Introduction: Displaying and Denouncing Slavery

On the evening of 12 February 1851, a large crowd gathered in the hall of Aberdeen Mechanics' Institute. Those who could afford it had paid sixpence for a reserved seat, while the majority stood, holding their threepenny tickets. Many others, unable to obtain tickets at the door, huddled together outside in the cold north-east wind hoping to catch a glimpse of the speakers, the former slaves William Wells Brown, William Craft and his wife, Ellen, publicised as the 'White Slave'.[1]

In Aberdeen a black person was a rarity, a black person who had been a slave a curiosity, and a woman who was Negro and white and a slave the greatest wonder of all. To be sure, some members of the audience had seen the occasional travelling minstrel show in Edinburgh or Glasgow, but those were white men with their faces blacked up, their lips enlarged and painted white or bright red, speaking with exaggerated accents of the American South, amusing spectators with their naivety, mispronunciations and misplaced ambitions.[2]

Now, in Aberdeen, there were real Negroes to see, hear and compare with the blackface minstrels – and, most extraordinary of all, a Negro

1. *Glasgow Herald*, 14 January 1851.
2. One of the most acclaimed blackface performers was New Yorker Thomas D. Rice whose songs and mimicries in blackface delighted large audiences throughout the United States and Britain. Rice's performance of a song called 'Jump Jim Crow' was especially admired. It included the creation of a grotesque, comic, black character named after the song. In 1838, the *Boston Post* reported 'the two most popular characters in the world at the present time are [Queen] Victoria and Jim Crow.'

woman with a white face, dressed as a white man. A minstrel in reverse. It was partly in the context of mocking and dehumanising minstrel performances, which encouraged in white Britons a sense of superiority among even those most sympathetic to the abolition of slavery, that the Aberdeen audience viewed and reviewed the three people on stage. It was in the knowledge of that same context that William Wells Brown, William Craft and Ellen Craft stood before that audience to demonstrate both their own humanity and the terrible inhumanity of slavery in the United States.

However, it was not only minstrel shows that influenced the perceptions of the audience. There were other contexts, including the expanding British Empire, the importance of the cotton industry for the British economy, and religious and 'scientific' debates about different races. Both slavery and imperial expansion were often justified by the argument that Africans (as well as Indians and the Irish) belonged to one of several inferior races. Many who defended the slave trade and slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean believed, or preferred to believe, in polygenesis, the theory that there were different human races originating from different ancestors. Most abolitionists were advocates of monogenesis, the theory that there was just one human race.

The cities of Belfast, Glasgow, Bristol, Manchester and Liverpool had become prosperous through trade and manufacture connected to slavery and cotton grown on slave plantations in the Caribbean and the southern states of America. By the mid-nineteenth century, cotton manufacturing had become the centre of the British economy, representing nearly a quarter of the value added to the economy, employing one in six British workers (including women and children) and dominating the world market in cotton cloth. By 1860, one tenth of all British capital was invested in cotton, and 77 per cent of the 800 million pounds of raw cotton brought to Britain came from the United States. According to historians such as Eric Hobsbawm and Sven Beckert, it was cotton that powered the Industrial Revolution in Britain, bringing masses of labourers to the cities to work in the cotton mills and shipping ports.[3] The

3. Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2015), pp. 76-82, 243. Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848* (Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1962), p.44.

squalor of those crowded cities, the harsh working conditions in the factories and mills, the lack of workers' rights, all brought protest movements, including those led by the Chartists (one of whose leaders was the black activist, William Cuffay). Some argued that the situation of these British workers was worse than slavery and, like the Earl of Shaftesbury, many Nonconformist religious leaders sought to improve the lot of British workers as well as condemning slavery in America and elsewhere.

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Abolitionist Medallion: 'Am I Not a Slave and a Brother?'

British activists, both white and black, had campaigned vigorously to achieve the abolition of British slave trading (in 1807), an end to slavery in the British West Indies (in 1833) and, in the mid-century, a boycott of cotton produced on slave plantations. The emblem adopted by the abolitionists and designed by Josiah Wedgwood (1787) showed a kneeling slave, with the caption 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' For William Wells Brown and William Craft only the second half of that question was in doubt and, although they invited support, their stance and speech were neither humble nor submissive.

