NECESSITIES, DECENCIES, LUXURIES:
ESSAYS IN 18TH-CENTURY INTERNATIONAL COMMODITY TRADE.

The Sugar Trade.

By

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Essay: Master Original.

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Let me remind you of this before everything else. History is infinite. It is unfixable. We are always trying to state past reality in terms of certainty, but all that we are able to do is to render our own impression of it. No book can reproduce more than a part of that reality, even within the confines of its particular subject; and each book, contains something else, which gets mixed up with historical truth in an almost untraceable manner — I mean the opinion, or the sentiment, or the philosophy of life, of the narrator; or, in other words, the personality of the historian. The admixture does not necessarily turn historical truth into falsehood, but it does transform it into something different from the simple truth.

Few of you probably imagine, or will readily believe, that, in order to raise our sugar, and other West-India commodities, perhaps half a million of persons are annually destroyed, and in a manner peculiarly shocking to humanity. To die by an earthquake, by pestilence, or even by famine, would be merciful compared with the manner in which many of these poor wretches often perish.

Joseph Priestley, *A sermon on the subject of the slave trade; delivered to a society of Protestant dissenters, at the new meeting, in Birmingham and published at their request* (Birmingham, Pearson and Rollason, 1788), 5.
SUGARCANE, its cultivation, its trade and its consumption, stirred controversy in Great Britain, Europe, the Americas, and the West and East Indies during the course of the 18th century. Sugar consumption had become a necessity in Great Britain, a growing decency in West European countries, and a luxury in Russia. Yet, not enough sugar was produced and imported to satisfy the increasing demand for the sweetener or to temper its fluctuating rising market price.

The African-Atlantic slave trade effected the transformation of the African-Atlantic economy, its mode of production, its labor force, and its overseas commerce. The growing importation and enslavement of black Africans to work the sugarcane fields fueled the decades-old debate as to the morality and economic efficacy of the slave trade and the underlying institution of slavery. Although Great Britain formally abolished its participation in the African-Atlantic slave trade in 1807, the horrific institution remained elsewhere for decades.

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During the second half of the 18th century, Parliament responded to popular protests over the increasing price of sugar, slavery and the slave trade, and it undertook fact-finding investigations into the extraordinary nature of “the slave-sugar complex” to determine whether the system was morally sustainable and profitable.¹

Rival advocacy associations emerged to carry their messages to the public and Parliament. Refiners and grocers lobbied for increasing sugar production on British West Indian islands, for importing East Indian sugar, and for making prize sugars available for domestic consumption. Their 1753 petition to the House of Commons emphasized: “That the Price of Muscovada Sugar is become excessively high, owing to deficient Importation from our Sugar Colonies in America,” and that “the Price of Sugars at the British Sugar Colonies is more than double the Price of what it is at the French Sugar Colonies.”²

A contrary view propagated by a lobby group of sorts rooted in historic


²An account of the late application to Parliament, from the sugar refiners, grocers, &c. of the cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark, of the city of Bristol (London, 1753), 3-4. See George Griffin Stonestreet, Prize Sugars not Foreign. An Essay intended to vindicate the Rights of the Public to the use of the Prize Sugars (London: T. Cadell in the Strand and J. Sewell, in Cornhill, 1782); and Stern (1954), 25-36.
regulated trade of the navigation laws comprised resident sugar island planters and merchants, absentee island agents, landlords and merchants resident in Great Britain, and government elites and members of Parliament who had West India connections. It became known as the West India Interest, the guardian of the sugar monopoly that provided income for planters, merchants, and custom revenue for the government.3

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How and when the cultivation of sugarcane migrated from East to West, to the Americas and the Caribbean, is a familiar story. From its origins in South and Southeast Asia, Indian and Arab traders introduced the cultivation of sugarcane into lands bordering on the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Archaeological and historical sources establish the early existence of sugar factories on Crete and Cyprus which became leading suppliers of the sweetener in medieval times.4

The cultivation of sugarcane progressively found its way westward along the Mediterranean about the time when the Portuguese embarked on colonizing islands

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in the Atlantic. In 1420, the Portuguese proceeded to colonize Madeira and, in 1452, a water-powered sugar mill (engenho) was probably introduced there which resembled the technology used in Cyprus to crush sugarcane. In 1479, the Treaty of Alcáçovas bestowed effective hegemony in the Atlantic to Portugal, and Madeira subsequently became the leading supplier of sugar superseding Crete, Cyprus, Egypt and Sicily. Its high quality sugar appeared on the markets in Constantinople, Genoa, Venice and London. The Portuguese gained control over the archipelagos of Madeira, Azores, and Cape Verde and expanded their cultivation of sugarcane with a labor force imported from West African slave entrepôts.⁵

The Portuguese also penetrated the African Gold Coast (Mina Coast) to participate in the gold and slave trades. In 1482, they constructed a fortified factory – São Jorge da Mina (Elmina Castle). Further to the west, in the Gulf of Guinea, the Portuguese colonized the strategically-located islands of São Tomé and Príncipe and, in 1485, initiated the cultivation of sugarcane utilizing Madeira’s

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agricultural and technological expertise with a slave labor force facilitated by the Yoruba kingdom of Benin. After Castile expelled its Jews in 1492, many of them sought refuge in Portugal, and the Portuguese decided to have “the children of the Jews be taken from their parents, baptized, and given to [undesirable] Christians,” who together were shipped to São Tomé. “The Europeans and Africans gradually blended, racially and culturally, until only ‘São Toméans’[sic] existed, brown in color, Portuguese in language, and Catholic in faith.” In 1520, São Tomé began supplying slaves to the Antilles and later in the century to Brazil. By 1522, there were 60 sugar mills in operation making São Tomé and Príncipe major suppliers of sugar, albeit of poor quality.6

As early as the 1340s, Spaniards randomly scoured the Canary Islands (the home to autochthonous Guanches) in search of slaves. More formidable expeditions followed into the early decades of the 15th century. However, it was only after Ferdinand and Isabella decided, in 1477, to bring these lands under their authority did the Spanish launch a twenty-year bloody campaign to conquer and colonize the Canary Islands. Spanish and Genoese mercantile houses dominated

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the trade of the Canary Islands which was largely based on sugar and which the
technologically-skilled Portuguese from Madeira are credited for developing.
By 1484, the first-water-driven sugar mill had been erected on Gran Canaria and,
by mid-16\textsuperscript{th} century, 29 sugar factories were producing sugar for export.\textsuperscript{7}

When Christopher Columbus embarked on his second voyage in late 1493,
he took with him sugarcane from the Canary Islands and, in January 1494, he
implanted it in Hispaniola where it “took root” and “flourished.” In the 1520s,
there were an estimated 40 water-powered and horse-powered sugar mills
\textit{(ingenious)} in construction. The Spanish Crown subsequently promoted the
cultivation of sugarcane in its colonial empire and encouraged the importation of
black slaves from Africa to work in its sugar mills.\textsuperscript{8}

Soon after the Portuguese discovered Brazil in the early 16\textsuperscript{th} century, sugar
mills \textit{(engenhos)} were erected in Pernambuco and, by the middle of the century,
Brazilian sugar was selling in Antwerp, Hamburg, Lisbon, and London. However,
when Spain annexed Portugal (1580-1640), the Dutch took control of Brazil’s

\textsuperscript{7}See Kicza, (1992), 233-238; Alfred W. Crosby, “An Ecohistory of the Canary Islands: A
Precursor of European Colonization in the New World and Australasia,” \textit{Environmental Review},
8:3 (Autumn, 1984), 214-242; and Roberto Nodal, “Black Presence in the Canary Islands

\textsuperscript{8}See Irene A. Wright, “Documents. The Commencement of the Cane Sugar Industry in
America, 1519-1538 (1563),” AHR, 21:4 (Jul., 1916), 755-757; and Mervyn Ratekin, “The Early
sugar region. But after the Portuguese regained their authority, they expelled the Dutch and the Jews (1654) from Brazil who then took with them their entrepreneurial, technological and managerial skills to the Caribbean. There they advanced the development of the sugar industry and contributed to a trans-Atlantic trading network linking the Caribbean and The Netherlands. Guadeloupe and Martinique are particularly noted and Barbados witnessed the beginnings of a “sugar boom.” Thus, the “slave-sugar complex” became the prototype for plantation sugar that would be developed in the Americas and the West Indies.9

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During the 18th century, the West Indian islands and the Americas became the largest producers of sugar. Although Great Britain led the Danes, Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish, it was decidedly second to the French. The Anglo-French wartime rivalry in the Atlantic reinforced the ongoing commercial competition for

productive centers, overseas markets, and enslaved labor. Although Britain’s consumption of sugar prior to the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763) was fast becoming a necessity of everyday life in sweetening caffeinated beverages, cooked foodstuffs, and pastries et cetera, the increasing demand for sugar exceeded the supply from Britain’s West Indian plantations. This dynamic impacted the price refiners, bakers, grocers, and the end consumers had to pay for sugar. In 1733-1734, the price of imported raw-brown muscovado sugar (which required further processing into refined sugar) was 13s. 6d. per hundredweight; in 1748-1749, the price had risen to 24s. 4d. per cwt. and, in 1753, the price spiked to about 40 shillings per cwt.

Sugar refiners, grocers, and other dealers in sugar petitioned Parliament for relief. Guided by John Locke’s underlying principle that “the Value of everything upon Earth arises from its Quantity in Proportion to its Vent, and that alone regulates the Price,” they asserted that “Planters are greater Gainers by a small

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10 See Eliza Smith, The compleat housewife: or accomplish’d gentlewoman’s companion. Being A Collection of upwards of Six Hundred of the most approved receipts in Cookery (London, 1753); Francis de Valangin, A treatise on diet, or the management of human life (London, 1768); Menon, The professed cook: or, the modern art of cookery, pastry, and confectionary made plain and easy (London, 1776); Concise observations on the nature of our common food (London, 1787); William Cullen, First lines of the practice of physic (Edinburgh, 1790); and “Qualities of Sugar,” in Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons.1840 (527), 607-608. See also, Berg, (2005), 21 et seq.; McCants: (2007) and (2008); Mintz: (1985) and (1993; Shammas: (1983), (1984) and (1990); and Smith: (1992) and (2002).

11 See Report 1792, 22; and S R. 1792, 10.
Importation than a large one . . . and the Consumers of Sugar are great Sufferers . . . the common People of *England* are deprived of one of the Conveniences of Life, by the present high Price of Sugar.”¹²

During the Seven Years’ War, Great Britain’s West Indian islands were vulnerable to attack and their sugar supply lines were subject to disruption. Yet, despite these challenges, Britain imported an annual average of about 1,277,000 cwt. of raw-brown *muscovado* sugar and, after exports, the amount remaining for domestic consumption was about 78 percent of imports. After peace was declared in 1763, demand for sugar surged. During 1763-1775, Britain imported increased to an annual average of about 1,668,000 cwt. of raw-brown *muscovado* sugar and, after exports, the amount of sugar remaining for domestic consumption was nearly 1.4 million cwt., that is, about 83 percent of imports.¹³

Nevertheless, complaints about the lack of available British sugar continued, even from abroad. Sugar was Hamburg’s most important commodity import and supported an expanding sugar refining business but Hamburg’s sugar imports came largely from France and Brazil and to a lesser extent from Great Britain. In 1764,

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¹²See *An account of the late application to Parliament, from the sugar refiners, grocers, etc., of the cities of London and Westminster, the borough of Southwark, and of the city of Bristol* (London: 1753), 4-5, 31 and 35; *An enquiry into the causes of the present high price of muscovada sugars; with some remedies, humbly proposed for a grievance so considerable. In a letter to a member of parliament* (London, 1753), 2-4 *et seq.*; and Richard Pares, “The London Sugar Market, 1740-1769,” *EHR*, 9:2 (1956), 254-270.

¹³Report 1792, 22-23.
John Hanbury, Deputy Governor of the Company of Merchants Adventurers in Hamburg, claimed that British merchants suffered a competitive disadvantage with French merchants. He attacked the “monopolized” British West Indian sugar trade that “seems calculated” to increase prices but not production for “private Ends, and a Disadvantage to the Publick.” He concluded that a tax on uncultivated land in the sugar islands would encourage planters to increase production and thereby make more sugar available to consumers at cheaper prices and on easier terms.  

A few years later, Ralph Woodford, the British Resident in Hamburg, echoed this sentiment to his superiors in London. “The Manner, Sir, in which the Trade of France has crept up since the Year 1763 will not escape You; Their Commerce now seems to be regaining it’s [sic] ancient State; I mean, that the Branches, in which They had the Superiority before the War, are reverting to Them.” Therefore, regarding English sugar imports into Hamburg, Woodford advised:

as long as Our Merchants trouble themselves only about the Growth of a sufficient Quantity to supply the Home Consumption, and which, it seems, They look upon it as Their Interest not to do more, as whilst They can get as much Money for One Hogshead of Sugar at Home, as They would by Two

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14See Hanbury (Ham.) to Woodford (Ham.), and Woodford (Ham.) to Sandwich (Lon.) 12 and 15 Sept 1764, in Stowe Mss. 259, 84 and 81-82, respectively. The controversial issue of the amount of land not cultivated for sugar production is discussed by Sheridan (1965), 298.
in cultivating a sufficient Growth for Exportation. They prefer their Ease to The Welfare of The Community, which, it is apprehended, will be the Case as long as some Method is not found out, to lower the Prices of Their Sugar in Great Britain.\textsuperscript{15}

Complaints continued into the early 1770s when Hamburg’s imports of British West Indian sugar declined significantly. The British envoy there asserted that “the chief Cause of the Decrease of this Commodity” was “to be found in the Indifference, which the Proprietors of Our Sugar Plantations are said to be subject to, about growing any large Quantities for Exportation . . . is the Means of the Price thereof being kept up in England.”\textsuperscript{16}

Great Britain’s sugar trade suffered a challenge from revolutionary America when, in September 1774, the First Continental Congress protested the passage of Parliament’s Coercive Acts (known also as Intolerable Acts) that were meant to punish Boston for the Boston Tea Party. In response, Congress threatened to boycott West Indian islands if the “Intolerable Acts” were not repealed. After September 1775, the American colonies would cease exports to Great Britain. This threat did not sit well with West Indian planters and merchants and, on 2 February

\textsuperscript{15}Woodford (Ham.) to Conway (Lon.), 6 Feb 1767, PROSP 82/85, 18-19.

\textsuperscript{16}Mathias (Ham.) to Suffolk (Lon.), 26 Oct 1773, PROSP 82/92, 279.
1775, they petitioned Parliament to reestablish commercial intercourse between the West Indian islands and the Northern Colonies. The petitioners stated that the West Indian islands provided the northern colonies primarily with rum, sugar, coffee, ginger and other commodities for which they received in return goods absolutely essential to their well-being and livelihood, such as timber, train-oil, horses, tallow, leather, tobacco, pitch, tar, turpentine, and iron. Nonetheless, British policy remained unaltered. The traditional trade between the British West Indies and North America had now been broken ending the mutually-beneficial exchange of Caribbean commodities for American foodstuffs and *matériel* supplies.\(^{17}\)

Moreover, the traditional notion that the British West Indian colonies were economically and strategically viable and contributed to the economic well-being of the home country came under attack when, in 1776, Adam Smith published *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. Smith was unrelenting in his analysis and criticism of Great Britain’s colonial system. He argued that better use of British resources could be made at home than in the island colonies where high costs of defense and administration were paid for by the British taxpayer: “Its effect has consequently been to turn a part of the capital

\(^{17}\)See *The evidence delivered on the petition presented by the West-India planters and merchants to the Hon. House of Commons, As it was introduc’d at the Bar, and summ’d up by Mr. Glover* (London, 1775), 2-5 *et seq.*
of Great Britain from an employment in which it would have maintained a greater quantity of manufacturing industry, to one in which it maintains a much smaller, and thereby to diminish, instead of increasing, the whole quantity of manufacturing industry maintained in Great Britain.”¹⁸

Smith stridently questioned the absence of transparency and soundness in the British body politic.

