

Caleb Rotheram, Ecroyde Claxton and their Involvement in the Movement for the Abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

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Summary

A PART from studies relating to Whitehaven, the involvement of Cumbria and Cumbrians in the slave trade and abolition movements has been rather neglected.¹ This paper examines the part played, albeit in a minor capacity, by two Kendal men in the movement which paved the way for the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807 – Caleb Rotheram, a Presbyterian minister and Ecroyde Claxton, a surgeon. Sources are examined outlining the way in which Kendal and its environs were affected by local and national abolition sentiments, by its proximity to trading ports and by the benefits which the trade gave to its industries. Detailed evidence given by surgeon Claxton during the House of Commons Select Committee hearing is presented and reflects the horrific conditions he encountered on a voyage from Africa to Trinidad, evidence which fired public indignation and strengthened the hand of abolitionists.

On 23 January 1792, a public meeting of the ‘Gentlemen, Clergymen, Manufacturers and Inhabitants of Kendal’ was held in that town under the chairmanship of the Mayor, Richard Braithwaite, and it resulted in the following proposition:

On taking into Consideration the many grievous and oppressive circumstances which necessarily attend the continuance of the African Slave Trade, wherein no regulation can possibly be made to render just and equal that, which in its commencement and progress, is founded in a violation of the rights of mankind, and destructive to every tender and social tie: Resolved, That it is our duty to petition Parliament to put a stop to, and abolish so iniquitous and oppressive a traffic.

Although it is not clear whether the ‘inhabitants of Kendal’ were against the idea of slavery *per se*, it was certainly considered that ‘All parties in Kendal seem to have been agreed in their condemnation of the slave trade’, and further steps were initiated in an attempt to drum up support in Appleby, with Sir Michael Fleming, M.P. for Westmorland, being asked to present the petition in the House of Commons.² At Carlisle in February of that year the Revd Archdeacon Paley led an identical meeting and a similar petition was framed.³

This paper will examine the small but significant role played by two Kendal men in the movement which led to the abolition of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in 1807, the initial step which paved the way for the eventual abolition of slavery in all British Colonies in 1833. A number of influential Kendal families, for example the Croppers and the Crewdsons, would perhaps play a greater part in the final stages, but their activities lie outside the scope of this present paper. These earlier concerns had

nevertheless been raised and contributed towards the breaching of what Wordsworth described as ‘... an obstinate hill to climb’.⁴ It is to these beginnings that the paper is dedicated.

Liverpool, London and Bristol were the major British ports involved in the slave trade but for a time Lancaster and Whitehaven were substantial players. Indeed, Whitehaven was one of the early participants, dominated initially by two men, Thomas Lutwidge senior and Thomas Rumball. In 1711 Rumball commanded the *Swift* for its first slave voyage to Africa, nearly 25 years before Lancaster joined the trade, and a total of 69 slave voyages were operated by Whitehaven merchants between 1710 and 1769, when the trade from there was abandoned.⁵ Although Lancaster was at one time rated as the fourth slave-trading port in Britain, its share of the national market was never particularly large and by the time the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson visited the port in 1787 it had started a slow decline, due in part to the effects of the American War of Independence.⁶ Only a small number of minor traders remained and they tended to clear from the bigger, better equipped port of Liverpool, where larger ships and concentrated expertise created a competitive bias against Lancaster.

Manufacturers in Kendal and the surrounding areas benefited from the opportunities created by the trade – a Barbados merchant in Liverpool was exporting ‘Kendal cloths’ as early as the 1670s, and by 1770 over 4,000 pieces were sent through Liverpool, mainly to Virginia and Maryland. Worsted stockings were also exported as were ‘Guinea kettles’ manufactured by the Backbarrow Company, and gunpowder from the Wakefield family mills.⁷ Joseph Symson, a Kendal tradesman, records that ‘large quantities of cottons, linseys and other textiles were supplied to merchants in Liverpool and Whitehaven for the Chesapeake, West India, and Africa markets’. His son Robert, whilst serving an apprenticeship in Liverpool, visited the Caribbean to explore the trading possibilities for importing sugar, lemons and the Amerindian medicine snakeroot – ‘the ripples of the expanding Atlantic economy were strong enough to penetrate a small north-western community’.⁸

