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GLADSTONE AND SLAVERY

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ABSTRACT. *William Gladstone's views on slavery and the slave trade have received little attention from historians, although he spent much of his early years in parliament dealing with issues related to that subject. His stance on slavery echoed that of his father, who was one of the largest slave owners in the British West Indies, and on whom he was dependent for financial support. Gladstone opposed the slave trade but he wanted to improve the condition of the slaves before they were liberated. In 1833, he accepted emancipation because it was accompanied by a period of apprenticeship for the ex-slaves and by financial compensation for the planters. In the 1840s, his defence of the economic interests of the British planters was again evident in his opposition to the foreign slave trade and slave-grown sugar. By the 1850s, however, he believed that the best way to end the slave trade was by persuasion, rather than by force, and that conviction influenced his attitude to the American Civil War and to British colonial policy. As leader of the Liberal party, Gladstone, unlike many of his supporters, showed no enthusiasm for an anti-slavery crusade in Africa. His passionate commitment to liberty for oppressed peoples was seldom evident in his attitude to slavery.*

Now, if there was ever a question upon which I would desire to submit all that I have ever said to a candid enquirer, it is that of negro slavery.

Gladstone, speaking in 1837[1]

The 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire in 1807 refocused historical interest on that event and its principal protagonists, such as William Wilberforce. Less attention, however, has been paid to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833 and to the role that slavery, the slave trade, and related issues played in British politics during the Victorian era. Many leading politicians of the period, including Edward Stanley (later Lord Derby), Sir Robert Peel, Lord Palmerston, Lord John Russell, and John Bright, were closely involved, at various times, with the slavery question. That was also true of William Gladstone, whose father, John, was one of the largest slave owners in the West Indies. Gladstone's family connection with slavery caused him embarrassment in later life and he rarely referred to it in his autobiographical reminiscences. Nevertheless he recalled that he had devoted most of his parliamentary time and attention from 1833 until 1841 to colonial subjects,[2] most of which were

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[1] *Times*, 12 Aug. 1837, Gladstone's speech at Manchester, 9 Aug. 1837.

[2] Gladstone's memorandum, 'my earlier political opinions, (II), the extrication', 16 July 1893, *The prime ministers' papers: W. E. Gladstone I: autobiographica*, ed. John Brooke and Mary Sorensen (London, 1971), p. 41.

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connected, directly or indirectly, with slavery or the slave trade. That was evident from Gladstone's reading, committee activities, and public speaking. During his first two decades as an MP, he made more and longer speeches on slavery and related issues than on any other subject.[3] Moreover, his stance on slavery and the slave trade played an important role in his emergence as a front bench Tory politician and it also influenced his later attitude, as a leading Liberal, to both the American Civil War and British colonial expansion.

Gladstone's views on slavery and the slave trade have, however, received little scrutiny from biographers or historians. John Morley, his authorized biographer, noted that 'the statesman whose great ensign was to be human freedom was … born in a family where the palliation of slavery must have made a daily topic'.[4] Nevertheless Morley paid little attention to Gladstone's views on slavery and the slave trade after 1833. His example, in that respect, was followed by later biographers, including Colin Matthew, Richard Shannon and Roy Jenkins.[5] Other recent scholarly studies of Gladstone pay little or no attention to his views on slavery.[6] The excellent study of the Gladstone family by S. G. Checkland detailed John Gladstone's involvement with sugar plantations in the West Indies, but it ended with his death in 1851 and provided only a partial account of William Gladstone's involvement with the slavery issue.[7] Historians of slavery and emancipation in the British Empire have generally paid only passing and incidental attention to the Gladstone family's involvement with the issue.[8] Eric Williams, however, was critical of both John and William Gladstone in his controversial study of capitalism and slavery.[9]

I

The Gladstone family were latecomers to the business of slave ownership. John Gladstone was a Liverpool merchant, who first acted as an agent and manager for absentee plantation owners and then became chairman of the Liverpool West India Association. Like many others, he was tempted by the prospect of rich rewards from sugar production, particularly in Demerara, which became a

[3] *Gladstone's speeches, descriptive index and bibliography*, ed. A. Tilney Bassett (London, 1916), pp. 6–17.

[4] John Morley, *The life of William Ewart Gladstone* (3 vols., London, 1903), I, p. 24.

[5] H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809–1874* (Oxford, 1988); H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1875–1898* (Oxford, 1995); Richard Shannon, *Gladstone I 1809–1865* (London, 1982); Richard Shannon, *Gladstone: heroic minister, 1865–1898*, II (London, 2000); Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone* (London, 1996).

[6] *Gladstone*, ed. Peter J. Jagger (London, 1998); *Gladstone centenary essays*, ed. David Bebbington and Roger Swift (Liverpool, 2000); David Bebbington, *The mind of Gladstone: religion, Homer and politics* (Oxford, 2004).

[7] S. G. Checkland, *The Gladstones, a family biography, 1764–1851* (Cambridge, 1971).

[8] William Law Mathieson, *British slavery and its abolition, 1823–1838* (London, 1926); W. L. Burn, *Emancipation and apprenticeship in the British West Indies* (London, 1937); William A. Green, *British slave emancipation, the sugar colonies and the great experiment, 1830–1865* (Oxford, 1981); J. R. Ward, *British West India slavery: the process of amelioration* (Oxford, 1988); Hugh Thomas, *The slave trade: the history of the Atlantic slave trade, 1440–1870* (London, 1997); Andrew Porter, ed., *The Oxford history of the British Empire*, III: *The nineteenth century* ed. (Oxford, 1999).

[9] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and slavery* (London, 1964).

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British colony after its capture from the Dutch during the Napoleonic Wars. In 1812 – five years after the abolition of the slave trade – he bought his first plantation in Demerara followed by further large acquisitions in both Demerara and Jamaica. By 1833, John Gladstone had become one of the largest slave owners in the British West Indies. In that year, he valued his West Indian estates at £336,000, which constituted over half of his total assets.[10] His plantations were financially lucrative but they also attracted criticism from abolitionists in Britain.

In 1823, John Gladstone's 'Success' plantation was the centre of a slave insurrection, which was harshly repressed, and the death in prison of a white missionary, accused of inciting the slaves, prompted protests in Britain. John Gladstone defended his record in a debate in a Liverpool newspaper with a Quaker merchant, James Cropper. He did not personally visit his plantations, but pressed his agents in Demerara to improve conditions for his slaves. Like his current political hero, George Canning, John Gladstone wanted to treat slaves more humanely and to improve their religious and moral education.[11] In an 1830 pamphlet, he defended slavery but advocated gradual amelioration, with a view to emancipation when it was safe and not unjust to the planters.[12] His stance was fully supported by his eldest son, Thomas, who became a Tory MP in 1832, and by his second son, Robertson, who was in business with his father and an active member of the Liverpool West India Association.[13]

The influence of John Gladstone's commercial interests on the early political career of his fourth son, William, has been under-estimated by historians. Colin Matthew, for example, claimed that Gladstone's view of Conservatism left him 'curiously dissociated from his own mercantile origins'.[14] Yet for the first thirty and more years of his life, William was largely dependent on his father for both his income and political expenses. His father gave him a large annual allowance and also paid half of his election expenses at Newark. In addition, Gladstone received assets worth at least £120,000 from his father before or after his death in 1851.[15] Much of that wealth, particularly in the early 1830s, derived from his father's plantations.