The rulers of Great Britain have, for more than a century past, amused the people with the imagination that they possessed a great empire on the west side of the Atlantic. This empire, however, has hitherto existed in imagination only. It has hitherto been, not an empire, but the project of an empire; not a gold mine, but the project of a gold mine; a project which has cost, which continues to cost, and which, if pursued in the same way it has been hitherto, is likely to cost immense expence, without being likely to bring any profit; for the effects of the monopoly of the colony trade, it has been shewn, are, to the great body of the people, mere loss instead of profit.¹⁹

Moreover, Smith explicitly opposed the employment of slave labor and thereby implicitly opposed the African-Atlantic slave trade.

¹⁸Adam Smith, II, 478.

¹⁹Adam Smith, III, 412.
The experience of all ages and nations, I believe, demonstrates that the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any. A person who can acquire no property, can have no other interest but to eat as much, and to labour as little as possible. Whatever work he does beyond what is sufficient to purchase his own maintenance, can be squeezed out of him by violence only, and not by any interest of his own.20

Smith’s analysis and advocacy resonated not only among middle class activists but also within the circles of the British establishment. For example, in 1791, Thomas Irving, the long-time and respected Inspector General of Imports and Exports, in testimony before a Select Committee of the House of Commons, went beyond a simple echo of Adam Smith’s caution.21

Q. “Do you think that the extension [sic] of the West India plantations beyond the degree that is requisite for the supplying Great Britain, and her immediate dependencies with the principal articles of West India produce, would materially promote the interest of the British Empire?”


A. “[It] does not appear to me likely to promote the interest of the
British Empire.

. . . . Thus a capital to a great amount, which might have been employed in
carrying on and extending the manufactures, the commerce, and agriculture
of Great Britain, has been transferred from hence to the most vulnerable part
of the empire, and there invested in pursuits which do not appear to me to
have been productive of a profit to the proprietor, or of advantages to the
public, in any degree adequate to the precarious situation in which such
property stands, from the contingencies of climate, the fate of the war &cc.
The money expended upon West India estates is in general far from yielding
a profitable return, and in this opinion I am supported by the testimony of
some of the best informed gentlemen connected with the West Indies. . . .
the proprietors of the islands obtained (and still retain) a complete monopoly
of our markets at a very considerable expense to the British consumer, as
appears by the difference of the prices between the British and the Foreign
islands.

Q. “Do you know the price of sugars has doubled in Great Britain within
the last eighteen years?”

A. “I believe the price of sugars in Great Britain is very considerably
increased within the last eighteen years.”
Q. “Do you not think, if a more ample supply of sugar were sent from the West Indies to Great Britain that the price in the home market would decrease?”

A. “If the quantity of sugars in the British West India islands were considerably increased, such an increase might probably have some effect in lowering the prices to the British consumer; but the natural consequence must be a diminution in the price to the West India planter, which would tend greatly to discourage him in the extension of his plantation.”

Q. “Do you think, that by a proper attention to the breeding of Slaves in the British West India Islands, such a number of Slaves may be obtained and kept up, without the aid of importation from Africa, as will be sufficient to raise the West India produce that is requisite for the supply of Great Britain and her immediate dependencies?”

A. I have long been of opinion, that by proper attention to the breeding of Slaves, the stock might be kept up in the British West India islands, without the aid of importation from Africa. I beg leave, however, to be understood, that this measure is not likely, in my judgment, to be effected by putting an immediate stop to the importations, but by adopting such a system of policy as will gradually do away the necessity for importation.

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Just prior to the outbreak of the American War of Independence, Great Britain’s imports of raw-brown muscovado sugar amounted to an annual average of slightly more than 2 million cwt. and it sold on the London market for approximately 35 shillings per cwt. But after France, Spain, and The Netherlands entered the war on America’s side against Great Britain (1778-1780), the West Indies was effectively turned into a war zone. Moreover, in October 1780, hurricanes and earthquakes ripped through the West Indies and caused the deaths of thousands of slaves and put thousands more at risk owing to insufficient foodstuffs. Great Britain’s imports of raw-brown muscovado sugar thus fell in 1780-1781 to an annual average of about 1,481,000 cwt. and its price on the London market spiked to approximately 53 shillings per cwt.\(^2\)

This had a damaging effect on the sugar manufactory economy. Once again the sugar refiners of London petitioned the government to temporarily moderate the duty on prize sugars imported into Great Britain. They protested the traditional practice of allowing foreign agents to purchase prize sugars at prices and duties for considerably less than imported British plantation sugar. George Griffin Stonestreet, the petitioners’ agent, cogently captured their views in the title page of

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\(^2\)See Report 1792, 23; S R. 1792, 33; Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: 7 April 1791 (82). Minutes of the Evidence, 269, 273 and 277; 7 May 1792 (80), Reports and Papers. Minutes, 359-374; and 20 April – 22 June 1789 (68), XI, Minutes of the Evidence, 62-63. See also Mr. Fowler, Comp. A general account of the calamities occasioned by the late tremendous hurricanes and earthquakes in the West-India Islands, foreign as well as domestic (London, 1781); Memoir (1793); and Sheridan (1976), 615-641.
his forthcoming publication *Prize Sugars Not Foreign*: “the Rights of the Public to the use of Prize Sugars; And to shew the Impolicy, as well as Injustice of forcing the Prize Cargoes out of the Kingdom, at a Time when the Manufactory is languishing through the want of due Employment, and the People are aggrieved by the excessive Price of the Commodity.”

In March 1781, the Board of Trade and Plantations sided with the sugar refiners and acknowledged that there were significant shortfalls in sugar imports which commanded elevated prices and, therefore, the refiners should, indeed, have their prize sugar. The Board “could not imagine the West-India Proprietors would see any reasonable Cause for Complaint, provided that such Home consumption of Prize Sugars, upon a moderate Duty, were to be authorized only whenever the West-India Sugars should exceed a certain Price, to be ascertained in any Bill that might be proposed for that Purpose.” Importantly, the Board concluded that this question was not merely one that concerned only the West India planters and merchants and the sugar refiners but also “THE CONSUMERS OF THAT COMMODITY IN GREAT BRITAIN whose Interest certainly is, that the Price should not be raised to an excessive Heighth . . . by adopting the Principle which may leave to the West-India Planter the Monopoly of the British Market.”

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23Stonestreet (1782).

24Great Britain. Board of Trade and Plantations. *The report of the Honorable the board of*
The West India Interest opposed the premises of the petition: “That the whole System of our commercial Laws, whereby the exclusive privilege of supplying the British Consumption has hitherto been secured to our own Sugar-Colonies . . . for the benefit of the Mother-Country . . . would thereby be overturned.” They claimed there was, in fact, no scarcity of sugar and no want of it because there was still unconsumed and unrefined sugar in sugar houses, in the hands of the grocers, and in the warehouses of importers yet undelivered to buyers. They stated that above 50 ships had already sailed from Jamaica and other fleets were already preparing to sail from other islands and would soon arrive at the port of London. They considered the proposed bill “subversive of every principle of Justice and sound Policy. That its success would directly lead to the ruin of the Sugar-Colonies, and to the great injury of the Manufactures, Commerce, Navigation, and Revenues of this Kingdom.”

The House of Commons was reluctant to revise its policy regarding the sale
of prize sugars, but it could not deny the social and economic impact that reduced sugar imports and elevated sugar prices had on the public’s consumption of the sweetener. Consequently, in May 1781 and in June 1782, a committee of the House engaged in fact-finding interviews with sugar refiners, bakers and grocers past and present about the fluctuating supply of imported sugars – raw brown muscovado, refined, lump, and molasses – as well as their market prices during the years 1774-1780. Testimony revealed that sugar houses in Bristol, Hull, London, and Liverpool had either gone out of business or had reduced their hours of work because of the “Badness of the Trade.” For example, in 1766, “Sugar Houses in and near London were 159, all working,” but many of them “have been broke up and dismantled since that Time” reducing the number to approximately 100.

Moreover, the high price of sugar was particularly burdensome on the poor.

That the Advance in the Price of Sugar falls principally upon the Poor; Fine Sugars, such as the higher Order of People use, are advanced in a much smaller Proportion than the lower Kinds; and Brown Lump Sugar, which is one of the Articles used by the former, is doubled in Price, and some inferior Articles are trebled in Price—That the Article of Molasses is used principally by the Poor, the Price is a great Hardship upon them; they use it to sweeten Fruit for the Use of their Families, to render their Drinks palatable, and for other Purposes—That it was formerly sold for 11 to 15s.
per Hundred, and it is now worth 25s. per Hundred, which is a Price at which they will not consume it.26

On the eve of the Peace in 1783, the issues and challenges inherent in Great Britain’s sugar trade remained largely unresolved. There was just not enough sugar imported and available for domestic consumption at affordable prices. This was so despite the fact that in every year since 1755, Great Britain imported over one million cwt. of raw-brown muscovado sugar. In 1782-1783, imports averaged about 1,479,000 cwt. (about the same quantity as in 1780-1781) but, after re-exports, the net amount available for consumption was about 1,278,000 cwt. at the average price of 60 shillings per cwt.27

Soon after the Peace of 1783, the consequences of the war were still being felt and were complained about. In May 1784, West India planters and merchants petitioned the British government to restore the mutually-beneficial commercial intercourse they had had ante-bellum with North America. They asserted that North American supplies, especially timber products, could not be acquired from any other country at any price; that, because the navigation between North America and the sugar colonies could not be effectively carried on by British ships

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26Report from the committee to whom the petition of the sugar-refiners of London was referred, in Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. 1781-1782 (37), 33-84 (quotes taken from 57-58, 76, 78 and 82-83).

27Report 1792, 23; and S R. 1792, 33.
only, American ships should be permitted to engage in that trade; and that the sugar colonies should be able to continue to pay for their American supplies with the produce of their own estates because such produce could not find an agreeable market in Great Britain.28

In closely detailed reports on the commercial intercourse between the West Indian islands and the United States of America, the British government rejected several of these assumptions but conceded others: that unmanufactured goods and merchandize produced in the United States of America, which Great Britain and Ireland could not supply in sufficient quantity and at reasonable rates, should be allowed importation; and that colonial merchandize not used in manufactures could be exported to the United States. Nonetheless, the British government declared that only British-built ships belonging to British subjects would be permitted to engage in the trade and navigation with the colonies.29

28 At a meeting of the West-India planters and merchants (London: 14 May 1784). See the plaint incorporating similar arguments which had been deliberated in the Hon. House of Assembly of Jamaica in The Representation of Stephen Fuller, Esq.; agent for Jamaica, to His Majesty’s Ministers (London: dated 8 March 1785).

29 See Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: 1784 (49), “A state of the allegations and evidence produced and opinions of merchants and other persons given, to the committee of council, extracted from their report of the 31st of May 1784... to shew the distressed state of His Majesty’s sugar colonies;” 1806 (206), “Report of the Right Honourable the Lords of His Majesty’s most Honourable Privy Council for plantation affairs, dated 31 May 1784, respecting the intercourse between His Majesty’s West India Islands, and the United States of America,” in Papers relating to trade and foreign plantations; 1788 (61), “A bill for regulating the trade between the subjects of His Majesty’s Colonies and Plantations in North America and in the West India Islands;” and Great Britain. Board of Trade and Plantations. A report of the Lords of Committee of Privy Council, appointed for all matters relating to trade
The American and Atlantic wars had undoubtedly caused economic hardships on the sugar colonies and Great Britain. But scholars have disagreed as to the depth, length, and severity of the economic consequences of the wars and whether they led eventually to the British government’s abolition of the African-Atlantic slave trade in 1807. Notwithstanding this rich and colorful debate, Kenneth Morgan has asserted that a “consensus” of modern historians believe that “the British West Indian economy recovered after the considerable difficulties experienced during the American revolutionary war; that the British Caribbean slave system was expanding not contracting in most years between 1783 and 1807; and, therefore, it made little sense to abolish the slave trade on economic grounds.”

This “consensus” is supported by a contemporary Report of the Board of Trade which compared the six years since the war with the six years prior to the war. It determined that, while the value of British exports to the United States expectedly diminished, the shortfall was made up by the increased value of British annual exports to the remaining British colonies in North America and to the

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30Quoted in Morgan (2004), 255-256.
British West Indian islands. Moreover, the Report stated that the value of merchandise imported into Great Britain from the British West Indies had increased; that there were more British ships and tonnage employed in the trade between Great Britain and the British West Indies in the years 1787-1789 than in the years 1770-1772; and that a greater number of British ships carried timber and provisions from the United States to the British West Indies after the war than they had before the war. Nevertheless, the Report conceded that after the war, the amount of rum, sugar, and coffee exported from the British West Indies to the United States declined by about one-third. Finally, and most importantly, the Report concluded that the British West Indian Islands showed a sustaining economic vitality.31

Moreover, the Quakers of Great Britain contributed to the debate about the economic vitality of the British West Indian colonies. With the encouragement of their American Friends, the British Quakers spearheaded a moral, humanitarian, and non-sectarian middle-class political movement to abolish Great Britain’s participation in the African-Atlantic slave trade. It was a pragmatic decision, one

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31Great Britain. Board of Trade and Plantations. *A report of the Lords of Committee of Privy Council, appointed for all matters relating to trade and foreign plantations, on the commerce and navigation between His Majesty’s Dominions, and the territories belonging to the United States of America* (London, 28 January 1791), 23, 25, 34-43 and 78-80. See also, Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: Thomas Irving’s testimony, 7 April 1791 (82), *Minutes of the Evidence,* 268; and “Return to an order. . . . an account showing the official value of the trade between Great Britain and the colonies in the West Indies,” 10 June 1817 (497), 1-2.
they and their allies believed they could win, but not the abolition of slavery itself, one they believed they could not win, at least, at that time.32

In January 1783, the London Yearly Meeting of Friends declared “that the importing of negroes [sic] from their native country” was “destructive of the natural rights of mankind,” and “a traffick calculated to enrich and aggrandize some upon the misery of others” should “be utterly abolished.”33

Subsequently, an unofficial committee of six Quaker businessmen met for the purpose of finding ways to alleviate the condition of slaves in the British West Indies and to stem the advancement of the slave trade from Africa. In 1784, James Phillips published two essays by the abolitionist Anglican Reverend James Ramsay, Vicar of Teston (in Kent), who had been a ship’s surgeon and also a medical supervisor of plantations on the island of St. Christopher [St. Kitts].34


33Society of Friends. Extracts from the minutes and advices of the year meeting of Friends held in London, from its first institution (London: James Phillips, 1783), 227-228.

Ramsay exposed the underlying concerns of those for and against the abolition of the slave trade and, as well, the institution of slavery itself. He was of the opinion that, because the sugar trade was of the utmost importance to Great Britain, “any sudden shock, that affects it, will be widely and deeply felt.” Thus, he asked: “supposing the African slave trade stopt, and the negroes on our sugar colonies made freeman, how will the measure affect the trade and interest of Great Britain and her colonies? . . . how are sugar plantations to be cultivated, without the usual supplies of slaves from Africa?” His answer involved a comprehensive sociological, humanitarian and Christian solution. “By stopping the importation of slaves into our colonies, you increase the value of those who are already there; you oblige their masters to use them well, and improve their condition.” 35

Ramsay believed there was already a critical mass of Creoles (native West Indian Negroes) who would provide necessary generations of labor to work in the fields and in the households and, even though they were universally more hardy, diligent, and trustworthy than Africans, their advancement must go hand in hand with their instruction in religion and moral life leading to conversion and a weekly Sabbath. 36 As an early and important voice protesting the slave trade and the

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35Ramsay (1784). *An inquiry*, quotes taken from 11-12, 31 and 40, respectively.

degrading treatment of plantation black African slaves, Ramsay’s writings, his personal association with the principal leaders of the abolitionist movement, and his testimony before a Parliamentary committee, assured him a place in history.\textsuperscript{37}

Yet, many other voices from a wide range of professions, occupations, and religious affiliations were heard. One, in particular, was the prolific writer and orator Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), a non-Quaker, who Cambridge University awarded in 1785 first prize for his \textit{An essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species, particularly the African, translated from a Latin dissertation}. Clarkson’s many subsequent history-commentary-rich publications revealed the horrors of the slave trade and his idealistic and political savvy speaking prowess made him one of the more recognizable spokespersons of the anti-slave-trade movement throughout Great Britain during the late 1780s and 1790s.