Since the 1840s the British Anti-Slavery Movement had sponsored hundreds of lectures by formerly enslaved African Americans. Throughout Britain a variety of dissenting or Nonconformist religious groups, including Quakers, Unitarians, Congregationalists, Baptists and Methodists, were eager to host these events. Temperance movements were also involved. Sponsored and advertised by the Congregational Church, the Aberdeen meeting was no exception. Newspaper reports and word of mouth had also excited increasing interest. Brown and the Crafts had already performed before large crowds in Glasgow. There, in the same column which advertised that Fanny Kemble would be giving readings from Shakespeare, the *North British Daily Mail* (14 January 1851) publicised the appearance on four consecutive nights of 'ex-fugitives William and Ellen Craft (the White Slave)'. They also spoke in Edinburgh and Dundee, so that by now the sessions were well planned. First, a local minister would introduce the two Williams as victims of slavery in a benighted America, while the audience eagerly observed the two black men. The flavour of these introductions can be glimpsed in a verbatim report Wells Brown sent Frederick Douglass of the opening speech given by the president of the Edinburgh Temperance Society. Here the speaker not only ridiculed North American Yankees, but also felt it necessary to insist that the audience should regard the three African Americans as their equals:

> A great feature in our meeting tonight, is that we have beside us two individuals, who, according to the immaculate laws of immaculate Yankeedom, have been guilty of the tremendous crime of stealing themselves. (Applause.) Mr. Craft who sits beside me, has stolen his good wife. And Mrs. Craft has stolen her worthy husband; and our respected friend, Mr. Brown, has cast a covetous eye on his own person. In

> the name of the Temperance reformers of Edinburgh – in the name of Universal Scotland, I would welcome these two victims of the white man's pride, ambition, selfishness, and cupidity. I welcome them all as equals in every respect. (Great applause.)[4]

After that introduction, William Wells Brown[5] stepped forward to present his 'Panorama', 24 'Scenes in the Life of an American Slave', showing graphic depictions of slave life on the cotton plantations. They included pictures of auctions where children were sold and separated from their mothers, slaves attempting to escape chased by hunters with dogs, and fugitives joyfully arriving on 'British soil' in Canada. Brown had employed artists to paint these scenes in vivid colour on a 2,000-foot roll of canvas, which was spread out on stage as his words brought each episode to life. The presentation also included his recital of anti-slavery songs and the exhibition of objects such as slave collars and manacles. It was a performance calculated not only to encourage condemnation of American slavery but also to offset the expectations that may have been formed by minstrel and stage representations of black people. The songs Brown wrote, sang and published (in a collection titled *The Anti-Slavery Harp*) included lyrics describing the pathos of a slave auction, stirring ballads about flight from slavery, and proudly affirmative choruses celebrating abolitionist identity. They were definitely neither comic nor condescending.

William Craft followed Brown, recounting his escape with Ellen from a plantation in Georgia. The Crafts fled to the free North in 1848, travelling first class on a steamer and train, with light-coloured Ellen

4. Quoted by William Wells Brown, letter to Frederick Douglass, 18 January 1851.
5. A practised and eloquent speaker, Wells Brown had come to England in 1849 together with his two young daughters (so that they could receive in England an education that would be denied them in the United States). He had been sent as an anti-slavery lecturer and delegate to the 1849 Peace Conference, which met in Paris from 22 to 24 August 1849, with Victor Hugo as president. The proceedings were published by Charles Gilpin. Among the speakers were many of the chief philosophers and politicians of the time, including Fédéric Bastiat, Charles Gilpin, Richard Cobden and Henry Richard. William Wells Brown was invited to speak against slavery.

disguising herself as a white male plantation owner accompanied by William as her faithful slave. The climax of the presentation was 'his master' Ellen's appearance on stage, dressed as a white gentleman in top hat, cravat, jacket and trousers. In this disguise she represented both the 'White Slave' advertised prior to the event and the daring escapee. For the audience she was a fascinating figure challenging race, class and gender identities. Many portraits of her in this outfit were sold after the proceedings.

It was not only this trio who attracted such large audiences wherever they travelled in the United Kingdom. Dozens of black speakers gave numerous lectures throughout Britain during the mid-nineteenth century. Their published stories were also very popular, eagerly

Ellen Craft Disguised as a Southern Plantation Owner.

purchased after lectures. One such speaker, Moses Roper, estimated that during the nine years he spent in Britain he gave about 2,000 lectures, sold 38,000 copies of his autobiography in English (first published in 1837)[6] and had an additional 5,000 copies translated into Welsh. By comparison, Charles Dickens' very popular *Pickwick Papers*, first published in 1846, had sold just over 30,000 copies in Britain and America by 1855.[7] George Eliot's first novel, *Adam Bede*, though highly praised by reviewers, had an initial print run in 1859 of 2,100 copies and eventually sold 15,000 copies within five years.