William was aware of the controversy about slavery from an early age. While he was a thirteen-year-old, at Eton, he carefully read 'the whole of the paper war' between James Cropper and his father.[16] At Oxford, he took a close interest in the slavery question, which was attracting much national interest at the time. His classical studies familiarized him with a slave-owning civilization and he made

[10] Checkland, *Gladstones*, pp. 414–15, Appendix II: 'The Gladstone fortune'.
[11] Ibid., pp. 186–7.
[12] John Gladstone, *Facts relating to slavery in the West Indies and America, contained in a letter to Sir Robert Peel Bt.* (London, 1830).
[13] Checkland, *Gladstones*, p. 263.
[14] Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809–1874*, p. 46.
[15] Checkland, *Gladstones*, p. 416, Appendix II, 'The Gladstone fortune'.
[16] Ibid., p. 192, W. E. Gladstone to his mother, 5 December 1823.

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notes on slavery in ancient Athens.[17] More particularly, he was profoundly influenced by the *Politics* of Aristotle, in which it was claimed that men were, by nature, either freemen or slaves.[18] In October 1830 Gladstone had breakfast with Acland and 'spent a good deal of time in discussing a paper about slavery with him & told him my position'.[19] Six months later he had 'A long discussion of slavery etc with Cunningham & Gaskell till 1/2 past one in morning.'[20] In some notes on the history of slavery in England, he concluded 'that the maintenance and extension of the slave trade was pressed upon the colonies by this country and by the manufacturing and trading classes of this country, upon its government'.[21] When the Oxford Debating Society considered a motion in favour of the immediate emancipation of the slaves in the West Indies, Gladstone moved an amendment in favour of gradual manumission along with better protection for the personal and civil rights of the slaves and better provision for their Christian education. In his notes for the speech, he wrote that emancipation was 'not the immediate object which should be sought' and observed 'slavery not necessarily an evil'.[22] His speech made a lasting impression on his future cabinet colleague, Robert Lowe, who remembered that Gladstone had proposed 'a well-considered and carefully prepared scheme' of gradual emancipation.[23] His stance on slavery was essentially the same as his father's.

Gladstone turned his command of the slavery question to advantage when he stood for parliament in 1832. Many years later he recalled:

> When I came into Parliament the slave question was uppermost and I was thrust into connection with it whether I would or not, for my father was a prominent West India proprietor, and Sergeant Wilde [the Whig candidate] warrantably worked the question against me without stint during the three months of prolonged conflict at Newark.[24]

In his address to the Newark electors, Gladstone declared that he supported 'measures for the moral advancement and further legal protection of our fellow-subjects in slavery'.[25] That contradictory statement failed to satisfy the Anti-Slavery Society, so he composed a second address. He accepted that slavery should be abolished, but argued that physical emancipation should be preceded by moral emancipation through the adoption of a universal system of Christian

[17] Gladstone's 1830 notebook, London, British Library (BL), Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44812, fos. 11–27.

[18] Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. and translated John Warrington (London, 1959), pp. 9–14. Bebbington, *Mind of Gladstone*, p. 4.

[19] Entry for 21 Oct. 1830, *The Gladstone diaries*, ed. M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew (14 vols., Oxford, 1968–94), I, p. 326.

[20] Entry for 15 Mar. 1831, ibid., p. 369.

[21] Gladstone's notes on Burnet's *History of the Reformation*, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44793, fo. 140.

[22] Gladstone's notes for his speech on 2 June 1831, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44649, fos. 30–1.

[23] A. Patchett Martin, *Life and letters of the right honourable Robert Lowe, viscount Sherbrooke* (2 vols., London, 1893), I, pp. 16–17.

[24] *Gladstone*, ed. Brooke and Sorensen, I, p. 41.

[25] F. W. Hirst, 'Mr Gladstone as a Tory, 1832–1841', in Sir Wemyss Reid, ed., *The life of William Ewart Gladstone* (London, 1899), p. 159.

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education and the inculcation of 'honest and industrious habits'. Then 'with the utmost speed that prudence will permit, we shall arrive at that exceedingly desired consummation, the utter extinction of slavery'.[26] When a placard was put up in Newark, denouncing his father's 1830 tract on slavery, he read that work carefully before writing an answer to the allegations. Before his nomination, he 'sat up late reading my father's pamphlet … and certain notes of my own on Slavery'.[27]

In his final Address to the Newark electors, directed particularly to the Wesleyan Methodists and Dissenters, Gladstone denied that his family owed all they possessed to slavery. He then set out his own position in a strange, but prophetic, pronouncement by a twenty-three-year-old political novice: 'My principle is, let emancipation go hand in hand with fitness to enjoy freedom; and let fitness be promoted and accelerated by all possible means, which the Legislature can devise. Such has ever been, such is and such please God shall be my language.' Gladstone ended his Newark address by claiming – as his father had in 1830 – that factory children in England grew up 'in a state of almost as great ignorance and deadness of heart as the negroes of the West Indies' and that the material conditions of the Irish and some of the English poor were worse than those of the slaves.[28]

How did Gladstone's stance on slavery sit with his religious conscience? His parents brought him up as an Evangelical, but although his mother had reservations about the morality of slavery, his father claimed that God permitted slavery in the tropics because of the indolent character of the Negroes in those climes.[29] William, himself, in his 1832 address to the Newark electors, declared that there was nothing in scripture that stated slavery was 'absolutely and necessarily sinful'.[30] Richard Shannon has claimed that the conflict between the slave tradition of Liverpool and the abolitionism of the Evangelical movement created a tension in Gladstone that was evident for many years.[31] Yet he soon abandoned Evangelicalism for the High Church and in 1832 he wrote of his attitude to slavery: 'in my soul and conscience as I shall answer on the day of judgement I do not feel that I have any bias in that question'.[32] Looking back, sixty years later, he recalled that the Tory Evangelicals, with the great exception of Wilberforce, were not abolitionists – unlike the Nonconformists and especially the Quakers.[33] Certainly the chief critics of his father's record and views on

[26] Gladstone's address to the Newark electors, 8 Oct. 1832, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44722, fos. 63–4.

[27] Entries for 6 and 10 December 1832, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthew, I, pp. 590–1.

[28] Gladstone's Address to the electors of Newark, 6 December 1832, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44722, fos. 87–8; Gladstone, *Facts relating to slavery*, p. 26.

[29] Gladstone, *Facts relating to slavery*, p. 14.

[30] Gladstone's address to the Newark electors, 8 Oct. 1832, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44722, fos. 63–4.

[31] Shannon, *Gladstone: 1809–1865*, pp. 4–5.

[32] Entry for 31 July 1832, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, I, p. 565.

[33] Gladstone to the Reverend Fairlie, 15 Oct. 1893, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, XIII, p. 311.

