Immediate, not gradual Abolition: the role of women in the Birmingham anti-slavery movement 1825-1838

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Immediate, not gradual Abolition: the role of women in the Birmingham anti-slavery movement 1825-1838.

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ABSTRACT

The Female Society for Birmingham formed in 1825 and continued in operation until 1919. This study asks who these women were, what motivated them to form the society and examines the religious and gendered aspects to their work. This study assesses how they led their campaigns from their formation in 1825 to the end of the British West Indian apprenticeship system in 1838.

Scholarship of the British abolition movement is sometimes congratulatory and at other times critical. Many scholars have noted the importance of British female-led abolition groups, particularly when exploring the pursuit of immediate, rather than gradual abolition. This study provides the political and social context of Birmingham in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. An introduction to the Female Society for Birmingham including their membership, religious motivations, their purpose, and the gendered approach to their work is presented in this study. Finally, an examination of the methods undertaken in their campaigns is provided.

This study concludes that women played a pivotal role in the Birmingham anti-slavery movement 1825-1838. By analysing the records of the Female Society for Birmingham, this study allows for a local focus whilst incorporating the national context of British abolition. The Female Society for Birmingham formed at a time of growing interest in abolition. The society used several tactics already employed by abolitionists, but their gendered approach differentiated them from local and national male anti-slavery societies. The notion of their
moral purity as women and their religious affirmations afforded them to take a more radical stance towards immediate abolition.
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Some material from the End of Module Assessment, part II for A825 has been used and referenced. No part of this dissertation has been previously submitted for a degree or any other qualification. I confirm that this dissertation is entirely my own work.

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1. INTRODUCTION

On 8th April 1825 a group of women met in West Bromwich, near Birmingham and formed the first female anti-slavery group in Britain, which would become known as the Female Society for Birmingham. The society formed with two secretaries, ten district treasurers and forty-four female subscribers.1 Their endeavours continued until 1919.2 This study asks why these women were motivated to form such a society, examines the religious and gendered aspects to their work and assesses how they led their campaigns from 1825-1838.

In positioning the Female Society for Birmingham within the broader conversation of British anti-slavery, this study draws on several themes previously explored in the first part of the MA in History. Urban history is touched upon with exploration of the town of Birmingham and how this not only held links to the trans-Atlantic slave trade but also provided the components for anti-slavery momentum. The family dimension is explored, with assessment of class constitution within the Female Society for Birmingham and consideration of the concept of ‘separate spheres’ of activity for male and female anti-slavery groups in the nineteenth century. The study also focuses on the theme of religion, with examination of how this provided motivation to campaign against slavery, delivered justification for women’s movement into petitioning and guided their discourse about slavery.

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1 Wilson Anti-Slavery Collection (Part of 19th Century British Pamphlets), Ladies’ Society, for the Relief of Negro Slaves, 1825.
The key primary sources are the annual reports of the Female Society for Birmingham, from 1825 to 1838. The reports summarise the society’s activities, include membership details, cash books, and provide copies of anti-slavery tracts and first-hand accounts of West Indian slavery. Some of the primary source material contains distressing text and racist and offensive terminology. Where required, this is included to maintain historical accuracy and context. The reports of the society have been compared with contemporary reports from other anti-slavery societies, including the men’s Birmingham Anti-Slavery society, to demonstrate the gendered aspects to their work. Newspapers provide insight into national and local concerns regarding slavery. Several anti-slavery books and accounts from previously enslaved people were published during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. These have been used to provide context for the anti-slavery momentum in Britain. Petitions for and against the abolition of the slave trade have been used to display the political aspect to campaigning.

The annual reports of the Female Society for Birmingham are unfortunately not complete, with some years missing, causing limitation in analysis. Primary source material also presents questions of interpretation. Records of the Female Society for Birmingham offer a limited outlook on British colonial slavery, predominantly of middle-class white women. Whilst they utilised copies of newspapers and personal accounts from the West Indies, much of the writing is their own, or scripts from other white female abolitionists. The lack of black voices hinders our examination of British colonial slavery; however, it provides insight into how white British women viewed enslaved people. This study does not propose to be a full account of the role of women in anti-slavery movements, because a large proportion of the anti-slavery story occurred with the resistance of enslaved African people. Nonetheless, these
reports are invaluable because they capture the essence of a women-led movement which has been often under-recognised.

There is a wealth of secondary source material concerning the trans-Atlantic slave trade, British colonial slavery, and British anti-slavery campaigns at a national level. Hochschild provides a detailed account of the British campaigns for abolition, with reference to women’s groups and their influence in pushing for immediate abolition. Walvin and Blackburn also offer comprehensive accounts of British anti-slavery. Jordan and Taylor provide a different outlook, with critique of the British government’s response to calls for abolition. Upton, Barnsby and Dent offer historical context of Birmingham in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Briggs and Ferguson concur that middle and working class issues in Birmingham were moving together, culminating in the formation of the Birmingham Political Union in 1829. The rise of a more vocal middle class in Birmingham by the end of the eighteenth century is explored by Hall. Despite women playing only a supportive role in many late eighteenth and early nineteenth century charitable and philanthropic societies, the anti-slavery movement was where women really held influence.

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9 Hall p.102.
Although women-led anti-slavery groups have been described as ‘…the cement of the whole Anti-slavery building…’, there are no public monuments to female campaigners to rival those of prominent male abolitionists.\textsuperscript{10} Indeed this is true of Birmingham, where a statue of prominent abolitionist, Joseph Sturge, stands at Five Ways.\textsuperscript{11} There are no monuments to the women who formed the first female anti-slavery group in Britain. Nonetheless, there has been focus on these ladies’ societies by scholars. Clare Midgley provides the most comprehensive account of British women involved in anti-slavery.\textsuperscript{12} Clapp and Jeffrey offer an examination of the role of women and religious dissent in anti-slavery movements.\textsuperscript{13} Exploration of class composition of such societies and the idea of separate spheres is offered by Davidoff and Hall.\textsuperscript{14} Kett provides a more local focus with exploration of Quaker women and anti-slavery in Street in the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{15} Midgley also explores the link between women’s anti-slavery groups and the development of feminism in late-nineteenth century Britain.\textsuperscript{16}

The rationale for this study is to contribute to the existing work on female anti-slavery societies in Britain, providing a detailed examination of a local society and assessing how this fitted in to the wider context of anti-slavery in Britain. This study assesses if these women fitted the idea of a middle-class, religious dissenting membership and examines their motives

\textsuperscript{10} Midgley, \textit{Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns 1780-1870}, pp.2-3 and p.44.
\textsuperscript{11} Andy Green, ‘Remembering Slavery in Birmingham: Sculpture, Paintings and Installations, Slavery and Abolition’, \textit{Slavery and Abolition}, 29 (2008), 189-201.
\textsuperscript{12} Midgley, \textit{Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns 1780-1870}.
\textsuperscript{13} Elizabeth J Clapp and Julie Roy Jeffrey (eds), \textit{Women, Dissent, and Anti-Slavery in Britain and America, 1790-1865} (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2011).
\textsuperscript{14} Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, \textit{Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850} (London: Routledge, 2002).
and methods of campaigning. The study explores their position as women and how this afforded them a distinctive role within the anti-slavery movement.
2. BRITISH ANTI-SLAVERY AND THE BIRMINGHAM DIMENSION

At the end of the eighteenth century ‘…freedom, not slavery, was the peculiar institution.’ A century later, slavery had been outlawed almost universally. There are three key pieces of legislation to consider in relation to Britain’s abolishment of slavery. The first is the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807, making it illegal to purchase enslaved people directly from Africa. Slavery, however, remained legal in British colonies until the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833. Enslavement then became apprenticeship, which commanded up to six more years of forced labour and resembled British master and servant law. As Scanlan highlights, ‘Freedpeople were no longer enslaved, but they were not much closer to liberation.’ Apprenticeships were abolished, earlier than planned, in 1838. The key focus of this research is the period after the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, thus exploring the later campaigns to end slavery within British colonies and end the apprenticeship system. Despite this focus on the later anti-slavery campaigns, it remains pertinent to view them within the context of the movement that had challenged the trans-Atlantic slave trade during the eighteenth century. These anti-slavery campaigns are well documented; Hochschild and Oldfield give detailed accounts. Scanlan explores the movement from emancipation to apprenticeship and Boa provides a fascinating insight into the experiences of female