By the time of the 1792 petition the abolitionist movement had been in progress for many years, mainly spearheaded by the Quakers – in 1727 the London Meeting of the Society of Friends had passed a resolution condemning the slave trade and the owning of slaves – but was making little headway. In April 1787 a ‘Society for effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade’ was established by the Quakers, Granville Sharp, philanthropist and abolitionist, and other social reformers and evangelical Christian groups. The London Committee of this Society was the steering committee for the national body and one of the founder members was a Kendal born Quaker, George Harrison (1747-1827), who in 1777 had married the daughter of a wealthy Plymouth Quaker.⁹ In November that year an Abolitionist Committee formed in Manchester gathered 10,000 signatures for a petition to be presented to Parliament and details of that petition, together with advertisements calling for its example to be followed, were placed in leading national and provincial newspapers. As a result, local committees sprang up around the country, petitioning became a vital part of abolitionist politics, and ‘abolitionism suddenly moved to the centre of British political life and set the pattern for a novel type of social reform’.¹⁰

The 1792 meeting in Kendal was probably in response to the newspaper advertisements and the growing mood for change. Despite the trade benefits described above, Kendal was rather removed from the harsh reality of the trade, although negroes and slaves were not unknown in Westmorland. On 28 November 1753 at Kirkby Lonsdale, 'Samuel, son of a female negro slave called Powers, a native of Carolina in North America' was baptised.¹¹ On 1 January 1766 'Zorayda Anna, a Blackamoor Girl which Mr Dixon of Winton Hall had from Senegal. She is about 8-years-old' was baptised at Kirkby Stephen. On 7 October 1768 John Parkinson, surgeon of Burton in Kendal, claimed expenses of £7 12s. 0d. for treating 'Charles Gordon a Negroe man, a vagrant' who had broken his leg, and Mathew Hopkin, yeoman and overseer of Lupton claimed £6 2s. 2d. for maintaining him.¹² On 28 July 1772, barely two months after Lord Mansfield declared in a court judgement that all slaves who set foot on English territory would thereupon be free, 'Samuel Thomas, a negro of Massachusetts Bay, aged 17 years', was buried at Kendal, having died of smallpox.¹³ In none of these instances, apart from the case of the female 'slave' Powers, can we be certain of the exact status of the persons concerned when they first arrived in Britain, whether they were in a state of bondage or had been brought as servants or maintained in some way. As far as Powers is concerned no further information, other than the title 'slave', is given in the parish registers.

But there were local men who were making determined efforts to assist the cause of abolition. Two of these men were Revd Caleb Rotheram, the younger, from Kendal, and Ecroyde Claxton, a surgeon from Burton.

Rotheram was born at Kendal on 21 November 1732, the son of Revd Dr Caleb Rotheram (1694-1752), Presbyterian Minister of the Market Place Chapel in Kendal, and Mary, daughter of Thomas Strickland, one of the first trustees of the chapel.¹⁴ Young Caleb was baptised at the Kendal chapel on 6 December 1732 and his early education was at the Academy established there by his father. When his father died in 1752 he was sent to Daventry Academy, a 'leading centre of learning for liberal Independents and Presbyterians', under the care of Mr Caleb Ashworth,¹⁵ where one of his direct contemporaries and 'particular friends' was the scientist and religious reformer, Joseph Priestley, who later was critical of the deficiencies of the curriculum.¹⁶ Rotheram remained there until mid 1754 and, by the end of that year he was appointed as minister at Kendal, following in his late father's footsteps. On 24 September 1755 he married Dorothy, daughter of John Markett, of Meopham, Kent, gentleman, and on 26 August the following year he was ordained.¹⁷ In 1770 Dorothy died, without issue, and he remarried, on 27 May 1789 at Selside Chapel, Hannah, daughter of John Thomson a Kendal merchant, and trustee of the Market Place Chapel, who subsequently bore him four children and died in Liverpool in 1820.¹⁸

