

525 Years in the Pursuit of Truth: A New History of The University of Aberdeen

Episode 6

[00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Dr Bradford Bow [00:00:09] Hello, my name is Dr. Bradford Bow, and I am a co deputy director of the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies, which is sponsoring this new series of podcasts entitled '525 Years in the Pursuit of Truth: A New History of the University of Aberdeen'.

[00:00:34] In this episode, my colleague Dr Richard Anderson, who is a lecturer in the history of slavery at Aberdeen University, will examine the life and influence of the Reverend James Ramsay, who was an alumnus of King's College, and then went on to become an Anglican minister and a ship's surgeon and ultimately a pioneering abolitionist. Dr Anderson explores Ramsay's antislavery convictions, which were born out of the experience of 15 years as a preacher and then as a medical attendant to the enslaved population of the island of St. Christopher. Dr. Anderson focuses the study on Ramsey's abolitionist tracts of 1784 through to 1787, which were the most influential publications in the years leading up to abolitionism before it became an organized movement.

Dr Richard Anderson [00:01:51] The famed abolitionist Thomas Clarkson's 1808 *History of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade* included a remarkable allegorical map. The map depicted streams becoming rivers becoming a large body of water. The map was Clarkson's visual representation of British abolitionism as "so many springs and rivulets, which assisted in making and swelling the torrent which swept away the Slave-trade."¹ Each spring and rivulet bore the name of individuals and organisations whom Clarkson had deemed influential "forerunners and coadjutors" of British slave trade abolition.² The map bore the names of two associates of the University of Aberdeen's predecessor institutions: James Beattie, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Marischal College and the Rev. James Ramsay, an Anglican priest and ship's surgeon educated at King's College between 1749-1753.

James Ramsay's biographer, the Nigerian historian Folarin Shyllon, subtitled his 1977 study of Ramsay as "The Unknown Abolitionist." In recent decades historians have restored Ramsay among the important abolitionist forerunners of Clarkson's map. Christopher Leslie Brown's influential study of the origins of British abolitionism, *Moral Capital*, presented Ramsay as an instrumental figure in the decades before abolitionism became an organised movement. Tracing the genealogy of abolitionist thought, Brown and others have delineated

¹ Thomas Clarkson, *The history of the rise, progress, & accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade, by the British Parliament, vol. I* (London: Printed by R. Taylor and Co. 1808), 259.

² The map was hardly a comprehensive account of those who contributed to the abolitionist cause. Clarkson omitted James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Ottobah Cuguoano, Phyllis Wheatley, and Olaudah Equiano, all black writers who contributed to the movement.

Ramsay's intellectual influence on Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, and other abolitionists who are far from unknown.

Ramsay's role in the burgeoning abolitionist movement of the latter eighteenth century was born out of the experience of fifteen years as a preacher and medical attendant to the enslaved population of the island of St Christopher, today better known as St. Kitts. His publications in the 1780s interwove first-hand observations, political-economic theory, and religious injunction against slavery. Ramsay's arguments were not entirely novel nor were they the most revolutionary among anti-slavery writers. As with the majority of those who wrote out against slavery at this time, Ramsay was a gradualist. Yet despite the conservatism inherent in his writing, perhaps no other abolitionist faced such a sustained counter-offensive from pro-slavery constituencies.

In this podcast I want to first trace Ramsay's development as an abolitionist from Aberdeen to St Kitts; then to situate his influential 1784 *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* within a broader corpus of abolitionist writing; and finally to consider the legacy of Ramsay's ideas over the ensuing half century to when emancipation was finally achieved within the British Empire.

[00:04:56] James Ramsay was born in 1733 at Fraserburgh, a small town in Aberdeenshire. From a respectable but not affluent family, he first studied at a Scottish Grammar School before pursuing studies to become a clergyman. His father died quite young and, with the family's circumstances reduced, James resolved to study surgery in Fraserburgh. In 1749 Ramsay also entered King's College as an arts student, winning the annual bursary for the candidate who displayed the most accurate knowledge of Latin. Ramsay graduated as Master of Arts in 1753 and, after further studies in London, he entered the Royal Navy as assistant surgeon.