However, it was the founding on 22 May 1787, in London, of the \textit{Society instituted in 1787, for the purpose of effecting the abolition of the slave trade} that sparked the awareness of the anti-slave-trade movement among the British middle-class.

Encouraged by the success which has attended the publication of sundry Tracts against Slavery, this Society was formed in order to excite still more the publick attention to the *Slave Trade*; . . . to promote, among the Members of both Houses of Parliament, a disposition to inquire into the inhuman traffick; [and] the general sense of the Nation (. . . liberty, justice, and humanity) may be expressed by Petitions to Parliament.38

Petitions were circulated in churches, chambers of commerce, middle-class households, and Parliament and included the powerful phrase: “That no commerce can be politically wise, which is not morally just.”39

The Society appointed a Committee – known as the London Committee – of fifteen activists, among them leading London merchants whose connections to the West Indian trade were well known. The London Committee became the driving force of the movement to procure information and to collect monies to support the effort. It spawned committees throughout Britain and became indispensable in the mobilization of middle-class public opinion calling for the abolition of the slave trade.40

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38 Society for Abolition. *Society instituted in 1787, for the purpose of effecting the abolition of the slave trade* (London, 1787), 1.

39 Society for Abolition. Society established at Edinburgh for effecting the Abolition of The African Slave Trade. *Two of the petitions from Scotland, which were presented to the last Parliament, praying the abolition of the African slave trade* (Edinburgh: 1790), 4.

40 The London Committee: Granville Sharp (Chair), Samuel Hoare, Junior (Treasurer),
Founding member Josiah Wedgwood’s emblem of the kneeling slave "Am I Not A Man And A Brother?" became the Committee’s official seal and a cameo of fashion.41

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41Image credit, see Trustees of the Wedgewood Museum, Barlaston, Staffordshire, England, taken from Africans in America, WGBH/PBS Online.
Several months after the Society was founded, Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), the brilliant scientist, educator, and Rational Dissenter, gave vent to the aspirational and emotional grip by which the nascent abolitionist movement had progressively taken hold of people. His sermon to a society of Protestant Dissenters in Birmingham on the pernicious slave trade was intended to appeal to a wider audience.

His sermon was ecumenical. “I can join heartily with every denomination of Christians in the country, the catholics, the members of the establishment, the dissenters of all denominations. This is not the cause of Unitariaism, of Arianism, or of trinitarianism, but simply that of humanity, and our common christianity.”

His sermon was moralistic. “Few of you probably imagine,” that “to raise our sugar, and other West-India commodities, perhaps half a million of persons are annually destroyed, and in a manner peculiarly shocking to humanity. To die by an earthquake, by pestilence, or even by famine, would be merciful compared with the manner in which many of these poor wretches often perish.”

Priestley believed that those who condoned the “evil” circumstances of the slave trade must share in the nation’s guilt. “This guilt will lie the heaviest, no doubt, upon ministers of state, and all those who have the greatest influence in public measures; but a due proportion of it will be imputed to all those who do not exert whatever influence they may have to prevent it; which includes all who do
not petition and remonstrate on the subject.” But ultimately, “no less guilty are we ourselves,” he said, “in order to have our sugars, and other West-India commodities, a little cheaper . . . connive at, and encourage, these iniquitous proceedings. It is not, therefore, the abuse of trade, but the trade itself, that must be abolished, if any good be done in the case.”

Echoing Adam Smith and Reverend James Ramsey, Priestley questioned the economic efficacy of the sugar market: “how shall we get sugar, and other products of the West India islands, now raised by slaves, if slavery be abolished?” it is demonstrable that we may have sugar, and every other commodity that we now raise by means of slaves, even cheaper without slaves; either by encouraging the culture of them in Africa, and other suitable climates, and the purchasing them there with our own proper commodities (without the expence of settling and defending plantations of our own) or even by the labour of freemen in those plantations. Abolish slavery, and the labour now performed by slaves will not be considered as disgraceful. Priestley was adamant: “The trade itself, and the abuse of it, are so connected, that to authorize the one is to authorize the other also.”

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The British government could not ignore the public outcry. Therefore, pursuant to His Majesty’s Order in Council of 11 February 1788, it appointed the Lords of the Committee of Council to investigate “the present state of the trade to Africa, and particularly the trade in slaves, and concerning the effects and consequences of this trade, as well as in Africa and the West Indies, as to the general commerce of this kingdom.”

This decision provoked members of the House of Commons on 9 May 1788 to complain that the Lords had intervened in an investigatory process that they believed rightly belonged to the Commons. They were also annoyed that William Pitt (the Younger), Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister, had proposed postponing the debate on “a subject of great importance” until early in the next session because of the severe indisposition affecting their member colleague, William Wilberforce: “The resolution he meant to move related to the slave trade, a subject which, it was evident from the great number and variety of petitions presented to that House respecting it, had engaged the public attention to a very considerable extent.” Pitt further stated that the members of the House “would have a full opportunity of considering every part of the subject; first, whether the whole of the trade ought to be abolished, and if so, how? – and when? If it should

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be thought that the trade should only be put under certain regulations; what those regulations ought to be, and when they should take place?”

Several members of the House already knew where they stood on this momentous issue. Charles James Fox boldly expressed “that the slave trade ought not to be regulated, but destroyed.” Sir William Dolben intended to move a bill to regulate “the number of Africans put on board each ship, limiting that number in proportion to the tonnage of the vessel, in order to prevent their being crowded too close together; securing to them good and sufficient provisions, and other matters equally conclusive to their health and their accommodation.” Dolben believed that this “immediate remedy” would alleviate the misery of the shipboard shackled slaves “crammed together, like herrings in a barrel,” who generated “putrid disorders, and all sort of dangerous diseases” which even affected ships’ crews.

Opponents of Dolben’s bill questioned whether the alleged shipboard abuses existed and asserted that such legislation foreshadowed the abolition of the slave trade. London and Liverpool merchant-shipping interests petitioned against the

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44P. R. 1780-1796 (23) 9 May 1788, 592-609, quotes taken from 597 and 602, respectively.
45P. R. 1780-1796 (23) 9 May 1788, quote taken from 600-601.
46P. R. 1780-1796 (23) 21 May 1788, quote taken from 734-735.
47P. R. 1780-1796 (23) 9 May 1788, quote taken from 606.
bill which attacked their livelihood.\textsuperscript{49} In June, merchants and former slave ship captains – including Robert Norris, a well-known slaver and lobbyist for the Liverpool African Merchants – testified before the House about the living conditions of slaves and seaman on board slave ships, about their health, about their dietary intake, and about their respective mortality rates during the Middle Passage. They denied that an increase in the amount of space allocated to slaves or a reduction of the number of slaves per ship tonnage would have any appreciable effect on improving the living conditions of slaves and their life expectancy.\textsuperscript{50}

In response, Dolben and his supporters solicited “A Copy of a return made to the Comptroller of the Navy, of the dimensions of certain ships in the port of Liverpool, employed in the African slave trade.” They believed that such data would bolster their argument about the horrid conditions of confinement of slaves transported from the African coast to the British West Indian islands and that an acceptable calculus for the number of slaves \textit{per} shipping ton could then be agreed

\textsuperscript{49}P. R. 1780-1796 (24) 28 May 1788, 25-34, \textit{passim}.

upon. Dolben’s bill was sent to the House of Lords\textsuperscript{51} which returned the bill with 
an amendment: “of appointing commissioners to inquire into the claims of such 
merchants as should incur losses in consequences of the operation of the bill, and 
to assess the degree of compensation to be made.”\textsuperscript{52}

Dolben incorporated the amendment in a new bill which stipulated that ships 
could not transport more than 1.67 slaves \textit{per} ton to a maximum of 207 tons 
burthen after which only 1 slave \textit{per} ton could be carried. Opponents of the bill 
petitioned against it and Stephen Fuller, agent for the island of Jamaica, speculated 
that “an insurrection of the slaves, in consequence of passing such a bill . . . would 
endanger the lives of twenty thousand white inhabitants in the island of Jamaica 
alone.”\textsuperscript{53}

Finally, Dolben’s amended bill was sent to the House of Lords and, on 11 
July 1788, it received Royal Assent. The Act of 1788 would be renewed several 
times and its essential provisions were made permanent in the Slave Act of 1799.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{51}P. R. 1780-1796 (24) 11-12 and 16-18 June 1788, 77-78, 82-86, 89-91 and 
102-112, respectively.

\textsuperscript{52}P. R. 1780-1796 (24) 4 July 1788, 120.

\textsuperscript{53}P. R. 1780-1796 (24) 4 July 1788, 122.

\textsuperscript{54}P. R. 1780-1796 (24) 4, 8 and 10-11 July 1788, 120-125, and (26) 23 June 1789, 
temporary regulations,” 17 June 1788 (61), 395-400; “A bill to explain and amend an act,” 20 
March 1799; and “A bill,” 12 April 1799 (120), 303-334. See also, James W. LoGerfo, “Sir 
William Dolben and ‘The Cause of Humanity’: The Passage of the Slave Trade Regulation Act 
Dolben’s regulating Acts had an immediate and long-term effect by reducing the number of slaves legally transported on slave ships. The parliamentary legislation of 1788 and 1799 resulted in reducing the average number of slaves per voyage from nearly 400 to just under 300 per voyage. These reductions came about even though demand for slaves had not weakened and the prices paid for them had not declined.55 “Dolben’s Acts” were clearly a manifestation of the Society’s successful grass-roots-country-wide-petition campaign to create support for the abolition of Great Britain’s participation in the African-Atlantic slave trade.

On 25 April 1789, a detailed voluminous Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council . . . concerning the present state of the trade to Africa and particularly the trade in slaves, was published.56 At about the same time, the House of Commons had independently summoned, slave merchants, planters, naval officers, seamen, creditors, and agents of the sugar colonies to testify on the “State of the African Slave Trade.” A summary of their testimonies, in dated transcript format as Minutes of the Evidence, was separately issued (inclusive of selective slave populations and their importation) and reflected to a very large


extent what the members of the Society and abolition publicists had for years been asserting.\textsuperscript{57}

Slaves were obtained from the interior parts of Africa: “By various acts of acts of oppression, violence, or fraud;” or “Prisoners taken in war;” or “Free persons sold for debt;” or by “Domestic Slaves sold for the profit of their Masters.”

“That the mode of transporting the Slaves from Africa to the West Indies [the Middle Passage] necessarily exposes them to many and grievous sufferings, for which no regulations can provide an adequate remedy; and that, in consequence thereof, a large proportion of them has annually perished during the voyage.”

“That a large proportion of the Slaves so transported has also perished in the harbours in the West Indies previous to their being sold.”

“That the loss of newly-imported Negroes, within the first three years after their importation, bears a large proportion to the whole number imported.”

“That the natural increase of population, among the Slaves in the islands appears to have been impeded” because of “the inequality of the number of the sexes in the importation from Africa. . . . The general dissoluteness of manners among the Slaves, and the want of proper regulations for the encouragement of marriages, and of rearing children. . . . Particular diseases . . . too severe labour . . .

insufficient or improper food. . . . Those diseases which affect a large proportion of Negro children in their infancy.”

“That the Slave Trade has been found by experience to be peculiarly injurious and destructive to the British Seaman . . . and that the mortality among them has been much greater than in His Majesty’s ships stationed on the Coast of Africa, or than has been usual in British vessels employed in any other trade.”

“That the continent of Africa . . . furnishes several valuable articles of Commerce highly important to the trade and manufactures of this Kingdom. . . . That such commerce might be reasonably expected to increase in proportion to the progress of civilization and improvement on that Continent [and] that an extensive commerce with Africa in these commodities might probably be substituted in the place of that which is now carried on in Slaves.”

Importantly, the summary concluded that “from the evidence which has been received respecting the present state of these Islands . . . it appears that no considerable or permanent inconvenience would result from discontinuing the farther importation of African Slaves.”

A consequence of great significance emerging from this large and diverse pool of testimonies was a debate in Parliament as to whether Great Britain’s

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participation in the African-Atlantic slave trade should be abolished. The leading
and renowned spokesperson for the abolitionists in the House of Commons was
William Wilberforce (1759-1833), a man of good birth and financial means, a
philanthropist, and an evangelical Christian. Although he would not become a
formal member of the Society until 1791, he had for many years taken a slow,
cautious and deliberate path to associate himself with those who had. From as early
as 1783, he met with Reverend James Ramsay and his sympathetic associates
(variously known as the “Testonites,” the “Saints,” and the “Clapham Sect”),
Thomas Clarkson, and the Thornton family to whom he was related.\(^{59}\)

On the 12\(^{th}\) of May 1789, Wilberforce rose in the Commons and announced
that what he was about to say was of such “magnitude” not only “of this country,
nor of Europe alone, but of the whole world, and of posterity.” Therefore, “I hope
now to prove, by authentic evidence, that, in truth, the West Indies have nothing to
fear from the total and immediate abolition of the slave trade.” He urged his fellow
members to “take into consideration the petitions which have been presented
against the slave trade,” together with their supporting documents and the recently
published extensive two-part *Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council* . . .

University Press, 1964). Wilberforce and Thornton were involved in foreign trade and banking.
Bank Ltd., 1958), 186-188 *et seq.*
concerning the present state of the trade to Africa, and particularly the trade in Slaves.\textsuperscript{60}

Wilberforce was confident that the evidence depicting the ill-treatment of the Negroes, especially during the Middle Passage, would be decisive. “Nay, indeed, what need is there of any evidence? The number of deaths speaks for itself, and makes all such enquiry superfluous.” He was dismissive of claims that “Liverpool will be ruined by the abolition;” that “commerce would be ruined, and our manufactures would migrate to France;” and that “if we relinquish the slave trade, France will take it up.” Those assertions were “absurd,” he said, “since the whole outward-bound tonnage of the Slave Trade amounts to only 1-fifteenth of the outward bound tonnage of Liverpool.” The petitions laid on the table from manufacturers were “not dated at Havre, or any port in France,” and that “France is too enlightened a nation, to begin pushing a scandalous as well as ruinous traffic, at the very time when England sees her folly, and resolves to give it up.”\textsuperscript{61}

Wilberforce was no less kind to the West India planters and merchants who did not trust “authentic documents” originating from the islands and “a variety of other proofs” but instead relied on the writings of the pro-slavery and pro-slave

\textsuperscript{60}P. R. 1780-1796 (26) 12 May 1789, quotes taken from 130-131.

\textsuperscript{61}P. R. 1780-1796 (26) 12 May 1789, quotes taken from 136, 142, 143 and 146.
trade “Mr. Long, whose works are looked up to in the islands as a sort of West India gospel.”

However, Wilberforce did not introduce a bill to abolish the slave trade but rather a series of “Resolutions” which he hoped the august body would translate into legislation. He submitted interpretative data of the number of deaths and rates of mortality of African slaves who were transported to the British West Indies. He insinuated the potential support for amelioration: “by obviating the causes which have hitherto operated to impede the natural increase of the slaves, and of lessening the demand for manual labor, without diminishing the profit of the planter.” He was persuaded “that no considerable or permanent inconvenience would result from discontinuing the farther importation of African slaves.”

Moreover, reflecting on what Joseph Priestley had recently voiced and the testimonies in the Minutes of the Evidence, Wilberforce proposed that “an extensive commerce with Africa . . . might probably be substituted in place of that which is now carried on in slaves. . . . Why may we not hope, ere long, to see Hans-towns established on the coast of Africa, as they were on Baltic?”

“Shame,” “guilt,” and “justice” were the underlying principles of

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62 P. R. 1780-1796 (26) 12 May 1789, 137 and 141.

63 P. R. 1780-1796 (26) 12 May 1789, quotes taken from 150-154.

64 P. R. 1780-1796 (26) 12 May 1789, quotes taken from 151 and 148, respectively.
Wilberforce’s advocacy. “The shame upon myself, in common, indeed, with the whole of Parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty – we ought all to plead guilty.” “The principle, however, upon which I found the necessity of abolition is not policy but justice – but though justice be the principle of the measure, yet, I trust, I shall distinctly prove it to be reconcilable with our truest political interest.” “I would never rest till I had effected its abolition.” 65

William Wilberforce was more a gifted orator than a politician. The House of Commons was not yet prepared to have Great Britain withdraw from the African-Atlantic slave trade and it chose not act on his Declarations.66  

Nevertheless, the debate in the Commons continued. Charles James Fox, a stanch pro-abolition member, provocatively reminded his colleagues “that the question of the abolition of the slave trade, was a question between humanity on the one side, and interest on the other. Nothing could be more disgraceful than for that the House to decide against the abolition from the principles of interest, unless

65P. R. 1780-1796 (26) 12 May 1789, quotes taken from 131, 137 and 136, respectively.