In 1791 the Unitarian Society was founded, reflecting the gradual doctrinal changes taking place whereby the liberal English Presbyterians, with whom the Market Place Chapel were associated, moved from an orthodox Trinitarian theology, through Arianism to Unitarianism: and Rotheram's name appears in the first list of members.¹⁹ Many of these men were strongly concerned with reform and were abolitionists. After 40 years of ministry he died on 30 January 1796 and is buried in the chapel yard at Kendal, where an inscribed stone remains in his memory.²⁰

It is probable that Rotheram was responsible for the 1792 anti-slavery resolution for, together with the Mayor and the Revd Mr Tatham of St George's Chapel, he was a member of the committee established to draw up the petition to Parliament. It is not known exactly when his interest in abolition was first aroused but his old school friend and fellow Unitarian, with whom he frequently corresponded, Joseph Priestley, was a strong advocate of the abolition of slavery. In 1788, Priestley had delivered a sermon on that subject in Birmingham based on the words of Acts xvii, 26, 'And hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth'.²¹ Rotheram was also a correspondent to the national 'Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade', which was set up on 22 May 1787, and in which William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson played the chief parts.²² Clarkson had travelled around the country drumming up support for the cause and recording evidence from all sources of information. In the course of seven years it is estimated that he travelled 35,000 miles and, although it is not known if he was ever at Kendal, he certainly was in Lancaster in 1787.²³ He dedicated his life to the abolition of slavery and so strenuous were his endeavours that they adversely affected his health. In 1794 Wilberforce and a number of his other friends raised the sum of £1,500 for him and with this money he was able, in 1796, to purchase land near Pooley Bridge, on the shores of Ullswater, and build a house, Eusemere, where he recuperated.²⁴ He was very friendly with the Wordsworths, as indeed was Wilberforce, who between 1781 and 1788 rented the house, Rayrigg, on the shores of Windermere.²⁵ In March 1807, the bard composed a sonnet in Clarkson's honour – *To Thomas Clarkson, on the Final Passing of the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. He sold 'Eusemere' in 1804 when he returned to the south of England to continue the fight for abolition.²⁶ It remains to be seen whether the presence of Clarkson or Wilberforce in Westmorland had any direct influence on local attitudes to abolition but certainly local activists such as Rotheram would have been well aware of their national impact.

Ecroyde Claxton adopted a rather more 'front line' approach to slavery. He was baptised on 14 December 1769 at the Market Place Chapel, the eldest son of Kendal surgeon and apothecary John Claxton and Martha (daughter of John Ecroyde, also a Kendal surgeon and apothecary, and Mary Rotheram, sister of Caleb Rotheram the younger).²⁷ In other words, his maternal grandmother was Caleb's sister.

Ecroyde established himself as a surgeon at Burton in Kendal. It is not known for certain with whom he served his apprenticeship for that profession but as his father and uncle were surgeons in Kendal it is safe to assume that it was with one of them. Certainly both were known to take apprentices.²⁸ On 26 November 1791 at Burton he married Margaret Dixon (or Dickson) and with her had four children: Mary, baptised at Burton on 16 June 1792; John, born 13 December 1793 but not baptised until 6 September 1801; John, baptised at Ambleside on 23 January 1794; and William baptised at Burton 29 February 1796.

Whether his contacts with Rotheram alone would have been sufficient to alert him to the abuses which were taking place in the slave trade is not clear: indeed, whether his motives for getting involved in the trade were altruistic is not known for certain, but he clearly determined to see the situation for himself.

In 1788 an *Act to Regulate the carrying of Slaves 1788* (known as Dolben Act) required all ships carrying slaves to have on board a qualified surgeon to look after the welfare of the slaves and maintain a mortality log up to their sale.²⁹ This provided lucrative employment and experience for many surgeons, some of whom may not have had too many scruples about the iniquities practised. Indeed, a number of surgeons themselves became captains of the slave ships,³⁰ and therefore medical evidence came to provide ammunition for both sides of the debate.