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slavery were Quakers, such as James Cropper and Joseph Pease. The campaign to abolish slavery in the British Empire was led, not by Tory Evangelicals, but by radical Whigs, including Brougham, who stood for Liverpool, in 1812, against Canning, who was backed by John Gladstone. William Gladstone did not meet William Wilberforce until the summer of 1833 – shortly before his death. At Wilberforce's funeral, Gladstone had 'solemn thoughts particularly about the slaves', but by then he had already determined his stance on emancipation.[34]

At the start of the 1833 parliamentary session, Gladstone was initially opposed to the proposal, by the colonial secretary, Lord Stanley, to abolish slavery in the British Empire.[35] In February, he was present at a 'singular discussion' about slavery between his father and a Whig MP, William Tooke, who favoured immediate abolition. Gladstone was disgusted by Tooke's stance, which he attributed to ignorance, levity, and a preoccupation with the hustings. In his diary, he described slavery as 'this solemn and awful question, of which it is the lightest part, that it involves the properties of many thousand Englishmen for it also involves the heavy responsibilities of an entire nation, and the temporal and eternal interests of an extensive and oppressed population'.[36] That comment was rather disingenuous, for although Gladstone was genuinely concerned with the physical and religious welfare of the slaves, his main concern, as an MP, was to protect the financial interests of his father and other slave owners. During the 1833 parliamentary session, he attended numerous meetings of MPs connected with the West India interest. Prominent amongst them was Lord Sandon, who had won a by-election at Liverpool in 1830 with the help of John Gladstone. William wrote in his diary on 3 June 1833:

> W. I. meeting of members at one, at Lord Sandon's. Resolutions discussed and agreed upon … re-arranged my notes for debate. House 5–1. Spoke my first time for 50 min. My leading desire was to benefit the cause of those who are now so sorely beset. The House heard me very kindly and my friends were satisfied.[37]

In notes for his speech, Gladstone wondered whether emancipation would undermine sugar production, but observed that the welfare of the Negro was paramount.[38] At the start of his speech, he admitted that he had 'a deep, though indirect, pecuniary interest' in the issue of slavery, but claimed that he had 'a still deeper interest in it as a question of justice, of humanity and of religion'. Nevertheless, he spent much of his speech defending his father's record as a plantation owner in Demerara and declared: 'I would not free the slave without assurance of his disposition to industry.' That would not be assured, he feared, if emancipation at a fixed date would be guaranteed. He did acknowledge,

[34] Entry for 3 Aug. 1833, ibid., II, p. 52.
[35] Gladstone's speech at Manchester, *Times*, 12 Aug. 1837.
[36] Entry for 13 Feb. 1833, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, II, p. 10.
[37] Entry for 3 June 1833, ibid., p. 33.
[38] Gladstone's notes for his speech in the House of Commons, 3 June 1833, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44649, fos. 34–9.

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however, that there had been some cases of wanton cruelty inflicted on slaves, which provided 'a substantial reason' for abolition. While he accepted that parliament had the right to remove property rights, he thought that the planters should be compensated for the loss of their slaves. In conclusion, he acknowledged that he had dwelt on 'the dark side' of the issue, but he looked forward to 'a safe and gradual emancipation'.[39] His speech was well received on both sides of the House and impressed Peel, who personally complimented him. Sixty years later, however, Gladstone viewed the speech with dissatisfaction, observing that since 1833 'the advance of social opinion generally on that dreadful subject has been immense', although he also noted that he had not opposed abolition and had argued – 'I think justly' – for compensation for slave owners.[40]

For Gladstone's father and the West India planters generally the key issue was not emancipation, but compensation. They were prepared to accept abolition providing they were adequately compensated for the loss of their human capital. The low price of sugar in 1831, along with the slave revolt in Jamaica and the 1832 Reform Act, which undermined the West India interest in parliament, combined to persuade many plantation owners, especially those resident in Britain, that it was a good time to cash in their slaves.[41] Gladstone later claimed that 'we who had seats in this House and were connected with West India property, joined in the passing of that measure; we professed a belief that the state of slavery was an evil and a demoralising state; and a desire to be relieved from it'.[42] The willingness of the West India planters to accept abolition was conditional, however, on the receipt of substantial compensation for the loss of their slaves. They co-opted Gladstone on to a committee to consider the Bill to which he 'acceded very reluctantly'.[43] The Whig government, lobbied by John Gladstone and other West India proprietors, agreed to provide compensation of twenty million pounds, which was estimated to be about half of the total market value of all colonial slaves. That proposal satisfied William, his elder brother, and 'other gentlemen interested in British Guiana', provided that it was implemented quickly.[44] In a further sop to the planters, the government decided that adult ex-slaves should continue to serve their masters, as apprentices, for twelve years. When that term was much reduced, after pressure from the abolitionists, Gladstone 'thought it hard that the West-Indies body should be thrown overboard'.[45]

Sidney Checkland alleged that Gladstone would not have been so deferential to the views of his father and the West India interest in 1833 if he had been

[39] Gladstone's speech in the House of Commons, 3 June 1833, John Henry Barrow, *The mirror of parliament, 1833* (2 vols., London, 18833), II, pp. 2079–82.

[40] Gladstone, 'My earlier political opinions, (II), the extrication', Brooke and Sorensen, eds., *Gladstone*, p. 41.

[41] B. W. Higman, *Slave population and economy in Jamaica, 1807–1834* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 230–2.

[42] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 42 (1838), c. 224.

[43] Entry for 9 July 1833, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, II, p. 39.

[44] 'Meeting of gentlemen interested in British Guiana', 11 July 1833, Flintshire Record Office (FRO), Glynne – Gladstone Papers, 2878–9.

[45] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 19 (1833), c. 1241.

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more established in parliament.[46] That argument is, however, unconvincing for Gladstone continued to defend the West India interest for many years thereafter and his stance assisted his political rise. In January 1835, Gladstone became under-secretary at the Colonial Office in Peel's very brief first ministry. He told his father that Peel, in appointing him, had 'adverted to my connection with the West Indies as likely to give satisfaction for persons depending on those colonies'.[47] Later that year he was closely involved with his father's compensation claim.[48] He opposed the publication of a parliamentary return of compensation payments, which showed that his father received about £93,000 for around 2,000 slaves, with further payments to other family members.[49] In 1836 he told MPs that the compensation paid to the slave owners had not been excessive.[50]

Gladstone also vigorously defended the apprenticeship system from what he termed 'gross misrepresentations' by the Anti-Slavery Society, which had accused the planters of flogging or imprisoning black apprentices for absenteeism. He claimed that the evils of the system had been exaggerated and observed that it was misguided when 'reasoning on the condition of the negro population, to make abstract freedom the basis of their argument'.[51] In other words, he wanted MPs to focus attention on the material conditions of the apprentices and their families, rather than on their legal position as tied labourers. Gladstone became an active member of a parliamentary select committee set up, in 1836, to investigate complaints about the apprenticeship system in Jamaica. The committee's report criticized some aspects of the apprentices' treatment, but concluded that the system should not end before its full term.[52] In 1837, Gladstone was again a member of a select committee on Negro apprenticeship, but its proceedings ended when parliament was dissolved on the death of William IV.[53] The apprenticeship issue remained, however, a contentious issue in Queen Victoria's first parliament.

In March 1838, MPs considered Strickland's resolution to end the apprenticeships later that year. During the debate, Gladstone felt 'a most painful depression' because he thought that 'all who spoke damaged the question to the utmost possible degree', except J. P. Plumptre and Lord John Russell, who both opposed the resolution as an infringement of the terms of the 1833 slavery abolition Act. Gladstone recorded in his diary: 'Prayer earnest for the moment was wrung from me in my necessity: I hope it was not a blasphemous prayer, for

[46] Checkland, *Gladstones*, pp. 391, 277.

[47] William Gladstone to John Gladstone, 26 Jan. 1835, FRO, Glynne – Gladstone papers, 224.

[48] Entry for 16 Sept. 1835, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, II, p. 195.

[49] Checkland, *Gladstones*, pp. 320–1. For British slave owners and compensation see Nick Draper, '"Possessing slaves": ownership, compensation and metropolitan society in Britain at the time of emancipation, 1834–1840', *History Workshop Journal*, 64 (2007), pp. 74–102.