66See P. R. 1780-1796 (26) 12 May 1789, 154-165. See also, Planter. West-Indian trade and islands. Commercial reasons for the non-abolition of the slave trade, in the West-India Islands, by a planter. And merchant of many years residence in the West-Indies (London, 1789); and William Innes. The slave-trade indispensable: in answer to the speech of William Wilberforce. Esq. on the 13th of May, 1789. By a West-India-Merchant. London. 1790.
they had the courage positively to affirm, that interest was their motive.”  

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Meanwhile, the evidence from those who had had first-hand experience in the African-Atlantic slave trade continued to pile up. In 1790 and early 1791, more than 1,000 pages comprised the Minutes of the Evidence and revealed every aspect of the slave-trade enterprise. There were details about slaver-tribal transactions and forceful incursions into the countryside to capture and enslave indigenous peoples; about tribal socio-political structures; about the extraordinary exchanges between Robert Norris and the Reverend Thomas Clarkson; about Africa’s commodity resources; about the mortality of slaves and seamen during the Middle Passage; and about slave nutrition, punishment, productivity and propagation.  

So when, on Monday, the 18th of April 1791, William Wilberforce rose once again in the House of Commons, he was well prepared to advocate abolishing Great Britain’s participation in the African-Atlantic slave trade. In his wide-ranging yet detailed nuanced address, he reflected on testimonies before the House which had “established, beyond contradiction, the existence of those acts of fraud, oppression, rapine, and murder;” and that slavers bribed “The Black Kings” by supplying them “with powder, ball, and ammunition, to go to war, and to give

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67R. 1780-1796 (26) 23 June 1789, 288.

68See Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: 1790 (71-73), and 1791 (82).
them all the encouragement that laid in [their] power . . . to get Slaves.”

Wilberforce was confident that the people of Great Britain “would abolish the slave trade,” when “its injustice and cruelty should be fairly laid before them.” They would be appalled, as he was, by the incidence of mortality during the torturous Middle Passage of not only slaves but also of seaman: “this trade was the grave, rather than the nursery.” They would also oppose bringing new lands into cultivation by “fresh importations of African slaves,” the “impolicy” of which, he argued, would result in “the dreadful mortality that attended the opening of new lands.” His words were telling: “in short, the history of this commerce was written throughout in characters of blood.”

Finally, Wilberforce took another important step toward fulfilling the promise he had made two years earlier. He requested “That the Chairman be instructed to move for leave to bring in a bill to prevent the farther importation of

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70P. R. 1780-1796 (29) 18 April 1791, pp. 182-220 (quotes taken from 198, 210 and 213).
slaves into the British colonies in the West Indies.” He declared that “the abolition of the slave trade” was indispensably required “not only by religion and morality, but by every principle of sound policy” and that it was “the most important question, on which a House of Commons had ever been called on to decide.”71

The reaction to Wilberforce’s speech was immediate, rhetorically impassioned, and above all critical. Characterized as a plea of “pathetic eloquence” and “mistaken humanity,” the alleged “barbarous practices” of the slave trade were nevertheless the “consequence of the natural law of Africa” to which “the Africans themselves had no objection.” If Great Britain were to continue to carry on the West India commerce and cultivation, the slave trade was an absolute necessity. “Parliament could not abolish the trade; they might relinquish it; but to whom? To France, Spain, and Holland, and other countries, who would take it up, and share it among them.”72

Sir William Young, who recently had inherited four colonial sugar plantations populated by nearly 1,000 slaves, offered a coherent and substantive critique of Wilberforce’s motion to abolish Great Britain’s participation in the African-Atlantic slave trade. Although he appreciated Wilberforce’s “subtle argument” and “impassioned address” which “comprised all that could be expected

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71P. R. 1780-1796 (29) 18 April 1791, quotes taken from 182-183 and 220.

72P. R. 1780-1796 (29) 18 April 1791, 220-225 (quote taken from 225).
from the most learned, the most acute, and the most eloquent advocate of the cause,” Young objected to “this crude and indolent simplification of all state policy, this abolishing a trade, by at once voting abolished.” Instead, he defended the “interests of private property and of the public commerce” against the future “prospect of indemnification from a new trade, to originate in the farther culture and civilization of Africa, as a natural result of suppressing the traffic for slaves.”

Great Britain may abandon her share of this trade, but cannot abolish it. The general question of abolition of the trade for slaves to Africa is not before us. We are not an Assembly of delegates from France, from Spain, from Holland, and other powers now engaged in that commerce, but the legislature of a single nation, whose dereliction of the trade on their own part, cannot any ways suppress, and . . . will eventually aggravate the miseries incident to a system of traffic, which every enlightened man must acknowledge, and every good man must deplore.73

William Pitt, Chancellor of the Exchequer rebutted Young’s advocacy with an impassioned, detailed-laden plea declaring that “the slave trade was founded in injustice,” absent of the “laws of morality,” and was simply “an evil” of great magnitude.74


74P. R. 1780-1796 (29) 19 April 1791, 288-289 et seq.
Charles James Fox went even further than Pitt in his strident critique of the slave trade. He declared it absolutely criminal to deprive human beings their personal freedom and that it was “repugnant to all laws, human and divine.” If his colleagues voted that evening not to abolish the slave trade, they would be giving “parliamentary sanction to rapine, robbery, and murder; for a system of rapine, robbery, and murder, the slave trade had now most clearly been proved to be.”

However, Fox added an ambiguous reservation of sorts: that the time frame stipulated in the bill to abolish the slave trade “should be left in blank, and that the blank might be filled up, by naming any period of one, two, three or four years, as the House might think expedient.” But, at the same time, he “assured the friends of abolition,” that “his warmest efforts should be used in promoting the same cause.”

In the end, the pro-slave-trade members mounted an effective defense of the West Indian planter and merchant classes, and most members of the House remained comfortable with the status quo and apprehensive of the consequences of abolition. On 20 April 1791, Wilberforce’s motion was defeated by a vote of 163 to 88.

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75P. R. 1780-1796 (29) 19 April 1791, 296-297 and 307.

76P. R. 1780-1796 (29) 19 April 1791, 241-243 et seq. and 310.
Yet, within the space of just one year, unanticipated events commanded the attention of parliamentarians and West Indian planters and merchants. They witnessed the international sugar trade being turned upside down, and Great Britain’s participation in the African-Atlantic slave trade move one step closer to abolition.

In July 1791, just three months after Wilberforce’s bill had been defeated, a sixteen-page pamphlet was anonymously published under the title: *An address to the people of Great Britain, on the utility of refraining from the use of West India sugar and rum*. It later became known that its author was William Fox, a London radical dissenter and abolitionist, whose message was both direct and appealing to middle-class consciousness. Fox’s pamphlet passed through more than two dozen editions and reached a circulation of at least 250,000.77

Fox employed tough polemical language to persuade his readership that their continuing consumption of sugar and rum would not only support Great Britain’s participation in the slave-trade but also that they would be complicit in a criminal act. “For let us not think, that the crime rests alone with those that conduct the traffic, or the legislature by whom it is protected: if we purchase the commodity we

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77See Timothy Whelan, “William Fox, Martha Gurney, and Radical Discourse of the 1790s,” *E-CS*, 42:3 (Spring, 2009), 397-398 and 401-404.
participate in the crime. The slave-dealer, the slave-holder, and slave-driver are virtually the agents of the consumer, and may be considered as employed and hired by him to procure the commodity.” Therefore, consumers should abstain from the use of sugar and rum “until our West India Planters themselves have prohibited the importation of additional slaves . . . or till we can obtain the produce of the sugar cane in some other mode, unconnected with slavery, and unpolluted with blood.”

Later that summer, on 22 August 1791, a horrendous slave insurrection took place on the commodity-rich French West Indian island of Saint-Domingue which would have huge long-lasting social, political, and economic consequences. In particular, it would precipitate a sharp fall in the island’s sugar production and exports and contribute to the eventual collapse of France’s extraordinary international sugar-trade and business.

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France’s involvement in the international sugar trade went back centuries. In 1670, France imported about 20 million pounds of sugar; in 1730, about 60

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78 William Fox. *An address to the people of Great Britain, on the utility of refraining from the use of West India sugar and rum* (London, 1791), 1-16 (quotes taken from 8 and 12).

million pounds; and, at the time of the French Revolution, about 215 million pounds. Historian Robert Louis Stein has characterized this important phenomenon thusly: “The astonishing growth in the use of sugar in France and throughout Europe occasioned the development of one of the largest businesses in the Old Regime. By the time of the French Revolution, sugar was one of the most important commodities in French foreign trade, and raw French sugar from the French West Indies dominated the European market.”

Unlike Great Britain, which obtained its overwhelming supply of sugar from its eleven West Indian islands, France depended very much on just three of its colonial West Indian islands – Saint-Domingue, Martinique, and Guadeloupe – for nearly all of the sugar it imported. Another difference was that Great Britain’s sugar colonies overwhelmingly produced raw brown muscovado and this created a huge domestic sugar refining industry. The French West Indian islands, however, produced both muscovado (sucre brut) and also a partially cleansed whitish clayed sugar (sucre terré). Both sugars required refining either in mainland France or in other refining industries primarily located in the Dutch Republic and Germany.

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The pivotal role of Saint-Domingue, “The Jewel of the West Indies,” in supplying sugar to France was emphasized in *A Report from the Committee of Warehouses of the United East-India Company, relative to the Culture of Sugar* (1792). Based on French and English sources, the *Report* stipulated that, in 1726, England imported 668,000 cwt. of sugar from its West Indian plantations while Saint-Domingue produced 400,000 cwt. of sugar. But, in 1742, Saint-Domingue produced 848,000 cwt. while England’s total sugar imports were 731,000 cwt. With the added supply of 622,500 cwt. from Guadeloupe and Martinique, France’s imports increased to 1,470,500 cwt., a quantity Great Britain’s imports would not reach until the closing years of the Seven Years War.82

During 1783-1789, Saint-Domingue’s population of approximately 465,000 slaves and 40,000 whites operated about 800 sugar plantations and exported an annual average of about 1,241,000 cwt. That was equivalent to about sixty-seven percent of Great Britain’s total annual average sugar imports of about 1,855,000 cwt. In 1790, Saint-Domingue’s exports rose to about 1,345,000 cwt., which was about 71.5 percent of about 1,882,00 cwt. of Great Britain’s sugar imports. But France also imported nearly 577,000 cwt. from Martinique and Guadeloupe. That

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brought France’s total sugar imports from those three islands to about 1,922,000 cwt.).

Most of France’s sugar imports passed through the ports of Nantes, Bordeaux and Marseilles, and to lesser extent via Le Havre, La Rochelle, Dunkerque, and Bayonne. When sugar refineries at La Rochelle, Nantes, and Orléans could no longer handle the sheer volume of France’s imported sugar, much of it was re-exported to refineries in Europe, especially to those in the Dutch Republic and in Germany.

The Saint-Domingue slave insurrection of 22 August 1791 jolted sugar markets and precipitated the redirection of the international trade in sugar. It also became the benchmark for evaluating future sugar production and consumption. According to Robert Louis Stein, it relegated France “to a secondary role in the international sugar trade” and had an immediate painful effect on Parisian consumers of sugar.

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84See Stein (1988), 106-115; and Geggus (Apr., 1981), 285-305. The Free Port status of Marseilles was prohibited from importing sugar into France per se and most of its sugar traded on Mediterranean markets.

85See James McQueen’s testimony before Select Committee in Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. 1831-1832 (381), 104, 106 and 108.
When crowds in Paris rioted in late January, 1792, they were not protesting against the rising price of bread, the usual reason for such actions during the French Revolution. Instead, they were reacting to the increased cost of sugar. This was an unprecedented phenomenon that reflected the recent popular acceptance of sugar in Paris . . . sugar was now considered a necessity by large numbers of the capital’s residents. . . . What had long been an expensive luxury was becoming a cheap necessity – at least in Paris – and during the Revolution, the Parisian crowds treated what they believed to be unjustifiable price increases in sugar with almost the same gravity as they treated rises in the price of bread. They therefore took to the streets to demand that the government set a reasonable price for sugar.86

*     *     *     *

Great Britain became the principal beneficiary of France’s declining international sugar trade. This was especially true for the port and the city of London which not only dominated the financial and commercial organization of Britain’s sugar business but also boasted of having about 100 working refineries. During the final decade of the 18th century, about sixty-six percent of Britain’s

sugar imports passed through the port of London.  

The seasonality of the Caribbean-Atlantic shipping cycle determined that most of the British plantation sugar delivered annually to the port of London took place between the months of July and October. In 1756, 203 ships delivered about 60,000 hogsheads of sugar to the port. But, in 1791, 252 ships delivered about 93,000 hogsheads; in 1792, 283 ships delivered about 106,000 hogsheads; in 1793, 304 ships delivered about 121,000 hogsheads; and, in 1794, 433 ships delivered about 140,000 hogsheads. The increasing ship traffic congested the river Thames and also revealed the deplorable state in off-loading cargoes. Available warehouse space on the Legal Quays could accommodate but 32,000 hogsheads. Thus, it was not uncommon that sugar hogsheads would sometimes be piled one on top of the other some six or eight high on the quays making them vulnerable to plunder and smuggling.

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87See Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: 1807 (65) “An account of the quantity of sugar imported from all parts into Great Britain,” in Report from the Committee on the Commercial State of the West India Colonies,” 72; 1829 (340) “Customs and excise duties,” 10; 1847-1848 (400), 2; and Draper, 432-466, passim.

88Great Britain’s sugar imports and exports were recorded in either hogshead (Hhd.) or hundredweight (Cwt. = 112 lbs.). At the port of London during the period 1760-1795, the equivalent of one hogshead of sugar ranged from about 11.56 cwt. to about 14.10 cwt. for an annual average of about 12.61 cwt. See “An examined copy of the from 25th March 1756, to 25th March 1796,” submitted by James Allen, Secy to the West India Planters and Merchants, 11 April 1796, 242-244, 296-298, 309, 315-317, 323-324, 388-389, 397, 403-433, and Appendixes (Hh.), (Pp.), (D.), (G.), (M. m.), and (W. w.), in Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: Report from the committee appointed to enquire into the best mode of providing sufficient accommodation for the increased trade and shipping of the port of London, etc. etc. etc (London, 13 May 1796); Second Report from the Select Committee upon The Improvement of the
As early as 1793, the port’s deficiencies were publicly exposed by William Vaughan, a successful London merchant with West Indian estates, diplomat, and director of the Royal Exchange Assurance Corporation, who published a tract advocating changes in the port’s infrastructure and the establishment of wet docks. In 1796, Vaughan presented his proposals to a parliamentary committee charged to determine the best mode of improving the trade and shipping of the port of London.\textsuperscript{89} It was subsequently determined that:

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
such was the crowded state of the river Thames, the legal quays, and warehouses for the reception of merchandize, that goods remained at times for some months before they could be warehoused or put in a place of safety and therefore the harbor itself, although perhaps one of the best and largest in Europe, being too small for the current trade, it became indispensably necessary to enlarge or extend it, for this purpose, recourse was had to docks.\textsuperscript{90}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Port of London} (11 July 1799), 250, 317-319, 323, 328 and 339; and \textit{Report from the select committee appointed to consider of the means of improving and maintaining the foreign trade of the country. West India Docks.} 1823 (411), 18, 21, 43-44, 143, 146, 184 and 373. See also, \textit{West India Planters and Merchants. Report of a committee of West-India merchants respecting the business of landing and delivering sugar at the Legal Quays.}(At Marine-Society’s Office. London. 20 December 1793), 36-44; and Stern (Feb. 1952), 59-77.

\textsuperscript{89}Vaughan: (1793), 10 and 21; and (1795), 1-8.

