

## *William Roscoe, James Irving and the Liverpool Slave Trade*

DAVID STEERS

On 25<sup>th</sup> March 1807 royal assent was given to the parliamentary bill abolishing the British slave trade. It is an important event to commemorate. Of course, it is not the only date to remember in this context, UNESCO declared 23<sup>rd</sup> August to be International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition in recognition of the first slave uprising that took place in Haiti in 1791.

But still this date of 1807 is important, especially here in Liverpool. We should note, of course, that this bill abolished the trade in slaves, it did not abolish the ownership of slaves which continued in the West Indies until 1838. We have to note also that there still continues to be many forms of slavery today in different parts of the world, there are many forms of people trafficking not least to this country which amounts to nothing less than slavery, and there are many parts of the world where people are kept as slaves, where people are exploited. Indeed it is said that there are more people being kept as slaves in the world today than they were in the eighteenth century.

But the act that was passed in parliament in 1807 was a key event in the move towards the complete outlawing of slavery and in building a world that was characterised by humanity and concern of one human being to another.

Slavery is something that has existed in human society in many forms across the ages. The foundations of our notions of democracy go back to ancient Athens. Yet Athenian democratic society was based on slavery, the mechanism of government only worked because underneath the class of the citizens was a large class of slaves. It was the same in the Roman Empire where households, farms, plantations and commercial businesses were operated using slave labour. When we read the Bible too we enter a world where the assumption that one man could own another and put him to use as he saw fit was taken for granted.

In the book of Deuteronomy we read about the Old Testament idea of Jubilee, when every seven years debts were written off, the poor were helped in a material way and slaves were released. Or more precisely it says “If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you” (Deuteronomy 15: 12). The book goes on to remind the Israelites that they were once slaves in Egypt. They had direct experience as slaves and part of the effect of that was to shape them as a people. But the idea of Jubilee, although it is about making restitution and freeing people, also shows that the Israelites themselves kept slaves and if they were of the same race as them they could be freed after seven years. By contrast non-Jewish slaves did not have to be freed, they could be kept for life.

Certainly the Old Testament set laws for the correct treatment of slaves but nevertheless slaves were an accepted even expected part of the life of the Jewish nation.

Similarly in the New Testament when Paul says “Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all” (Colossians 3: 11) he was not trying to undermine or overthrow the institution of slavery but instead trying to suggest that the gospel transcended it. In his first letter to the Corinthians he encourages slaves to be indifferent to their social status “Every one should remain in the state in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ” (1 Corinthians 7: 20-22).

Above all we see in Ephesians Paul’s acceptance of slavery as part of his normal social picture and his urging that everyone should live up to the best level that they can within their predetermined social group:

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ;

not in the way of eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that whatever good any one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. (Ephesians 1: 5-8).

In many ways it is something that is hard for us to come to terms with. Slavery – for us today – is something that is so obviously contemptible. It is true, of course, that the kind of household slaves that Paul was addressing often had a not particularly arduous lifestyle compared to some other slaves. In any case he wasn't in any kind of position to call for a social revolution. But part of the result of this acceptance of what was the social norm in the first century AD was what was no more than a slow recognition within Christianity of the need to question the institution of slavery.

These Biblical precedents undoubtedly gave impetus to the development of slavery with the expansion of the British and other European empires. It was this trade that was eventually abolished only 200 years ago. It was this trade that certainly made the general condition of a slave in the first century BC or in St Paul's time seem a good life because this was a brutal trade.

### **The Slave Trade**

It is estimated that in the eighteenth century between Britain, France, Portugal and the Netherlands some six million Africans were forced into slavery by what was euphemistically termed the Atlantic trade. This was a trade that increased as the century wore on and in the last two decades of the eighteenth century around 1.5 million Africans were transported as slaves, about half of these being carried in British ships, many of them from Liverpool.