[50] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 32 (1836), c. 486.

[51] Ibid., cc. 486–8.

[52] Select Committee on Negro Apprenticeship in Colonies, Report, Minutes of Evidence, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1836 (560).

[53] Select Committee on Negro Apprenticeship in Colonies, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1837 (510).

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support in pleading the cause of injustice.'[54] His speech, however, revealed no sign of a bad conscience for while he condemned ill treatment of the apprentices, he vigorously defended the planters in general. He pointed out that the 1836 select committee on apprenticeships had not recommended the premature abolition of the scheme, even though only a small minority of the committee were connected with the West India interest. He then claimed that the willingness of apprentices on his father's Success plantation, in Demerara, to contribute to a relief fund for distressed Highlanders demonstrated their good feelings towards their Scottish managers. He also repeated his 1832 allegation that Negro plantation workers enjoyed better material conditions than factory children, handloom weavers, and Irish peasants in the United Kingdom. He advised abolitionists to concentrate their efforts on trying to suppress the slave trade and boycotting slave-produced goods such as American cotton. In a reference to the public campaign, led by the Quaker, Joseph Sturge, to end the apprenticeship system, Gladstone urged MPs to act 'not in subservience to blind impulses from without, originating no doubt in benevolent motives, but founded upon information most partial, inadequate and erroneous'.[55] His speech – the last in the debate – was instrumental in ensuring the defeat of the resolution by fifty-nine votes. On the following day he wrote in his diary: 'In the morning my father was greatly overcome and I could hardly speak to him. Now is the time to turn this attack into measures of benefit for the negroes.'[56] He wanted to go to the West Indies to investigate conditions on the family properties but his father vetoed the proposal. When the Standing Committee of the West India Planters and Merchants thanked Gladstone for his speech, he replied that all his arguments had conformed to 'the dictates of imperial justice'.[57]

In May 1838, MPs again debated a motion calling for the immediate abolition of the apprenticeship system. Lytton Bulwer 'blushed to think that the genius of one of our ablest Members' had cited the generosity of the apprentices towards the Scottish Highlanders 'as an argument for their continued degradation'.[58] The motion secured a narrow majority, which dismayed Gladstone, who thought that 'the only course of justice to all parties, especially to the negro, would be to rescind immediately'. He feared that when news of the division reached the West Indies, the Negroes would mistakenly assume that the apprenticeship system had been abolished. Together with his father, he tried to persuade Whig ministers of the 'fatal impolicy of such a course'. He told Sir George Grey, under-secretary at the Colonial Office, that if the motion was not reversed 'the law could only be maintained in the colonies by increased coercion and punishments'. That would undo the friendly relations between the planters and their workers and make the

[54] Entry for 30 Mar. 1838, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, II, p. 358.
[55] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 42 (1838), cc. 224–56.
[56] Entry for 31 Mar. 1838, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, II, p. 358.
[57] Burn, *Emancipation and apprenticeship*, p. 533 n. 2.
[58] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 43 (1838), cc. 114–16.

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continuance of the apprenticeship system both morally and politically impracticable. After pressure from the West Indian interest and Peel, the government agreed to retain the apprenticeship system until August 1840.[59]

In 1838, criticism of the mistreatment of apprentices in Jamaican prisons led the Whig government to demand reforms, which prompted the planter-dominated Jamaican assembly to refuse to carry out its functions. Melbourne's ministry then proposed to suspend the Jamaican constitution and impose direct rule by the Colonial Office. In the debate, Gladstone voiced his fear of black majority rule and advocated a gradual extension of the franchise to ensure that blacks and whites would merge into a single constituency.[60] Although he did not join in the cheering of the Tories when the government was nearly defeated on the issue, he had, once again, defended the interests of the planters.[61] Soon afterwards, he became a plantation owner himself when his father transferred his Demerara estates to his four sons. His gift elicited a characteristic response from William: 'This increased wealth so much beyond my needs, with its attendant responsibilities is burdensome.'[62] He was not involved in the management of the estates, which were subsequently sold, but he remained sympathetic to the planters. As late as 1856, he observed that if parliament had heeded the West India planters and their 'practical knowledge of the negro', it would never have emancipated the slaves.[63]

II

Although Gladstone steadfastly defended the economic interests of the West Indian planters, he was strongly opposed to the slave trade. In that respect, as well, he followed in the footsteps of his father. In 1806, John Gladstone had supported William Roscoe, the Whig-Radical candidate for Liverpool, who campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade.[64] In 1840, William attended the first anniversary meeting of the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade, which attracted support not only from abolitionists, but also from the lay and religious establishment. At the meeting, Prince Albert, as the Society's president, made his first public speech in Britain and letters of support were read out from the Anglican archbishops. Several Tories spoke at the meeting, including Peel, whose speech Gladstone described as 'excellent', and Lord Sandon, who supported a proposal for an expedition up the Niger River to stop slavery and develop trade with the interior of Africa.[65] The expedition was supported by a parliamentary grant, but the steamships that were sent up the Niger did not reach their objective. The

[59] Gladstone's memorandum, 24 May 1838, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44777, fos. 54–7.
[60] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 47 (1839), c. 932.
[61] Entry for 6 May 1839, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, II, p. 598.
[62] Entry for 30 Aug. 1839, ibid., II, pp. 623–4.
[63] W. E. Gladstone, *War in China, speech on 3 March 1856* (London, 1857), p. 12.
[64] Checkland, *Gladstones*, pp. 48–50.
[65] *Times*, 2 June 1840. Entry for 1 June 1840, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, III, p. 32.

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failure of that expedition subsequently led Gladstone to question the efficacy of direct intervention in Africa to suppress the slave trade.

Gladstone's hostility to the slave trade, and to the slave economy that it supported, was also apparent in his views on the taxation of sugar. During the 1840s he spoke at greater length on sugar duties than on any other subject, including repeal of the Corn Laws. His interest in the issue was political, personal, and moral. Sugar taxation was an issue that linked imperial and fiscal policy more closely than the taxation of corn and, as such, it aroused much political controversy. It was also a question of considerable financial importance to John Gladstone, who was largely involved with sugar production in both the West and East Indies. The profitability of those operations would be adversely affected by any reduction of the duty on foreign sugar.

Although William generally endorsed the principle of free trade, he regarded sugar as a partial exception – on humanitarian grounds. He argued that equalizing the duty on colonial and foreign sugar would promote the slave trade to countries where slavery was still legal, such as Brazil and Cuba. Therefore he proposed, as an alternative, an increase in the supply of free labour to the British colonies.[66] In both respects, he followed in his father's footsteps. In 1831, John Gladstone had warned Peel that early emancipation of the slaves in the British West Indies would directly encourage slavery in Cuba and Brazil because free Negroes would not work in the fields.[67] To overcome that problem, John Gladstone decided to ship indentured labourers from India to Guiana. The scheme was approved by a royal Order in Council in July 1837 and two contingents of 'Hill Coolies' arrived in Guiana in May 1838. There was, however, a high mortality rate among the Indian immigrants and the scheme was criticized in both Britain and Guiana. Consequently the Whig government cancelled the Order in Council and refused to renew it.[68] The Gladstone family was condemned in the press as 'the originators of the Hill Coolie emigration – a new and ill-disguised slave trade'.[69] Such criticism encouraged William to emphasize his own anti-slavery credentials.