In 1788, as surgeon's mate, Ecroyde sailed under the command of Captain Forbes³¹ on board the *Garland*, a slave ship of 525 tons owned by Peter Baker and John Dawson of Liverpool,³² en route to Bonny³³ on the African coast. There he transferred, as surgeon, to a brigantine, *Young Hero*,³⁴ under the command of Captain Thomas Molyneux,³⁵ which was preparing for the Middle Passage, taking slaves from Africa to Trinidad in the West Indies.

On 4 February 1790, as a result of lobbying by the growing numbers of concerned bodies, following discussions with Prime Minister Pitt, and despite some opposition, William Wilberforce succeeded in putting through the House of Commons a motion to have evidence against the slave trade heard by a Select Committee. Three lists were drawn up: one was of witnesses to be examined by the Privy Council only, a second to be examined by the Privy Council and the House of Commons, and a third by the House of Commons only.³⁶ On 10 and 11 February 1791 Ecroyde gave evidence relating to his experiences to the Select Committee at the House of Commons and much of his testimony is harrowing.³⁷

The *Young Hero* carried a cargo of 250 slaves, of whom 132 died, mainly of the 'flux' [amoebic dysentery]. They were stowed in the vessel in such density that they were only able to lie on their sides – if they did otherwise it created disturbance and quarrels amongst them. 'It was impossible for me to go amongst the Slaves with my shoes on, as they were stowed so close that I should have been in danger of hurting some of them'. It was not possible to isolate the sick because there were too many of them and eventually a sail was laid out on the deck for some of them to lie on but it soon became covered in blood and mucus and the sailors who had to clean them became angry and beat them with their hands or with a whip. Some of them were so terrified that, instead of soiling the sail and deck they 'crept to the tub, and there sat straining upon it in such a manner, as from their debilitated state and violent straining, to produce a prolapsus ani, which it was entirely impossible to cure'. Some of them suffered from scurvy, others from oedema of the legs caused by the leg irons. They were made to exercise by dancing, encouraged by use of the whip, and were force fed. The Captain treated them with more tenderness than many of the other Captains Ecroyde had heard about, but the crew were less kind. The slaves were generally dejected and distressed by their captivity and many tried and indeed succeeded in throwing themselves overboard thinking that their spirits would return to their homeland. The Captain, in an effort to prevent this decided to cut off the heads off the first and all succeeding slaves who died, intimating that if they wished to return to their own country they would do so without their heads. He mustered the slaves on deck and ordered the ship's carpenter to decapitate the body with a hatchet. One of the slaves was so overcome with the idea that he broke free and managed, after a struggle to get overboard and into the sea. Attempts were made to retrieve him but he dived down and when he resurfaced he 'made signs which it is impossible for me to describe in words, expressive of the happiness he had in escaping from us. He went down again, and we saw him no more'. The Captain decided to abandon that particular initiative and although a strict watch was kept others later did manage to throw themselves overboard.

On occasions slaves were ordered to sing by the Captain but the songs were 'sad songs of lamentation', expressing fears of being beaten, of lack of food, and of never returning to their own country. He said that the slaves generally spoke one language but one of their number spoke a tongue unknown to the others. Such was his loneliness and dejection that it brought on a form of insanity and he died while they were at anchor in Trinidad.

The voyage lasted 15 weeks and although at first they had plenty of food, much of it they would not eat because it was unfamiliar. But eventually rations were restricted and, although they attempted to get supplies en route, if the voyage had lasted another week or ten days, they would have been obliged to throw some slaves overboard, or to have eaten those who died. He had spoken to another surgeon who had also experienced high mortality, mainly from smallpox and had lost more than half of his cargo of 360 slaves.