These statistics are shocking enough but, of course, the human misery was much worse than bare numbers can convey. Human beings taken from their homes were carried off on ships in appalling, insanitary conditions in a cruel and violent environment that often resulted in death.

But from our perspective it is hard to imagine how people who were so like us in every respect, indeed many of the members of this and many other churches in this city, could immerse themselves in an activity that seems so devoid of pity and so utterly unchristian, yet we know that they did.

The Atlantic trade or the 'triangular trade' was enormously profitable for those who were involved in it. Ships set sail from Britain laden with goods which were exchanged for captured Africans on the coast of West Africa. Often they were the captured members of defeated tribes in local warfare. The slaves were then crammed into the holds of ships in the cruellest way imaginable and carried across the Atlantic to the Caribbean or the British colonies in America to work on the plantations there. Hundreds of slaves were crammed into the ships, chained together by their hands and feet with little room to move. It has been estimated that only about half the slaves captured in Africa went on to work in the Americas. Many died of diseases such as dysentery and smallpox, others starved to death while others were crippled. But after releasing their human cargoes the ships returned to Britain with cargoes of sugar and other produce for the European market.

Yet this trade, for a long time, existed with the acceptance of the church and was often carried out by people who would have thought of themselves as Christian, God-fearing folk. No less an institution than the Church of England itself owned a slave plantation at Codrington on Barbados from 1710 to 1838.

But I'd like to look at the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade through the eyes of two men, both citizens of Liverpool, and both members of this congregation, both of whom were linked to the trade in some way. One was a slave captain, the other was the most notable opponent of the slave trade that this city has ever produced.

### **James Irving**

James Irving was born at Langholm in Dumfriesshire, Scotland in 1759. At some point he moved Liverpool, the leading slave port in Britain where he became involved in the trade, sailing on his first voyage as ship's surgeon in 1783 at the age

of 23.<sup>1</sup> This was the start of what was to be, for him, an enormously successful career. As a surgeon and captain in the Liverpool slave trade he was to participate in the transporting of approximately 3,000 Africans to slavery in the Americas.

James Irving's letters and journal have survived and so we know something about him as a person, about his domestic background. He married his wife Mary Tunstall in Liverpool and with her was a member of one of the main Presbyterian congregations in Liverpool namely Benn's Garden Chapel where their child was christened. This Chapel stood somewhere near where the law courts stand today. In 1811 the Chapel was sold and the congregation moved to Renshaw Street. In 1899 the congregation moved again, leaving Renshaw Street and building this magnificent building on Ullet Road. At times in his letters from his journeys he encouraged his wife to go to church, and he was clearly a man of liberal education but who never saw any conflict between his occupation and his religious beliefs. Indeed his attitudes seem incomprehensible to us. In December 1786 he wrote to his wife from Tobago: "I'm nearly wearied of this unnatural accursed trade and think...when convenience suits of adopting some other mode of life." But if he was tired of this business it was not because he felt any sympathy with the slaves. In the same letter his attitude was only too clear when he brought his letter to a close with the observation "I think I'll desist as our black cattle are intolerably noisy and I'm almost melted in the midst of five or six hundred of them," he wrote.<sup>2</sup> Such language is truly shocking and offensive to our ears.

By May 1789, at the comparatively young age of twenty-nine, Irving had been promoted to the captaincy of his own ship. But on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1789, just twenty-four days after sailing from Liverpool, his ship was shipwrecked on the coast of Morocco and the following day, in a bitter twist of irony, he and his crew were captured and themselves sold into slavery.

You might think that finding himself in such a difficult and dangerous situation he might have reconsidered his career so far. Yet his letters home and his

---

<sup>1</sup> Details concerning James Irving life are taken from Suzanne Schwarz (ed.), *Slave Captain. The Career of James Irving in the Liverpool Slave Trade*, (Wrexham, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted *ibid*, 113.

journals reveal that his predicament did not prompt any reflection on the way he made his living. He was quite unaffected by any crises of conscience prompted by his own misfortunes. At no point does Irving seem to make any comparison between his own experiences and those of the slaves he traded in. But he was lucky. After fifteen months of enslavement he was released and able to get home. But after just a few weeks at home he was back in command of another slave ship which sailed from Liverpool at the end of December bound for Africa to collect a cargo of slaves from the Gold Coast before sailing with them for the West Indies. They were on a special bounty if they could make the passage with only a small number of slaves dying.