\textsuperscript{90}Testimony of Thomas Groves, Inspector General of imports in the port of London, in Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. \textit{Report from the select committee appointed to consider of the means of improving and maintaining the foreign trade of the country. West India Docks.} 1823 (411), 44, and George Hibbert’s testimony, 142-146, 173 and 176.
The ports of Bristol and Liverpool were also challenged by their outmoded navigational and structural architecture. But, while Liverpool had benefitted by making large investments into port improvement, Bristol, had not. Nevertheless, Bristol and Liverpool imported an appreciable quantity of sugar from the British West Indies. Bristol imported an annual average of about 241,000 cwt. during 1790-1792 and about 331,000 cwt. during 1799-1802. For these same years, Liverpool’s sugar imports were an annual average of about 227,000 cwt. and about 512,000 cwt., respectively. Scotland’s ports of Glasgow, Greenock and Leith together imported an annual average of about 139,000 cwt. and about 272,000 cwt. respectively. Taken together, the annual average quantity of sugar imported into these five ports amounted to about 1,255,000 cwt. (1790-1792) and 2,369,000 cwt. (1799-1802), respectively, that is, about 48 percent of London’s annual average imports.92

* * *

In the late 1780s, the British colony of Jamaica, which possessed about 775 sugar estates and a slave population of about 256,000, was the largest producer and exporter of sugar among Great Britain’s eleven West Indian islands. From the time

91 Morgan (1992), 627-628, and (1993), 186-188 and 203-205.

92 Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. 1802-1803 (138(1)) (2)) and 1808 (337(1)) and (338 (2)).
of the outbreak of the Seven Years’ War to the slave insurrection on the French island of Saint-Domingue (1756-1791), the port of London took an annual average about 46 percent of Jamaica’s sugar. But, in the years immediately preceding the slave insurrection (1788-1791), the annual average increased to approximately 67 percent. Thus, in the decade following the slave insurrection, Jamaica became the *de facto* leading producer and exporter of West Indian sugar.\(^9\)

However, according to David Geggus, the British colony was burdened with societal and political apprehension: “When the slaves and free coloureds of Saint-Domingue rebelled in the autumn of 1791, Jamaican society faced the greatest challenge of its history. The dramatic spectacle of violent self-liberation was acted out almost before the eyes of its blacks and mulattoes, while the ruling white elite experienced a dilemma that seemed to oppose its prosperity to its survival.”\(^9\)

Moreover, owing to persistent and disturbing rumors that Parliament would soon abolish the slave trade, several members of the Hon. House of Assembly of Jamaica speculated on just how long Jamaica’s preeminence in the West Indian sugar trade could continue. The abolition of the slave trade, they opined, would

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“put a stop to all further improvements in the culture of sugars and coffee;” that it would “reduce the quantity of sugars and coffee exported to Great Britain;” that it would “cause bankruptcies, create discontents, and ultimately interrupt the peace and tranquility, and affect the internal safety of Jamaica;” and, finally, “The slaves, seeing the white people in a state of discord with each other, would do what they have done in Hispaniola; they would rebel, burn the estates, and destroy the inhabitants.”

*  *  *  *

On April 2, 1792, William Wilberforce once again rose in the House of Commons to advocate the abolition of Great Britain’s participation in the African-Atlantic slave trade. He “trusted that time and reflection” would have convinced his colleagues “that the trade was as injurious to their interests, as it was disgraceful to their feelings,” and that those “who loved justice, would condemn the trade, for the man that loved justice must love mercy also, the one principle naturally and necessarily followed the other.” Wilberforce’s lengthy and detailed remarks dug deeper into the horrors committed during the Middle Passage. He refuted the claims that abolition would be “the ruin of commerce” and would “injure the manufactures of this country.” Such claims, he declared, had not “the

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95Jamaica Assembly (1793), quotes taken from 9-13.
least colour of proof, nor the smallest foundation in truth.” In conclusion, he proposed a bill that “the trade carried on by British subjects, for the purpose of obtaining slaves on the coast of Africa, ought to be abolished.”

Opponents of Wilberforce’s proposal produced a “Petition of the Planters, Merchants, Mortgagees, Annuitants, and others” that reiterated not only the traditional arguments against abolition but also the lesson to be learned from the Saint-Domingue slave insurrection.

That it is notorious that the negroes now consider an abolition of the slave trade to be synonymous with a general emancipation; and that, should the abolition take place, they will, in consequence of this idea, become . . . less contented and less happy in their situation; but, most probably, they will be urged to acts of desperate revolt, and involve themselves, their masters, and the colonies, in one common ruin.

The petitioners sought to protect the financial and proprietary interests of the British colonists: “if it shall be decided that the slave trade shall be abolished . . . the colonists, their creditors, and others connected with the West Indies, may be fully indemnified.”

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96P. R. 1780-1796 (32) 2 April 1792, pp. 154-175 (quotes taken from 156, 165, 172 and 175).

It was late into debate when Henry Dundas, the Home Secretary, rose to speak and unexpectedly scuttled Wilberforce’s uncomplicated proposed slave-trade abolition bill. Although Dundas had long been viewed as an opponent of Great Britain’s participation in the African-Atlantic slave trade, he now appeared to be serving the interests of the pro-slave trade lobby. He explained his current position to “His honourable friends,” that even though they “had very well known that he had long entertained the same opinion with regard to the abolition of the slave trade . . . he had differed from them as to the mode of effecting it.” To that end, he proposed inserting the word “gradually” into the controlling language of the bill to abolish Great Britain’s participation in the African-Atlantic slave trade. He was successful and the question: “That the abolition of the slave trade ought to be gradually abolished” carried 230 for and 85 against.\footnote{P. R. 1780-1796 (32) 2 April 1792, 221-223, 242 and 258 (for quote).}

On 3 May 1792, the House of Commons resolved that after 1 January 1796 “it shall not be lawful to import any African Negroes into any British Colonies or Plantations.”\footnote{Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. Resolutions considered in committee of the whole House, 1792 (82), 305-310, and Resolutions of the Commons, Communicated at a Conference, 3 May 1792, 371-374.} While it may be argued that the campaign for abolition was now one important step closer to fruition, it would take yet another fifteen years before Parliament, on 25 March 1807, formally passed “An Act for the Abolition of the
Recent scholarship has determined that during the period 1700-1809 slavers shipped 6,686,000 captive slaves from the west coast of Africa to the West Indies and the Americas. That was slightly more than half the number of slaves shipped during the entirety of the African-Atlantic slave trade. This forced migration of millions of men, women, and children embarked from about two dozen ports from Senegambia to Angola for a harrowing sea journey across the Atlantic – the Middle Passage – during which time from 10 to 20 percent would die. Great Britain’s slave-trading operation was huge (3,120,000) compared to the Portuguese (1,903,000) and the French (1,052,000). British slavers obtained most of their captives from Sierra Leone, Gold Coast, Bight of Biafra and West-Central Africa and shipped them to the British West Indian colonies; the Portuguese captives were exported from Luanda, Benguela, and Angola and shipped to Rio de Janeiro, Bahia, and Pernambuco in Brazil; and French captives were taken principally from the Bight of Benin and West-Central Africa and shipped to the French West Indies (see Table 1.).

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[100] See Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: 24 May 1793 (86); 18 Feb 1794 (92); 2 June 1794 (1); 22 Feb 1796 (97); 7 March 1796 (97); 5 July 1797 (1); 3 May 1799 (1); 21 April 1806 (124); 13 June 1806 (213); and 1806-1807 (92).
Table I.  **ESTIMATED SLAVE EXPORTS FROM WEST COAST OF AFRICA: 1700-1809.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1700-1809</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>1760-1809</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>3,120,000</td>
<td>46.67</td>
<td>1,778,000</td>
<td>51.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>1,903,000</td>
<td>28.47</td>
<td>772,000</td>
<td>22.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>1,052,000</td>
<td>15.74</td>
<td>578,000</td>
<td>16.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>352,000</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>117,000</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>208,000</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>165,000</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>51,000</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>6,686,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>3,450,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The primary purpose of the infamous British slaver voyages was to barter British goods and produce for African slaves who would be transported from West Africa to the West Indies and the Americas and sold as slave labor for the production of sugar and other commodities for export. These trading and shipping operations have been referred to as simply and, at times, incorrectly, as “the triangular trade,” a term that Professor Kenneth Morgan has cogently clarified.

In this triangular operation, exports were shipped to the West African coast on the first leg of a voyage and exchanged for slaves; black cargoes were taken across the Atlantic via the notorious ‘middle passage’ on the second leg; and staple commodities were loaded on board ships in the plantation colonies for the final leg of the voyage home. The trade was a bonanza that offered the chance of making good profits on each leg of a voyage. But this riskiest form of Atlantic commerce was subject to high transport costs, problems of seasonal timing, and high mortality rates for crew and slaves.¹⁰²

However, a close examination of the planning, timing, and the execution of these operations, including those made in the interiors of both England and West Africa, reveals that it was an extraordinarily complicated and complex business.

¹⁰²Morgan: (1992), 637.
Firstly, after British slaver ships offloaded their slaves in the West Indies and the Americas, they returned to Great Britain with a rather modest amount of commodities because they were not outfitted to load up large and bulky cargoes. That task was more suitably left to transatlantic oceangoing Indiamen. Secondly, the settlement of accounts required a coordinated and sophisticated financial mechanism which usually employed bills of exchange and engaged commission agents who were accountable to the London financial network.\textsuperscript{103}

After the disestablishment of the Royal African Company in 1698, British merchants principally from Bristol, Liverpool and London nevertheless continued their engagement in the African-Atlantic slave trade. During the first half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, London led in the number of slaver voyages followed by Bristol and Liverpool. But, from mid-18\textsuperscript{th} century to 1807, Liverpool took the lead by a wide margin followed by London and Bristol.\textsuperscript{104} Between 1776 and 1807, the slaver merchants of Liverpool, London, and Bristol together commanded about 91 percent of the estimated slaver voyages that originated from Great Britain to the


\textsuperscript{104}See Morgan (1992), “Table 2 Distribution of the Slave Trade from London, Bristol and Liverpool 1699-1807 (annual averages),” 639, and with reference to Richardson (1989), App. 185-191.
west coast of Africa with Liverpool leading with an estimated 70 percent of those voyages.\textsuperscript{105}

The reasons for Liverpool’s relative success were many. In particular, the slaver merchants of Liverpool exhibited a greater skill in developing trusted business and personal networks with their indigenous counterparts in all major African markets. Anthony Tibbles, the notable Liverpool scholar and Keeper, Merseyside Maritime Museum, summed up Liverpool’s contribution to the slave trade: “During the course of the period 1700 to 1807, Liverpool was responsible for half the British trade which meant that her ships carried approximately 1.5 million Africans into enslavement, more than a tenth of all Africans who were transported over more than four centuries. So the title, capital of the slave trade is not an exaggeration.”\textsuperscript{106}


In the late 1780s, the estimated number of slaves resident in the British West Indian islands was about 462,000 slaves, about the same number that resided on the island of Saint-Domingue. The estimated annual average number of slaves imported into the British West India islands was about 28,000. Jamaica was the leading slave-owning island with about 256,000 slaves (four times the number of slaves on the island of Barbados). It also led in the number of slaves imported from Africa with an estimated annual average of about 8,700 slaves. After exporting some of those slaves to other territories, Jamaica still retained an estimated imported annual average of about 5,000 slaves.\textsuperscript{107} During 1789-1791, in particular, Jamaica increased slave imports to an annual average of about 13,000 and retained about 11,000. However, immediately following the 1791 slave insurrection on Saint-Domingue, the number of slaves Jamaica imported rose: in 1792, to about 16,000 (retained about 13,000); and, in 1793, to about 23,000 (retained about 21,000).\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{107}Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: “An account of the number of slaves imported into the British West India Islands from the coast of Africa, in the years 1789, 1790, 1791, 1792, and 1793,” 22-24 March 1794 (1-3), 193-196, 223-224 and 227; “An account of the ships that have arrived from the coast of Africa in any of the British West India Islands . . . also the number of the slaves shipped on board each ship,” 22 June 1799 (003), 453 and 456; “An account of the ships . . . and the number of the slaves shipped on board each ship . . . with the account of those who arrived in any of the said Islands;” 25 June 1799 (003), 467 and 470; Minutes of the Evidence, 20 April-22 June 1789 (68), 62; and Report 1789 (70), Part 2, IV, Nos. 15, 17 and 18, 272, 279-283 and 288-290, respectively.

\textsuperscript{108}See Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: “An account of the number of Negroes imported into, and exported from the Island of Jamaica,” 12 May 1789 (67), 239; “An account of the number of ships . . . which have entered, in the year 1787 and 1788, in the several
Although British West Indian planters and merchants welcomed the news of Saint-Domingue’s loss of sugar exports, British sugar refiners, bakers, grocers, and end consumers did not and they complained about the extraordinary high prices they were still being asked to pay for British imported sugar. During 1783-1789, London’s imported raw-brown *muscovado* sold at an annual average of 46-47 shillings *per* cwt. But, in 1790, the price suddenly spiked to 63s. 2d. *per* cwt. It did so again, in 1791, even “before the Insurrection in St. Domingo.” At Christmas time, the price rose to 82 shilling *per* cwt.¹⁰⁹

The high price of sugar in Great Britain led to renewed efforts to increase imports not only from the British West Indian plantations but also from the British East Indies. There was the widely-held perception that a significant amount of quality sugar from the East Indies could be imported into Great Britain which not only would increase the amount of sugar for domestic consumption and re-export

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¹⁰⁹Report 1792, 23, and S R. 1792, 12 and 33 (for quote).
but also would lead to the moderation of the price of sugar to the refiner, grocer and the consumer. Later testimony before a Select Committee of the House of Commons recalled that “after the destruction of St. Domingo the East India Company made the most strenuous efforts in order to raise a large quantity of sugar in India, to fill up the vacuum which the destruction of St. Domingo had created.”

The obstacles to importing East Indies sugar into Great Britain were firmly embedded in the history of India and the monopoly held by the East-India Company. Early in the 17th century, Asian sugars began arriving in Europe and England in the ballast of ships from Canton, China. But these ballast sugars were different in character and quality from the raw-brown muscovado and whitish-clayed sugars arriving from Brazil and the Caribbean. Produced by a non-Western indigenous technology, these ballast sugars were, at first, often damp with a tendency to liquefy but later on exhibited a drier powdered, crystalline and candy structure. The traditional sugar produced in India was commonly known as khand (a white to pale yellow in color and small crystalline in structure) that married easily with tea. It had for centuries been supplied to the caravan trade to Persia, Afghanistan and Central Asia. It was only in the early 1790s that a fine khandisari

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(a semi-refined clean sugar), a less expensive alternative to British manufactured refined sugar, could establish a niche for itself as “grocery” sugar and “direct consumption sugar.”

A deterrent to Great Britain’s importation of sugar from the East Indies was the prohibitive custom duty imposed on it (at 37£. 16s. 3d.) compared to the much lower duty on imported British plantation sugar (at 15s.). To alleviate this situation and allow for greater imports of sugar entering Great Britain, the sugar refiners, therefore, petitioned Prime Minister William Pitt to allow foreign sugars and sugars from the British East Indies to be imported (in British ships) with only a modest custom duty above that of British West Indian plantation sugar.

The consequences of eliminating or even reducing the differential custom duty were far reaching and beyond simple economic arithmetic. The West India Interest apprehended that any modification in current custom duties would not only undercut its monopoly of the sugar trade with Great Britain and weaken its inherent pricing power, but also would undermine its social and political position.

The complexity of this issue was debated at a London meeting of the General Court of the East-India Company on 15 March 1792. The Directors had

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111 Andrew Radledge, *Competing for the British sugar bowl: East India sugar 1792-1865, politics, trade and sugar consumption* (Germany: VDM. Verlag Dr. Muller, 2009), 15-20, 43-44, 96, 110, 199-200 and 227-228. *Khand* is a general name for sub-continent sugar. Raw unrefined sugar was known as *goor*, *gur*, *jiggery* and *khaur*.

112 Report 1792, 12-16.
before them *A Report from the Committee of Warehouses of the United East-India Company, relative to the Culture of Sugar.* The Report included a letter from nine proprietors led by Randle Jackson calling on the General Court “to take into consideration an application to His Majesty’s Ministers, or to Parliament, for lowering the duties on East-India Sugar . . . when the prices of Sugar are so high as to materially injure the consumption both of that article, and also of Tea, from which the Public, as well as the Company derive such essential benefits.”¹¹³

In the ensuing debate, Jackson contended that it was absurd to label “Sugar a luxury,” but rather it was “an indispensible [sic] necessary of life.”

