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Cover Page Footnote

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The Quaker Paradox: A Case Study of David Barclay as a Malevolent Slave Trading Banker and a Benevolent Abolitionist

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Abstract

In the eighteenth century, the British Quaker community faced a dilemma regarding their morals to pioneer the abolition movement and their economic interests to facilitate the slave trade. Members of the Society of Friends were expected to be established bankers, and many of them gave out loans to slave traders. At the same time, they were pacifist pioneers of the abolition movement in Britain. However, Friends who did not meet these expectations were disowned. This research analyzes how British Quakers of this time upheld both positions of this paradox through a case study of David Barclay, founder of Barclays Bank as well as a well-respected member of the Society of Friends. Lending out loans to slave traders, Barclay implicitly facilitated the slave trade. When Barclay became a slave owner through family inheritance, however, he chose to free the enslaved people from Jamaica to Pennsylvania and oversaw their wellbeing until everyone was fully integrated into the American society. The study consisted of letter exchanges, Barclay's personal statements on freeing those who were enslaved, and other publishing of the Quaker Friends. Through these documents, Barclay's humanitarian intentions were made clear and overcame his indirect and insidious contribution to the slave trade. Though Barclay played multiple roles in the banking and abolition fields, the primary document records suggest Barclay as a benevolent Quaker rather than a malevolent banker. The scope of the

research was general, and the study has potential for further research on the life of David Barclay specifically as well as the Quaker abolition movement generally.

Keywords: Britain, History, Religion, Quaker, Slavery, Abolition, Barclays, Economics

Quakers in the Eighteenth Century

In the eighteenth century, England was not only at war with the American colonies, but also at war with her own morality regarding the issue of slavery. In the literal sense, Britain was at war for over a century with France over North American land in the Seven Year's War, and her own American colonies in the American Revolution. Contributing to the war effort was Quaker gun maker Samuel Galton Jr, one of the best gun makers in Britain during this time. In 1795, Galton was confronted by fellow Friends regarding the immorality of his family business, as many Quakers were pacifists and condemned war and violent weapons. Galton defended his livelihood by arguing that everyone in Britain contributed to the war efforts and Britain's empire expansion, including other Quakers, suppliers, taxpayers, and even bankers and merchants (Satia 4). Galton's story closely tied into the making of the British empire, leading to the second issue regarding morality and ethics for the British Quakers during this time, slavery and abolition.

Though Britain as a nation was gaining momentum to push for the abolition of the slave trade, the Society of Friends especially were in such turmoil when their economic interest in the slave trade and moral interest in abolition came to be at odds with each other. It was assumed in Quaker tradition that Friends would choose to pursue successful careers in business and banking. Those who failed were shunned and marginalized (Ackrill and Hannah 28). One can thus see the importance of economic interests among Friends. At the same time, Quakers were among one of

the pioneers in advocating for the abolition of slavery. The Society of Friends had first confronted the issue in the third quarter of the eighteenth century by refusing to further take part in it (Brown 394). The Friends who outwardly expressed their opposition against abolition were disowned as well. In such a critical time, Friends had to be careful of their words and actions to balance these financial and ethical pressures. This essay explains how one prominent Quaker and his family faced such tensions and upheld both standards.

Who was David Barclay?

David Barclay, a prominent Quaker banker in eighteenth century London, was a leading figure who portrayed Quaker ideals perfectly. Through Quaker connections and strategic marriages, the Barclays became an important partner in the Freame Bank, originally founded by John Freame, and later took full ownership of the bank upon John Freame's retirement (Ackrill and Hannah 1-28). Barclay prospered by lending credit to slave merchants, allowing him and his bank to earn a huge share of the income derived from the Atlantic slave trade (Williams 101). Barclay thrived both in the economy and banking business as well as living ethically for his own moral well-being. As a good Quaker with an influential position in the Society, Barclay in the late eighteenth century faced a paradox deeply rooted in Quaker expectations of successful men. His success as a banker depended on lending credits to slave merchants and the lucrative Atlantic slave trade. On the other hand, his support for the antislavery movement was also important to maintain his power and status. Barclay's paradoxical stance on the issue of slavery and abolition was the result of socio-economic factors of the slave trade and the ethical Quakers ideals.

Slavery through Different Lenses

Historians have previously approached the topic of the slave trade through the perspective of how much economic benefits were brought in by the Atlantic slave economy.