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7 Scanlan, p.327.
apprentices in St Vincent.\textsuperscript{9} Midgley provides extensive research regarding the role of women in British anti-slavery campaigns from 1780 to 1870.\textsuperscript{10}

It has been argued that abolition occurred due to pressures placed on leaders of slave-trading nations, by anti-slavery movements.\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, Britain has been hailed as the forerunner in such anti-slavery momentum and Walvin contends that the British anti-slavery campaign was the ‘…first modern successful campaign of popular politics.’\textsuperscript{12} This was not an easy campaign for abolitionists. Indeed, Jordan and Taylor are critical of the British political response to abolition, suggesting it was drawn out by British politicians.\textsuperscript{13} Even prominent abolitionist William Wilberforce called for gradual rather than immediate abolition of the slave trade.\textsuperscript{14} It is important to contextualise eighteenth century politics here. As Lang explains, Parliament was seen to represent the ‘…different interests that constituted the nation’, rather than representing the electorate. These could be economic interests, farming interests or the Church of England. Indeed, in context of the slave trade, plantation owners who opposed the abolition of the slave trade were the ‘West India Interest’ or the ‘Sugar Interest’.\textsuperscript{15} The West India Interest allocated funds to an ‘…onslaught of proslavery newspaper articles and pamphlets.’\textsuperscript{16} Williams concurs that it was ‘…imperative for the abolitionists to try to win over hostile forces thinking fundamentally in terms of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Clare Midgley, \textit{Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns 1780-1870} (London: Routledge, 1995).
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Hochschild, p.3.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} James Walvin in J.R.Oldfield, pp.vi-vii.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} David Brion Davis, ‘The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought’, \textit{The Mississippi Valley Historical Review}, 49 (1962), 216.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Sean Lang, \textit{Parliamentary Reform, 1783-1928} (London: Routledge, 1999), p.8.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Hochschild, p.324.
\end{itemize}
Despite this challenge to convince parliamentarians to support abolition, the campaigners achieved success in 1807 and in 1833.

It is agreed that anti-slavery campaigning garnered significant momentum in Britain, in the late eighteenth century and again in the 1820s and 1830s. The true impact of these campaigns in the decision-making processes in Westminster we may never know, however it is vital to analyse them in order to seek out the roots of anti-slavery. Walvin argues that to ‘…view the campaign against the slave trade (and later against slavery) as a parliamentary affair is to see only one aspect of a highly complex process.’ Despite growing public interest in anti-slavery at the end of the eighteenth century, many Britons were not eligible to vote. This was a particular issue for new industrial centres, including Birmingham which was completely unrepresented. Birmingham gained its first MP in 1832. If public opinion was to be felt by Westminster, then significant campaigning, petitioning, and protesting needed to occur. However, the push for abolition from white British abolitionists only forms part of the complex anti-slavery story. The countless slave-led rebellions which were sometimes successful, most notably in Haiti, should not be neglected. There were also several black abolitionists who promoted anti-slavery in Britain, many of whom were formerly enslaved. Published works of the formerly enslaved were used to encourage anti-slavery sentiment, most notably those of Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, Ignatius Sancho and Frederick

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20 Walvin in J.R.Oldfield, p.vi.
21 Lang, p.6.
23 Scanlan, pp.105-136.
It is also essential to acknowledge women’s involvement in anti-slavery campaigns, which increased across Britain during the 1820s and 1830s. Women’s role in the fight against slavery will be examined further in Chapters Three and Four.

The 1780s is often seen as the beginning of a formalised British campaign for abolition. This was a tumultuous time for the people of Birmingham. A culmination of events led to the so-called Priestly Riots in 1791; an attack on property of religious dissenters. The decade preceding the riots had been prosperous for dissenters in Birmingham, with the building of new meeting houses, a new synagogue, and the building of the New Jerusalem Temple, the first temple built in the world dedicated to Swedenborgians or The New Church. It was believed that the dissenters, most notably Dr Joseph Priestley, a Unitarian minister, were sympathetic to the French Revolution. Their opponents embarked on three days of riots, destroying prominent dissenter’s properties and spreading their message of Church and King. These same dissenting groups, including Dr Joseph Priestley, were influential figures in the fight to end slavery.

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25 Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life or Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written By Himself* (London, 1789);
Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave: Related by Herself* (London: F. Westley and A.H. Davis, 1831);
Frederick Douglass, *A Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845).
27 Oldfield, p. 7.
30 Upton, p. 50-57.
31 Barnsby, pp. 29-35.
Birmingham saw similar social issues to other rapidly expanding towns and cities during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Disease, poverty, and squalor had become common place and the town was experiencing economic turmoil, because it could no longer rely on French and American markets as it had done before the French Revolution and the American Revolutionary War. Thomas Attwood, a Birmingham banker, was to take notice of these concerns. Attwood wanted to change the government’s indifference to provincial England. Attwood achieved success in 1812, helping to revoke the Orders in Council of 1807, which forbade French trade with Britain. Further success was gained when the East India Company’s monopoly over trade with the Far East was lifted. Just over a decade later, Attwood formed the Birmingham Political Union (BPU), aiming to unite the middle and lower classes, calling for shorter parliaments, the end of property qualifications for MPs, the introduction of a salary for MPs and the vote for all men who contributed to local or national taxation. This union was seen as model to other political unions throughout the country and became a supporter of the Great Reform Act of 1832. Ferguson argues that the BPU was successful due to the cohesion of class groups. This differed to other industrial towns, like Manchester and Leeds, where there existed a larger disparity between class groups. Briggs states that in Birmingham, ‘Middle-class and working-class discontents were moving together.’ Briggs concurs with Ferguson; this class cohesion formed the backdrop of creating the BPU as the two classes in Birmingham were not ‘…separated from each other by

34 Upton, p.110.
35 Barnsby, pp.42-57.
39 Briggs, p.199.
the gaunt walls of the factory.' The ‘emergence of a vocal middle class eager to advance its own ideas and interest and keenly aware of its own virtues’ had been developed in manufacturing towns like Manchester and Birmingham by the end of the eighteenth century. Hall contends that the middle class in Birmingham had developed few institutions or organisations by the mid-eighteenth century but had established an entire range by the end of the century. This increase in middle class activity would lay foundations for anti-slavery movements across Britain, as Oldfield explains, ‘Grass-roots support for abolition was predominantly white and predominantly middle-class.’

Birmingham is indelibly tied to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It was the town, that manufactured guns, sent to Africa. It was the town that manufactured chains used to shackle enslaved Africans. It was the town that manufactured manilla, used as currency to purchase enslaved Africans. At a household level, it was the demand for sugar that was felt to be fuelling slavery and the boycotting of West Indian sugar was used in both the earlier and later anti-slavery movements. Birmingham was also the town that had a large community of religious non-conformists, many of whom were interested in abolition or members of anti-slavery groups. Birmingham had gained links to the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade from the beginning. Thomas Clarkson, one of the key figures in the formation of the

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40 Briggs, p.199.
41 Oldfield, p.20.
43 Oldfield, p.125.
45 Upton, pp.29-30.
society in London, visited Birmingham in 1787. He made connections with the Quaker community, most notably the Lloyd family.49 The following year Dr Joseph Priestley, whose home would soon become the target of the so-called Priestley riots, delivered, and published a sermon against the slave trade.50 In his sermon he implores people to understand the evils of the slave trade and to accept some personal accountability, ‘But no less guilty are we ourselves, who in order to have our sugars, and other West Indian commodities…connive at, and encourage, these iniquitous proceedings.’51 He not only condemns the slave trade but argues for emancipation:

‘Moreover, we see reason enough to infer that several customs were permitted in the early stages of mankind such as polygamy, and divorces, which are no longer lawful; and though there is not in the New Testament an express authority for the emancipation of slaves, we may easily see the reason of it, as well as that the spirit of Christianity leads us to it.’52

Olaudah Equiano, a former slave, visited Birmingham in 1790 to promote his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written By Himself* (1789).53 *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette* published a list of local subscribers to Equiano’s narrative and Equiano wished to ‘…publicly express my grateful acknowledgements to them for their favours, and for the fellow-feeling they have discovered for my poor and much oppressed countrymen…’54 Catherine Philips of Dudley was a Quaker Minister who travelled to America in the 1700s. Her memoirs published in 1797, record a conversation with a slave on James Island, South Carolina. He tells her that ‘…many negroes

51 Priestley, p.11.
53 Connecting Histories, *Equiano and Birmingham* [https://www.search.connectinghistories.org.uk/details.aspx?ResourceId=444&ExhibitionId=444&SearchType=2&ThemeId=4> [accessed 19/07/2022].
54 ‘To the printer of the Birmingham Gazette’, *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette*, 19 June 1790.
were treated no better than dogs.’ She states ‘…we could not but lament over those poor people, as we passed through the colonies.’ She acknowledges the complexity of the relationship between Quakerism and abolition, as many Quakers were slaveholders. She appears relieved that ‘…concern arose amongst Friends, to abolish slave keeping in our Society; which concern has since prevailed in the American Colonies; and many friends have given up large possessions in negroes…’

Thomas Clarkson’s An Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade (1789), argues that there were no manufacturing towns where ‘…the inhabitants worked solely for the African trade.’ He states that Manchester was by far the largest supplier of goods to Africa, followed by Birmingham,

‘…the goods which are made there for the African trade are unworthy in comparison in point of value with those which are made at Manchester… They consist principally of guns. But the whole branch of it is so insignificant in itself…that the change of fashion only in a button, has occasioned, and will still occasion, greater distress to the labouring manufacturers there, than the abolition of the whole trade in slaves.’