[It was] a main ingredient in almost every medicinal composition. It was essential to the nourishment of the infantine part of the community, to Women under circumstances of domestic confinement, and to many descriptions of infirmity and disease. It was besides a corrective to spirits, to tea, and to the fruits of the Island, so much so, that a bad fruit year was known to make a difference of several thousand hogsheads in the consumption of Sugar. . . . The only question then which remained for the Consumers, was, whether they should obtain the further quantity which their necessity required, openly or illicitly, whether they should procure it from

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¹¹³Report 1792, iv. The letter was dated 9 March 1792. Randle Jackson (1757-1837), Parliamentary counsel of the East Indian Company and of the corporation of London, became a director of the Company in 1802.
foreigners, or purchase it from [The East- India] Company?”

He argued that the slave insurrection in Saint-Domingue provided the British government with the opportunity to increase its public revenues because the French could no longer compete with British sources of sugar. “Those who were lately our Rivals had become our Customers! . . . this was the moment to strike for the repossessing of the invaluable, though long lost foreign trade.” He insisted that London refiners had recently examined sugars from Bengal and pronounced them “equal in quality to the Sugars of any other Country,” and that “the impediment” to its importation, “to bring back to this Country its foreign Sugar trade and to benefit Bengal,” was the custom duty which was “so enormous as to operate as a prohibition.” The only reason why East India sugar was not originally listed as a staple of the Company’s commerce was owing, he said, to an “accident” in it being listed as “non enumerated” along with manufactured articles.

Other speakers at the meeting included Deputy Chairman Francis Baring, a merchant-banker with interests in the West Indies, who, while he did not speak against Jackson’s proposal, cast doubt on whether the Company would be able to import a great quantity of sugar.

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114 Jackson (1793), quotes taken from 8-9.

115 Jackson (1793), quotes taken from 5-6.

116 Jackson (1793), 16-27.
Richard Twining, an influential corporate tea entrepreneur, took the floor and vigorously supported Jackson’s proposal. Twining’s credibility stemmed from the time when he had served as Chairman of the Committee of the Tea Trade and also had been instrumental in assisting William Pitt in the passage and enforcement of the Commutation Act of 1784, which not only lowered custom and excise duties on tea from 119 to 12.5 percent *ad valorem* but also had effectively reduced the smuggling of tea. In 1793, he would become a director of the East India Company.

Although Twining believed that from the time of Charles the Second taxing policies on sugar had diminished the consumption of sugar, he also believed that the current high price of sugar was not only “the proof of its scarcity” but also “the dearness of Sugar.” He feared that diminished consumption of sugar would negatively affect the consumption of tea. He was, therefore, persuaded that “there was room in the country for a much greater quantity of Sugar than was brought in” and that the Company “had a right to remedy the evil and bring their own Sugar.”

Finally, Lord Kinnaird brought the Company debate to an agreeable close when he confessed he had “always thought that emulative commerce was best; that

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Commerce throve by competition,” and he no longer held the view “that Sugar could not be brought with any profit from India.” The Company should be permitted to sell its sugars alongside those from the West India islands and “consequently bring their Sugars to a profit.”

Thus, following upon the influential letter of the nine proprietors and the oratorical skill of Randle Jackson, the Court of Directors concluded that because “the present enormous price of Sugar is owing to the annual importation of that article being very unequal to the increased consumption in Great Britain, and the demand for exportation,” it would place before the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury the following resolutions.

1. “That the East India Company could speedily and permanently supply a considerable quantity of Sugar for the relief of Great Britain, provided they are placed on the same footing with respect to duties and drawbacks as the West India Planters.

2. “That the present duty of 37£. 16s. 3d. per cent, on East India Sugars, while West India Sugar pay only 15s. per cent, was purely accidental . . . and therefore can only now be received under the head of manufactured goods non enumerated 37£. 16s. 3d. per cent ad valorem.

118 Jackson (1793), 26-27.
(3) “That the importation of East India Sugar is not only essential to the relief of the British Consumer, but of the utmost moment to the publick at large.

(4) “That if the importation of East India Sugar is not allowed (the present duty operating as a prohibition), the Sugar Trade, and the carrying Trade attached to it, must inevitably be driven into the hands of foreigners, who have sent, and are still sending ships from various parts of Europe and America to India to purchase that article.

(5) “That therefore, it is absolutely essential to the relief of the British Consumer, the prosperity of the Public Revenue, and the preservation of the Sugar Trade, with its attendant carrying Trade to Great Britain, that Sugar (being the produce of the British territories in the East Indies) be received into this country upon equal terms with Sugar produced by other plantations.”

If accepted by the government, these very important resolutions would reshape the flow of sugar into Great Britain not only to the greater satisfaction of the sugar industry but also to the greater appetite for sweetness in the daily diet of the ordinary consumer.

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119Jackson (1793), 15-16; and see Report 1792, v-vi.
The West India Interest lost no time in defending the status quo. Stephen Fuller, agent for Jamaica, once again took the lead in organizing a “Meeting of the Agents of the West India Sugar Colonies,” on 20th March 1792, where they authored a Memorial that Fuller would deliver to William Pitt. The Memorial argued “THAT the present high Price of Sugar is owing to no particular Deficiency in the Supply of that Article from our own Colonies, but to a Variety of extraneous and accidental Causes, which are likely to be of a temporary Nature, and ought not to produce any permanent Change in the System of Commerce which has so long obtained,” because any such change in that system, would in the course of time cause the ruin of the West India colonies. The Memorial emphasized that “no Regulation of a permanent Nature may be adopted for encouraging the Growth and Manufacture of Sugar in the East Indies, either by reducing the Duties now payable on the Importation of it into Great Britain, or otherwise.”120

The West India Interest was again successful in the corridors of governmental power. On 19 April 1792, Francis Baring reported to the General Court of the East India Proprietors that the Treasury had denied the application for an equalization of the custom duty on imported sugar.121 The Treasury decision was a setback not

120 Memorial of the Agents of the West India Sugar Colonies; presented to The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State (London: 1792), 2-3.

121 East India Company. A regular series of the several debates (London, 1793), 38.
only for the Company but also for the sugar refiners who also had railed against the system of import drawbacks and export bounties on sugar. The refiners complained in Memorials to William Pitt, that British West India planters had “established a complete monopoly of the Sugar Trade” which was “a growing evil to this country . . . oppressive of the poor, cramps the spirit of industry and navigation, narrows the revenue, and is contrary to every other principle of commerce.”¹²²

Nevertheless, the House of Commons could not turn a deaf ear to the public outcry to moderate the price of sugar and to increase the amount of sugar available for domestic consumption. In May 1792, it enacted a “Sugar Bill” stipulating that when the average prices of a hundredweight of raw brown (and clayed) sugar sold in the port of London during a prior six-week period exceeded 65 shillings (inclusive of custom duty), both the drawback on imported raw brown sugar and the bounty on exported refined sugar would cease for a period of four months.¹²³

However, the “Sugar Bill” did not work as the government had hoped it would. During the latter 1790s, the London fluctuating market price of imported raw-brown Muscovado sugar rose and triggered the limits provided in the Bill, but the government finally concluded that the “provisions regulating the determination

¹²²S R. 1792, 4-33 (quote taken from 8).

¹²³See Remarks on the new sugar-Bill, and on the national compacts respecting the sugar-trade and slave-trade (London: J. Johnson, and J. Debrett, 1792), 1; and “The Propositions of the Privy Council for Trade,” in S R. 1792, 23-25.
of the average price of sugar for the purpose of controlling the grant of drawbacks and bounties . . . worked so badly that they had to be repealed in 1799.**124

* * *

In June 1792, following the lack of parliamentary action to allow sugar from the East Indies to enter Great Britain on a customs par with the sugar from the British West Indies, the East India Company continued to deliberate the direction that the Company and the British government should take in the international sugar trade. In the midst of a heated debate on shipping concerns, Randle Jackson once again asserted that it was imperative to seek protection against foreign interlopers in the carrying trade to and from the East Indies: “The Sugar produced in Bengal is deserving great attention, as its quality and cheapness will occasion the consumption of great quantities in Europe and America, to which places it will be assuredly carried in foreign bottoms, if the English neglect the trade, or if they

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124The London average market price of a hundredweight of muscovado (exclusive of duty) in July-October 1792 was about 56 shillings; in August-October 1795, it exceeded 60 shillings; in early December 1796, it was slightly above 62 shillings; in July 1798, it spiked above 75 shillings; in February 1799, it dipped to about 69 shillings; and, in June 1799, it fell to 65 shillings. Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: 1808 (178) Report from the committee on the distillation of sugar and molasses, “(No. 3.) An account of the general average prices of brown or Muscovado sugar, exclusive of all Duties,” 180; and 1826 (328), Muscovado sugar. An account of the different rates of duty levied on British plantation sugar imported into Great Britain, from 1776 to 1826, 2-3. See also “Average Price of Raw (Muscovado) Sugar in England, exclusive of duty, per cwt.” in Stern (1954), 36.
charge it with *a heavy Freight and heavy Duty.*” Jackson cautioned “that
Foreigners were running away with our trade, owing to those two unfortunate
impediments of high Freight and high Duty.” He stated that his “private
intelligence” had confirmed that there had been an increase in foreign ships,
particularly American, which sail at low freights and import goods from India to
America and to Europe.125

However accurate Jackson’s intelligence was, the situation remained more
complex and involved long-standing relationships among Free Merchants of India,
Committee” of the Company, documented why foreign bottoms would continue to
trade at India’s ports.126

(1)“The Rights of several European Nations to Commercial Establishments
in those Countries of Hindostan [sic] now subject to our Government, *existed and
were enjoyed long before* we acquired Territorial Power there, and *have ever since
been exercised by the Subjects and the Flags of those Nations;*”

125“East India House, General Quarterly Court. – Thursday, June 14, 1792,” in J. Fiott.
Comp. *Three addresses to the proprietors of East-India stock, and the publick on the subject of
the* (London, 1795), 167.

126Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. 1801 (122) III, 11 and 18-20 (for
quotes).
(2) “Ships of several States which had no Settlement in India, as the American, Tuscan, and Genoese, began to resort thither, particularly to Bengal;”

(3) “if refused Entrance into our Ports, [they] have proceeded to those of the French, Dutch, Danes, or Portuguese, it was but an Extension of the same Principle of Policy, which recommended our admitting the Flags of these Powers, to admit also the Flags of other Countries in Amity with us . . . Calcutta has become the Seat of almost the whole Export Trade of Bengal.”

(4) “were we to exclude them from the Shores of India, it is obvious that, in Return, they would prohibit the Entrance of the Productions of that Country into their Ports; and thus the Trade which we had sought to engross, would in fact be lost both to Britain and to the British Possessions.”

The outbreak of war in 1793 brought into sharper focus the impact that neutral shipping was already having on the East India Company. During the latter decades of the 18th century, an increasing number of merchantmen flying American, Danish, Dutch, French, Imperial, Portuguese, Prussian, Savoyard, Spanish, and Tuscan flags sailed into the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and the South China Sea in search of trade and profit.

Neutral American ships from Baltimore, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Providence and Salem made these voyages, either on their own account or on the account of a foreign national, under the American flag or the flag of another
neutral. When doing so on an English account, they circumvented the monopoly long held by the East India Company. Although it was commonplace for neutral American ships to export Indian goods and manufactures marked up for the United States, they just as often did not unload their cargo at American ports but simply proceeded to ports in Europe where they disposed of their Indian cargoes.127

We learn more about how this worked from those who had first-hand experience. For example, John Bainbridge, a British merchant whose firm was “extensively connected with the Americans,” testified before the House of Commons how neutral Americans benefited from their trading operations in the East Indies after the outbreak of the war in 1793. He said Americans sent their ships to India for much less “than the East India Company could possibly send” and they purchased and shipped exports from India at lower costs in freight and insurance than shippers who were not flying the neutral flag. The “magnitude” of this trade increased when “they had an opportunity of extending their commerce,

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as well to the Spanish and French Colonies, [and] to that part of the continent of Europe to which this Country was principally prevented enjoying a trade.”\textsuperscript{128}

Daniel Beale, who had engaged in extensive mercantile business with houses in Bombay and Bengal and, in 1787, had become Consul to His Prussian Majesty in Canton, testified that, even though the Americans had very few ships in China prior to 1793, American ships and the American flag benefited from their maritime neutrality in trade with China: “With respect to the American trade to China. I attribute the extensive trade of the Americans to China greatly to the neutral character which America possessed” and “I consider the great increase of the American trade to have taken place from that period; the war tended very much to the increase of the American trade in China.”\textsuperscript{129}

The Danes exhibited another outstanding example of neutral overseas commercial shipping prowess in the East Indies. The Danish Asiatic Company, Danish merchant houses and ship owners exploited Denmark’s neutrality policy. Danish ships were not only the biggest but their cargoes were also the richest. It was Denmark’s “golden age” of trade and its merchant entrepreneurs were “the aristocracy of trade.” Under the guise of fictitious Danish owners and foreign


\textsuperscript{129}Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: 1812-1813 (122), quotes taken from 447 and 457, respectively; and 1821 (476), \textit{Minutes of Evidence}, 122.
accounts (in particular, English ones), Danish bottoms were commissioned out of Copenhagen and foreign ports to trade in commodities and manufactured goods of the East Indies. The Danish Kommercekollegium acknowledged and defined this policy: “it is for several reasons desirable and profitable, that the trade between Denmark and the East Indies should be carried on foreign account.”

The illustrative story of Captain Joseph Greenway, a native of Stokes in Devon, who during his mercantile career “had amassed a handsome fortune,” was probably not unique.

Greenway sailed as a captain on board Danish East Indiamen, which actually were British owned, stowed with British property and manned almost entirely by British subjects. This trade between India and Copenhagen was a direct violation of all British acts and charters, but thanks to the formal protection of the Danish flag and to the Danish citizenship which he acquired in 1786, Greenway managed to sail without interference from British authorities in India or from British customs cruisers in European waters.

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130 See Feldbaek: (1969), 138-139 (for quote); (1978), 128-129; (1986), 204-218; and (1991), 12-19. See also “Remarks on The Trade of Denmark,” PROFO 33/1, ff. 135-138.

131 Feldbaek (1966), 193.
The East India Company’s proprietary shipping continued to worsen during the 1790s. Because British agency houses in Calcutta had not expected the Company’s monopoly to be renewed, as it would in fact be in 1793, they had proceeded to build ships and stockpile warehouse goods ready for export under neutral colors. Their underlying motivation for doing so was obvious, as Governor-General Richard Wellesley clearly stated.

Although the Voyage by which the Produce of India is conveyed in Foreign Ships to Europe may occasionally be circuitous, the superior Advantages . . . enable the Proprietors of the Goods to dispose of them at a lower Price, than that which the same Descriptions of Goods can be brought to the Continental Markets of Europe, if exported from India by British Merchants under heavy Freight and other Incumbrances [sic], to which the Trade is at present subject.132

Contemporary extant data of India’s foreign and private overseas trade in the 1790s reveal in meticulous detail that a host of carriers flying neutral flags transported Indian manufactures and commodities to markets in America, Copenhagen, Hamburg, Leghorn, Lisbon, and London. In terms of value, the

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leading exports were piece goods, indigo, and sugar.133

Despite this vigorous overseas shipping activity, sugar from the East Indies did not gain a significant market share in Great Britain. British Custom records do not reveal Great Britain’s importation of sugar from the East Indies prior to 1790. Indeed, during the 1790s, the annual average of Great Britain’s sugar imports from the East Indies was about 83,000 cwt. This was insignificant compared to the annual average of more than 1 million cwt. imported from the British West Indies. Sugar imported from the British West Indies would remain the dominant sweetener for British consumers.134

*  *  *  *

The horrific slave insurrection on the French island of Saint-Domingue in August 1791 not only precipitated a significant reduction of the island’s sugar exports to mainland France and, consequentially, a significant reduction of France’s sugar re-exports to countries on the Continent but also it had a significant

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133 See Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: 1801 (122) III. “Abstract Accounts,” 21; 1812 (151) (182), “Supplement . . . Appendix, No. 47. – (Private Trade.), passim, especially, Tables 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 16; and 1812-1813 (171), 1-19, passim. See also, PROFO 33/8, f. 45, and 33/9, f. 31; and Andrew Radledge, Competing for the British sugar bowl: East India sugar 1792-1865, politics, trade and sugar consumption (Germany: VDM. Verlag Dr. Muller, 2009), 35, 43-44, 118, 199, 256-268, 280 and 290.

effect on other global centers and suppliers of sugar that led to the redirection of international trade in sugar during the latter decade of the 18th century and early years of the 19th century.

