

FREEDOM FIGHTER

Zachary Macaulay spent a lifetime gathering evidence to show how appalling slavery was. So why did this quiet witness to inhumanity always let others do the talking?

In 1784 at the age of 16, Zachary Macaulay, who was working in a merchant's counting house in Glasgow, was leading a life that would have horrified his father, a Highland minister. Sent to work in the city when he was 14 – he was one of 12 children – Macaulay got into bad company and abandoned the douce habits of rural Inveraray where he was born for more intoxicating thrills. As he later wrote, among other pleasures, “I began to think excess of wine, so far from being a sin, to be a ground of glorying; and it became one of the objects of my ambition to be able to see all my companions under the table.”

But this way of life was to come to a bad end. Months of drinking, gambling and flirting culminated in an event that remains shadowy, but is thought to have involved a woman. As Macaulay wrote in his memoir, “a circumstance happened which gave a temporary suspension to my career of vice and folly, and led to a few sober reflections. I then saw the only way that remained for extricating myself from the Labyrinth in which I was involved, was going abroad ...”

Whatever form his trouble took, it proved a turning point in Macaulay's career. Without it, he would probably have gone on to become one of Glasgow's many rich merchants, melting into wealthy and gout-ridden obscurity. Instead, he went to Jamaica and became a book-keeper on a sugar plantation. The years he spent there transformed him into a passionate advocate of eradicating slavery.

Largely because he insisted on anonymity in all his anti-slavery work, Macaulay is pitifully unknown in the history of the abolition of slavery. Looking out from a portrait of five of the main abolitionists in the National Gallery alongside William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, Thomas Fowell Buxton and Thomas Clarkson, he is a stern-looking, small-featured man with hooded grey eyes and a calm, unreadable expression. Some described him as dour and unimaginative. “Imperturbable” is the word his memoirist Charles Booth gave him. Yet he was an affectionate family man despite being a workaholic. As well as his nine children by his wife Selina, he adopted his

sister's four orphans and was guardian to the son of one of his nephews. His youngest son Charles recalled his mother scolding this menagerie of youngsters for chattering too much. “Let our children talk, Selina,” said Zachary. “We shall know them better by what comes out than by what stays in.”

He himself, however, was neither garrulous nor gregarious. Dogged in his pursuit of abolition, he became so hated and feared by those with interests in the plantations – known as the West India Party – that they set out, tabloid-style, to dig up any dirt in his early life that could be used against him. Interestingly, they never discovered the reason for his hasty exit from Glasgow as a teenager, nor did anything else come to light that could damage his reputation. Despite a constant barrage of lampoons and caricatures Macaulay remained untarnished and undaunted.

For almost 50 years he rubbed salt into Britain's conscience

On first arriving on the plantation, however, thoughts of social reform were far from his mind. All he wanted to do was fit in. This he managed, despite the pricking of his conscience. In a letter to a friend, he described his new life, “The air of this island has some peculiar quality in it, for no sooner does a person set foot on it than his former ways of thinking are entirely changed. The contagion of an universal example must indeed have its effect. You would hardly know your friend ... were you to view me in a field of canes, amidst perhaps a hundred of the sable race, cursing and bawling, while the noise of the whip resounding on their shoulders, and the cries of the poor wretches, would make you imagine some unlucky accident had carried you to the doleful shades.”

Macaulay recalled that far from feeling pity for the Negroes, “Now I was callous and

indifferent, and could allude to them with a levity which sufficiently marked my depravity.”

This sentiment is echoed in a letter from an anti-slavery campaigner living in Cape Town, who noted, “I have known ladies, born and educated in England, charitable and benevolent in their general character, yet capable of standing over their female slaves while they were flogged, and afterwards ordering salt and pepper to be rubbed into their lacerated flesh.”

Gradually, however, Macaulay sickened of the barbarism around him, and after four years of increasing disillusionment he left Jamaica for London. By all accounts his behaviour on his return was boorish, a product, no doubt, of the company he had kept on the plantation. Yet while he may have looked unpromising material for a social reformer, his brother-in-law, Thomas Babington, who had married his sister Jean, saw his potential and introduced him to his circle of abolitionist friends, among them Wilberforce and Sharp. Nobody could have predicted Macaulay's influence was to be almost as great, if unsung, as theirs. On the bust erected in his honour on his death in 1838 in Westminster Abbey, he is acknowledged for having “finally conferred freedom on 800,000 slaves”. Even so, many know him only as the father of historian Thomas Babington Macaulay.

The first step on Zachary Macaulay's illustrious career was taken when the Anti-Slave Trade Committee, led by Wilberforce, sent him out to a new trading colony at Freetown in Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leone trading company, of which he quickly became governor, had been established as a place for freed slaves to run their own businesses. Despite a desperately unhealthy climate for westerners – 57 of the 119 men sent to establish the scheme died in the first year – Macaulay turned it into a successful operation.