In a long and impassioned speech, in May 1841, Gladstone supported Lord Sandon's parliamentary motion opposing the equalization of the colonial and foreign sugar duties. He claimed that equalizing the duties would abandon 'a great principle of humanity, that has received the most solemn sanction of the Legislature, the principle of hostility to the slave trade and to slavery'.[70] He described the slave trade as 'a monster', which consumed the lives of a thousand people each day and declared that the British people would not allow the sugar

[66] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 55 (1840), cc. 101–3.

[67] Sir John Gladstone to Robert Peel, 5 and 7 Apr. 1831, FRO, Glynne – Gladstone papers, 303.

[68] *The first crossing, being the diary of Theophilus Richmond, ship's surgeon aboard the Hesperus, 1837–1838*, ed. David Dabydeen, Jonathan Morley, Brinsley Samaroo, Amar Wahab, and Brigid Wells (Coventry, 2007), pp. ix–xxvii.

[69] Newspaper cutting from the *Sheffield Independent*, 15 May 1841, FRO, Gladstone – Glynne papers, 2891.

[70] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 58 (1841), cc. 161–2.

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duties issue to be decided merely by political or commercial considerations.[71] Sandon's motion united the abolitionists with the Tories and was carried against the Whig government. That led to a vote of no confidence in the government and subsequently to a general election, which was won by the Tories.

In Peel's new government, Gladstone became vice-president of the Board of Trade and he was soon involved in commercial negotiations with Brazil, where the rapid expansion of sugar and coffee production largely depended on slave labour. Gladstone took the view that if Brazil refused to take action against the slave trade and slavery that would constitute a moral and parliamentary justification for refusing to modify the sugar or coffee duties in her favour.[72] He told MPs that the sugar duties were an exception to ordinary commercial regulation for reasons connected with morality and humanity.[73] His father actively lobbied to preserve the duty on foreign sugar and they often discussed the matter together. In February 1843 William wrote: 'Conversation with Mr G on sugar (chiefly on his side)'.[74] His father continued forcibly to express his views on the sugar duties when Gladstone became president of the Board of Trade. In 1844, in a letter to the chancellor of the exchequer, published in *The Times*, John Gladstone opposed the proposal in the budget to halve the duty on foreign sugar that was not produced by slave labour.[75] His criticism embarrassed William, who supported the change on the grounds that it would secure 'the effectual exclusion of slave-grown sugar'.[76] Nevertheless, Sandon and a few other Tory MPs associated with the West India interest voted, with the Whigs, against the proposed change in the sugar duty and the government was defeated.[77] Peel thought that resignation was unavoidable, but Gladstone disagreed and the amendment was quickly reversed.

Despite Gladstone's opposition to slave-grown sugar, he came to doubt whether coercion was the best way of suppressing the slave trade. In 1842, he claimed that British naval patrols had reduced the transatlantic slave trade.[78] Two years later, however, he acknowledged that patrols along the West African coast had not stopped the slave trade with Brazil.[79] In 1849, as a member of a parliamentary select committee on the slave trade, he asked Palmerston whether the attempt to suppress the slave trade by force had enlisted 'all the national pride in Brazil on the side of the slave-trading party'.[80] The committee concluded that further attempts to suppress the trade by naval patrols were impracticable and

[71] Ibid., cc. 176–9.

[72] Gladstone's memorandum on negotiations with Brazil, Nov. 1841, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44729, fo. 222.

[73] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 63 (1842), c. 1193.

[74] Entry for 22 Feb. 1843, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, III, p. 261.

[75] John Gladstone to Henry Goulburn MP, 11 June 1844, *Times*, 14 June 1844, p. 7.

[76] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 75 (1844), cc. 958, 1138, 1143.

[77] Gladstone's memorandum, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44734. fo. 130.

[78] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 63 (1842), c. 1205.

[79] Ibid., 73 (1844), cc. 631–2.

[80] Select Committee on the Slave Trade, First Report, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1849 (308), Minutes of the Evidence, p. 14.

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recommended reliance on peaceful influences such as religion, education, and legitimate commerce.[81]

The chairman of the select committee on the slave trade was William Hutt, who introduced a parliamentary motion, in 1850, calling for an end to anti-slave trade patrols off the African coast. Gladstone prepared for the debate by reading official evidence and pamphlets on the trade.[82] In his speech, he denounced the slave trade as 'by far the foulest crime that taints the history of mankind in any Christian or pagan country'.[83] He admitted, however, that he had changed his mind on the naval patrols and he supported Hutt's motion. He claimed that Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton (a leading abolitionist) and the Anti-Slavery Society, along with most merchants and naval commanders, believed that the patrols were ineffective and should be scrapped. He acknowledged that the experiment had been worth trying but observed: 'it is not an ordinance of Providence that the government of one nation shall correct the morals of another'. Gladstone argued that since Britain could not force the Brazilians to give up the slave trade, it should try to persuade them to do so themselves.[84] Hutt's motion was supported by radical Liberals and some Tories, but was defeated by the Whig government. In 1853, in his first budget statement, as chancellor of the exchequer in Aberdeen's coalition ministry, Gladstone declared that the best method of suppressing the slave trade was by promoting legitimate trade as a substitute. He hoped that his repeal of the soap duty would encourage the growth of palm oil production along the rivers of Africa.[85] Thus he foresaw the development of the vegetable oil soap industry on which the fortunes of Lever Brothers were subsequently founded.

III

Gladstone's opposition to the use of force to suppress the slave trade influenced his attitude to the American Civil War. He showed an interest in American slavery and its connection with Britain from the start of his career. In the early 1830s, he made notes on slavery in the United States culled from Basil Hall's recently published *Travels in North America*.[86] At Newark, in 1832, he pointed out that four-fifths of the cotton goods bought by British consumers were produced by a system of slavery in the United States 'far more rigorous than our own'.[87] In 1838, he noted that the American slave labour system had been fuelled by British

[81] Select Committee on the Slave Trade, Second Report and Proceedings, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1849 (410), pp. xi–xxix.

[82] Entry for 19 Mar. 1850, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, IV, p. 194.

[83] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 109 (1850), cc. 1158.

[84] Ibid., cc. 1157–62, 1168–72.

[85] Ibid., 125 (1853), cc. 1404–5.

[86] BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44722, fo. 148.

[87] Gladstone's Address to the electors of Newark, 6 Dec. 1832, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44722, fos. 87–8.

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demand for cotton, which could have been obtained from free labour in India.[88] In 1852, he wrote of Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery bestseller, *Uncle Tom's cabin*, 'it is a *great* book, but scarcely denies exaggeration which under the circumstances would be a serious error'.[89] That qualification echoed his earlier scepticism about the truth of some abolitionist literature. Gladstone described Stowe as 'not without mark and character', when he met her at a reception in London hosted by Lady Stafford, who was a strong supporter of the American abolitionist movement.[90] Lady Stafford subsequently became the duchess of Sutherland and a close friend of Gladstone.

At the start of the American Civil War in 1861, Gladstone agreed with the duchess of Sutherland that 'the principle of the superiority of the white man and his right to hold the black in slavery' was 'detestable'. He questioned, however, the commitment of most Northerners to the anti-slavery cause and feared that the enforcement of the Union with the slave-holding South would poison freedom in the North.[91] His view had some validity for, during the first eighteen months of the war, President Lincoln insisted that the conflict was not about slavery but about preserving the Union. The Federal government, moreover, continued to enforce the Fugitive Slave law and to return runaway slaves. That enabled Gladstone to allege, in a speech at Newcastle in October 1862, that 'the slaves would be better off if the States were separated, as on the basis of the Union the laws against the slaves were enforced by the whole power of the Federal United Government'.

