public addresses and other activities took place. The change in public opinion could have been said to have been won by 1792, but actual legislative change was hindered by the change in the political climate with the Jacobin turn in the French Revolution and the related slave revolt in St. Dominigue.²⁸

In late August or early September 1793 James Phillips suffered a serious “fit of gout or palsy”, a “paralytic stroke” from which he never completely recovered. While he rejoined the Committee for a meeting on February 11th 1794, the work of the Committee was restricted by war and no recorded meetings of the London Abolition Committee took place between 1797 and 1803. Phillips remained active in London politics and business despite his poor health, assisted by his eldest son, William, but died in the summer of 1799, aged 55, with few assets except his inventory of books and stationery supplies. His publishing business and bookstore were taken over by William, who continued to print for the movement.

This conference paper is intended to provoke a wider and larger project looking at the British abolitionist movement and print culture. Such a project could further document the intertwined publishing roles of the London committees and James Phillips and expand to look at other publishers active in printing both abolition and anti-abolition works. A project will also look in more depth at the role of both the magazine and newspaper press in abolitionist print culture.

²⁷ Jennings, 56-57

²⁸ D’Anjou, 70

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