[00:05:40] It was at sea that Ramsay first witnessed the realities of colonial slaving. As surgeon on the ship *Arundel* the crew encountered a slave ship on route from Africa to the West Indies on which dysentery had swept away much of the enslaved, crew, and the ship's surgeon. Ramsay visited the ship and the Africans imprisoned on board. Returning to his vessel, he fell and broke his thighbone, leaving him lame for the rest of his life. When the *Arundel* reached the island of St Christopher, Ramsay resolved to take holy orders. He was admitted into orders by the Bishop of London, and immediately returned to St Christopher. Ramsay soon earned the ire of the island's plantocracy for preaching to the enslaved. He set aside particular hours for church services and hours when Africans could visit him at home.

Planters soon feared that “he aimed at making of them Christians, to render them incapable of being good slaves.”³

In 1763, Ramsay married a “daughter of a planter of the best-family-connections in the island.” As there was no medical practitioner in his part of the island, Ramsay tended to the medical care of the enslaved. His profession and his marriage both made him witness to slavery and the slave trade on St. Kitts. As he later explained to the Privy Council investigating the slave trade, “My Brother-in-Law was a Guinea Factor; and a Desire for Information led me to from Time to Time to attend the Sales, and to enter into Conversation with the Guinea Captains at his House.”⁴ Ramsay observed how slave factors separated the Africans “into three sets; the healthy, well assorted, or prime slaves; the puny and ill-assorted; and the emaciated, sickly or refuse Slaves.”⁵ After the sorting, the captain would attempt to hid as many of the “refuse” among the “prime” as possible, though the former often died soon after. Still, Ramsay did not shy away from slavery. His household had black servants, of whose identity and status little is known. Yet the conclusion he drew from his experiences was clear. Slavery, especially as practiced in the British Caribbean, was “an unnatural state of oppression on one side, and of suffering on the other.”

Ramsay remained on St Kitts for fifteen years, the constant target of planter acrimony. After he served as a chaplain in the Royal Navy during the American Revolution, he returned to England in 1781 with his wife and family. He became Vicar of Teston and Rector of Nettlestead in Kent. In Kent, he became associated with a network of well-heeled evangelical Anglican social reformers. This included his neighbours and patrons, Sir Charles and Lady Middleton, who encouraged him to unearth and revise a memorial he had written for the better treatment of the enslaved.

In 1784, Ramsay published two tracts, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* and *An Inquiry into the Effects of putting a stop to the African Slave Trade, and of granting Liberty to the slaves in the British Sugar Colonies*. Ramsay’s publications had evolved over many years. He had begun work on his manuscript in 1768, completed an initial draft of the *Essay* in 1771, extended it further by

³ James Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (London 1784), p.179.

⁴ “Observations made by Mr. James Ramsay of Teston, on the Condition in which African Slaves are imported into the West Indies,” in *Report of the Lords Committee of Council appointed for the Consideration of all Matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations... Concerning the present State of the Trade to Africa, particularly the Trade in Slaves*.

⁵ James Ramsay papers, Rhodes House, Oxford, MSS Brit. Emp.S.2, f.50. Quoted in Nicholas Radburn, “Guinea Factors, Slave Sales and the Profits of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Late Eighteenth-Century Jamaica: The Case of John Tailour” *William & Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 2, 01.04.2015, p. 243-286.

1776, then abandoned the text for several years.⁶ The text began in 1768 as a detailed plan to facilitate the religious instruction of enslaved Africans in the sugar colonies. By the completion of the first draft in 1771, Ramsay had reached the conclusion that only state intervention, legal protection for the enslaved, and provisions for limited civil rights would facilitate the spread of Christianity in the slave quarters.⁷

The 1770s saw the publication of the first abolitionist tracts that went beyond condemning slavery, offering the first proposals for what an empire without slaves might look like.⁸ Ramsay presented his own vision of a post-slavery Caribbean and laid out a scheme of gradual emancipation that proved influential. At the core of his proposal was the insistence that plantation owners in the West Indies had a responsibility to the spiritual and cultural education of their enslaved populations. He hoped that a programme of incremental reform would show planters that there was profit in kindness. Far from a call for immediate emancipation, he hoped that enslavers would gradually and voluntarily take steps to manumit their enslaved people.