He continues to explain that anti-slavery meetings had been numerously attended by inhabitants of Manchester and Birmingham, despite having trading arrangements with Africa. As Drescher explores, a mass petition started anti-slave trade momentum in 1787. This petition had many signatures from Manchester’s textile trade and Birmingham’s metals trade, both of which were invested in exporting goods to Africa. Manchester, played a

55 Catherine Phillips, Memoirs of the Life of Catherine Phillips: to which are added some of her epistles (London: James Phillips and Son, 1797), p.68.
pivotal role in gaining signatures for the petition, with a fifth of people in the town signing it.\textsuperscript{58} Anti-slavery sentiment was rising in other parts of Britain too; Oldfield suggests this occurred mostly in towns where large dissenting communities existed such as Nottingham, York, Newcastle and Exeter.\textsuperscript{59} A further large petition came in 1792, again signed amply by Manchester residents and signed by thirteen thousand people in Glasgow.\textsuperscript{60} Despite this, abolition was not to come until 1807; something was halting this movement. The West India Interest played a key role in protecting British interests in the Caribbean and had strong ties with Britain’s three Atlantic outports; Liverpool, Glasgow, and Bristol.\textsuperscript{61} The West India interest employed an entire sub-committee in 1788 to oppose anti-slavery rhetoric.\textsuperscript{62} At a local level, petitions against the slave trade were not the only ones making their way to Parliament in the 1780s. A petition against the Foreign Slave Trade Abolition Bill was sent from manufacturers and merchants of Manchester in 1806, although the town also sent a much larger petition in support of the Abolition Bill.\textsuperscript{63} In Birmingham, the local press highlight the purported benefits of the slave trade in \textit{Aris’s Birmingham Gazette} in 1789, with an article, written by two local Constables, requesting attendance at a meeting to ‘…take into Consideration a Petition to Parliament, that the African Slave Trade (which is greatly and extensively Beneficial to this Town and Neighbourhood) may not be abolished, but undergo such Regulations only as are conducive to Humanity.’\textsuperscript{64} The Parliamentary Archives contain several petitions against the Abolition Bill from 1788 to 1799, pre-dominantly from West

\textsuperscript{58} Hochschild, pp.120-121.
\textsuperscript{59} Oldfield, p.127.
\textsuperscript{60} Hochschild, p.230.
\textsuperscript{61} Taylor, p.52.
\textsuperscript{63} UK Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/JO/10/8/106, \textit{Petition from Manufacturers and Merchants of Manchester against the Foreign Slave Trade Abolition Bill, 1806}; HL/PO/JO/10/8/106, \textit{Petition from the inhabitants of Manchester in support of the Foreign Slave Trade Abolition Bill, 1806}. [accessed 08/12/2022].
\textsuperscript{64} ‘Monday’s Post’, \textit{Aris’s Birmingham Gazette}, 18 May 1789, p.3; LBAC, AX266/12495 Aston Cross Book Collection, William Hutton, \textit{An History of Birmingham} (Birmingham: Thomas Pearson, 1795), p.153.
Indian Planters and merchants of Bristol, Liverpool and London. The road to abolition presents a mixed picture. Nonetheless abolition of the slave trade was achieved in 1807, but further campaigning was needed to end British colonial slavery entirely.

The broad reach of the anti-slavery movement is exemplified in the list of subscribers to the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, with contributions from anti-slavery societies all over Britain. Evidence from local newspapers demonstrates the growing anti-slavery momentum in Britain during the 1820s. The Mayor of Worcester sent a petition to Parliament against colonial slavery in March 1824. The boycotting of West Indian sugar played a pivotal role in anti-slavery campaigns throughout Britain. Adverts appeared in *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette* in 1825 to promote East Indian sugar in favour of slave-cultivated West Indian sugar. The *Sheffield Independent* stated that using West Indian sugar was a ‘…great moral crime..’ and the *Northampton Mercury* published an anti-slavery poem entitled, ‘An answer to the Question- Do you take sugar in your tea?’. *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette* documented the formation of the Birmingham Anti-Slavery Society and their purposes in December 1826, stating that ‘Among the many important questions which have lately occupied the public mind, it would be difficult to name one exceeding in magnitude that which relates to Colonial Slavery…’ Interest in the topic of slavery is also found in circulation of material within religious groups. The Birmingham Quaker community held the

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65 UK Parliamentary Archives, Search results for slave trade 1788-1799 [https://archives.parliament.uk/collections/search?s=slave+trade&qa%5Bkeyword_reference_type%5D=0&qa%5Btitle%5D=&qa%5Bperson%5D=&qa%5Bplace%5D> [accessed 21/07/2022].
68 Midgley, pp.60-62.
69 ‘Anti-Slavery’, *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette*, 28 November 1825, p.3.
70 ‘Anti-Slavery Society’, *Sheffield Independent*, 13 June 1829 p.4; ‘An Answer to the Question- Do you take sugar in your tea?’, *Northampton Mercury*, 12 May 1827, p.4.
Friend’s Book Society and from 1822-1838 we see books purchased such as *6 months in the West Indies*, *Memoirs of a West Indian Planter*, *A Negro Slave*, *Leonard’s Voyage to the Coast of Africa*, *Pringle’s African Research* and *The Life of Hannah Moore*.72 A letter to the editor of the *Worcester Journal* included a copy of what is supposed to be the last letter written by Rev. John Wesley before he died. This is taken from the *Wesleyan Methodist* magazine, a periodical issued monthly. The letter reads that ‘…a man who has a black skin, being wronged, or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a law, in all our colonies, that the oath of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this!’73 It is evident that interest in anti-slavery increased during early nineteenth century at both a local and national level.

Birmingham, like many other towns in Britain, followed the trends of anti-slavery movements during the end of the eighteenth century and from the 1820s to the end of apprenticeship in 1838. Financially, the town had important trade arrangements with Africa which may have been lost due to abolition, although the significance of this is debated. Birmingham also had the right elements to form anti-slavery momentum. There was political agitation, communities of religious non-conformists and the rise of a more vocal middle class. In 1825 the first women’s anti-slavery society in Britain was formed in Birmingham. An introduction to and analysis of the Female Society for Birmingham is provided in the next chapter.

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72 LBAC, MS 2160/2/1 Quaker Reading Society Register of Book Sales 1822-1838.
3. THE FEMALE SOCIETY FOR BIRMINGHAM

On 8th April 1825, a group of women met at the home of Lucy Townsend in West Bromwich and formed The Female Society for Birmingham, West Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall, and their Respective Neighbourhoods, for the Relief of British Negro Slaves, later known as the Female Society for Birmingham.¹ They became the first female anti-slavery group in Britain, with others forming in the following months and years.² This chapter examines the origins of the society, assessing the class composition of the membership and their links to other anti-slavery activists. Their motivations will be explored, particularly the religious aspect to their work. The purpose of the society and how this changed over time will be examined. The gendered aspect of the society will be studied to question whether their sex affected the activities of the group.