It was, however, Gladstone's claim, at Newcastle, that Jefferson Davis 'had made a nation of the South', which caused a 'great sensation'.[92] His comment shocked Bright, who accused him of inconsistency: 'he is for union and freedom in Italy, and for disunion and bondage in America. A handful of Italians in prison in Naples without formal trial shocked his soul … but he has no word of sympathy for the four million bondsmen of the South!'[93] Bright attributed Gladstone's stance to his background: 'He was born of a great slave-holding family & I suppose the taint is ineradicable.'[94] Gladstone, however, was not as unsympathetic to the slaves in the South as Bright alleged. In a memorandum for the cabinet, he observed that although the South would probably win the war, it was 'seriously tainted by its connection with slavery'. Consequently he wanted the British government and other European powers to use their influence with the Confederacy, while it was still effective, to promote 'the mitigation, or, if possible,

[88] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 42 (1838), c. 255.
[89] Entry for 15 Oct. 1852, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, IV, p. 461.
[90] Entry for 7 May 1853, ibid., p. 524.
[91] Gladstone to the duchess of Sutherland, 29 May 1861, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MS 44531, fo. 167.
[92] *Times*, 8 Oct. 1862, Gladstone's speech at Newcastle.
[93] Bright to Charles Sumner, 10 Oct. 1862, G. M. Trevelyan, *The life of John Bright* (London, 1913), p. 320.
[94] Keith Robbins, *John Bright* (London, 1979), p. 164.

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the removal of slavery'.[95] His preference for peaceful persuasion, rather than force, as a means of suppressing slavery, echoed his support for Hutt's parliamentary motion in 1850. Hutt was the MP for Gateshead and Gladstone's host when he visited Newcastle in 1862.

Early in 1863, Gladstone still took the view that 'negro emancipation cannot be effected in any sense favourable either to black or white by the bloody hand of war, especially civil war' and he opposed those in Britain who 'favour in the interests of the negro the prolongation of this awful conflict'.[96] The British public, however, welcomed Lincoln's emancipation proclamation and Gladstone told an American correspondent, later in 1863, that England would rejoice 'if it should please God that by the war slavery shall be extinguished'.[97] Yet in 1864, he 'spoke with astonishment of the eagerness of the 'negrophilists … to sacrifice three white lives in order to set free one black man, even after it was shown that there was no disposition among the negroes to rise to their own defence'.[98] His hostility to the 'negrophilists' reflected his long-standing distaste for the fanatical abolitionists. At the end of the Civil War, many liberal Britons supported the efforts of the National Freedman's Aid movement to assist the newly emancipated blacks in America. They included Gladstone's friend, the eighth duke of Argyll, but there is no direct evidence to support the contention that Gladstone gave the movement his blessing.[99] His post-bellum enthusiasm for the United States was prompted, not by the emancipation of the slaves, but by admiration for the vigour with which the North – and indeed the South – had fought the war.

The American Civil War had repercussions in the British West Indies. In 1865, there was a Negro uprising at Morant Bay, in Jamaica, which was harshly suppressed by the governor, E. J. Eyre. Gladstone deplored the 'Jamaican horrors', which he thought exceeded in 'atrocity and barbarity, the doings, in our time at least, of any civilised people within our knowledge'.[100] Yet although he supported Eyre's removal and the holding of a commission of enquiry, he did not publicly campaign on the issue in the way that he did on behalf of other oppressed peoples. Russell's Liberal government responded to the crisis by abolishing the Jamaican assembly and imposing direct rule from London. Gladstone did not dissent from that policy, despite having opposed it as a Tory in 1839. In 1873 he observed that racial problems in British colonies were particularly great where, as in Jamaica, the whites – 'the superior race' – were very small in number

[95] Gladstone's memorandum, 24 Oct. 1862, in *Gladstone and Palmerston, being the correspondence of Lord Palmerston with Mr Gladstone, 1851–1865*, ed. Philip Guedalla (London, 1928), pp. 245–7.

[96] Gladstone to Newman Hall, 2 Feb. 1863, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44533, fo. 87.

[97] Gladstone to Sumner, 5 Nov. 1863, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 44533, fo. 187.

[98] Entry for 23 June 1864, *Disraeli, Derby and the Conservative party: the political journals of Lord Stanley 1849–1869*, ed. John Vincent (Hassocks, 1978), p. 219.

[99] Cf. Christine Bolt, *The anti-slavery movement and reconstruction, a study in Anglo-American co-operation, 1837–1877* (London, 1969), p. 70.

[100] Entry for 1 Dec. 1865, *Gladstone diaries*, ed. Foot and Matthews, VI, p. 400. Gladstone to Argyll, 1 Dec. 1865, BL, Gladstone papers, Add. MSS 544535, fo. 155.

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compared to the Negroes – 'the less developed race'.[101] His opinion of black people was influenced by racial stereotypes because he had hardly any personal contact with them. He did, however, once meet a 'negro gentleman', whom he considered not only agreeable and accomplished, but also refined.[102]

The problems of the British West Indies led Gladstone, in 1878, to compare them unfavourably with the former slave States of the United States:

> We emancipated a million of negroes by peaceful legislation; America liberated four or five millions by a bloody civil war: yet the industry and exports of the Southern States are maintained, while those of our negro colonies have dwindled: the South enjoys all its franchises, but we have, proh pudor! Found no better method of providing for peace and order in Jamaica … than by the hard and vulgar, even where needful, expedient of abolishing entirely its representative institutions.[103]

Gladstone's view of the political situation in the South during the Reconstruction era was far too rosy, but his economic assessment was pretty valid. Yet the comparison that he drew between the United States and the West Indies did not lead him to conclude that force should be used to eradicate slavery.

Gladstone remained reluctant to use force to suppress slavery and the slave trade when he was prime minister. In 1869, his first Liberal ministry repealed the so-called Aberdeen Act of 1845, which had tried to enforce a convention with Brazil to suppress the trade. The Act was repealed despite Brazil's failure to sign a new anti-slave trade treaty acceptable to Britain.[104] In the early 1870s, the anti-slavery movement in Britain revived when Bartle Frere, a member of the Indian Council, led a campaign to stamp out the slave trade on the coast of East Africa. Frere and the Anti-Slavery Society wanted Britain to renounce its treaty with the sultan of Zanzibar, which permitted a limited slave trade within his dominions. Gladstone hoped that concerted action by interested western powers would persuade the sultan to suppress the slave trade, but that was not forthcoming. In 1872 the cabinet, bowing to pressure from the press and abolitionists, agreed to send Frere on a special mission to Zanzibar to negotiate with the sultan an end to the trade.[105] Gladstone, however, was uneasy about the vague and wide-ranging powers granted to Frere and he also objected to the proposed ban on the transport of slaves from one part of the Sultan's dominions to another.[106] He wanted to focus on suppressing the international slave trade, rather than on slavery as an institution. He wrote to the foreign secretary, Lord Granville:

> I do not want to foreswear, but on the contrary to leave open, the question of the use of force, in any manner or degree which may be necessary for the suppression of the

[101] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 216 (1873), c. 951.

[102] The Hon. Lionel A. Tollemache, *Talks with Mr Gladstone* (London, 1903), p. 24.

[103] William Gladstone, 'Kin beyond the sea', in *Gleanings of Past Years* (7 vols., London, 1879), I, p. 214.