British abolitionists had stressed that slaveholding was antithetical to the national character. But Ramsay was also one of a growing number of voices to focus attention on the natural liberty of Africans. Had nature intended Africans for slavery, Ramsay argued, “she would have endowed them with many qualities which they now want. Their food would have needed no preparation, their bodies no covering; they would have been born without any sentiment for liberty.”⁹ Ramsay disagreed with another Scot of his age, David Hume, who subscribed to the idea of polygenesis (the idea that Africans and Europeans were members of two different species). Ramsay replied, “That there is any essential difference between the Europeans and African mental powers, as far as my experience has gone, I positively deny.” Africans and Europeans, were not distinct races but originated from “one common parent.” Differences in physical features or differences in “natural capacity” between Europeans and Africans were, to Ramsey, due to different workloads and nutritional deficiencies both within

⁶ Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 229-230.

⁷ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 74. Citing James Ramsay to Margaret Middleton, Mar. 20, 1771, Noel Papers, DE 32124/ 322/1, fol. 19, Leicestershire Record Office.

⁸ For the earliest examples see [Maurice Morgann], *Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies* (London, 1772); Granville Sharp, *The Just Limitations of Slavery in the Laws of God, Compared with the Unbounded Claims of the African Traders and British American Slaveholders; with a Copious Appendix: Containing, an Answer to Rev. Mr. Thompson’s Tract in Favor of the African Slave Trade... A Proposal on the Same Principle for the Gradual Enfranchisement of Slaves in America* (London, 1776); anonymous, *Essays, Commercial and Political, on the Real and Relative Interests of Imperial and Dependent States, Particularly Those of Great Britain, and Their Dependencies; Displaying the Probable Causes of, and a Mode of Compromising the Present Disputes between This Country and Her American Colonies; to Which Is Added an Appendix, on the Means of Emancipating Slaves without Loss to Their Proprietors* (Newcastle, 1777).

⁹ Ramsay, *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves*, 199. See also Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759–1815* (Taylor and Francis, 2016)

Africa and on the plantation. Ramsay believed that through Christian teaching, enslaved Africans in the colonies could be placed on par with Europeans in terms of innate humanity, if not civilization.¹⁰

To achieve this end, Ramsay called for the construction of churches across West Indian sugar estates. Religious principles were essential to teaching enslaved people “to become a good member of society.”¹¹ Ramsay held the paternalistic view, common among abolitionists, that black freedom needed to be gradual and guided. “Such at present is the ignorant, helpless condition of far greater part of the slaves,” wrote Ramsay, “that full liberty would be no blessing to them.”

Ramsay saw slavery as corrupting to both enslaver and enslaved. He had seen too much on St. Christopher to believe planter claims that self-interest alone would prevent the abuse of the enslaved. Ramsey did offer more pointed critiques of the planter class than other pamphleteers of his time. He criticised the common practice of absentee plantation ownership. The practice was, for him, as an abrogation of responsibility among planters who had “determined it better to employ perhaps a dissipated, careless, unfeeling young man, or a groveling, lascivious, old bachelor.” Indifferent absentee owners and callous overseers meant overwork, undernourishment, and shockingly low fertility and high mortality. Living among their human property, Ramsay presumed, would force planters to internalize the humanity of the enslaved and moderate their working conditions.¹²

If enslavers could not be trusted to act humanely, Ramsey argued that colonial law must compel them to do so. He found extant colonial legislation hopelessly wanting and did not know of “a single clause in all our colony acts... enacted to secure to them the least humane treatment, or to save them from true capricious cruelty of an ignorant, unprincipled master, or a morose, unfeeling overseer.”¹³ He contrasted this legislative void with the French “Code Noir” and concluded that “The English have not paid the least attention to enforce by a law, either humanity or justice, as these may respect their slaves.”¹⁴

Ramsay advocated legal reform, not immediate legal emancipation. British slavery critics accepted the need to sustain the productivity of colonial plantations, and Ramsay did not foresee his plan as undermining sugar production. Drawing on Adam Smith’s influential passage on the advantages of wage labour in his *Wealth of Nations*, Ramsay urged slaveholders to consider “the state of workers in free countries,” who execute “in the same

¹⁰ Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, 96.

¹¹ Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies*, 130.

¹² David Beck Ryden, “Anthony Benezet, James Ramsay, and the Political Economic Attack on the British Slave Trade,” in Wim Klooster and Alfred Padula, *The Atlantic World: Essays on Slavery, Migration, and Imagination*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2018), 260.