After a first session giving evidence Ecroyde was directed to withdraw but was recalled the following day and further questioned. He then stated that there were about 50 boys and girls amongst the cargo, most of them without any parents or other relations with them. He stated that on one occasion when they were on the coast of Africa the natives were somewhat apprehensive about coming on board to trade with them and he had heard that on one occasion Europeans were 'cut off' by the natives, although in general they were happy to barter with them. He finished his evidence by stating that some slaves were in an infectious state when they were sold in the West Indies and that there were some who would not recover. This testimony is in line with evidence heard from other witnesses to the various committees of the day and, indeed, some of the stories recount even greater brutality.

I have been unable to trace details of Ecroyde's further career – a number of slave-ship surgeons did go on to become slave-ship captains, but there is no evidence that he took that path. His involvement with Africa certainly continued in some form as it is recorded that he died on the Gaboon River, near the present day Libreville in Gabon³⁸ and, although the date is unknown, it must have been after 1796 when his youngest child was baptised. If his involvement extended beyond 1807, he may not have been involved in slave trading but he could have been concerned with other kinds of trading.

Through the efforts of Titans such as Wilberforce and Clarkson, slavery was eventually abolished but the contributions of the many lesser players, the Rotherams and Claxtons of the world, should also be applauded. A testimony of sorts can be found on the eastern edge of Windermere Parish Churchyard – a memorial to Rasselas Belfield, a native of Abyssinia, who died on 16 January 1822, aged 32 – 'A Slave by birth, I left my native land, And found my Freedom on Britannia's Strand. Blest Isle! Thou Glory of the Wise and Free! Thy Touch alone unbinds the Chains of Slavery'. Though Belfield was clearly not a victim of the trans-Atlantic slave trade himself, his memorial attests Britain's contribution to the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. The preoccupation of the British government with the problems in France and with war meant that it would take many years for slavery to be abolished in the British Colonies, but the early seeds eventually grew. Kendal's involvement in abolition continued after 1807 up to the 1833 Act, but that activity lies beyond the scope of this paper.

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Notes and References

- ¹ For an insight into the wider context of the British involvement in the Slave Trade, apart from the texts cited below, see James Walvin, *Black Ivory: History of British Slavery* (1992); *Slaves and Slavery: The British Colonial Experience* (1992); *Questioning Slavery* (1996); *Slavery and British Society 1776-1846* (1982), and following the recent bicentenary, in 2007, of the 'Abolition of the British Trade in enslaved people' see Walvin's, *The Trader, The Owner, The Slave: Parallel Lives in the Age of Slavery* (2007); and *A Short History of Slavery* (2007).
- ² Francis Nicholson and Ernest Axon, *The Older Nonconformity in Kendal* (Kendal, 1915), 359-360 citing *Cumberland Pacquet* 7 February 1792.
- ³ A. N. Rigg, *Cumbria, Slavery and the Textile Industrial Revolution* (1994), 153.
- ⁴ William Wordsworth, *To Thomas Clarkson, on the Final Passing of the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (March 1807).
- ⁵ For Whitehaven see David Richardson and M. M. Schofield, 'Whitehaven and the Eighteenth-century British Slave Trade', *CW2*, xcii, 183-204. See also Diane Rushworth, 'Tom Ellen: a Malayan in Cumberland and the Caribbean in the later 18th century', *CW3*, viii, 169-175.
- ⁶ Melinda Elder, *The Slave Trade and the Economic Development of Eighteenth-Century Lancaster* (Ryburn Publishing, 1992), 169, 189-193. See also M. M. Schofield, 'The Slave Trade from Lancashire and Cheshire Ports outside Liverpool, c.1750-c.1790', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 126 (1977).
- ⁷ Elder, *The Slave Trade*, 49; J. V. Beckett, *Coal and Tobacco: The Lowthers and the Economic Development of West Cumberland 1660-1760* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 143; Ian Tyler, *The Gunpowder Mills of Cumbria* (2002), 29.
- ⁸ S. D. Smith (ed.), *'An Exact and Industrious Tradesman' The Letter Book of Joseph Symson of Kendal 1711-1720* (Oxford, 2002), cxxix.
- ⁹ John R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade 1787-1807* (Manchester University Press, 1995), 41-42.
- ¹⁰ Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (Verso, 1996), 137-139.
- ¹¹ Edward Conder, 'The Kirkby Lonsdale Parish Registers 1538-1812', *CW2*, v, 236.
- ¹² CRO (K) WQ/SR/341/7-8.
- ¹³ CRO (K) WPR/38/8.
- ¹⁴ For a full history of Rotheram senior see *Oxford DNB* and *Older Nonconformity*, 292-333.
- ¹⁵ *DNB* for Caleb Ashworth.
- ¹⁶ *DNB* for Joseph Priestley and *Older Nonconformity*, 335.
- ¹⁷ *Older Nonconformity*, 334-338.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 364f.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 358. See Leonard Smith, *The Unitarians: A Short History* (2006) for a greater insight into the changes which took place. See also Francis Nicholson, 'Kendal (Unitarian) Chapel and its Registers', *CW2*, v, 179f.
- ²⁰ *Older Nonconformity*, 362f.
- ²¹ *A Sermon on the subject of the slave trade delivered to a Society of Protestant Dissenters at the New meeting in Birmingham and published at their request* (London, 1788). I am most grateful to Revd Dr L. Smith of Arnsdale for bringing this to my attention.
- ²² Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, vol. ii, (1808), 22.
- ²³ *DNB* entry for Clarkson and *Victoria County History Lancashire*, viii, 20n.
- ²⁴ Jane M. Ewbank, 'An American in Westmorland, 1828', *CW2*, lxii, 303. David Watson Rannie, *Wordsworth and his Circle* (London, 1907), 156-157; and *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, 2nd edn., revised by Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967), numerous references.
- ²⁵ Robert Isaac Wilberforce, Samuel Wilberforce and Caspar Morris, *The Life of William Wilberforce* (1839), 21.
- ²⁶ *DNB*.
- ²⁷ *Older Nonconformity*, 317.
- ²⁸ P. J. and R. V. Wallis, *Eighteenth Century Medics* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1988), 2, 118.
- ²⁹ Stephen D. Behrendt, 'The Captains in the British Slave Trade from 1785 to 1807', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, Vol. 140 (1991), 94, 98.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