By the early nineteenth century, Birmingham had various elements contributing to anti-slavery momentum; including the rise of a vocal middle class. This was not exclusive to middle class men. British middle class women were becoming increasingly involved in philanthropic societies and charitable groups.³ Midgley’s research concurs with Prochaska, both Lucy Townsend and Mary Lloyd (founders of the Female Society for Birmingham) were involved in several charitable and philanthropic organisations.⁴ This notion of a middle class membership is supported by assessment of the Female Society for Birmingham. Noted in

¹ Wilson Anti-Slavery Collection (Part of 19th Century British Pamphlets), Ladies’ Society, for the Relief of Negro Slaves, 1825.
⁴ Midgley, pp.72-73.
their annual reports, ‘That all members of this Society shall subscribe towards the furtherance of its object, 12s. annually, and give whatever donations they please, and endeavour to obtain them from their Friends.’ This was approximately two days wages of a skilled labourer of the time, supporting the idea that the membership were middle class. Indeed, one of the founding members of the society, Mary Lloyd, was married to an iron master. As Midgley suggests, there was little drive to recruit working class members to the society as the leadership’s relationship with working class women was likely to be ‘philanthropic benefactor or employer’. This placed the society in a difficult position against the backdrop of the conditions of the poor in Britain. As Randall suggests, the working class may have compared ‘…black slavery to white wage slavery, and the separation of families under slavery with that forced upon white workers by the New Poor Law.’ The Female Society for Birmingham refuted the notion that they should only support the poor at home and not look further afield with their philanthropic endeavours. As noted in their second report,

‘Those by whom all this is forgotten, look only to the distress of our own poor at home, and are persuaded that all our sympathy should be expended on the nearest objects of misery; that our charity should not only “begin at home” but end there…they forget that if two beggars presented themselves in distress at their door to ask for alms, they would first help the one to whose misery they had contributed, whose sufferings were chargeable to their oppression, their inhumanity of thoughtlessness.’

5 Library of Birmingham, Archives and Collections (hereafter LBAC), MS 3173/2/2, The first report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, 1826, p.14.
7 1851 England, Wales & Scotland Census, Archive number HO107, Piece number 2027, Folio 15, p.6.
8 Midgley, p.84.
10 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The second report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1826-27, pp.13-14.
Despite middle class leadership of anti-slavery societies, working class support for the anti-slavery movement existed, and this was apparent in Birmingham.\textsuperscript{11} This was evident in the extent to which people supported the boycotting of West Indian sugar. The third annual report stated, ‘Only about one sixth of the town of Birmingham yet remains to be visited house by house, to promote this benevolent design.’\textsuperscript{12} Midgley argues that the sheer number of signatures on petitions to parliament means the inclusion of the working class.\textsuperscript{13} In a letter to her brother, Elizabeth Heyrick, district treasurer to the Female Society for Birmingham, suggested a ‘…strong feeling on the subject of slavery among the humble classes of society and they only want information, to secure their zealous cooperation.’\textsuperscript{14} The third report of the Female Society for Birmingham states, ‘We wish also to notice the spontaneous offering from a Servant, near Leicester, of an annual subscription of half a crown.’\textsuperscript{15} Despite no strong evidence of working class membership or leadership of women’s anti-slavery societies, there clearly existed support for the movement amongst the working class. Rendall has proposed that a proportion of working class support of anti-slavery societies occurred through non-conformist religious groups.\textsuperscript{16}

Religion has been heralded as one of the driving forces behind anti-slavery movements.\textsuperscript{17} David Brion Davis purports that a ‘…sense of moral urgency and fear of divine retribution persisted in British antislavery thought and was held in check only by a faith in the certain

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\textsuperscript{11} Midgley, p.84.
\textsuperscript{12} LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The third report of the Female Society for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1827-28, p.17.
\textsuperscript{13} Midgley, pp.84-85.
\textsuperscript{14} LBAC, MS 168/59 Letter to Mr Coltman from E.H. (1825).
\textsuperscript{15} LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The third report of the Female Society for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1827-28, p.22.
\textsuperscript{16} Rendall, p.246.
\textsuperscript{17} David Brion Davis, ‘The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought’, The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 49 (1962), 228.
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and predictable consequences of indirect action. It has been suggested that the influence of religious dissenters or radicals may be overstated. In contrast, Walvin contends that the work of Quakers was critical to the rise of abolition. The Methodists formally denounced slavery in 1743 and the Quakers publicly condemned the slave trade in 1758. In 1796, a Birmingham gun-maker, Samuel Galton was no longer allowed to attend Quaker business meetings due to selling instruments of war and his connection to the slave trade. However, Galton’s daughter would later become involved in the anti-slavery movement. This exemplifies the complexities of the relationship between religion and slavery. Despite providing a social connection for anti-slavery groups to form, many religious groups, including Quakers were slaveholders.

Women’s anti-slavery societies harnessed religion to emphasise the importance of their campaigns. Rendall suggests the anti-slavery campaigns tied in to religious and moral ideas and indeed this was further reinforced for women as they were seen to be purer, sin free and to adopt a moral high ground compared to men. Billington and Billington concur that women’s involvement evolved from ‘..already accepted roles in religious philanthropy and the religious societies aimed at the expansion of evangelical Christianity.’ From assessing

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18 Davis, p.219.  
20 James Walvin, ‘Slavery, the Slave Trade and the Churches’, *Quaker Studies*, 12 (2008), 191.  
25 Rendall, p.245.  
some of the membership that formed the Female Society for Birmingham, we see there is a link to religion, particularly Quakerism. Lucy Townsend, whose home played host to the first meeting of the society, was married to Reverend Charles Townsend. Mary Lloyd was from a Quaker family; her mother was a Quaker minister. Sophia Sturge was the daughter of prominent Quaker abolitionist Joseph Sturge. Joseph Sturge was related to the Clark family of Street, Somerset. They were a Quaker family with a female anti-slavery campaigner and promoter of free-labour produce, Eleanor Clark. The Birmingham Quaker community showed interest in the topic of slavery in their Friend’s Book Society.

Throughout the reports of the Female Society for Birmingham they display anti-slavery as a religious duty. In their fifth report they write,

‘If we search the Scriptures with a sincere desire to learn from them our duty on this subject, without attempting to wrest them to our own purposes or opinions, shall we not perceive God’s anger against oppression, and the abettors of oppression, indelibly engraved on the pages of that sacred volume as with a pen of iron? Undoubtedly we shall.’

This theme continues in the seventh report where the society says the slaveholders should prepare for ‘…an awful day of reckoning, when God shall render unto every man according as his works have been…’ and they use a quotation from the Bible to condemn those who have done nothing to help the campaign against slavery, ‘whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry

27 1841 England, Wales & Scotland Census, Archive number HO107, Piece number 862, Book number 29, Folio 15, p.22.
29 1851 England, Wales & Scotland Census, Archive number HO107, Piece number 2049, Folio 181, p.35.
31 LBAC, MS 2160/2/1 Quaker Reading Society Register of Book Sales 1822-1838.
of the poor, he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard. In their eleventh report they show that they use their faith to provide hope for their endeavours, ‘But we endeavour to…remember, that our adorable Redeemer yet governs the world, and may put an earlier period to these atrocities than our calculations are anticipating.’ Membership of the Female Society for Birmingham concurs with Walvin, Quakerism appeared crucial in formulating the group. Assessment of the society’s reports supports the notion that these women felt the anti-slavery movement was a religious duty and it helped to unite them in the fight against slavery.