¹³ Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* 54.

¹⁴ Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* 62.

time, thrice the labour of slaves.”¹⁵ He was “firmly of opinion, that a sugar plantation might be cultivated to more advantage, and at much less expense, by labourers who were free-men, than by slaves.”

Ramsay published his *Essay* at a critical juncture in the history of abolitionist advocacy in the years prior to the establishment of an organised abolitionist movement. In June 1783, just months after the conclusion of the American War of Independence, the Religious Society of Friends, presented a petition to the House of Commons calling for the abolition of the traffic in enslaved Africans. Over the following months a smaller group of Friends composed and published abolitionist texts to distribute as pamphlets. Ramsay seized this opportunity to put his experiences in print. Ramsay began challenging slavery during a period in which Britain’s commerce in humans had reached its peak and was more essential than ever to the proper functioning of the British Atlantic economy.

The renowned historian of abolition Seymour Drescher has described Ramsay’s work as “The most important antislavery tracts published between 1783 and 1787,” the key years spanning the loss of the Thirteen Colonies to the foundation of Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in London.¹⁶ Ramsay’s publications in this period once again established him as an adversary to the planter class. His work sparked a firestorm of controversy and spurred a series of polemical exchanges and a renewed period of pamphlet writing.

Many previous anti-slavery pamphleteers had never seen a sugar plantation or visited the West Indies. Ramsay’s credentials were less easily dismissed. The first rebuttals came within months of the publication of his *Essay* in the form of a pamphlet composed by authors who identified themselves only as “Some Gentlemen of St. Christopher.” They accused Ramsay of misrepresenting those Britons he had lived amongst in the Caribbean.¹⁷ The tract combined damage control over planter image with personal criticisms of Ramsay. Islanders wrote of Ramsay’s poor performance as minister on the island; his slave ownership; and that he had sold rather than manumitted his enslaved.

A second response, prompting a more active exchange, came from James Tobin, “late of His Majesty’s Council in the Island of Nevis.” Writing under the pseudonym a “friend to the West India colonies, and their inhabitants,” Tobin published his *Cursory Remarks upon the*

¹⁵ Ramsay, “Memorial Suggesting Motives for the Improvement of the Sugar Colonies,” fol. 79; *Essays, Commercial and Political*, 137, 143.

¹⁶ Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 211, n.13.

¹⁷ *An Answer to the Reverend James Ramsay’s Essay, on The Treatement and Conversion of Slaves, in the British Sugar Colonies, By some Gentlemen of St. Christopher* (Basseterre in St. Christopher: Printed by Edward L. Low, 1784).

Reverend Mr. Ramsay's Essay in 1785. Tobin questioned Ramsay's motivation as an "ardent desire of popularity." He held that Ramsay had misrepresented colonial law and the treatment of the enslaved. Worse still, he had praised the French "Code Noir" and the slave-keeping practices of a rival nation. Over the next two years, Ramsay and his detractors exchanged rebuttals in what became a battle of representation over the nature of West Indian slavery.¹⁸

Ramsay's work provoked detractors but also inspired admirers. One admirer was the twenty-five-year-old Thomas Clarkson, then completing his studies at Saint John's College, Cambridge. Clarkson's own famous treatises drew upon Ramsay's arguments while adding empirical evidence of the horrors of the slave trade.

Ramsay published in the 1780s, the decade in which a wide swath of working and middle-class Britons came to see slavery as a national sin. He died in 1789 at a moment when organised abolitionism in Britain was making significant inroads. The abolition of the slave trade took a further two decades to achieve, delayed in particular by the wars with revolutionary France and the rise of Napoleon. Ramsay did not live to see the abolition of the slave trade pass through British Parliament. But his ideas remained current in the twenty-six-year period between the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and of colonial slavery in 1833. In 1803, his friend Beilby Porteus, the Bishop of London, recalled that the discussion created by Ramsay's *Essay* "contributed perhaps more than any other to the parliamentary enquiry" into the slave trade.¹⁹

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¹⁸ See *A Reply to the Personal Invectives and Objections contained in two answers, published by certain anonymous persons, to An Essay. By James Ramsay, MA Vicar of Teston* (London: Printed and Sold by James Phillips, 1785).

¹⁹ Hodson, ed., *The Works of Beilby Porteus*, II, 401n-402n.