Others have presented arguments and reasonings for abolition, including the Quaker perspectives. Eric Williams, in his book *Capitalism and Slavery*, discussed the profitability of the slave economy, and the various groups that supported it regardless of social hierarchy. Other historians argued that Friends fought for abolition for their morality, to repent their sin, out of fear that God would punish Britannia, and the concept of moralistic wealth. Though they were all causes that helped to ignite the antislavery movement, each historian offered a slightly different perspective and used these reasons to question the pure philanthropy of abolition.

In the chapter “The Development of British Capitalism” in *Capitalism and Slavery*, Eric Williams shed light on the Quaker efforts of abolition as early as 1783. When the ardent Quaker abolitionists appealed their efforts to Prime Minister Lord North, he dismissed it saying it was impossible because “the trade had become necessary to almost every nation in Europe. Slave traders and sugar planters rubbed their hands in glee” (Williams 126). Continuing with economic factors, Williams addressed in his later chapter “‘The Commercial Part of the Nation’ and Slavery” the economic circumstances that ended slavery. He introduced the concept of “lucrative humanity,” and the hypocrisy of the English merchants (Williams 170). When the slave trade was prosperous, all merchants wished to be a part of it. After several decades, when it was no longer considered valuable, merchants integrated into the abolition forces. These capitalist merchants, Williams argued, were utilizing their rights to free trade to their advantage. Thus, the British Parliament and other abolition groups, including Quakers, did not need to push for abolition. Free trade was the crucial factor, and “commerce was the great emancipator” (Williams 172). When slavery was no longer profitable, the slave trade would “commit suicide” (Williams 173).

As Williams offered an economic solution and perspective to analyze the abolition movement and the end of slavery, Christopher Leslie Brown provided a different angle in studying this topic. In the book *Moral Capital*, Brown explained the transatlantic influence of Quaker Friends in the abolition campaign from North America to England in the era of the American Revolution. The chapter “The Society of Friends and the Antislavery Identity” argued that since the Friends were not affiliated with society in most aspects, they had to shape a new identity with the antislavery campaign and act out of character. As Friends tried to shape the abolition movement, the movement would simultaneously form the new identity for the Friends. The first step to battle slavery for the Friends was in the late eighteenth century “by refusing to have further part in it” (Brown 394). Those who opposed simply were disowned. As Friends in Pennsylvania became more ardent campaigners against slavery, Friends in England were still not cooperating as much. Since the elder Friends were in charge in London, “the private and national interests in the slave trade were great” (Brown 419). Thus, for someone like David Barclay, as Brown pointed out, would be a supporter of abolition in America, but not in England. It was not until the 1780s that English Friends began to advocate for antislavery through the press. Friends would then be seen as “unusually virtuous, as distinctively philanthropic,” allowing abolition to put “focus to their religious fellowship” (Brown 424).

Instead of focusing on outside influences such as the transatlantic Quaker network, David Brion Davis explained in “Quakers and the Sectarian Tradition” of *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* the inner Quaker motivation of the antislavery movement. Davis explored the role of sin in Quaker abolitionism and the idea of a Quaker perfectionist that enhanced the movement. With these reasonings, Davis also provided hardships of making such a movement a reality and the ways which Quaker Friends could be ignorant to such topic of negro bondage.

Davis employed an anecdote of Benjamin Lay, a prominent Quaker abolitionist of the time. Lay argued that “sin was traditionally thought of as a kind of slavery, and external bondage was justified as a product of sin” (Davis 292). Thus, for Quakers to cleanse their souls and rid their sins, they must work against the slave trade and human bondage. It is then understood that they were “concerned with their own freedom from sin and not with the freedom of slaves” (Davis 292). As this concept progressed to become a moral principle, any objection to this principle could result in disownment. Davis also acknowledged the fact that Quaker fortunes and expansions were closely tied to “British expansion in the North Atlantic and Caribbean, and hence, either directly or indirectly, to the African slave trade” (303). With such prosperity in the economy as well as influence on both side of the Atlantic, the Quakers faced a quandary in their abolition movement. The “very exclusiveness of the Society, reinforced by the rigorous obligations of membership,” would prove to hinder abolition, as it easily barred slaves to be considered equals spiritually. Therefore, many Quakers had no problem condemning the luxuries and cruelties of life yet saying nothing about the brutality of human bondage.