Former slaves such as Frederick Douglass and Moses Roper had toured Britain, Ireland and Europe during the previous decade seeking support for ending slavery in America. However, after the United States Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act in September 1850, which required slaves who had escaped to the North to be defined as lost or stolen property and returned to their previous owners in the South, hundreds more African Americans sought refuge in Canada or Britain. Many remained in Britain for years and published their stories there, while also lecturing to large crowds, arguing for abolition, and seeking support for the Unionists during the American Civil War. They became part of a community of refugees who had come to Britain for the same reason; they also became involved in other movements such as the temperance movement and women's suffrage. Above all, they sought to influence public opinion in Britain so that it would put moral pressure on the United States to abolish slavery.

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This book explores the stories of three couples and a single woman who fled to Britain from America and made their homes there for many years, together with their children born in the United Kingdom or Ireland. The fact of their long residence in Britain, unlike the many other African American abolitionists, like Frederick Douglass, who made lecture tours of just several months, is one of the chief reasons for my choosing to write about them. At the same time, they also

6. Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery, with a Preface by the Rev. T. Price* (London: Darton, Harvey & Darton, 1837).
7. See Robert L. Patten, *Charles Dickens and His Publishers*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 358.

reveal the diverse experiences, attitudes and beliefs African American refugees brought to Britain, which informed their activism as well as their reception there. Although they share a common history as escapees from harsh discrimination and tyranny in America, each of them represents a different background and experience in relation to education and social class, racial inheritance, experience of slavery and racial prejudice. Each of them also found differing opportunities and engaged in diverse activities in Britain. Each of them also wrote and spoke in quite different ways about their experiences of slavery and discrimination. In addition to William and Ellen Craft, they are William and Mary Allen, Francis and Jane Frederick, and Sarah Parker Remond.

William Allen was born a free black in Virginia. Denied an education there, he managed, thanks to a wealthy sponsor, to attend one of the very few integrated schools in New York State. He later became the only black professor in America. When he fell in love with and married a white student he was threatened with lynching and in 1853 escaped with his wife to Britain, where he lectured and performed for thirty years. Francis Frederick suffered brutal and dehumanising treatment for fifty years as a slave in Virginia and Kentucky, before escaping in 1854 via the 'Underground Railroad' to Canada and Britain. He recounted his story throughout England and Scotland, set up a temperance boarding house in Manchester and published three versions of his autobiography. Sarah Parker Remond, who came from a free-born, activist, middle-class black family in Salem, Massachusetts, began public speaking at the age of 32. Although she was not a fugitive from slavery or threat of death, she was denied many of the rights and freedoms taken for granted by white women in America, including the right to education. In 1859 she travelled to Britain where she would become a student at Bedford College, as well as an activist for abolition, women's suffrage and Italian independence. After ten years in Britain, she moved to Italy to become a doctor.

William Craft, Francis Frederick and William Allen all published book-length accounts of their lives in America and details of their escape from brutality, discrimination and violence. These autobiographies were addressed to a British audience and were widely read by people of all classes. They deserve to be read now, as a part of Victorian literary culture representing characters, concerns, experimental narrative strategies and voices that have been too long ignored in studies and perceptions of that period.

This book will not only recount the lives of these seven people and the circumstances that brought them to Britain, but will also explore in detail their lives in the United Kingdom and Ireland, the varying degrees of support or hostility they received, and the networks and institutions involving British men and women who helped them. It attempts to recover how they were perceived and how they thought of themselves. How did it feel to become a free human being and a celebrity after being identified as a slave, and treated as mere property? What models of humanity, fulfilment and respectability did they encounter and follow? Also, to what extent did they continue to identify as Americans, embrace European culture and at the same time value their African heritage?

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The anti-slavery movement was reinforced by antipathy to 'Yankeedom' and nourished by different nationalist, reformist and religious currents in the British Isles. Then, as now, British definitions of class, racial and national identity differed in significant ways from those in the United States, affecting the ways in which Sarah Parker Remond, the Crafts, Fredericks and Allens identified themselves and were identified by others. Their appearance and behaviour as well as their published narratives were considered in the light of writings and performances by white American and British writers. The most significant and frequent comparisons were with the characters created in American novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (published in book form in both America and Britain in 1852), minstrel show characterisations and, also, *Othello*. Autobiographies and other writings published by African Americans during the 1850s and 1860s responded not only to the image and experiences of black people as portrayed by Stowe, but also to other fiction, drama and essays, such as Thomas Carlyle's pamphlet 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question' (1853). Then as now, black authors emphasised the importance of being able to represent themselves and having their own voices heard.

Seeking to expose the harm inflicted by slavery on white owners as well as the people they enslaved, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* told the story of devoutly Christian Uncle Tom, torn from his wife and children on a comparatively benevolent Kentucky plantation and sold 'down river' to brutal traders and slave owners. It presented its readers with a large cast of black characters, ranging from comically idle Sam, cute wild child Topsy, whose name quickly became embedded in the phrase