Irving expected to be at sea for a year or less but he succumbed to an occupational hazard. Just as so many of the slaves were allowed to die on the crossing so the crew of the ships were prey to the many diseases and illnesses that multiplied on board the ship, and very often up to 20% of the crew of a slave ship also died. On 5<sup>th</sup> April 1791 Irving purchased 341 Africans as slaves from local traders on the Gold Coast. On 16<sup>th</sup> September 1791 his ship set sail for Trinidad. Forty-six Africans died during this crossing together with six members of the crew of 27. Irving himself died on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1791.

But James Irving was far from alone either in Liverpool or within this congregation in terms of his attitudes or actions. There were many other slave ship captains and owners of slave ships sitting in the pews of the meeting house. There were about a dozen ship owners in Benn's Garden Chapel alone.<sup>3</sup> And with them were chandlers, rope makers, sailmakers, coopers and all manner of merchants who made a living supplying the needs of the trade.

In the eighteenth century the city expanded rapidly as its importance as a trading and mercantile centre grew. The amount of shipping sailing from the port grew partly because of on-going war with France. Naval conflict with the French on the high seas gave ship owners the chance to make a fast profit through privateering. This was a practice that was about one part patriotism and ninety nine parts greed. By fitting out their ships for warfare they sailed off in search of French merchant ships to

---

<sup>3</sup> Anne Holt, *Walking Together. A Study in Liverpool Nonconformity 1688-1938*, (London 1938), 155.

attack and plunder which they did most successfully. In 1778 they captured the French merchant ship *Carnatic* which had a cargo of diamonds and spices worth at that time £135,000, but even the exploits of privateering began to be dwarfed by the money to be made from the purchase of slaves.

### **William Roscoe**

Watching the city grow and expand was the other member of the Benn's Garden Chapel congregation whom I want to talk about. William Roscoe was born on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1753 and grew up at the Bowling Green Inn at Mount Pleasant. It's hard to believe now but it was then a semi-rural area on the outskirts of the town. His father was an inn-keeper and market gardener.

Roscoe inherited from his father a tremendous energy and a lifelong interest in agriculture, gardening, and botany. From his mother he inherited a love of books and poetry. The site of the Bowling Green Inn gave Roscoe an impressive view of the growing city, including the docks and the many ships sailing out of the Mersey.

Roscoe was not marked out for greatness. But his career took on a remarkable trajectory, different in every way to that of James Irving. He left school at 12 and went to assist his father in the market garden but kept up his education learning Latin, Greek, French and Italian, also developing an interest in art and in poetry and the study of the New Testament. He left the market garden at 16 to become articled to a local solicitor for a period of five years.

There is only time here to briefly sketch his life – the successful attorney – the serious artistic and literary scholar – his deep interest in the European renaissance and considerable published works – his collecting of important manuscripts, pictures and books – his educational interests – his vision of Liverpool as a renaissance city in a new industrial age.

From the very start he had been an opponent of the slave trade. His very first published poem, *Mount Pleasant*, had attacked the trade, and included an indictment of slavery and those who profited from it:

Shame to Mankind! But shame to BRITONS most,  
Who all the sweets of Liberty can boast;  
Yet, deaf to every human claim, deny  
That bliss to others, which themselves enjoy.<sup>4</sup>

A few years later he went into print with a longer poem, published in two volumes, and entitled *The Wrongs of Africa* which brought him wide fame and established him as a leader of the abolitionist cause. He devoted all the income from this publication to the London Committee for the Abolition of Slave Trade and followed it up with a prose attack on the trade, *A General View of the African Slave Trade, demonstrating its Injustice and Impolicy*.

