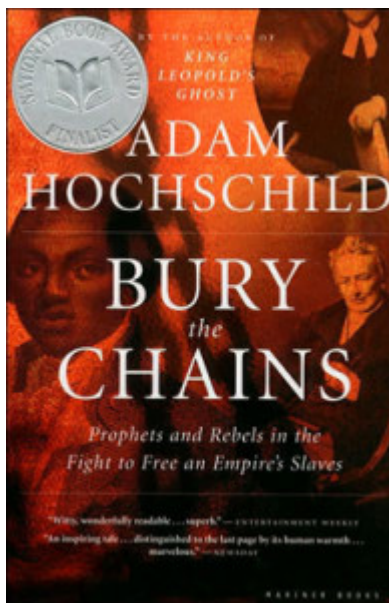
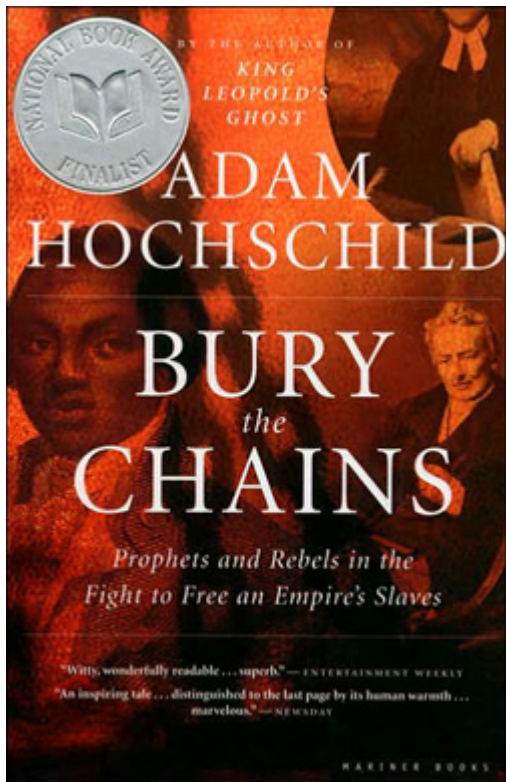


Undermining an Empire



Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves*.

Adam Hochschild knows how to tell a good story. And not just any story, but the one in which a network of British abolitionists successfully undermined the commercial regime that sustained the eighteenth-century British Empire: the African slave trade. Indeed, Hochschild demonstrates how a “small group of people . . . helped to end one of the worst injustices in the most powerful

empire of its time" (6). Hochschild's *Bury the Chains*, which was a finalist for the 2006 National Book Award, examines how the profitable traffic in human flesh was transformed from the bulwark of Britain's empire into its nemesis by 1807. Stretching from British ports such as Bristol and Liverpool to Cap Francois in St. Domingue and the slave factory at Bance Island off Africa's West Coast, Hochschild's narrative unfolds against a backdrop of putrefaction and violence in the Atlantic world.

Hochschild's primary focus is not the formative events of British abolitionism's early history such as the Haitian Revolution, the Somerset case, or the African settlement at Sierra Leone. Rather, he examines how Britons at home *perceived* such events. Hochschild argues that it was public perception of war, slave rebellions, and African slave trading in the far reaches of the British Atlantic that, when coupled with the tireless campaigning of zealous abolitionists like Thomas Clarkson, finally brought an end to the transatlantic slave trade. This feat, Hochschild reminds us, was neither easy nor inevitable, and it had a decisive impact on the history of Britain, the Atlantic, and the world.

Though Hochschild's account begins in the marchlands of the British Empire—in Africa and the Caribbean—he is careful to note that anti-slave-trade sentiment first ignited in the British Isles. And the man who did more than any Briton to elicit that sentiment was a young Cambridge graduate “who wore black clerical garb” and was considered a “moral steam engine” by the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (366). Thomas Clarkson is Hochschild's central character, not least because of his “sixteen hour a day campaigning against slavery” on a crusade that crisscrossed England and Europe (4). Clarkson also established the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, which included nine Quakers and three Anglicans—Granville Sharp, the American-born William Dillwyn, and Clarkson himself. During the late 1780s and early 1790s, Clarkson and his associates traveled thousands of miles to circulate petitions among lower- and middle-class Britons; he also collected evidence from slave ships in Liverpool and Bristol to confirm the horrid cruelty of the Middle Passage. Armed with testimony from sailors who witnessed the maltreatment of Africans firsthand as well as thumbscrews and shackles used to confine and torture captured slaves, the society's movement began to gain momentum and public attention.