This research thus far allows us an understanding of the society’s membership and motivations. Further assessment reveals the purpose of the society and how this changed over time. The Female Society for Birmingham was formed following the end of Britain’s involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The growing British anti-slavery momentum in the 1820s and 1830s was a call to end British colonial slavery and the apprenticeship system that followed it. This was achieved in 1838. Ostensibly, the goal of an anti-slavery group would be to end slavery. However, there existed differences in approach towards the abolition of slavery. Many groups fought for amelioration of conditions for enslaved people and some campaigned for gradual emancipation of enslaved people. Indeed, ‘gradualist mentality dominated antislavery thought from the late eighteenth century to the 1820’s.’ In contrast other activists fought for an immediate end to slavery. Immediate abolition was a

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36 Scanlan, p.327.
38 Davis, p.215.
radical thought at the time. As Davis explores, many anti-slavery activists expressed a ‘…middle-class fear of sudden social change’, resulting in ‘…a wide gap between the abstract proposition that slavery was wrong, or even criminal, and the cautious formulation of antislavery policy, with fears of bloodshed as seen following slave-led rebellion in Haiti’.39

The initial purpose of the Female Society for Birmingham, outlined in the first report was to promote ‘…the melioration of the condition of the unhappy children of Africa, and especially of Female Negro Slaves…’ They note that their work must continue until slavery is finished. This only pertained to British colonial slavery; not slavery in general.40 At this stage in their campaigning the society was to ‘…abstain as much as possible from needlessly offending the West-India planters…’41 As it became clearer that gradual emancipation was not working, many groups, including the Female Society for Birmingham, moved from a position of gradualism to immediatism. This was largely influenced by the writings of Elizabeth Heyrick, with her Immediate not Gradual Abolition: Or into the Shortest, Safest, and most effectual means of Getting Rid of West Indian Slavery.42 Both Midgley and Gleadle have argued that female anti-slavery groups played a significant role in pushing for immediatism, indeed no female anti-slavery group included ‘gradual’ in their title.43 Despite being the first female anti-slavery group in Britain, the Birmingham society did not lead the way to immediatism. It was in fact the Sheffield women’s society that adopted this first, in 1827.44

39 Davis, pp.214-216.
40 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The first report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, 1826, p.14.
41 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The first report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, 1826, p.14.
42 Davis, p.220; Elizabeth Heyrick, Immediate not Gradual Abolition: Or into the Shortest, Safest, and most effectual means of Getting Rid of West Indian Slavery (London: R.Clay, 1824).
Society for Birmingham formally advocated immediate abolition in April 1830, four months before the Birmingham men’s society did the same.\textsuperscript{45}

The Female Society for Birmingham took a radical change in stance towards immediatism in 1830, following the suggestion of its Treasurer, Elizabeth Heyrick. The society threatened to remove their funding to the National Anti-Slavery Society if they did not agree to remove the word ‘gradual’ in their title and thus replace it with ‘immediate abolition’.\textsuperscript{46} Understanding the influence of the Female Society for Birmingham over the network of female societies, which supplied over a fifth of all donations, the Anti-Slavery Society removed the terms of ‘mitigation and gradual abolition’ from their title and replaced them with ‘immediate abolition’.\textsuperscript{47} By the time of the eighth annual report of the Female Society for Birmingham, the language towards the planters had changed. The planters are criticised for not allowing the enslaved people to have days for cultivation of their own food and for worship and the report talks of ‘…the heartless advocate of the Planters…’\textsuperscript{48} The purpose of the society clearly changed from gradualism to immediatism, and this altered their language about slavery and slaveholders. In the eighth annual report they stated, ‘Of God’s retributive justice on Slaveholders and Oppressors we cannot doubt, if we read his Holy Word; and we shall find that the page of History agrees…’\textsuperscript{49} They discuss a story of revenge taken by forty thousand slaves at the fall of the Roman empire.\textsuperscript{50} Religion played a key role in establishing

\textsuperscript{45} Midgley, p.108.
\textsuperscript{46} LBAC, MS 3173/1/1, Birmingham Ladies Negro's Friend Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves Minutes, 1830, p.100.
\textsuperscript{48}Wilson Anti-Slavery Collection, The eight report of the Ladies’ Negro’s Friends Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, Established 1825, 1833, pp.11-12.
\textsuperscript{49} Wilson Anti-Slavery Collection, The eight report of the Ladies’ Negro’s Friends Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, Established 1825, 1833, p.10.
\textsuperscript{50} Wilson Anti-Slavery Collection, The eight report of the Ladies’ Negro’s Friends Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, Established 1825, 1833, pp.10-11.
themselves as campaigners for immediate abolition. As seen in the language used by the society, it enabled them to move away from the male convention of gradual abolition, ‘But we endeavour to turn from man to God...’51 This sentiment of following God rather than male abolitionists is echoed by the women’s Sheffield Anti-Slavery Society,

‘We ought to obey God rather than man. Confidence here is not at variance with humanity. On principles like these, the simple need not fear to confront the sage; nor a female society to take their stand against the united wisdom of this world.’52

As Twells explains ‘...the legitimacy of their stance came from God.’53 This allowed for a potentially feminist dimension to their work, questioning male authority and the suggestion that their views on immediate abolition were not represented by men.54

The role of women in British anti-slavery movements has garnered interest from several scholars with Clare Midgley providing a detailed account of their campaigns from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century. 55 Outside of the academic world their achievements may not be universally recognised, but their impact should not be disregarded. Their influence was felt strongly enough for their contemporaries to not only describe female anti-slavery associations as the ‘...cement of the whole Antislavery building…’, but for others to speak out against women’s involvement; as expressed by prominent abolitionist William Wilberforce, ‘...but for ladies to meet, to publish, to go from house to house stirring up petitions- these appear to me proceedings unsuited to the female character…’.56 To form

54 Twells, p.67.
an influential anti-slavery movement may not have felt an easy achievement for these women. They were not formally part of the political process. As Hall argues, ‘Women were not defined by the middle class as political- they could play a supportive role, for example fundraising for the Anti-Corn Law League, but that marked the limit.’ The idea of separate spheres reinforced the notion that ‘home was the woman’s proper sphere.’ Indeed the very first meeting of the Female Society for Birmingham occurred within a private home; whilst the Birmingham Anti-Slavery Society formed at the Public Office. Despite the barriers to these women, anti-slavery provided them a movement that they could play an important role in.

It is no surprise that the anti-slavery campaigns appealed to women. Heyrick suggested that women were especially qualified to speak for the oppressed. Billington and Billington highlight that women’s antislavery activity ‘…heightened the consciousness of women as a disadvantaged group more generally.’ Midgley suggests women managed to establish their activities as an acceptable extension of their domestic and religious duties. Rendall concurs that the anti-slavery movement ‘…united women’s religious, domestic and moral concerns…’ Davidoff and Hall agree that ‘anti-slavery was recognized almost from the beginning as a peculiarly feminine concern.’ Female anti-slavery groups broke from tradition and were some of the first groups to form separately to men’s societies. Indeed, the

58 Hall, p.103.
60 Elizabeth Heyrick, *Appeal to the hearts and consciences of British women* (Leicester: A Cockshaw, 1828), p.3.
61 Billington and Billington, p.82.
63 Rendall, p.245.
Female Society for Birmingham acted as an independent group, not an auxiliary of the National Anti-slavery society or the local men’s group and the society’s affairs were executed by women only.65

The way in which the Female Society for Birmingham presented their role was certainly gendered. The language used within the society’s reports clearly expresses their desire to aid fellow women. Indeed, the documentation of the formation of the society states that they wished for ‘…the Amelioration of the condition of the unhappy children of Africa, and especially of Female Negro slaves…’66 They vowed not to stop their campaigns until ‘…the lash shall no longer be permitted to fall on the persons of helpless Female Slaves… and when every Negro Mother, living under the British dominion, shall press a free-born infant to her bosom.’67 The society acknowledged that household affairs were not considered influential, yet they felt this was where a real impact could be made by women all over Britain. This occurred through the boycotting of West Indian sugar, for as noted in the society’s second report,

‘The influence of females in the minor departments (as they are usually deemed), of household affairs is generally such, that it rests with them to determine whether the luxuries indulged in, and the conveniences enjoyed, shall come to them from the employers of free men, or from the oppressors of British Slaves.’68

65 Midgley, p.46; Billington and Billington, p.85.
67 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The first report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, 1826, pp.15-16.
68 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The second report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1826-27, p.16.
The society did not present themselves as a feminist society, however, if we consider the actions the society undertook these could be considered feminist. This has been examined in detail by Midgley, with the suggestion that the organisation of mass petitions and the challenge to men’s position of gradual abolition demonstrates a feminist angle to their actions.\textsuperscript{69} Indeed, the difference in approach was available to them because they were women. Hochschild concurs, ‘The women’s societies were almost always bolder than those of the men.’\textsuperscript{70} Women were initially campaigning on religious and moral grounds and eventually on an economic and political perspective. This afforded women’s anti-slavery groups the ability to not only utilise their influence in the domestic sphere but to also take a more radical approach towards immediatism.

Assessment of the Female Society for Birmingham supports the notion of a middle-class, religious membership with connections to religious non-conformist groups. The purpose of the society altered over time, aligning with a generalised trend towards immediate abolition in the 1830s. This change in approach confirms that they were not only a philanthropic group, but they were political, and they challenged the male orthodoxy of gradual abolition. The presentation of the society was gendered and the emphasis on women’s religious and moral duty afforded them to take a more radical approach than men’s anti-slavery societies. The activities undertaken by the Female Society for Birmingham undoubtedly would have laid groundwork for future women’s political movements.\textsuperscript{71} The next chapter will explore further their role in the anti-slavery movement and examine how they conducted their campaigns from 1825-1838.