Here he laid down very clearly the basis of his opposition to slavery:

The wickedness and injustice of this trade will evidently appear from the consideration of the following maxims, which are of universal import, and have been assented to by all rational men in all ages.

1<sup>st</sup> All men have by nature, an equal right to the enjoyment of personal liberty and security.

2<sup>d</sup> No man can be deprived of this right, unless it be forfeited by offences against that society to which he has positively or virtually acceded.

3<sup>d</sup> No title to the perpetual servitude of another can be supported by purchase; for the origin being unjust, the right cannot be validated by transfer.

Such are the first laws of society, as ordained by God, and collected from the nature of man; the violation of which places the offender in the light of a criminal, and gives to the oppressed the right of ultimate resistance.<sup>5</sup>

This might seem obvious to us but to do this required no little moral courage at the time. To publicly make such statements was to go against the tide of public opinion as well as question the means of acquiring wealth of so many of his fellow citizens, numbers of whom sat with him in church every Sunday. His attack on slavery was rebutted by the City Council who paid a clergyman to write a theological answer to Roscoe's arguments. Yet he was inspired by his faith to oppose this trade, he was

---

<sup>4</sup> William Roscoe, *Mount Pleasant a Descriptive Poem*, (Warrington, 1777), 14.

<sup>5</sup> William Roscoe, *A General View of the African Slave Trade, Demonstrating its Injustice and Impolicy: with Hints towards a Bill for its Abolition*, (London, 1788), 8-9.

encouraged by his friend and former minister the Rev William Enfield, and felt a great impetus towards standing up for what he knew was right because of his reflections. Amongst his poetry he began also to write hymns which were popular in their day, although little used today, he contributed many to a new hymnbook for his church.

His religious attitude is summed up by some verses from Mark's gospel which he recast into a hymn:

What is the first and great command?  
To love thy God above:  
And what the second? As thyself  
Thy neighbour thou shalt love.

Who is my neighbour? He who wants  
The help which thou canst give:  
And both the law and prophets say  
This do, and thou shalt live.<sup>6</sup>

He applied this view to the position of slaves which was something that many people were unable or unwilling to do at the time. He was unafraid to see the gospel in the light of all people and not just those who held the levers of power.

As a result Roscoe became increasingly active in the political arena and in 1806 was encouraged to stand for Parliament as an independent candidate. This was a difficult and stormy campaign, he met with strong opposition. The campaign squibs of his opponents threatened poverty on Liverpool's citizens if they elected Roscoe.

But against all the odds Roscoe was successful. Becoming an MP meant a rare trip away from Liverpool for Roscoe but he was able to go to the House of Commons where he spoke and voted in favour of the abolition of the slave trade. Telling the House:

I have long resided in the town of Liverpool: for thirty years I have never ceased to condemn this inhuman traffic: and I consider it the greatest

---

<sup>6</sup> See George Chandler, *William Roscoe of Liverpool 1753-1831*, (London, 1953), 422.

happiness of my life to lift up my voice on this occasion against it, with the friends of justice and humanity.<sup>7</sup>

But he received little thanks in his home town. On his return to Liverpool he was met with a riot orchestrated by some of the local slave traders and he remained in Parliament for just about a year, until the next election.

But this is not the most important thing. He had achieved what he set out to do. An opponent of the slave trade he had been successful in bringing about its end. He was one of that group of people who were not cowed by the prevailing situation which took for granted the order of things but instead determinedly opposed what was wrong. Just as the story of the Hebrew people was that of them being brought out of slavery by the will of God so Roscoe, like Wilberforce and others, could see that God could not intend any people to be kept in such a state.

William Roscoe, for this and many other reasons, has been well remembered in the years after. There is a striking memorial to him in the cloisters here. One hundred years after his birth the Victorians minted an attractive commemorative medal in his honour. He is rightly remembered today.

