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BENE LEGERE
 NEWSLETTER OF THE
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THE LIBRARY AS MUSE: RESEARCHING THE ANTI-SLAVERY MOVEMENT

Adam Hochschild

In the year 1787, if you had stood on a London street corner and called for the end of slavery, your listeners would have laughed you off as an impractical crackpot.



Adam Hochschild charms the crowd at the Dinner in the Library.

Slavery was harsh, to be sure, but, as one Member of Parliament said around this time, "neither was the trade of a butcher an amiable trade, and yet a mutton chop was, nevertheless, a very good thing." Without slaves, where, people would ask you, would we get sugar for our tea? And the tens of thousands of British sailors manning slave ships, "the nursery of the Royal Navy"--did you want to throw all of them out of work?

Yet by five years later, some 400,000 Britons were refusing to eat slave-grown sugar. There were antislavery committees in every major town in the British Isles. In 1792, 390,000 people signed protest petitions to Parliament on the subject. And the House of Commons voted to abolish the slave trade. The House of Lords refused, and British slave ships continued to cross the Atlantic. But a great movement was under way, and in the end--with the powerful help of huge slave rebellions in the West Indies--slavery came to a stop in the British Empire a full quarter century before it did in the United States.

The British antislavery movement not only burst into being with astounding suddenness, it pioneered virtually every major technique of political organizing we use today. When you take part in a consumer boycott, answer a direct mail appeal, put up a political poster, paste the logo of an environmental group on your car, or join a national lobbying organization with local chapters like the Sierra Club or the ACLU, you are using tools invented or perfected by the antislavery activists of 1787-1792.

For the last two years I have been writing a book about this movement and its leading figures. Friends often tell me, "This must mean you'll be having to spend a lot of time in England!" I wish this were so--for I'd love nothing better than to settle into some London archive to do my research, sipping tea while Big Ben chimes in the background. But the problem is, 95% of what I need is right here in Berkeley.

Sometimes I don't even have to leave home. By just logging on to the Gladis catalog on my home computer I can see if particular books or documents I need

are in Doe or Moffitt--or whether, heaven forbid, I have to look for them in that other place in Palo Alto. A few months ago the Library opened a whole new set of electronic doors. Without leaving home I can now get the full text of articles from hundreds of academic journals over the last twenty years. And if I want to know how the *Times of London* reported William Wilberforce's 1807 speech in the House of Commons about banning the slave trade, I just need to enter his name and the date, and that article is instantly on my screen, in the pitted and flecked hand-set type of its day.

Other such electronic riches now make research easier at the Library itself. I came across, for instance, a fascinating reference to an eccentric peer who was head of the Scottish Abolition Committee, who was said to sleep with a pet pig in his bedroom. Where do you quickly find information about anybody who was anybody in Britain? In the *Dictionary of National Biography*, whose 70-plus volumes' worth of information are now conveniently on a CD-ROM in the Reference Room. I entered his name, and there was his life story, complete with the tale of a surprised visitor who stumbled over a sleeping sow when coming to call on His Lordship early one dark morning.

Any time I want to find information about a particular slave ship or its officers, I go to another of the Library's CD-ROMs, which pulls together all known information about some 27,000 trans-Atlantic slave voyages. In browsing through this database, I was unsettled to find the record of some slaves carried from Africa to Jamaica in 1701 on a ship whose captain was named John Cross. 23 years later another slave vessel sailed from London under the command of William Cross. I'm descended from a long line of John and William Crosses, with the names sometimes alternating by generations. I've not yet been able to determine if these captains are my ancestors. I'm hoping they're not...

The greatest treasures, however, are the books. Two have moved me particularly. The first is a small, pocket-sized book with a big title: *An Abstract of the Evidence Delivered Before a Select Committee of the House of Commons in the Years 1790 and 1791 on the Part of the Petitioners for the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. Antislavery activists compiled this 117-page summary for Members of Parliament, so that M.P.'s wouldn't have to wade through thousands of pages of transcripts of hearings. And then, most unexpectedly, they found that had produced a best-seller. Although the phrase was unknown at the time, they had inadvertently compiled the first great work of investigative journalism. For this was the first book against slavery that, instead of arguing from the Bible, instead relied entirely on a carefully-documented series of eyewitness accounts. The testimony was shocking then and it is still shocking today.

My other favorite book is the autobiographical history of the movement by Thomas Clarkson, its firebrand chief organizer and very much the hero of my story. In 1787, he set off on an epic half-year horseback journey around England, to set up local antislavery committees, gather evidence, and find witnesses. On the Bristol waterfront, Clarkson lurked in seamen's taverns, looking for men about to sail, who would be willing to take notes on a slave ship voyage and then come testify before Parliament. Amazingly, he found one. When a group of slave ship officers realized what he was up to, they tried to kill him. In a Liverpool ship chandler's shop that supplied "the trade" Clarkson was startled to find handcuffs, shackles and thumbscrews for sale. He bought samples of them all, threw them in his saddlebags, and brought them out to show to newspaper editors in every town he stopped in from then on.

This is the most stirring memoir of a political organizer ever written. It amazes and delights me that I can borrow this book, take it home, and read pages that were printed in 1808, on paper so soft it feels like cloth--which it

partly is, for in those days pulp contained rag fiber. A volume like this should probably be kept under lock, key and armed guard in whatever section of Bancroft holds the rarest of rare books. But I don't intend to suggest that to the Library until I return it.

Adam Hochschild was born in New York City in 1942. His first book, *Half the Way Home: a Memoir of Father and Son*, was published in 1986. It was followed by *The Mirror at Midnight: A South African Journey* and *The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin*. His 1997 *Finding the Trapdoor: Essays, Portraits, Travels*, won the PEN/Spielvogel-Diamonstein Award for the Art of the Essay. His most recent *King Leopold's Ghost: a Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and also won the Lionel Gelber Prize in Canada and the Duff Cooper Prize in England. Three of Hochschild's books have been named Notable Books of the Year by The New York Times Book Review. His books have been translated into eight languages.

Besides his books, Hochschild has also written for *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Mother Jones*, *The Nation*, and many other periodicals. His magazine pieces have won prizes from the Overseas Press Club, the Society of Professional Journalists, the Society of American Travel Writers, and elsewhere; one is included in *Best American Essays 2001*. He is a former commentator on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered."

Hochschild is currently researching a new book at UC Berkeley, where he also teaches writing in the Graduate School of Journalism. He has been a visiting instructor at other campuses in the U.S. and abroad, including a Fulbright Lecturer in India for five months in 1997-1998. He lives in San Francisco with his wife, Arlie Hochschild, a UC Berkeley sociologist and author. They have two sons.

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