With other historians focusing on the big overarching argument of Quakers, Margaret Acrkill and Leslie Hannah offered insights on Quaker lifestyle as well, but more specifically, David Barclay. For powerful and influential Quakers such as Barclay, they were subjected to more criticism as “they were not entirely successful in preventing themselves from enjoying life” (Acrkill and Hannah 27). It would prove difficult for such figures to faithfully follow Quaker traditions and live up to the expectations of the sect. Regarding abolition, Quakers were ardent abolitionists, and those “who owned or traded slaves were disowned in both England and Pennsylvania” (Acrkill and Hannah 28). Therefore, Acrkill and Hannah argued that when David

Barclay inherited a group of enslaved people in Jamaica, he transported them to Philadelphia and freed them to claim his belief in “moralistic wealth” (Acrkill and Hannah 28).

David Barclay’s efforts to be a good Quaker in eighteenth century England according to sect principles resulted in a paradox that simultaneously led him to participate in the slave trade and the abolition movement. Many historians have offered arguments that provided background and context to the motivation and catalysts of abolition efforts. They all seem to be purely philanthropic on the surface. When analyzed deeper, however, each reason actually sets up abolition to be an excuse for the morality, safety, purification, and wellness of the Quaker Friends. All would come in agreement with Eric Williams stating that the benefits of the slave trade outweigh the evil of it as abolitionists promoted antislavery through other reasonings, and not to attack such insidious trade. In this research, Barclay would be the subject used to reflect the allegory of the Quakers in eighteenth century England as Friends were caught in the tension formed by the economic and moral issues of the slave trade.

David Barclay’s Influences and Contributions

In London, the Friends formed the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade on May 22nd, 1787, shortly after the publishing of an important pamphlet “The Case of our Fellow Creatures, The Oppressed Africans.” The Committee was formed under the leadership of William Wilberforce, an Evangelical abolitionist, and several other Quakers. The printer of this pamphlet, James Phillips, was also a key figure in the committee (Oldfield 331-343). In addition to publishing antislavery tracts, the Committee and leading Friends also employed the eighteenth-century consumer revolution to their advantage. After Josiah Wedgwood became an official member, he made the Committee seal, the kneeling slave, into a cameo as he understood the powerful effects of consumerism and social emulation during this time period (Oldfield 331-

343). The use of a new cameo symbol would spread the abolition message quickly and effectively, along with the various pamphlets Friends were publishing. In 1788, Friends launched another huge campaign all across England to petition to parliament the issue of abolishing the slave trade. They tried to reach the effect of spontaneous agreement among many cities including Bristol, Manchester, Bridgewater, and many others to parliament. The pamphlet set up a very religious tone as it provided background and context to the readers, giving a brief understanding in the beliefs of the Quakers regarding abolition during this time period. It condemned Britain, a nation “characterized by its attachment to civil and religious liberty,” (Benezet 4) for its participation in the slave trade, especially “perhaps more than any other” (Benezet 7). The ideals of Christianity and civil virtues were continuously mentioned and emphasized throughout the pamphlet. Thus, one can see that these two concepts were important in shaping their motivations behind abolition.

In addition to religious background, it is also important to understand surrounding events that possibly contributed to the antislavery movement at large such as the controversial Zong incident that occurred in 1781. The Liverpool ship Zong owned by Gregson was heading towards Jamaica from Black River, Africa. Midway through the journey, the ship captain Luke Collingwood realized there was a shortage of supplies and water onboard. He then decided to throw the enslaved people overboard, starting with those in the worst conditions. In the end, he threw 132 enslaved people off the ship into the ocean, only securing the ones who could still be sold and profitable. Upon returning to Liverpool, Collingwood took the case to court and filed a claim for insurance coverage on his loss of “cargo” during the trip (Walvin 1-11). This incident and court case raised many opportunities for press coverage, abolitionists, and other purposes. Regarding abolition, Granville Sharp, a prominent abolitionist of the time, took the chance to

mobilize and speak out. He believed that Gregson, the owner, was simply asking for money for the lives brutally and innocently killed. Granville Sharp also took the chance to recognize the paradox in the English law regarding human liberty and capitalism. The capitalist idea that allowed slavery and slave trade to thrive was simultaneously taking away the liberty and freedom of countless Africans, yet both of these ideas were key components of the English law at the time. With Granville Sharp as an important player in the case, the Zong incident proved to be a powerful instrument to ignite the abolition movement across Britain (Walvin 118-119).



