



THOMAS CLARKSON (1760-1846), A MILITANT ABOLITIONIST

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Thomas Clarkson is a British abolitionist who organized the campaign against the slave trade in Britain in the late 18th century and in the first half of the 19th century. He dedicated his life to the abolitionist cause, deploying many effective means to rally the general public and parliamentarians behind the abolitionist movements in Britain, and in France. He was the first to use images, artifacts, surveys and evangelical pamphlets to raise public awareness. As early as 1815, he also embarked on a European crusade to convince nations and monarchs to act collectively to put an end to the trade.

Clarkson, an abolitionist and a crusader

Though his name is not very well-known outside Britain, Thomas Clarkson is a British abolitionist who devoted his life to the crusade against the slave trade. He was touched by a divine revelation when, as a theology student, he was asked to write an essay on servitude. He was moved by reading abolitionist authors (Benezet, Wesley) who denounced the inhumanity of the slave trade and slavery. Clarkson decided to dedicate his life to the cause of abolition, convinced that spreading true facts about the slave trade, providing brutal figures, would bring the British and Europeans to realize that their nations were engaged in a traffic of human beings.

Clarkson organized the Society for the abolition of the slave trade, in London in 1787. It supported the work of William Wilberforce, a member of Parliament, who brought the abolitionist discourse to the House of Commons. Clarkson's arguments were based on facts and figures that he collected in British ports, while recording rare testimonies from former sailors and ship captains... Their words had to be reported because they knew about the cruelty of the trade, first hand. Clarkson gave lectures in churches throughout the United Kingdom, bringing the general public to learn about the abolitionist cause by depicting the cruelty of the Middle Passage. Engravings and the schematic representation of a slave ship (The Brookes) depicting bodies crammed below deck, containing twice as many slaves as the ship could hold, were intended to shock members of Parliament and the general public. Clarkson had these disturbing images reproduced in multiple copies, while he published short fact-based pamphlets, which he distributed on his tours. He carried with him a trunk containing various objects used in the trade (whips, irons...). He exhibited them to



shock the audience in order to make them feel the pain of the slave. His collection of testimonies and his investigations supported Wilberforce's discourse who convinced the parliamentary committee in charge of the slave trade to introduce a bill. It was presented by Wilberforce in April 1791 and on several occasions thereafter. When the slave trade was abolished by the British parliament in 1807, Clarkson read it as his own triumph, though the reason behind the abolition was to be found elsewhere in a new economic context. From that date on, and for about fifteen years, Clarkson continued his crusading work, trying to convince Europeans that the abolition of the trade should be collective and international, to save humanity.

Despite his old age when the campaign against slavery began in 1823 in Britain, Clarkson resumed his lecturing, on the road, meeting with a new generation of abolitionists, writing evangelical and factual essays while still using images and artifacts. Alone, he created a network of two hundred committees across the country, from which he organized the signing of petitions against slavery, which was abolished in 1833.

Clarkson, the promoter of European abolitionism

Thomas Clarkson was convinced that only an international approach, associating France and other European countries, would really put an end to the slave trade. He went to Paris to meet with Les Amis des Noirs in the summer of 1789. He brought figures, pictures and objects to convince his co-abolitionists of the interest of starting a campaign aimed at the general French public. He even got in touch with Louis XVI, whom he believed he had convinced of the importance of stopping the slave trade. He also held a correspondence with Vincent Ogé, the leader of the free colored deputies. He was not surprised to hear that a first insurrection had been organized in Saint Domingue by Ogé, in October 1790. Clarkson warned French abolitionists that the civil or human rights discourse brought by the French Revolution, would soon have a major impact in the sugar colonies, unless France chose to free the slaves.

After 1815, Clarkson continued his campaign against the slave trade with the approval of the British government, first in Paris, then at the Congress of Vienna, to convince political leaders to pass a public declaration banishing the slave trade. He obtained an interview with the Emperor of Russia who was touched by his abolitionist pamphlets and the poster of the slave bodies crammed in the hold of the Brookes. Clarkson hoped to advance a collective European abolition of the slave trade, using the Tsar to influence the other crowned heads. He wished to obtain a collective measure against the French, Spanish and Portuguese merchants by having the trade denounced as an act of piracy. Clarkson continued to lobby political leaders at the European congresses of Aachen (1818) and Verona (1820), but his proposal for an immediate collective abolition went unheard.



At the same time, he also interacted on behalf of Henri Christophe, the king of Haiti, who relied on Clarkson to help him in his so-called "civilization" project. Clarkson and the African Institution, founded in 1807 by British abolitionists to support the development of the colony of Sierra Leone, among other things, also sent Christophe missionaries and agricultural tools to his request. Christophe intended to make Clarkson his ambassador in Europe to negotiate a peace and trade treaty with France. Clarkson interacted as best he could but did not succeed before Christophe killed himself in 1820.