[104] Leslie Bethell, *The abolition of the Brazilian slave trade, Britain and the slave trade question, 1807–1869* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 387.

[105] R. J. Gavin, 'The Bartle Frere mission to Zanzibar', *Historical Journal*, 5 (1962), pp. 136–41.

[106] Gladstone to Lord Granville, 1 Nov. 1872, in *The political correspondence of Mr Gladstone and Lord Granville, 1868–1876*, ed. Agatha Ramm, Camden third series, 80–1 (2 vols., London, 1952), II, pp. 357–8.

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sea-going slave trade. Only I do not wish, except under an absolute and clear necessity for the main purpose, to take measures with respect to domestic slavery which in the case of a stronger power or one owned in the family of civilised nations we should not be prepared to take.[107]

When Frere arrived at Zanzibar, he unilaterally ordered naval action against the slave trade. The government initially reprimanded him but then changed tack and issued an ultimatum to the sultan to suppress the slave trade. The sultan then agreed to a treaty abolishing the trade in return for continued British support.[108] The result was a victory for the abolitionist cause but one that owed very little to Gladstone.

In 1873, Gladstone resisted pressure from the abolitionist movement for Britain to annex the Fiji Islands, in the Pacific. Although he condemned British subjects engaged in human trafficking, he questioned whether the current rulers of Fiji were engaged in the slave trade.[109] He claimed that annexation would not lead to the abolition of serfdom in Fiji, but merely make the crown responsible for 'a savage race among whom slavery exists'.[110] Thus Britain would be complicit in perpetuating slavery rather than instrumental in suppressing it. Once again, Gladstone used a variety of pragmatic and moral arguments to express his opposition to the use of force to suppress slavery.

After his resignation as prime minister, in 1874, and retirement from the leadership of the Liberal party, in 1875, Gladstone had more time and freedom to pursue his own political and moral agenda. The anti-slavery cause did not, however, occupy him significantly. In 1876, an Admiralty circular that instructed naval commanders to return fugitive slaves to their owners provoked much controversy. Gladstone voted with other Liberals in support of a resolution that slaves on British ships should be treated as freemen and not forcibly removed.[111] He did not, however, speak or take a lead on the issue for he was much more preoccupied with the crisis in the Balkans. In 1877, he admitted that the sufferings of the Bulgarians and Slavs at the hands of the Turks moved him more than the sufferings of black slaves at the hands of their white masters because 'in the case of negro slavery … it was the case of a race of higher capacities ruling over a race of lower capacities'.[112] During his 1879 Midlothian campaign, Gladstone declared that foreign policy should be inspired by a love of freedom but he made no reference to the abolition of slavery.[113] In an 1880 Midlothian speech, he did complain that previous attempts by the British government to suppress the slave

[107] Gladstone to Granville, 7 Nov. 1872, ibid., p. 359.
[108] Gavin,'Bartle Frere mission', pp. 145–6.
[109] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 216 (1873), cc. 943–7.
[110] Ibid., 221 (1874), c. 1285.
[111] Ibid., 227 (1876), c. 899.
[112] W. E. Gladstone, *The sclavonic provinces of the Ottoman Empire* (London, 1877), p. 11.
[113] Gladstone's speech at West Calder, 27 Nov. 1879, in W. E. Gladstone, *Political speeches in Scotland, November and December 1879* (London, 1879), p. 117.

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trade had been reversed at the Congress of Berlin, but that was an isolated remark.[114]

During Gladstone's second premiership, from 1880 until 1885, the slavery issue was most prominent with regard to British policy towards Egypt and the Sudan. In 1877 Gladstone had opposed the occupation of Egypt even though he had accepted that it would assist the abolition of slavery in that country.[115] Yet in 1882, following riots in Alexandria against Europeans, he changed his stance and sanctioned British military intervention in Egypt. Prior to the invasion, Gladstone had not responded positively to appeals from the Anti-Slavery Society for the government to use its influence to suppress slavery in Egypt.[116] After the British victory at Tel-el-Kebir, however, he conceded that some action against slavery might be possible,[117] and he told Lord Shaftesbury that the government would take every opportunity to suppress the slave trade and slavery.[118] In 1883, he welcomed signs that the Egyptian government was adverse to slavery[119] and, two months later, he proposed a cabinet committee to consider the slave trade in Egypt.[120] By 1884, however, most of Sudan was in the hands of the Mahdi and his slave-dealing followers and Gladstone's government despatched General Gordon to Khartoum to evacuate the country. Gordon had previously suppressed the slave trade in Sudan and British abolitionists welcomed his mission as an anti-slavery crusade. But that was not Gladstone's intention and he did not oppose Gordon's decree sanctioning the holding of slaves in Sudan or his request that Zobeir, a notorious slave dealer, should succeed him as governor of Khartoum.[121] Gladstone did, however, suggest that slave hunting and slave exporting should be excluded from Zobeir's authority.[122] In the event, Gordon's death at Khartoum, early in 1885, ended any prospect of further action against slavery in Sudan for another decade.

Gladstone's lack of zeal for anti-slavery campaigns in Africa was still evident in the last decade of his life. In 1890, the explorer, Henry Morton Stanley, showed Gladstone a map of East Africa and tried to interest him in a project for a railway to Uganda to suppress the slave trade. But his only response was to complain that modern cartographers had not used the ancient place-names of Africa cited by Herodotus.[123] During his fourth ministry, from 1892 until 1894, Gladstone

[114] Gladstone's speech at Ford Pathhead, *Times*, 24 Mar. 1880, p. 6.
[115] W. E. Gladstone, 'Aggression on Egypt and freedom in the east', in *Gleanings*, IV, pp. 345, 359.
[116] *Times*, 8 June 1882, p. 4, and 10 June 1882, p. 9.
[117] Gladstone to Arthur Pease MP, 27 Sept. 1882, *Times*, 10 Oct. 1882, p. 7.
[118] Gladstone to Lord Shaftesbury, 22 Nov. 1882, *Times*, 27 Nov. 1882, p. 4.
[119] Gladstone to Granville, 21 Oct. 1883, *The political correspondence of Mr Gladstone and Lord Granville 1876–1886*, ed. Agatha Ramm (2 vols., Oxford, 1962), II, p. 90.
[120] Gladstone to Granville, 28 Dec. 1883, ibid., p. 141.
[121] Entry for 10 Mar. 1884, *The diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton, 1880–1885*, ed. Dudley W. R. Bahlman (2 vols., Oxford, 1972), II, p. 573.
[122] Gladstone to Granville, 11 Mar. 1884, *Correspondence of Gladstone and Granville, 1876–1886*, ed. Ramm, II, p. 163.
[123] *The autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley* (London, 1909), p. 419.

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strongly opposed the creation of a British protectorate over Uganda, despite pressure to do so from Liberal imperialists and Christian missionaries.[124]

IV

Gladstone spent much of his life campaigning for liberty yet the abolition of slavery – the antithesis of liberty – was never a high priority for him, not even when he was leader of the Liberal party. Why was that the case? His original attitude to slavery and the slave trade was powerfully influenced by his long dependence on his father, John Gladstone, and deference to his views. In the 1830s and early 1840s, William publicly supported the interests of his father and other British colonial sugar plantation owners, even when he had some private reservations. As John Bright noted, Gladstone's family connection with sugar brought out all his eloquence and ingenuity.[125] His loyalty to his father's interests led him to adopt somewhat contradictory policies. In the early 1830s, he favoured gradual amelioration, rather than immediate emancipation for the slaves, while in the 1840s – after emancipation – he championed the cause of sugar grown by free labour. Consequently Macaulay mocked Gladstone and like-minded Tories for their constant, but inconsistent, defence of the planters – defending slavery while they employed slaves but crying up the blessings of freedom when they were forced to employ freemen.[126] Although Gladstone's family connection with the West India slave-owning interest was sometimes embarrassing for him, it assisted his rapid political rise. It provided him with material for his first major speech in parliament, which brought him to the attention of Peel, who later rewarded him with posts at the Colonial Office and the Board of Trade.