In addressing these events, Professor David Beck Ryden has proffered a provocative thesis to explain them:

I demonstrate that the European shortage of sugar following the Haitian Revolution led to irrational exuberance on the part of British planters, who more than doubled their output in order to cash-in on the high European prices. This massive expansion ushered forth a new period in the history of British sugar growing, during which British producers were, for the first time, re-exporting (from Britain to Europe) a significant share of their product. . . . This problem of overcapacity helps explain the timing of Abolition.135

Underpinning his thesis was his assertion that there was a “shortage” of sugar on European markets following the August 1791 slave insurrection. All other contentions simply follow from this important stipulation. Therefore, it is necessary to determine whether verifiable evidence exists to support Ryden’s principal assertion. To do this, it seems to me, it is necessary to examine the extant

135Ryden (Jun., 2001), 504-507 (505, for quote). See also Ryden: (Winter, 2001), 347-374; (2009); and (2012), 117-133.
archival data of the two principal continental European sugar markets – Amsterdam and Hamburg.

* * *

During much of the 18th century, France re-exported enormous amounts of sucre brut and sucre blanc to northern and northeastern Europe: to Le Nord (as Les Villes Anséatiques were commonly known); to the Dutch Republic; to Denmark, to Sweden and to Russia.¹³⁶ For example, during 1741-1778, Bordeaux alone re-exported more than one billion livres poids of sugar to those destinations, of which 93 percent went to Le Nord (53.43 %) and to the Dutch Republic (39.40 %).¹³⁷

The Dutch Republic was a major continental importer and exporter of sugar during the 18th century and it boasted a well-earned reputation for sugar refining with as many as 165 operating refineries. Henk den Heijer, a noted professor of Dutch maritime history at Leiden University, has offered a cogent explanation for the success of the Dutch Republic’s sugar economy and how it benefited from

¹³⁶ADG. ChCG. C. 4387-4388; AN/AE: BI 986 (1-2); BIII/432; Marine B/7/349 and 351 (for 1744–1766 to Russia); B/7/438-439 (for 1766-1776 to Hamburg); B7/443 (nos. 3, 8, 13); F12/242-243, 245-249bis, 250-252, 643 (2); and 1835 (1-2) (for 1775~1789, 1792 to Le Nord and Russia); PROSP 82/86-98; PROFO 33/1-7, and PROFO 97/240; SA. Hamburg 371-2, Admiralitäts-Kollegium, F 9-11; and Köncke, passim.

France’s sugar business.

One might have expected that a country like France, with the most productive sugar colonies in the Caribbean, would have taken the initiative to begin [to] refine sugar on a large scale and ruin the Dutch sugar industry, but this did not happen. In fact the reverse was true. Money was the key to this. Sugar refineries were large enterprises which required substantial investment. Capital was available in the Republic, but not in France. For a long time the French refining capacity could not keep up with the explosive growth of the sugar production in the colonies, so large quantities of semi-refined and raw sugar were re-exported to other countries.138

Amsterdam’s sugar imports more than doubled from about 31 million Dutch *ponds* in 1753 to about 64 million Dutch *ponds* in 1790. It is important to note that about two-thirds of Amsterdam’s sugar were imported from the Dutch Republic’s Atlantic-Caribbean colonies – Berbice, Demerara, Essequibo, St. Eustatius, and Surinam. From the end of the Seven Years’ War to 1790, Surinam and St. Eustatius supplied Amsterdam with an annual average of about 24 million *ponds* of sugar (16 and 8 million *ponds*, respectively). Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo together increased their sugar deliveries to Amsterdam from about 2.5 million

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138Heijer, 6.
ponds, in the 1770s, to about 8 million, in the 1780s, and to about 19 million, in 1790. During the same period, France led all foreign suppliers of sugar to Amsterdam with an annual average of about 15 million ponds. But France’s re-exports of sugar to Amsterdam were seriously undermined by the events of the French Revolution, the Saint-Domingue slave insurrection of 1791, the outbreak of the war in 1793, and the French occupation of the Dutch Republic in 1795. Thus, Amsterdam’s foreign sugar imports during 1789–1799 compared to 1771-1787 declined by roughly 9 million ponds, the same quantity of sugar not imported directly from France (see Table II.).

Table II. AMSTERDAM’S FOREIGN SUGAR IMPORTS: 1771~1799.

[Annual Average: Measured in Dutch Ponds]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>1771-1787</th>
<th>1789~1799</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15,002,530</td>
<td></td>
<td>6,008,859</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>1771-1787</th>
<th>1789~1799</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>2,333,074</td>
<td>368,497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>1,673,971</td>
<td>829,962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>579,000</td>
<td>837,659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>157,089</td>
<td>103,062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamburg</td>
<td>107,280</td>
<td>2,018,029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bremen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kleine Ost</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total   | 19,852,944 | 10,288,068 |
The absence of 9 million Dutch ponds of imported foreign sugar during the final decade of the 18th century seriously threatened Amsterdam’s sugar refining business. During the second half of the 18th century, about two-thirds of the Dutch Republic’s imported sugar was processed into refined sugar, and about two-thirds of the refined sugar was consumed in the Dutch Republic. But at the same time (1753-1790), the Dutch Republic’s exports of refined sugar increased significantly. Amsterdam more than doubled its refined sugar exports from 10.7 million to 21.8 million Dutch ponds and Rotterdam increased its exports from nearly 7 million to over 9 million Dutch ponds. Moreover, about 80 percent of Amsterdam’s sugar exports and almost all of Rotterdam’s sugar exports were shipped by land and water into the German hinterland making it the largest recipient of Dutch sugar exports. France’s occupation of the Dutch Republic in 1795 put an end to Amsterdam’s independent overseas commercial competitiveness and effectively redirected the overseas trading patterns in northern Europe.\(^{140}\)

“These events produced a positive shock for Hamburg’s trade,” according to Professor Dr. Ulrich Pfister of the Universität Münster, “and inaugurated Hamburg’s ascendancy in handling Germany’s overseas trade.” He further states that the energetic mercantile and entrepreneurial manufacturing elite of Hamburg had not only exploited the city’s economically strategic geography but also had created an import-export trading gateway that linked Germany with Atlantic and Mediterranean overseas markets which “mediated the exchange of a broad range of goods across a wider area that included south-western and north-eastern Europe as well as central Europe.”

The commercial vitality of the port of the Free City of Hamburg was reflected in the growing number of ships flying more than a dozen flags that visited this major transshipping entrepôt in northern Europe: from the close of the Seven Years’ War to 1782, an annual average of more than 667 ships; from the Peace of Paris to the French Revolution (1783-1789), an annual average of 786 ships; and from 1790 to 1795, an annual average of more than 1,100 ships.

Moreover, Great Britain, France and Portugal comprised about 80 percent of

\[141\] See Pfister: (2012), 7-8, 16, 20, 24, 41 and 53-54 (for quotes); Tables 2-3; and (2015) “The quantitative development of Germany’s international trade during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,” 175-221, passim.
the port-city’s overseas trade, and sugar was the most valued import accounting for slightly more than one-third of all commodity imports. The enormous demand for sugar imports generated upwards of about 365 working sugar refineries and made Hamburg the most important concentration of sugar refineries in 18th-century Europe.142

Hamburg’s universally recognized reputation in the sugar business was reflected in an 1810 popular publication: “This most extensive branch of industry carried on here, is however sugar refining, at which here are about 500 establishments. The sugar bakers of London, Bristol and Liverpool are chiefly drawn from this city, which still keep its pre-eminence.”143

* * *

Notwithstanding, soon after the conclusion of the Seven Years’ War,


143 The Picture of Hamburg, or the Englishman’s Guide to that Free, Imperial City (London: 1810), 124.
Hamburg suffered a financial crisis which was, in part, caused by a volatile market in sugar. The price of sugar declined by over 25 percent from its peak and seriously affected the sustainability of traders, bankers, and speculators who had made huge investments in the sugar trade. Their inability to meet their commercial and financial obligations and their lack of liquidity resulted in a substantial number of bankruptcies in 1763.144

Although, the Hamburg sugar market showed signs of recovery in 1764, John Hanbury, the Deputy Governor of the Company of Merchant Adventurers in Hamburg, warned his British colleagues that French sugars, not British sugars, would come to dominate the Hamburg market because French sugars were “better & cheaper.”145

Hanbury’s prognostication was dramatically borne out in the decade preceding the French Revolution. During 1783-1789, Hamburg’s sugar imports from France were 151 million pfund, 1.7 times greater than from Portugal and 5

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145Hanbury (Ham.) to Woodford (Ham.), 12 Sept. 1764, in Stowe Mss. 259, f. 84.
times greater than from Great Britain. However, France’s supply of sugar to Hamburg dramatically changed just prior to the slave insurrection on Saint-Domingue in August 1791. For example, in 1788 and 1789, Hamburg’s declared sugar imports from France averaged about 25 million pfund but, in 1790, they declined to about 22 million pfund and, in 1791, they fell again to about 17 million pfund. In 1792, following the slave insurrection on Saint-Domingue, they dropped to 7.7 million pfund. During the wartime years (1793-1802), Hamburg’s declared sugar imports from France plummeted to an annual average of just slightly more that 1 million pfund.\footnote{Compiled and computed from Hamburg Custom House in PROFO 33/3, 5-9 and PROFO 97/240; SA. Hamburg 371-2, Admiralität-Kollegium, F 9, 10/Bd. 1-3, 6-15 and F 11; and Köncke.}

Nonetheless, the shortfall of France’s sugar re-exports to Hamburg was expeditiously made up by other overseas sugar suppliers both large and small. Extant archival data reveal the flow of sugar from ports worldwide by ships flying a variety of flags destined for Hamburg. In 1792-1793, ships from the Dutch ports of Amsterdam, Ostend, Rotterdam, Sardam and St. Eustatius delivered an average of about 1.4 million pfund of sugar to Hamburg compared to 209,000 pfund in 1791. In 1793, ships from the Danish ports of Copenhagen and St. Thomas delivered nearly 800,000 pfund of sugar to Hamburg compared to 1792 when imports amounted to only 4,500 pfund. In 1793, ships from America’s ports of
Charleston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Salem delivered slightly more than 1 million *pfund* of sugar to Hamburg compared to 1791-1792 when they delivered an average of about 111,000 *pfund*. Other ships, including those from Calcutta and Canton, delivered an average of nearly 1.2 million *pfund* of sugar to Hamburg in 1792-1793 compared to 282,900 *pfund* in 1791.\(^{147}\)

Spain’s complex international sugar trade underwent fundamental changes towards the end of the 18th century which were intended to encourage the production and export of sugar. Henceforth, sugar exported via Vera Cruz would be duty-free and, during 1796-1802, about 29 million pounds of sugar exited the port.\(^{148}\)

Moreover, the Spanish Crown granted permission to foreign slave traders to land African slaves in Cuba and, following the 1791 slave insurrection on Saint-Domingue, French planters migrated to Cuba with their capital, technology and slaves. Cuba’s population grew considerably, from about 172,000, in 1774, to about 272,000, in 1792. From 1759 to 1789, the number of sugar mills increased from 89 to 277, and the average production of each mill tripled.\(^{149}\)

\(^{147}\)Compiled and computed from the Hamburg Custom House in PROFO 33/5-9; SA. Hamburg 371-2, Admiralität-Kollegium, F 9, 10/Bd. 1-3, 6-15 and F 11; Königke; and Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. 1812-1813 (171), 3-19.

\(^{148}\)See Fisher: (1785) 66-75, and Appendixes, 114-145; (May, 1985), 45-78; (1998), 459-479; and Tejada (1858), III. *Documentos Numero 14*.

\(^{149}\)Klein (1971); Franklin W. Knight, “Origins of Wealth and the Sugar Revolution in
1760 to 1789, Havana exported approximately 325,865 cases of sugar but, from 1790 to 1802, the number of cases increased to 1,563,046. In 1797, Havana’s direct sugar exports to Hamburg amounted to 2,541,000 pfund nearly seven times more than they were in 1791-1792. During the wartime years 1793~1802, Hamburg’s sugar imports from Spanish territories amounted to about 12 million pfund.

Subsequent to the slave insurrection on Saint-Domingue in August 1791, which led to the demise of France’s overseas sugar trade, an abundance of sugar flooded European markets. In particular, during 1792~1802, Hamburg’s declared sugar imports from Portugal amounted to 235 million pfund and from Great Britain to 241 million pfund (see Table III.).

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151See Köncke.

152Compiled and computed from Hamburg Custom House in PROFO 33/3, 5-9, and PROCO 97/240; SA. Hamburg 371-2, Admiralität-Kollegium, F 9, 10/Bd.1-15 and F 11; and Köncke. See Schwartz (1985), 426 and 502-503; Maxwell (1973), 213. Bahian sugar exports were shipped in caixa where one caixa was equivalent of 40 arrobas (at 32 pounds per arroba), approximately 1,280 pounds (Avoirdupois). Therefore, allowing for shrinkage during shipping, one caixa weighed on arrival at Hamburg about the same as 1 grosse kiste weighing 1,200 Hamburg pfund; and Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. 1831-1832 (381), 104-110.
Table III. Hamburg’s Sugar Imports from Ports in France, Great Britain and Portugal: 1783-1802.

[Minimum Estimates. Measured in Hamburg Pfund]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1783</th>
<th>1784</th>
<th>1785</th>
<th>1786</th>
<th>1787</th>
<th>1788</th>
<th>1789</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>16,272,000</td>
<td>18,002,300</td>
<td>22,968,450</td>
<td>18,338,400</td>
<td>25,405,200</td>
<td>25,102,800</td>
<td>24,524,550</td>
<td>150,613,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gt. Britain</td>
<td>4,790,700</td>
<td>5,074,200</td>
<td>8,731,800</td>
<td>3,517,650</td>
<td>486,000</td>
<td>944,100</td>
<td>6,839,550</td>
<td>30,384,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>12,394,800</td>
<td>12,622,800</td>
<td>15,588,000</td>
<td>11,115,600</td>
<td>13,479,600</td>
<td>7,527,600</td>
<td>15,495,600</td>
<td>88,224,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

269,221,700
### Table III. Hamburg’s Sugar Imports from Ports in France, Great Britain and Portugal: 1783-1802.