\textsuperscript{69} Midgley, pp.154-177.
\textsuperscript{71} Midgley, pp.172-177.
Despite Britain ending its participation in the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, slavery continued within its colonies and remained present in many respects under the apprenticeship system which ended in 1838.\footnote{The National Archives, *Slavery and the British transatlantic slave trade* <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-transatlantic-slave-trade-records/> [accessed 25/11/2022]. Material used here from Elizabeth Quibell A825 EMA part II, p.1.} Following the emancipation bill of 1833, enslaved people were not liberated. To appease slaveholders, Parliament declared that slaves would become apprentices. These apprentices were obliged to work for their former owners for a further six years without pay. This sparked significant backlash from anti-slavery supporters who ‘...waged a vigorous campaign against it...’\footnote{Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery* (New York: Pan Books, 2012), p.348.} The Female Society for Birmingham lasted far beyond the end of apprenticeship, remaining in operation until 1919.\footnote{Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.198.} Their campaigns from 1825-1838 have been examined in this study. This period has been chosen to allow insight from the society’s formation at a time when British anti-slavery momentum was high and to explore their campaigns to end apprenticeship. The work of British anti-slavery groups changed following the end of the apprenticeship system. The focus shifted to aiding emancipated slaves and promoting abolition worldwide. Midgley explores women’s role in supporting abolitionists in the United States.\footnote{Midgley, pp.121-153.} To expand the research beyond 1838 is beyond the scope of this study. This chapter will examine the methods used by the Female Society for Birmingham in supporting the anti-slavery campaign. It will provide assessment of the rhetoric used by the society and provide comparison to other anti-slavery societies, exploring general themes and any differences in approach.
A key objective of the society was to disseminate knowledge about British colonial slavery and the subsequent apprenticeship system. In the resolutions made within the first annual report, they believed the abolition of the slave trade could be owed to ‘…diffusing throughout the country the knowledge of the real miseries, with which the Trade in human beings is being attended, and to that general sentiment of great abhorrence which necessarily followed…’ Members were asked to ‘…endeavour to awaken in the minds of their Country-women and of all those over whom they have any influence, a lively sense of the injustice, inhumanity, and impiety, of our present system of Colonial Slavery…’ They felt that nothing would bring about change more than continuing this information sharing. To circulate this information, they used copies of ‘…Jamaica Gazettes, and Mr. Clarkson’s Argument…and other documents which may serve to show the evils of Slavery…’ To increase the reach of this sharing of knowledge, members were encouraged to promote the formation of other societies throughout Britain. This was successful, with a network of other female anti-slavery groups formed during the 1820s and 1830s. The Dublin Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society was formed with communication from the Female Society for Birmingham and the Salisbury Society quotes the Female Society for Birmingham in their efforts to encourage abolition. The men’s Birmingham Anti-Slavery Society drew parallels to this information sharing with their first list of resolutions in 1826, where they wished to ‘…diffuse information on the present state of the Slave Trade, on the evils of Slavery in general, and on

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5 Library of Birmingham Archives and Collections (hereafter LBAC), MS 3173/2/2, The first report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall, and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, 1825-26, p.15.  
6 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The second report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1826-27, p.24.  
7 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The first report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall, and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, 1825-26, p.16.  
8 Midgley, p.44.  
9 Wilson Anti-Slavery Collection (Part of 19th Century British Pamphlets), Rules and resolutions of the Dublin Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society, with lists of the district treasurers, committee and secretaries; and of the subscribers, 1828, p.4; The fourth annual report, of the Ladies' Association, for Salisbury, Calne, Melksham, Devizes, &c in aid of the cause of negro emancipation, 1829, pp.11-12.
the condition of the Slaves in our own Colonies in particular. Despite men’s anti-slavery groups stating information sharing as an important aspect of their campaigning, Midgley has highlighted that proportionally the Female Society for Birmingham invested more funds to this, with ‘total expenditure on publications amounted to almost half the amount spent by the national Anti-Slavery Society itself on publications in 1826’. Indeed, examination of the Female Society’s cash books show the proportion of funds they were investing in propaganda material. In their first year they raised £907, of which £194 was spent on printing and £498 was spent on work-bags. Similarly, in the second year of the society they raised £823 and spent £204 on printing and £402 on work-bags.

Work-bags formed a key part of the society’s strategy to distribute knowledge about slavery. Work-bags were traditionally used to carry embroidery and sewing related items. Anti-slavery work-bags were made from East-Indian cotton or silk and contained articles, poems and illustrations about slavery, abolition and the free produce movement and were regularly emblazoned with anti-slavery images. These often-contained works of individual women writers, including On the Flogging of Women by Charlotte Elizabeth Phelan and British Slavery by Hannah Moore. In the society’s ledger, it is evident they were producing

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10 LBAC, MS 3058/1, Birmingham Anti-Slavery Society Minutes 1826-37, Abolition of Slavery, 1826.
11 Midgley, p.57.
12 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The first report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall, and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, 1825-26, p.33.
13 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The second report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1826-27, pp.30-31.
14 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The second report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1826-27, pp.30-31.
these work-bags to sell throughout Britain and Ireland.¹⁸ This displays the importance of their connection to other female anti-slavery societies, with sales to Miss H. Kiernan of the Dublin Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society and to established campaigner Eliza Cropper of Liverpool.¹⁹ In 1826, ‘two thousand of the workbags were distributed through England, Wales and Ireland.’²⁰ The Society even presented one of these work-bags to King George IV.²¹ The idea of displaying anti-slavery articles to the general public was not new. One of Britain’s most prominent abolitionists, Thomas Clarkson had been travelling throughout Britain with his so-called ‘campaign chest’. This was a wooden chest filled with items from Africa and anti-slavery literature.²² However, the work-bags produced by the Female Society for Birmingham allowed a more feminine appeal. As Gardner explores, these work-bags allowed women to ‘…physically carry their political beliefs between domestic and public spaces.’²³ This occurred without censure because the work-bags maintained the notion of fashionable femininity.

Boycotting slave grown produce was certainly not a new idea in the early nineteenth century. Earlier anti-slavery campaigns had encouraged the boycotting of West Indian sugar in the eighteenth century.²⁴ One of the biggest advocates for boycotting sugar produced by slaves was District Treasurer, Elizabeth Heyrick, writing in a letter to her brother in 1825,

¹⁸ LBAC, MS 3173/3/1, Ledger belonging to the Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves for Birmingham, West Bromwich, etc, 1825-1831.
¹⁹ LBAC, MS 3173/3/1, Ledger belonging to the Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves for Birmingham, West Bromwich, etc, 1825-1831, pp.19-36; Wilson Anti-Slavery Collection, Rules and resolutions of the Dublin Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society; with lists of the district treasurers, committee and secretaries; and of the subscribers, 1828, p.11; Midgley, p.181.
²⁰ Midgley, p.57.
²³ Gardner, p.95.
²⁴ Hochschild, pp.6-7.
‘...endeavouring wherever I go, to make converts to the plan of substituting East for West India sugar, and have gained an accession of between 200, and 300 families...’

The Female Society for Birmingham also adopted a door-to-door approach. They visited the residents of Birmingham with the hope that they would no longer purchase slave grown sugar, as explained in the first report,

‘Convinced that abstinence from Slave cultivated Sugar, is one of the best modes to which recourse can be had to express its abhorrence of the system of Colonial Slavery...its members will endeavour by their influence, as well as by their example, to promote the exclusive use of the productions of free labour in the neighbourhoods in which they reside.’

This approach was distinctly female, as explored by Holcomb, ‘...most likely adopted from the system of female district visitors to the poor used by benevolent associations in this period.’ Indeed, the boycotting of sugar or the free produce movement is absent in the resolutions of the men’s Birmingham Anti-Slavery Society. By the time of the Female Society for Birmingham’s second annual report, more than half the town had been visited.

A year later, in the next annual report, they had progressed further with ‘Only about one sixth of the town of Birmingham yet remains to be visited house by house, to promote this benevolent design.’ A local tea merchant even placed a piece in the Birmingham Chronicle to promote the superiority of their East Indian produce.