About the author

Françoise Le Jeune is a Professor of North American and British history and civilization at Nantes University. Her research on the British Empire in the 18th-19th centuries, and on the revolutions in the Atlantic world, is part of Axis 1 of the Centre de Recherche en Histoire Internationale et Atlantique (CRHIA).

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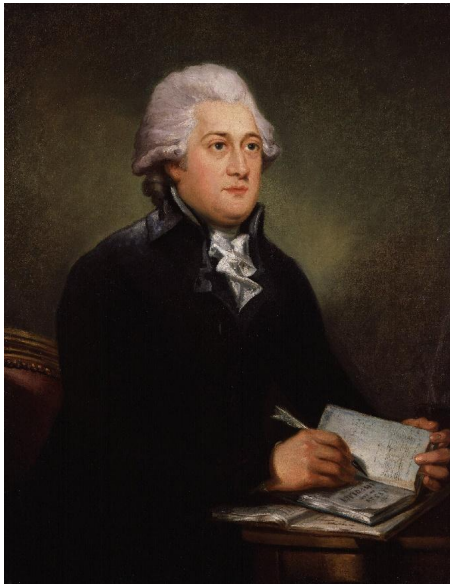
Further information

Discover Clarkson English abolitionist and original artefacts, letters and documents that belonged to him. To consult online : <https://www.wisbechmuseum.org.uk/clarkson/index.php>

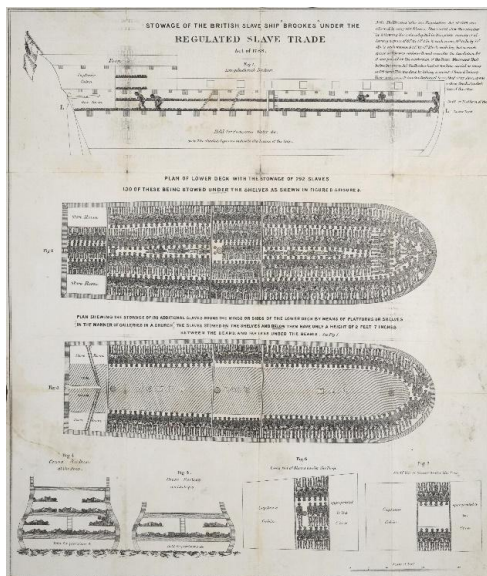
Thomas Clarkson's mahogany campaign chest and some of the original contents on the British Museum educational website : http://teachinghistory100.org/objects/about_the_object/thomas_clarksons_campaign_chest

Short video on the abolitionist engraving of the Plan of the British Slave Ship Brookes, website "History through images" à consulter en ligne : <https://histoire-image.org/etudes/plan-bateau-negrier-symbole-mouvement-abolitionniste>

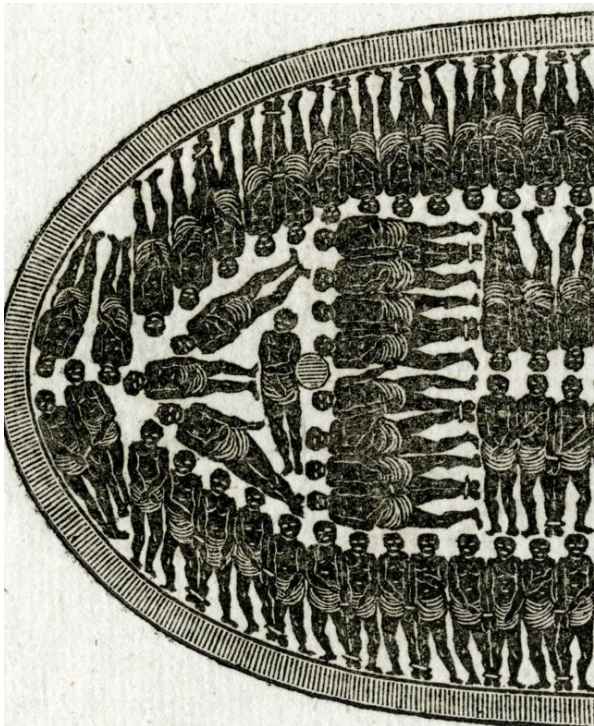
Illustrations



Thomas Clarkson Portrait Painting by Carl Fredrik von Breda, National Portrait Gallery, London.



Stowage of the British slave ship Brookes under the regulated slave trade act of 1788, December 1788, Library of Congress



Detail of Stowage of the British slave ship *Brookes* under the regulated slave trade act of 1788, December 1788, Library of Congress



The Anti-Slavery Society Convention, 1840, by Benjamin Robert Haydon, National Portrait Gallery, London.



Thomas Clarkson's mahogany campaign chest and some of the original contents including textiles, seeds, leatherwork, arrows and metal work, Wisbech Museum.