After the colony at Freetown was razed to the ground by French marauders, Macaulay fell seriously ill. Forced to return to England to recover, he chose to travel home on a slave ship so he could see for himself the conditions. Did slaves really have berths “perfumed with incense” as some slavers claimed?



The five main abolitionists of the slave trade in Britain: Granville Sharp, Zachary Macaulay, William Wilberforce, Thomas Fowell Buxton and Thomas Clarkson. Macaulay was called a “walking encyclopedia” on abolitionism by his fellow anti-slavery campaigners

PHOTOGRAPH: NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON



Preposterous myths about slave conditions were regularly peddled. In 1788, for instance, a parliamentary report claimed: "The Slaves are comfortably lodged in rooms fitted up for them. They are amused with instruments of music and when tired of music and dancing they then go to games of chance. They are indulged in all their little humours." So attractive were their lives, indeed, that in the same report Admiral Barrington said, "They appeared to him so happy that he often wished himself in their situation."

But far from finding fragrant slave quarters, Macaulay was met by an overpowering stench as he slept in a bed above a floor packed with fetid bodies. When he asked the captain if he was ever afraid of a slave mutiny, he replied, "I put them all in leg-irons. If handcuffs be too little, I put a collar round their neck with a chain fastened to it, which is locked to a ring-bolt in the deck."

Macaulay returned to England permanently around 1798, his knowledge of the plantations of the West Indies and the slave traders of west Africa making him uniquely valuable as a witness in the parliamentary inquiries that finally led to the abolition of the slave trade. A superb statistician who kept up a huge correspondence from across the empire in his search for facts to pit against prejudice and ignorance of the trade, he became known as "the walking encyclopedia" of the movement. Wilberforce constantly urged those seeking information to "look it up in Macaulay". Thus, when the Anti-Slave Trade Acts were passed in 1807 Macaulay already deserved a place in the abolitionists' hall of fame. But even greater and harder work lay ahead.

As became clear after 1807, plantation owners were alarmed to learn their slaves had powerful supporters back in Britain. Terrified of revolts, they grew even harsher in their treatment. As Macaulay's memoirist Booth wrote, "Such information as leaked out, past the vigilance of the West India Party, was so horrible it was unbelievable." Macaulay realised he would have to act.

In 1823, in opposition to governmental and plantation owners' lobbies, he formed the Anti-Slavery Association. Where Wilberforce had been the leader of the Anti-Slave Trade movement in parliament, on his retreat Thomas Fowell Buxton became the parliamentary leader of the Anti-Slavery Association. All the while insisting on anonymity, Macaulay supplied the statistics and facts for every single speech made in the House of Commons and the House of Lords during the decade it took to see the abolition of slavery across the empire. In Buxton, Macaulay had met his equal as a crusader. As the MP told his followers,

"You must kill yourself if need be, but the slave must be emancipated."

At times it must have seemed to Macaulay's wife that he might indeed be felled by the workload he now shouldered. Working late into the night, keeping up with reports from his associates across the world, devouring political papers and memorising the new slave laws so he could expose those plantation owners – almost all – who flouted them, he had no time to oversee his own business interests. He was on the brink of bankruptcy when his son Henry stepped in and staved off ruin.

Macaulay also published an influential monthly pamphlet, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*. Largely written by himself, this 30-odd page publication offered stark, often harrowing facts about slavery.

Faced with formidable opponents, the Anti-Slavery Association seemed a long way from reaching its goal when news arrived of a massacre of slaves in Mauritius. In 1832, Buxton reported to parliament that it had been proved that since 1810 the 60,000-strong slave population of the island had been murdered and replaced on more than one occasion. As Buxton stated, "Slaves were murdered piecemeal, roasted alive in ovens; flogged, starved, dismembered, tortured and slaughtered. Suicide and infanticide were the daily resort of parents; mothers killed their children from humanity, and killed themselves from despair. And the decrease in the slave population was supplied by daily importations from Madagascar and the Seychelles, unchecked by our cruisers, and unheeded by the local authorities."

The scale of this inhumanity created uproar in Britain, and swiftly led to the Anti-Slavery Act of 1833. The day that Act was passed, Macaulay had his finest hour. Given his reserved personality, one cannot see him cracking open champagne but he must have felt a grim sense of relief in achieving the goal he had worked towards for more than five decades.

Yet far from ending his life in the comfort he deserved, he spent his last widowed years in poverty, evading creditors and living a hand-to-mouth existence among his children. For four days and nights, as his father lay dying, his son Charles sat holding his hand. It is said that his eldest son, the historian Thomas, was almost prostrated with grief at the news of his father's death. The man who had faced down the empire's most powerful bullies may have been severe, but he was greatly loved.

For almost half a century, with a clear-headed lack of bombast or exaggeration he had rubbed salt into Britain's conscience by putting his knowledge into the hands of more charismatic campaigners. It is impossible to assess his contribution to ending slavery. All that can be said for sure is that few have ever done more for the welfare of humankind. ■

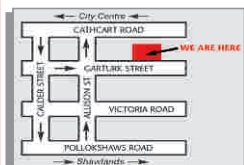
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