- ³¹ William Forbes, baptised 5 March 1753, son of Edward Forbes a Liverpool merchant: held his first command at the age of 32 years; commanded five slave voyages and later became a slave merchant – Behrendt, ‘Captains in the British Slave Trade’, 112-3, 124. I am most grateful to Revd Dr L. Smith of Arnside for bringing this information to my notice.
- ³² Baker and Dawson had the largest firm in the slave trade from 1783 to 1792. They had a contract with the Spanish government to supply slaves to Spanish colonies from 1785 to 1788. When the Spanish market was opened to all merchants in 1788, they remained the leading British slave traders to the Carribean. Behrendt, ‘Captains in the British Slave Trade’, 104.
- ³³ One of the major slave-trading ports in West Africa, on the coast of Nigeria, at the eastern end of the Niger Delta, about 25 miles (40km.) south-east of Port Harcourt.
- ³⁴ A brigantine of 80 tons, two decks, two masts and a figurehead of a man, built and registered in Liverpool in 1786. It was owned by Peter Baker and John Dawson of Liverpool, usually disembarking slaves from Africa at Havana in Cuba and was seized and condemned in the West Indies in 1794 or 1795. Robert Craig and Rupert Jarvis, *Liverpool Registry of Merchant Ships* (Chetham Society, 1967), 69 and Suzanne Schwarz, *Slave Captain: The Career of James Irving in the Liverpool Slave Trade* (2nd edn. Liverpool, 2008), 179.
- ³⁵ Molyneux commanded six slave voyages and later became a slave merchant – Behrendt, ‘Captains in the British Slave Trade’, 112-113.
- ³⁶ Thomas Clarkson, *Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, 421-425.
- ³⁷ Parliamentary Papers. *Minutes of the Evidence taken before a Committee of the House of Commons being a Select Committee, Appointed to take the Examination of Witnesses respecting the African Slave Trade* (1791), 32-39.
- ³⁸ *Older Nonconformity*, 317.