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26 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The first report of the Female Society for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, 1826, pp.16-17.
28 LBAC, MS 3058/1, Birmingham Anti-Slavery Society Minutes 1826-37, Abolition of Slavery, November 1826, p.1.
29 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The second report of the female society, for the relief of British negro slaves, 1826-27, p.17.
30 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The third report of the Female Society for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1827-28, p.17.
that 90% of families visited in England by female anti-slavery groups did boycott West Indian sugar.\(^{32}\) Aligned with the domestic aspect of the society’s work, households could purchase anti-slavery sugar bowls and other tableware. This is promoted in the fifth annual report of the Society stating that, ‘Anti-Slavery China may be purchased, at prime cost, of Sarah Bedford and Son, China Rooms, New Street, Birmingham…’\(^{33}\)

Although it has been suggested that the abstention from West Indian sugar had no significant impact on the amount of slave-grown sugar imported to Britain, this local door-to-door approach would have undoubtedly created a sense of an anti-slavery community.\(^{34}\) Other female societies were encouraged by the actions of the Birmingham group. The third report of the Salisbury society stated,

‘Much encouragement may be derived from the good effects which have resulted from the indefatigable exertions of the ladies of Birmingham…the consequence of these unwearied exertions is a growing dislike to slave-grown produce, and many amongst the opulent classes have become deeply interested in the subject, and some of the poor would rather deny themselves sugar altogether than use that which is produce of slave-labour.’\(^{35}\)

The third report of the Female Society for Birmingham detailed, ‘In Worcester, the Ladies’ Anti-slavery Association withhold their countenance from grocers who sell, and from confectioners who use, West India Sugar.’\(^{36}\) As Hochschild highlights, ‘This was the first


\(^{33}\) Wilson Anti-Slavery Collection, *The fifth report of the Ladies’ negro’s fiend society, for Birmingham, West Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall, and their respective neighbourhoods, established 1825, 1830*, pp.69.

\(^{34}\) Midgley, p 62. Material used here from Elizabeth Quibell A825 EMA part II, p.5.

\(^{35}\) Wilson Anti-Slavery Collection, *The fourth annual report, of the Ladies’ Association, for Salisbury, Calne, Melksham, Devizes, &c in aid of the cause of negro emancipation*, 1829, pp.4-6.

\(^{36}\) LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, *The third report of the Female Society for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1827-28*, p.21.
time on record that the sugar boycott had been used this way…’37 Women were able to capitalise on their role in the domestic sphere and utilise this to make a political statement.

A further method utilised by the Female Society for Birmingham in their campaigns was obtaining signatures for petitions. The nineteenth century saw a large increase in petitions presented to Parliament, although as Midgley highlights women did not have a tradition of petitioning Parliament.38 Alison Twells discusses how this altered in the early nineteenth century, with women’s entry into politics being justified on religious terms.39 The Female Society for Birmingham canvassed throughout the town to obtain signatures for the National Female Petition Against Slavery in 1833.40 This petitioning activity was undertaken by the Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society in Sheffield too, as stated in their third report ‘…and now what remains in the power of the people appears to be the firm and persevering language of petition.’41 They asked their members to convey to their representatives in Parliament, ‘…the utter impossibility of any system that is morally wrong being politically right.’42 The National Female Petition of 1833 gained 187,157 signatures. It was described as a ‘huge featherbed of a petition’ as it arrived by carriage at the doors of Parliament, and it is the largest single anti-slavery petition ever presented to Parliament.43 Midgley has argued that the number of signatures obtained demonstrates that there was working class support for the anti-slavery

37 Hochschild, p.327.  
movement; despite a lack of evidence showing working class membership to the society.\textsuperscript{44}

This petitioning activity continued, with the Female Society for Birmingham obtaining the most signatures for a petition to the new Queen Victoria in 1837 regarding the apprenticeship system.\textsuperscript{45} As demonstrated in the \textit{Patriot} newspaper, the society appealed beyond the local community and communicated to a Rev. Dr. Price to urge pastors throughout the country to obtain signatures from the female members of their services.\textsuperscript{46} Similarly to the boycotting of West Indian Sugar, the scale of signatures demonstrates that the Female Society for Birmingham held influence over a significant number of people. It is, therefore, likely that they would have drawn support from different classes of society. By utilising the ‘female’ door-to-door approach to obtain signatures and maintaining that this petitioning was required on religious grounds, these women were able to step in the political domain.

Fund-raising often plays a significant role in philanthropic societies. Prochaska argues that fund-raising was the most significant contribution made by local women’s societies to national societies in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{47} Midgley has highlighted that women’s anti-slavery groups contributed a larger proportion of donations to the National Anti-slavery Society than men’s groups.\textsuperscript{48} Despite this, fund-raising is not cited as one of the key resolutions of the Female Society for Birmingham and indeed a large amount of their funds raised fuelled their own propaganda campaign, through publications and work-bags.\textsuperscript{49} The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} Midgley, pp.84-85.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Midgley, p.85.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Midgley, p.52.
\item \textsuperscript{49} LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, \textit{The first report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall, and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, 1825-26}, p.33; LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, \textit{The second report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1826-27}, pp.30-31.
\end{itemize}
Female Society for Birmingham also used their funds for specific causes. These reflected their women-centred approach and their religious motivations. In 1833, they noted that ‘Had Slavery been abolished, we had hoped to see Ladies’ Anti-slavery Societies, generally, merge into Societies for the education of the African race.’ A proportion of funding was allocated to groups involved in conversion to Christianity, education, and relief work in the British West Indies. These included the Society for the Relief of distressed and discarded Negroes and the Female Refuge Society in the Island of Antigua. They contributed to the Wesleyan Missionary Society and to the Ladies’ Society in the Bermudas, for ‘…promoting the early education and improvement of the children of Negroes, and people of colour…’ In later years, the society targeted their funds towards acquiring the freedom of enslaved people who had arrived in Britain and on educational facilities and refuges in the British Colonies. They sent funds directly to Thomas Pringle, the Secretary of the National Anti-Slavery Society, to acquire the freedom of the slave Nancy Morgan. The annual report of 1833 states the society issued £305 for the ‘ransom of seven enslaved British subjects.’ The evidence from the Female Society for Birmingham suggests that not only did they contribute to the National anti-slavery society, but they also utilised their funds for their own targeted purposes. The largest proportion of this was the creation of their own propaganda. Their donations to

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50 Wilson Anti-Slavery Collection, The eighth report of the Ladies’ negro’s friend society, for Birmingham, West Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall, and their respective neighbourhoods: established 1825, 1833, p.23.
51 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The first report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall, and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, 1825-26, p.33; LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The second report of the Female Society, for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1826-27, pp.30-31.
52 LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, The third report of the Female Society for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1827-28, pp.54-55.
Educational and relief work can be seen as an extension of women’s existing role in missionary and charitable societies at the time.\textsuperscript{55}

Examination of the records for the Female Society for Birmingham offer us an insight into their view of enslaved people, in particular enslaved women. Their campaigning was strongly based upon a paternalistic or as Midgley terms more appropriately, maternalistic discourse which was common in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{56} Many of the images utilised by the society display enslaved people, mainly women, kneeling and praying for help.\textsuperscript{57} Indeed it is an image of an enslaved woman nursing their sick child which was emblazoned over the society’s work-bags.\textsuperscript{58} They used an image of a ‘Goddess-like’ white woman providing saviour for helpless enslaved Africans kneeling at her feet.\textsuperscript{59} In the society’s third report, enslaved females are described as the ‘…weakest and most succourless of the human race…’\textsuperscript{60} In \textit{On the Flogging of Women} by Charlotte Elizabeth Phelan, she writes, ‘Weak, helpless, succourless, to thee, Her looks for mercy pray…’\textsuperscript{61} Midgley suggests these types of images and discourse defied the lustful, trouble-making planter stereotypes of black women by replacing them with the stereotype of helpless women in need of male protection.\textsuperscript{62} Of course this protection was not granted to enslaved women, thus further justifying the need for female anti-slavery societies. They exemplify this in their eleventh annual report, ‘…our

\textsuperscript{55} Midgley, p.53.
\textsuperscript{56} Midgley, p.102.
\textsuperscript{57} MS 3173/4/1 Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves album entitled ‘Leaflets etc relating to Negro Slavery’, c.1822-27. See appendices 2 and 3.
\textsuperscript{59} MS 3173/4/1 Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves album entitled ‘Leaflets etc relating to Negro Slavery’, c.1822-27. See appendix 4.
\textsuperscript{60} LBAC, MS 3173/2/2, \textit{The third report of the Female Society for Birmingham, West-Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and their respective neighbourhoods, for the relief of British negro slaves, Established 1825, 1827-28}, p.11.
\textsuperscript{62} Midgley, p.97.
endeavours to assist our own helpless sex, who cannot speak for themselves…’

The information used by the Female Society for Birmingham were predominantly accounts from the *Jamaica Gazettes* and accounts from white missionaries and publications from the Anti-Slavery society and other British publications. This leaves the narrative from enslaved women absent. *The History of Mary Prince* was the dominant contemporary account of a previously enslaved female, although this was mediated through a sixteen-page editorial supplement, written by white abolitionist Thomas Pringle.