Figure 1. *J. M. W. Turner's Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*

The painting captures the controversial Zong incident, more specifically, moments when slaves were being thrown into the ocean by the captain and the crew. If looked closely, one can see the human figures roughly outlined in the ocean, and the ship in the background steered away from the enslaved people. The colors used by Turner also conveys his message clearly. The background of the ship includes dark colors such as red and dark blue. These colors signal the

typhoon coming on, as the title suggests (see figure 1). It is also an indication at the inhumane actions the ship crew took in order to ensure their own safety. As the exhibition of the painting was presented with a poem, a study of the poem would enhance the interpretation of the painting as well. Turner's poem is of a sarcastic tone, asking the ship crew "where is thy market now?" after performing such an inhumane act of throwing the dead and dying overboard (Turner). Titling the poem and referring to the entire incident as a "fallacious Hope," Turner indirectly voiced his disapproval of such act (Turner). Though the painting and poem were not presented to the public until 1840, long after the end of the slave trade and Barclay's death, these two sources provide a background in understanding a crucial event that took place during Barclay's time, at the peak of the abolition movement.

Upon understanding background and context, it is crucial to analyze the documents Barclay wrote himself. In the introduction, Barclay mentioned the "rights of human nature." The discussions of rights, including "natural rights," "human rights," "rights of mankind," and "rights of humanity," became an important topic after the 1760s again. With the American colonies declaring independence from Britain using these principles in the 1770s, the idea of "rights" traveled back to Europe, mainly Britain, the Dutch Republic, and France (Hunt 125). Though the concept of rights did not apply to slavery during that time, it is clear to see Barclay employing such ideology in his emancipating of those who were enslaved. From the start, Barclay admitted that he was a slave owner, but he was "much dissatisfied in being so" (Barclay 1). He then used both religious and civil reasons to explain his decision of emancipation. He was convinced that human bondage "was not only irreconcilable with the precepts of Christianity, but subversive of the rights of human nature" (Barclay 1). These two themes were seen earlier in the pamphlet written by the Society of Friends and Anthony Benezet. Thus, it is difficult to decipher whether

Barclay was writing from his own beliefs or simply from Quaker pressure. The idea of human rights and rights of mankind were made popular again by the American Revolution during this time, and it was also stated in the English law. However, Barclay did not make any mention to either as the support for his claims but based his beliefs on experience. Towards the end of his writing, Barclay also sounded hopeful and optimistic that Britain as a nation will put slavery to an end. The end of slavery would mean the success of the Quaker efforts. It would thus be beneficial to the nation, as well as the pride of the Quaker sect. David Barclay's prominent position and involvement in the Society of Friends proved to be a huge influence on his beliefs and writing.

Conclusion

The research on the Quaker tensions through David Barclay in the eighteenth century produces new questions for further research. It is unclear at this point whether Barclay was propelled by some forces more than others, or if there were other nonreligious factors involved. This paper was centered on the influence and pressure of the Quaker sect on Barclay. The extent of this research certainly is limited at this stage, and more can be explored regarding the topic of slavery, abolitionism, and Quaker involvement. The famous historian Eric Williams claimed that slavery and abolitionism were the results of capitalism rising and falling. The economic factors cannot be discredited, but with the primary documents presented in this research, including several tracts written by the Society of Friends, Anthony Benezet, and David Barclay, it is important not to overlook pure religious and civil reasons behind the abolition movement. The tensions David Barclay faced in facilitating the slave trade, through lending credits to merchants, and supporting abolitionism and emancipation were certainly caused by an intersecting of many different variables. Further research can be directed towards other events which intersects

capitalism and humanitarianism in Barclay's life, to understand him better as a Quaker, a banker, and a philanthropic abolitionist. It would be beneficial as well to look into other contemporaries at the time to analyze their views on Barclay as a person and his decision to emancipate the group of people in Jamaica who were enslaved. The dividing line between capitalism and humanitarianism was not clear in David Barclay's life, yet he upheld the paradoxical expectations of his sect. Barclay was certainly a benevolent abolitionist and Quaker, and not a purely malevolent banker behind the slave trade.

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