However, in order to play his part in the struggle to abolish the slave trade he had to go against the perceived wisdom of so many of those about him. And not just against the vicious and the wicked but against people who otherwise appeared pious, respectable, decent. In this respect James Irving was far closer to the average way of thinking of his day than William Roscoe. Irving lived unquestioningly within the norms of his own day and age. His life shows just how difficult it was for those who opposed the slave trade at this time to get their message across. Not only was it a very lucrative trade for those involved in it so also it was something that was not questioned by most people, it was taken for granted. Irving was well educated and intelligent. Beyond that he experienced at first hand the horrors of slavery as a slave himself for a while. But at no time did he ever consider even leaving the trade himself, let alone opposing it.

---

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Donald A. Macnaughton, *William Roscoe*, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, (Oxford 2004)

This makes the prolonged campaign in opposition to the slave trade, and its ultimate success, even more impressive. Generally it was people who had a sense of its wrongness because of their religious beliefs who opposed it. Some of these were evangelicals like, perhaps the most famous of all, William Wilberforce, who coordinated much of the campaign. Another prominent evangelical opponent was John Newton who had himself been a slave ship captain and wrote the famous hymn 'Amazing Grace'. Newton was actually first mate or captain on a number of ships, including the 'Brownlow' and the 'African', which were owned by Joseph Manesty, another member of this congregation. But even though Newton underwent a religious conversion that made him oppose the slave trade, this was not an immediate result of his conversion, it is remarkable to think that he initially continued as a trader for some time after his conversion.

The earliest opponents of the slave trade were the Quakers but some Unitarians also joined the campaign including the famous potter Josiah Wedgwood who devised the famous medallion featuring a kneeling slave pleading "Am I not a man and a brother?" which became the symbol of the abolitionists. It took a campaign that extended over nearly fifty years, beginning with the Quakers in the 1760s who later founded the Society for the Effecting of the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1787). Indeed it was the Quakers and evangelical Christians like William Wilberforce who led the campaign, Unitarians were by no means as actively involved in other places as William Roscoe. But all such people remain as an example to us. When we look back from our vantage point today they seem so obviously right, it seems so clearly a thing that had to be opposed. But we need to remember that in their work for abolition they opposed not only those who profited greatly from the trade, either directly or indirectly, but the received opinion of the times, they attacked what for many people was quite normal, hardly worth questioning. They overturned vested interest and society's own sense of what was acceptable. In challenging this the abolitionist opponents of the slave trade were truly prophetic. We can ask ourselves who are we most like in our own day in the issues we face? Are we like Irving – decent, respectable, honest, truthful certainly but ultimately unquestioning about the really important issues? Or are we like Roscoe and prepared to challenge received opinion and speak against injustice wherever it is found?

For this reason it is only right that we remember the achievement of the campaigners against the slave trade 200 years later and because of it continue to give our voice to opposing inequality and oppression wherever it is found in the world. It is a reminder that sometimes the church has to say things that are unpopular, that sometimes just because things are the way they are that doesn't mean they shouldn't be challenged. This is what the opponents of the slave trade understood, and we should be thankful that ultimately they were successful 200 years ago.

Particularly in our context here we remember William Roscoe. He was a man of extraordinary gifts and talents yet he used them all for good. His abilities and strengths marked him out as a greater leader and achiever, because of them he became well known and widely respected. Yet in the end he was animated by his faith as a member of a liberal minded dissenting congregation. He became one of those who played a part in the abolition of slavery. Despite all the social and political difficulties that surrounded him he was not afraid to take seriously the statement made by Jesus which stands at the heart of the gospel, a statement that is at one and the same time both strikingly simple yet also deeply profound. The reiteration of the great commandments:

The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'  
The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12: 29-31).

*Adapted from a sermon preached at Ullet Road Unitarian Church, Liverpool at a service to celebrate the bicentenary of the abolition of slavery on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2007.*