Research has shown that enslaved women in the British West Indies were subjected to abject suffering, as described by women abolitionists, including the Female Society for Birmingham. The stereotype of the helpless female slave, however, is undermined. As explored by Barbara Bush, resistance by male and female slaves was not undertaken just by revolt in the West Indies but began from the moment of their capture. This continued throughout their enslavement, with enslaved females often described as awkward and difficult to manage. Their small acts of defiance lay in purposely not performing set tasks in a certain way, refusing outright to complete duties set to them and feigning sickness despite the threat of physical punishment.

Enslaved women also played an important role in maintaining African cultural traditions and religious practices and were ‘prominent in all areas of resistance against the dominant white culture.’ These roles were threatened by white women abolitionist’s promotion of British family life, gender roles and British forms of marriage. Despite acknowledging the horrors of slavery and reporting on accounts of slave rebellion, their role as white women abolitionists was one of

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64 Midgley, p.102.


67 Bush, pp.56-63.

68 Bush, p.160.
Christian missionary, of white saviour to the helpless slave, not one of equality and promotion of African cultural traditions.

The Female Society for Birmingham utilised various strategies to promote anti-slavery. Many of these fitted within the realms of the domestic sphere and were gendered in nature. They encouraged the formation of other ladies’ anti-slavery societies throughout Britain. There is little doubt that they played a pivotal role in disseminating information about slavery, with education, about the plight of enslaved females in particular, being one of their key goals. In order to spread information, they spent a large quantity of their funds on printing and work-bags, proportionally more than the national Anti-Slavery Society. They participated in creating the largest single anti-slavery petition ever presented to Parliament. They successfully spread the plea to boycott West Indian sugar not just in Birmingham, but through other female anti-slavery societies across Britain. Their campaigns give us valuable insights to the horrors of slavery and how the Female Society for Birmingham thought best to end it. They also inform us how enslaved people, particularly women, were viewed by the society. Their portrayal of the powerless female slave endorsed the idea of white saviour. This was commonplace in the nineteenth century and fitted with the paternalistic discourse of many other prominent British abolitionists.69

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CONCLUSION

This study of the Female Society for Birmingham endeavoured to assess the role played by women in the Birmingham anti-slavery movement 1825-1838. The study aimed to discover what motivated this group of women to start the society, what type of women the members were, how they conducted their campaigns and examine the gendered nature to their work. This research strove to place a local anti-slavery society within the national framework of British anti-slavery. Chapter Two explored the contextual landscape of Birmingham and the anti-slavery movement at the end of the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth century. Despite economic ties to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Birmingham’s metal trades signed a mass petition against the slave trade in 1787. Birmingham also followed the trend of increased interest in abolition during the 1820s and 1830s. Birmingham had large dissenting communities, particularly Quakers, who helped to form anti-slavery networks. This combined with a more vocal middle class to provide a fertile ground for an anti-slavery group to form.

Chapter Three served as an introduction to the Female Society for Birmingham, providing analysis of the membership, their motivations, their purpose, and their women-centred approach. The evidence supports the notion of a middle class leadership and membership of the society. There is little evidence to suggest working class membership to the society, although working class support for the anti-slavery movement certainly existed. Religion played a key role in establishing members to the Society, with religious dissenters, most notably the Quaker community, being key members of the group. The Female Society for Birmingham deemed anti-slavery work as a duty to God and this guided a lot of their language used in their reports. The findings in Chapter Three also demonstrate that many
aspects of their role were women-centred and their ‘pureness’ as women afforded them a more radical stance when it came to calling for immediate abolition.

Chapter Four assessed their campaign endeavours from 1825-1838. This timeframe allows for exploration of the Society’s origins through to the end of the British apprenticeship scheme in the West Indies. The evidence demonstrates the various methods used by the Female Society for Birmingham and other anti-slavery societies to promote abolition. Their key objective was to educate people about slavery, for which they spent large sums on printing and work-bags. They made a particular focus on education about the treatment of enslaved females. The discourse employed by the Society aligned with the commonly used paternalistic language of nineteenth-century abolitionists. The Female Society for Birmingham conducted a large boycotting campaign throughout the town and encouraged similar activity in other women’s anti-slavery societies in Britain. Women’s anti-slavery groups contributed to a change in petitioning activity, which had been largely signed by men only prior to the early nineteenth century. This move into the political and public sphere could be justified on moral and religious grounds. In terms of obtaining signatures, they were successful. The National Female Petition of 1833 is the largest single anti-slavery petition ever presented to Parliament. The society were also successful at fund-raising and used these funds for specific causes, often with the motivation of educating and converting enslaved Africans to Christianity.

This study has focussed on a short timeframe of the lifespan of the Female Society for Birmingham. Annual reports of the society from the mid-1840s to 1919 remain available. This research could therefore be extended to cover the period following the end of apprenticeship. This would allow for further assessment of their role in worldwide abolition
campaigns, particularly linking with the female abolition movement in the United States of America. Extending the period analysed would allow examination of the connection between the British female anti-slavery movement and the female suffrage campaign.¹

Early nineteenth century Birmingham provided fertile ground for an anti-slavery group to form. This included religious dissenting communities and the rise of a vocal middle class. The Female Society for Birmingham formed on an independent basis, were completely women-led, and challenged the male orthodoxy of gradual abolition. This society encouraged several other female societies to form across Britain. They employed numerous techniques which were not new to abolitionists, but they utilised a gendered approach. This afforded them the option of campaigning for immediate abolition on moral grounds. Religion appears as a key motivator for the members of the society and religious language is used throughout their reports. Religion provided them with justification for moving into the political realm as they felt it was their duty under God to speak for the enslaved females of the West Indies. They capitalised on their role in the domestic sphere to the advantage of their campaigns. Their door-to-door approach of enlisting boycotters of West Indian sugar, their use of fashionable feminine work-bags and their role in pursuing immediate abolition demonstrate their gendered approach. The role of women in the Birmingham anti-slavery movement 1825-1838, should be recognised as important. Despite debate about the reasons why Britain abolished slavery, the evidence presented in this study would suggest that the British female anti-slavery campaigns certainly held influence. Indeed, the findings in this study would

concur that ‘…they formed the cement of the whole Antislavery building’. ² This is especially apparent when exploring their role in pursuing immediate, not gradual abolition.

APPENDICES

| Appendix 1 | Image of an anti-slavery work bag and some of its contents produced by the Female Society for Birmingham |
| Appendix 2 | Image used by the Female Society for Birmingham, depicting a kneeling slave |
| Appendix 3 | Image used by the Female Society for Birmingham, depicting a praying slave |
| Appendix 4 | Image used by the Female Society for Birmingham, depicting a Goddess-like white savoir |
*IMAGE REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

APPENDIX 2

Image used by the Female Society for Birmingham, depicting a kneeling slave. MS 3173/4/1 Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves album entitled ‘Leaflets etc relating to Negro Slavery’, c.1822-27.

I would not have a Slave to till my ground
To carry me, to fan me while I sleep,
And tremble when I wake, for all the wealth
That sinews bought and sold have ever earn’d.
We have no Slaves at home—why then abroad?

COWPER.
APPENDIX 3

Image used by the Female Society for Birmingham, depicting a praying slave. MS 3173/4/1 Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves album entitled ‘Leaflets etc relating to Negro Slavery’, c.1822-27.
APPENDIX 4

Image used by the Female Society for Birmingham, depicting a Goddess-like white savoir. MS 3173/4/1 Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves album entitled ‘Leaflets etc relating to Negro Slavery’, c.1822-27.
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