[Minimum Estimates. Measured in Hamburg Pfund]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1790</th>
<th>1791</th>
<th>1792</th>
<th>1793</th>
<th>1794</th>
<th>1795</th>
<th>1796</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>21,699,300</td>
<td>17,437,200</td>
<td>7,717,200</td>
<td>5,204,400</td>
<td>927,450</td>
<td>149,100</td>
<td>387,900</td>
<td>56,896,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gt. Britain</td>
<td>4,731,150</td>
<td>4,847,850</td>
<td>11,508,450</td>
<td>6,765,000</td>
<td>30,414,900</td>
<td>32,283,450</td>
<td>21,988,800</td>
<td>251,384,712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>18,686,400</td>
<td>22,448,100</td>
<td>21,151,800</td>
<td>12,984,000</td>
<td>25,916,800</td>
<td>16,724,000</td>
<td>27,427,200</td>
<td>275,939,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1797</td>
<td>1798</td>
<td>1799</td>
<td>1800</td>
<td>1801</td>
<td>1802</td>
<td></td>
<td>584,220,462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>24,300</td>
<td>160,200</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1,420,200</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1,768,800</td>
<td></td>
<td>56,896,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gt. Britain</td>
<td>21,614,900</td>
<td>23,796,000</td>
<td>17,077,500</td>
<td>34,794,712</td>
<td>18,777,600</td>
<td>22,784,400</td>
<td></td>
<td>251,384,712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>26,568,600</td>
<td>8,704,800</td>
<td>30,310,800</td>
<td>20,855,700</td>
<td>43,735,200</td>
<td>426,300</td>
<td></td>
<td>275,939,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>584,220,462</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the second half of the 18th century, thousands of mercantile ships annually visited the northern ports of the Russian Empire and imported hundreds of different necessities, decencies, and luxuries. Even though so many of these imports did not originate in Western Europe, this cultural process, for lack of a more attractive if not a more accurate expression, has been termed “Westernized,” and it reflected the socio-economic values of wealthy Russians as much as it did the economic and commercial imperatives of the empire. In particular, ships visiting the ports of Reval, Riga and St. Petersburg/Kronstadt on the Baltic Sea and Archangel on the White Sea were laden with appreciable cargoes of sugar which, second only to textiles, was Russia’s most valued import.\(^\text{153}\) The consumption of sugar was a luxury but only the wealthy could afford to purchase it as a substitute for domestically produced honey.\(^\text{154}\)


Until the outbreak of the war in 1793, France was Russia’s principal sugar supplier via Amsterdam and Hamburg.\textsuperscript{155} Although Peter I had established early in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century Russia’s first sugar refinery in St. Petersburg, by the 1780s, the increasing Russian appetite for sugar generated many more refineries and even encouraged merchant entrepreneurs to purchase fire insurance policies from Phoenix Assurance of London.\textsuperscript{156}

The extant records of St. Petersburg/Kronstadt Custom House reveal the quantity (in Russian \textit{poods}), quality, and price (in Rubles) of imported sugar from as early as the 1740s to the close of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. From the end of the Seven Years’ War to the outbreak of the American War of Independence, sugar imports averaged annually about 128,000 \textit{poods} and from 1783 to 1789 to about 234,000 \textit{poods}. But, in 1790-1791, imports nearly doubled reaching an annual average of

\textsuperscript{155}Heijer: “Table 2: Sugar export of Amsterdam in 1753 and 1790,” 11, and “Table 6: Share of Baltic cities in the volume of sugar shipped from Amsterdam 1750-1790,” 18; Johansen (1978), 238-239 and 242; AN/AE: BI 986 (1-2), BIII/432; Marine: B/7/349 and 351 (for 1744–1766 to Russia); B/7/438-439 (for 1766-1776 to Hamburg); B7/443 (nos 3, 8, 13); F12/242-243, 245-249bis, 250, 252, 643(2), and 1835 (1-2) (for 1775–1789, 1792 to Le Nord and Russia); and ADG.ChCG. C. 4387-4388. For the establishment of Franco-Russian commercial relations, see L. Jay Oliva, \textit{Misalliance: A Study of French Policy in Russia During the Seven Years’ War} (New York: New York University Press, 1964), and Kaplan (1968), 64-66, and 121.

about 418,000 *poods*.\textsuperscript{157}

However, beginning in 1792, St. Petersburg/Kronstadt experienced a significant drop in the volume of sugar imports. Undoubtedly, this was owing to the lingering effects of the Russo-Turkish-Swedish Wars (1787-1792) when Sweden’s naval vessels intercepted, searched, and seized even non-contraband cargoes destined for St. Petersburg/Kronstadt. But more importantly it had become patently obvious to everyone at the Russian court that the cost of the wars had exacerbated Russia’s already deteriorating financial situation. Russia’s overseas commodity trade balance was in jeopardy in 1790, 1791 and 1792, and St. Petersburg/Kronstadt suffered unfavorable balances in all three years. Foreign observers noted that Russia would soon reduce the amount of imports, in particular, expensive luxury articles.\textsuperscript{158}

The execution of King Louis XVI of France in January 1793 and the

\textsuperscript{157}Compiled and computed from the records of the St. Petersburg/Kronstadt Custom House in PROSP 91/73, 75, 78-79, 94, 96 and 107; PROCO 388/54 and 95; PROBT 6/231-233; PROFO 65/3 and 16, and PROFO 97/340; Whitworth’s report from St. Petersburg to Grenville in London on Russia’s sugar imports from 1788 through 1791, 30 Sept 1794, No. 53, PROFO 65/28; Eton’s report on Russia’s “Importation of British Manufactured Goods in 1792,” PROFO 97/342; “An Account of the Quantity of Refined Sugar Exported [from Great Britain in British bottoms for the years 1783-1785],” PROBT 6/240, f. 143. The qualities of imported sugar declared at the Custom House included: refined, middling, ordinary, raw-brown *muscovado*, lump, candy and molasses. The Russian *pood* is equivalent to 36.113 English pounds.

declaration of war by the French Convention against Great Britain in February 1793, encouraged Empress Catherine II (1762-1796) to proclaim radical commercial and financial policies. In April 1793, Catherine II issued a detailed edict that canceled all commercial intercourse between Russia and France. Subsequently she issued edicts that punished imports from Great Britain, Russia’s dominant overseas trading partner.¹⁵⁹

These prohibitive edicts curtailed commodity imports originating in the West Indies and, in particular, sugar. Robert Voûte, an astute Dutch merchant and commodity entrepreneur, who was in Russia at the time representing the interests of the Amsterdam merchant banking firm of Hope & Co., reported on the St. Petersburg sugar market.

The importation of Sugars of all kinds in 1793 falls far short of the quantity usually brought to this market. The deficiency is greatest in raw Sugars and particularly in those of prime quality. In the course of last winter the circumstances of several of the principal sugar refiners here became extremely embarrassed, and continued to be, so that they have been and still are unable to import for themselves or by purchase in the market to give encouragement to other importers. The quantity of Sugars of all sorts

¹⁵⁹Traduction de l’Edit émané de Sa Majesté Impériale de toutes les Russies, Et addressé à Son Sénat le 8 Fevrier 1793; and Traduction de l’Edit de Sa Majesté Impériale émané du Sénat dirigeant le 14 Avril 1793, in PROFO 65/24.
brought to the Port of St. Petersburg in 1793 is not equal to \( \frac{1}{2} \) of the medium importation of the two years that preceded it.\(^{160}\)

Robert Voûte was correct. Russia’s volume of sugar imports during 1792-1796 fell to about half that of 1790-1791. However, sugar prices continued to rise: the price of raw brown muscovado and powdered sugar quadrupled, and the price of molasses and refined sugar more than doubled. Since the Peace of Paris, the total Ruble value of sugar imports declared at St. Petersburg/Kronstadt had steadily risen from 1.6 million (1783); to 2.0 million (1787); to 2.8 million (1792); and to 5.3 million Rubles (1796). During the latter decades of the 18\(^{th}\) century, sugar remained consistently the second most valuable commodity imported into St. Petersburg/Kronstadt and, in 1796, it accounted for about 20 percent of the total value of commodity imports.\(^{161}\)

* * *

In March 1792, in an emotionally-charged debate at General Court of the East-India Company, Randle Jackson declared that it was absurd to label “Sugar a luxury,” because it was “an indispensable [sic] necessary of life,” and that it formed


the principal ingredient in a wide range of medicines, nutriments, spirits, fruits, and tea.¹⁶²

By the end of the century, British consumers demonstrated an enormous appetite for the sweetener. Great Britain’s annual average sugar imports increased to more than two million cwt., twice the annual average imported from its West Indian colonies during the preceding half century.¹⁶³

However, during the wartime years of the early 19th century, the flood of sugar that entered the British market spiked to levels never before registered. During the run up to Parliament’s abolition of the African-Atlantic slave trade in 1807, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’s worldwide sugar imports accelerated to an annual average of more than three million cwt. The official publication of the per-capita consumption of sugar in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland revealed that:

Prior to the year 1800, the records as to the consumption of sugar are very meagre, but for the years subsequent to that date tables are given shewing the quantities of sugar retained for consumption to the kingdom together with the quantity consumed per head of the population. . . . during the 14

¹⁶²Jackson (1793), quote taken from 8.

¹⁶³See Report, 1792, 22-23.
years of almost uninterrupted war with which the century opened, the average quantity consumed by each person was 18 lbs. 7 oz. annually.\textsuperscript{164}

* * * * *

While most of the imports were from the United Kingdom’s colonial West Indies, large quantities of sugar also came from Brazil, the Danish Islands and the United States of America. In 1799, a hundredweight of raw-brown \textit{muscovado} sold at London (exclusive of duty) for about 69 shillings but, in 1800, it dipped to about 65 shillings. The price continued to fall and, in 1807, raw-brown \textit{muscovado} sold for as low as 32 shillings \textit{per cwt}. During 1800-1807, London’s annual average price of a hundredweight of raw-brown \textit{muscovado} sugar was about 49 shillings.\textsuperscript{165}

It was apparent to members of the House of Commons that West Indian planters were in deep distress. In April 1808, a Committee of the House issued a

\textsuperscript{164}1898 [C. 8706] \textit{Customs Tariffs of the United Kingdom, from 1800 to 1897. With some notes upon the history of the more important branches of receipt from the year 1660.} (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1897), 209. See also, \textit{Tea and sugar. Accounts relating to the consumption of tea and sugar in the United Kingdom, in Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. 1857 Session 2 (184), 1-10, passim.} Cf. Shammas (1990), 81-85; and Joel Mokyr, “Is There Still Life in the Pessimist Case? Consumption during the Industrial Revolution, 1790-1850,” “Table 1. Consumption (Retained Imports) Per Capita of Key Imported Commodities (in pounds),” \textit{JEH.} 48:1 (Mar. 1988), 75.

Report on “The Commercial State of the West India Colonies” and concluded:

“that since the year of 1799, there has taken place a progressive deterioration in the situation of the Planters, resulting from a progressive diminution of the Price of Sugar;” that “the expences attending the cultivation, have been increasing, till at length the depression of the Market has become such, that the prices obtained for the last year’s Crop will not pay the expence of cultivation;” and that British merchants, who had formerly “enjoyed nearly a monopoly,” suffered as well because they no longer could compete with “neutral” and “hostile Colonies.” The Report further noted that in Jamaica 32 sugar estates had already been sold under the decrees of the Court of Chancery and another 115 were pending. The Committee stated its inquiries had “brought before their eyes one grand and primary evil, from which all the others are easily to be deduced: namely, the facility of intercourse between the hostile Colonies and Europe, under the American Neutral Flag, by means of which not only the whole of their Produce is carried to a Market . . . while the British Planter is burthened with all the inconvenience, risk, and expence, resulting from a state of War.” The Committee not only recognized the “severe pressure upon the Holders of West India property, and those connected with it,” but also sought to alleviate the situation and it recommended that “it may be practicable and expedient to confine the Distilleries
of the United Kingdom to the use of Sugar and Molasses only.”

During the immediate post-abolition period (1808-1812), the United Kingdom’s worldwide sugar imports catapulted to an annual average of slightly more than 4 million cwt. However, only 88 percent of it came from the United Kingdom’s West Indies compared to about 92 percent during the immediate preceding period (1800-1807). Although sugar imports from the East Indies had fallen to slightly more than 1 percent from 4 percent previously, foreign sugar rose to slightly more than 10 percent from 4 percent previously. About 83 percent of imported sugar was retained as raw-brown muscovado, an increase of about 10 percent from previously. Yet, despite the obligatory use of sugar in distilleries which had begun in 1809, the glut of sugar remained. In 1808-1812, the annual average market price of a hundredweight of raw-brown muscovado had fallen to about 44 shillings per cwt. (see Table IV).

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166 Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: Report from the Committee on the Distillation of Sugar and Molasses, 1808 (178), 3-4, 21-22, 215-216 and 251-252; Custom and excise duties, 1829 (340), 10; and Sugar. Return of the quantities of sugar imported into the United Kingdom, and retained for home consumption, from 1793 to 1847, inclusive; etc. 1847-1848 (400), 2-3.

167 Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: “An account of the quantity of sugar imported from the West India Colonies into Great Britain,” and “An account of the quantity of sugar imported from all parts into Great Britain,” in Report from the Committee on the Commercial State of the West India Colonies, 1807 (65), 73 and 72, respectively; “An account of the quantities of rum, sugar, coffee, and cotton wool, exported from the British West India Islands, from the 5th January 1793 to the 5th January 1806,” in 1806 (141) 427; Minutes of the Evidence [testimony of Thomas Irving], in 1791 (82), 269-288, passim; “Accounts,” in 1802-1803 (138(1)), 1802-1803 (138(2)), 1808 (337(1)), and 1808 (338 (2.); “Sugar imported and exported;” in 1803-1804 (72a); “Report from the committee on the distillation of sugar and
molasses,” in 1808 (178), 3-4, 21-22, 247 and 251-252; “An account of the quantity of sugar imported into Great Britain,” in 1812 (117); “Sugar imported,” in 1812 (225, 227, and 256); “(East India Company.) An account of the quantities and prices, respectively, of sugar,” in 1813-1814 (40); “(Sugar imported from the East Indies.) An account of the quantities of sugar imported into Great Britain from the East Indies,” in 1813-1814 (41); “Custom and excise duties,” 1829 (340), 10; Report from the Select Committee on East India Produce, 1840 (527), 590; “Sugar. A return of the quantities of sugar imported . . . United Kingdom,” 1847-1848 (400), 2-3; “Sugar,” 1854 (237), 2-3; “Return of the quantities of sugar imported into the United Kingdom,” 1857 Session 2 (47), 3; and “Sugar, 1801-1856,” 1857 Session 2 (184), 5-7. See also, “An account showing the net revenue of Customs derived from Sugar in Great Britain,” 1789-1800, in 1898 [C.8706] Customs tariff of the United Kingdom from 1800-1897 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1897), 209-216.
Table IV.  UNITED KINGDOM’S SUGAR IMPORTS AND EXPORTS: 1800-1807/1808-1812.

[Minimum Estimate in Cwt. = 112 lbs.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1800-1807</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BWI imports</td>
<td>EE imports</td>
<td>Foreign imports</td>
<td>Total imports</td>
<td>Percent imports from BWI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800-1807</td>
<td>27,280,179</td>
<td>1,049,677</td>
<td>1,148,312</td>
<td>29,538,168</td>
<td>92.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Average</td>
<td>3,410,022</td>
<td>131,211</td>
<td>143,539</td>
<td>3,692,271</td>
<td>92.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1808-1812</td>
<td>18,643,368</td>
<td>240,077</td>
<td>2,197,724</td>
<td>21,081,169</td>
<td>88.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Average</td>
<td>3,728,674</td>
<td>48,015</td>
<td>439,545</td>
<td>4,216,234</td>
<td>88.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
By way of conclusion, it seems to me, that following the slave insurrection on the French island of Saint-Domingue in August 1791, which contributed to the collapse of France’s sugar business, archival data reveal that there was an abundance rather than a shortage of marketable worldwide sugar.

In 1832, James McQueen, a West Indies merchant from Glasgow, who had been a planter and manager of West Indian plantations, testified before a Select Committee of the House of Commons on Europe’s comparative consumption of sugar in 1791 and 1831. McQueen averred that his data for 1791, were derived from “the most authentic sources,” and were “perfectly accurate;” and that his data for 1831 were taken “from the British official Returns, and from the most accurate Returns . . . of the Imports and Consumption in all the principal countries and ports of Europe.” He stated that the quantity of sugar (reduced to muscovado) imported into Europe in 1791 was 9,556,000 cwt. and in 1831 it was 14,310,000 cwt. for an increase of nearly fifty percent.168

It also seems to me that the accelerated worldwide flow of sugar into Great Britain/United Kingdom was not only the result of the enormous demand and consumption of sugar but also reflected the preconditions – notwithstanding

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Sydney W. Mintz’s cautions—of the nascent addiction to the sweetener.169

Concerned that the acceleration of sugar consumption in the United Kingdom and its relatively low nominal price on the London market not only encouraged worldwide imports but also harmed British West Indian planters, Select Committee solicited the wisdom of Alexander Macdonnell, the Secretary to the Committee of West India Merchants: “Are you of opinion that an increase of price would check the present extent of consumption?”

Macdonnell’s reply was unexpectedly novel:

Probably it would; but I do not exactly think that it would be the same proportion as the fall in price has increased the consumption. I consider when habits are once formed for the consumption of an article, the increase of price does not necessarily reduce the consumption in the same manner as consumption is increased by a fall in price.170

END OF ESSAY