In that first speech, Gladstone, while admitting a family connection with slavery, claimed that his main motivation was a humanitarian and religious concern with the welfare of the slaves. Yet he showed little evidence of such concern in his subsequent attitude towards the ex-slave apprentices or their freeborn successors. Although he routinely condemned their ill treatment, he was usually more exercised by what he regarded as exaggerated claims by abolitionists. That was evident in his comments not just in the 1830s and 1840s, but also in the 1850s and 1860s. His persistent reluctance to believe all the horrific allegations made by the anti-slavery campaigners contrasted with his readiness to accept claims of atrocities in Naples, Bulgaria, Afghanistan, and Armenia. That reflected, in part at least, his racial outlook.

After the passage of the emancipation Bill in 1833, Gladstone denied the right of the white man to keep the black in subjection. Nevertheless, he still believed –as late as the 1870s – that blacks, along with some other non-Europeans, were 'a race of lower capacities'. His belief in a racial hierarchy was common enough at that time. There is no evidence, however, that he was directly influenced by racist theory such as Joseph de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races*, or by evolutionary

[124] Shannon, *Gladstone: 1865–1898*, p. 528.
[125] *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, 78 (1845), c. 469.
[126] Ibid., 77 (1845), c. 1306.

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theory, such as Charles Darwin's *On the origin of species*. Nor, indeed, is there any indication that he was interested in the Victorian debate on what was called 'the Negro question'. He did not read, for example, Thomas Carlyle's 1849 'Occasional discourse on the Negro question' or the riposte that it provoked from John Stuart Mill.

Gladstone's opposition to the international slave trade was more outspoken and consistent than his opposition to slavery. In that respect, his outlook remained that of a liberal Tory of the earlier nineteenth century, such as William Wilberforce, George Canning, or Robert Peel. Yet it was only in the 1840s and early 1850s that Gladstone roundly condemned the slave trade on moral and humanitarian grounds. Even then his denunciations of the trade accounted for only a few sentences in long speeches. He never matched, for example, the long description and condemnation of the slave trade, which Palmerston delivered to MPs in 1845.[127] Unlike Palmerston, moreover, Gladstone questioned the efficacy of force as a means of suppressing the slave trade. While he did not always rule out the use of force, he never called for it in public. Unlike many Liberals, he did not regard action against the slave trade as a justification for imperial expansion or military intervention. In general, there is no substantive evidence that Gladstone's conversion to Liberalism significantly changed his attitude to slavery and the slave trade.

Gladstone's handling of the slavery issue foreshadowed, both in method and strategy, his approach to some later political problems. He made up for a lack of first-hand experience of the subject by extensive reading of relevant literature, both official and unofficial. That gave him a command of facts and figures relating to slavery, which he deployed at great length in parliamentary debates – as in 1842 when he 'discharged an unusual quantity of figures'.[128] He subsequently adopted the same methodological approach when he investigated other topics ranging from Ireland to the Eastern Question. His approach to the slavery issue was also characterized by a preference for gradual, rather than sweeping, reform. In the early 1830s, he sought amelioration rather than immediate emancipation and in the mid-1830s, he opposed any reduction in the full term of apprenticeship. The principle that he proclaimed about slaves at Newark in 1832 – freedom for those who were fit to be free – was one that he subsequently applied to franchise reform in Britain the 1860s and 1880s. Moreover his support, in 1833, for government compensation of slave owners was a precedent for his 1886 Irish land Bill, which proposed to buy out another controversial group of proprietors. In both cases, Gladstone was a reluctant and belated convert to compensation, but a firm one nonetheless.

Judged by today's moral standards, Gladstone's advocacy of compensation for the planters, but not for their slaves, and his opposition to the use of force to suppress slavery and the slave trade seem reprehensible. Certainly force played a more important role in the suppression of transatlantic slavery than Gladstone

[127] Ibid., 76 (1844), cc. 922–48.

[128] Ibid., 63 (1842) cc. 1193–207.

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was prepared to acknowledge.[129] Nevertheless his pragmatic and consensual policy on slavery had some advantages. Compensation for planters secured the abolition of slavery in the British Empire a generation earlier than in the United States and without the massive loss of life that the American Civil War occasioned. His belief that peaceful persuasion, rather than coercion, was the best way to eradicate slavery eventually produced dividends in Brazil, where slavery was finally abolished in 1888. In Africa, however, what progress there was in the suppression of slavery and the slave trade was achieved through the use or threat of force and the extension of imperial control.

Gladstone was often as exercised by the decadence of the enslaved – whether in the West Indies or the American South – as by the despotism of their masters. In 1875 he cited Homer's observation that enslavement 'takes half the man away' as one of his most noble and penetrating judgements.[130] In 1889, he welcomed a favourable memoir of a slave owner in the American South before the Civil War. He thought the book exposed the moral evil of slavery in its depiction, not of the master, but of the slaves, who cheated him on occasion. While he admitted that 'it is idle to reproach those we degrade', he believed that the book taught a useful lesson:

> We are not to judge individuals hastily on account of social mischiefs, that may be due to them as a body, through their holding of a position inherited from their forefathers, the whole nature of which they have not had strength and depth of wisdom to detect.[131]

Thus Gladstone implied that his own early stance on slavery should be condoned for the same reason. Moreover, he believed that the whole British establishment had been collectively responsible for creating and maintaining the slave system in the colonies. In 1886, he cited the abolition of slavery as one of ten great political issues of the last half-century in which the masses had been right and the classes had been wrong.[132]

In the later Victorian period, when Gladstone walked home after a late session in the House of Commons, he would sometimes stop to drink at a fountain which had been erected, in 1865, to commemorate Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton and his fellow abolitionists: Wilberforce, Macaulay, Clarkson, and Sharp.[133] Unlike them, Gladstone's support for abolition was always qualified, rarely committed, and often self-serving.

Gladstone's passionate commitment to liberty for oppressed peoples was seldom evident in his attitude to slavery.

[129] David Richardson, 'Agency, ideology and violence in the history of transatlantic slavery', *Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), pp. 988–9.

[130] W. E. Gladstone, *Vaticanism, an answer to reproofs and replies* (London, 1875), p. 120.

[131] W. E. Gladstone, 'Memorials of a Southern planter', *The Nineteenth Century*, 154 (1889), pp. 984–5.

[132] Gladstone's speech at Liverpool, *Times*, 29 June 1886, p. 11.

[133] The Rt Hon. Viscount Simon, 'The stature of Mr Gladstone', in *Mr Gladstone: Founder's Day Lectures, St Deiniol's Library, 1931 to 1955*, ed. Peter J. Jagger (Hawarden, 2001), p. 147. For the Buxton Fountain see, Madge Dresser, '"Set in stone?" statues and slavery in London', *History Workshop Journal*, 64 (2007), pp. 185–6.

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