The famous pottery manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood designed small buttons—each emblazoned with the slogan “Am I not a Man and a Brother?”—for mass distribution to the British public. West Indian sugar planters and their allies, angered by the society's agenda, began spying on meetings and publishing pro-slave-trade pamphlets. Yet the society found a strong political ally in William Wilberforce, the prominent York MP and evangelical Anglican. Hochschild argues that the initiative to end the slave trade had, by the early 1790s, assumed all the trappings of a successful, grass-roots reform movement.

But two revolutions—one in France and one in St. Domingue—nearly extinguished the movement altogether. Fearing “homegrown British radicalism and the prospect

of French subversion" (241), the government restricted civil liberties throughout the 1790s. The harshest of these restrictions were the Seditious Meetings Act and the Treasonable and Seditious Practices Act of 1795. Since these acts made most group meetings illegal, the society could neither organize debates nor circulate petitions. In short, the revolutionary spirit of the 1780s, of which anti-slave-trade sentiment was part and parcel, came to be viewed as dangerous and subversive by the mid-1790s. Many prominent politicians conflated abolition with rebellion, thus muffling the society's voice. The abolitionists' efforts were further eroded by a slave rebellion on the French sugar island of St. Domingue in 1791. Accounts of violent executions and torture during the insurrection convinced some Britons that abolition might yield similar bloodshed in British dominions. At the close of the eighteenth century, Clarkson and his allies had fallen all but silent; Wilberforce had stopped talking publicly of abolition; and a major surge in slave trading transported more African slaves than ever to New World plantations.

But what war could suppress, war could also resurrect. While British officials had worried throughout the 1790s that violent social upheaval akin to that of revolutionary France would break out at home, the first few years of the nineteenth century left Parliament fearing that Napoleon would soon dominate all of Europe. The France that Britain fought was labeled as popish, tyrannical, and "trying to restore" the same system of colonial slavery it had outlawed in 1794 (300). Thus, the "archenemy Napoleon had thereby opened up some political space" for British antislavery to forge a link between "abolition and British moral superiority" (301). To combat France successfully, Britain would have to fashion itself as liberal, Protestant, and antislavery; its Royal Navy would have to serve as a moral policeman throughout the Atlantic world, detaining foreign ships that carried cargoes of chained Africans. James Stephen, the former West Indian and "one of the empire's leading maritime lawyers," understood the potential imperial hegemony Britain might enjoy were the slave trade to be abolished (301). In 1806, Stephen helped Wilberforce draft a new bill for Parliament's consideration. Christened the Foreign Slave Trade Act, the bill "banned British subjects, shipyards, outfitters, and insurers from participating in the slave trade to the colonies of France and its allies" (303). On the face of it, the act seemed like a curtailment of French commerce. Yet Stephen also knew that while Britain carried more Africans to the New World than any other empire, most British slave traders sold their chattel to American or French planters. Couched as anti-French legislation, however, the bill passed in both houses of Parliament. And just a year later, Wilberforce's Abolition Bill received the approbation of both Parliament and George III; as of May 1, 1807, the slave trade ceased to be a legal form of commerce. In Hochschild's estimation, this was a first critical victory on the path to emancipation.

What Hochschild does is not so much revise our understanding of the British abolition movement as humanize it. Indeed, Hochschild's ability to weave together the lives of naval officers, former slaves, Quakers, and slave-trade captains demonstrates how complex and expansive the Atlantic slave trade really

was. But here, Hochschild falters. To truly humanize the abolition movement should be to complicate the proslavery/antislavery binary, not merely to applaud those who later found themselves on the moral high ground. That is, Hochschild's task should be to remind us that social progress is always rooted in a nexus of conflicting motives and agendas, many of which assume much darker shades than he has here been willing to admit. British abolition, for instance, was not the clear-cut social movement that Hochschild makes it out to be. Rather, British conceptions of evangelical religion, political economy, and race often blurred the boundaries between what was antislavery and what was not. Like their slaveholding opponents, most abolitionists, including Clarkson, had imperial aspirations of their own. Antislavery they were, but abolitionists were also global reformers who wanted Britain—and its empire—to expand under the aegis of Christian progress. Thus, in his chronicle of morality and improvement, Hochschild might do better to follow in the footsteps of Reinhold Niebuhr and C. Vann Woodward, both of whom understood that people are capable of self-awareness as well as self-deception and that moral struggles occur between individuals as well as within them.

Further Reading:

Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (London, 1975); Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrown of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London, 1988); Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging a Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, Conn., 1992); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1776-1823* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975); Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1987); Philip Gould, *Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); J. R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Antislavery: The Mobilization of Public Opinion Against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807* (Manchester, UK, 1995); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994).

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