

From Liverpool to Mount Vernon: Edward Rushton in Transatlantic Perspective

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Among historians of British anti-slavery Edward Rushton is probably best known for his *West-Indian Eclogues*, which established his reputation as a hard-line anti-slavery activist. Perhaps less well known is his second abolitionist publication, his *Expostulatory Letter to George Washington, of Mount Vernon, in Virginia, on his continuance to be a proprietor of slaves*, published in Liverpool in 1797. Both works were startlingly original. In *West-Indian Eclogues*, Rushton had flirted with the idea of slave insurrection as a justifiable (even laudable) response to black enslavement, presenting his readers with assertions of black fury and black-on-white violence that were startlingly at odds with the non-confrontational tone of most eighteenth-century anti-slavery rhetoric. Rushton's letter to George Washington was equally blunt and uncompromising, challenging the former President of the United States to free his slaves, presumably with immediate effect, thereby making good what he (Rushton) saw as America's commitment to the ideas of freedom and equality. By any standard it was a bold, even foolhardy, intervention into public debates about slavery that tells us not only a great deal about Rushton but also about the transatlantic roots and complexion of British anti-slavery during the 'Age of Revolution'.

To fully appreciate the significance of Rushton's *Expostulatory Letter*, we need to set it in the context of the early abolitionist movement, which emerged in the late 1780s. Of course, there were dissenting voices before this date but those voices were largely uncoordinated and did not as yet represent a coherent movement. That was to come in the years immediately after the American Revolution, with the appearance on both sides of the Atlantic of highly organised and broad-based abolitionist societies that together formed a vibrant and relatively

well-integrated international community. The timing of this 'take off' was not entirely accidental. While there were long-term factors involved, including economic development and the growth of compassionate humanitarianism, there is little doubt that the American Revolution changed the terms of the debate, giving rise to prolonged discussion on both sides of the Atlantic about the nature and extent of liberty. But of far greater moment was the fact that the Revolution effectively divided British America, at the same time halving the number of slaves in the British Empire. At a stroke, the problems of slavery and the slave trade became more manageable. 'As long as America was ours', British activist Thomas Clarkson conceded, 'there was no chance that a [government] minister would have attended to the groans of the sons and daughters of Africa, however he might feel for their distress' [O'SHAUGHNESSY 2000, p. 254]. Now things were very different. After 1783 abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic found themselves operating in a radically altered political environment and one in which formal amalgamation, in the shape of abolitionist societies, seemed not only possible but also highly desirable.

In quick succession, four of these new societies appeared between 1785 and 1788: namely the New York Manumission Society, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, the London Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and the Societe des Amis des Noirs in Paris. There was further expansion after 1788. Estimates vary, but by the mid-1790s there were at least sixteen of these societies that together spanned the Atlantic world, from New York to Paris; from Paris to London; and from London to Philadelphia [OLDFIELD 2013, pp. 22]. Furthermore, the members of these societies were in regular contact with each other and through their networks they circulated a huge amount of material, including books and pamphlets, the majority of which (certainly after 1786) emanated from British presses. As we

now know, British activists regularly sent their American counterparts gifts of books, which, in turn, were copied and (more often than not) serialised in local newspapers [OLDFIELD 2013, pp 53-4]. Mapping the full extent of these circuits of knowledge is a painstaking task, but there is no doubting the American taste for British abolitionist publications, or the value placed on them by American activists engaged in their own struggles against slavery and the slave trade.

Rushton was part of this British invasion. Although there are precious few references to him in American newspapers, there are original copies of *West-Indian Eclogues* in the Library Company of Philadelphia, as there are of Rushton's *Expostulatory Letter*. It is also worth noting that an American edition of the letter was published in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1797 and there also appears to have been a later edition published in New York around 1835.¹ How much Rushton knew about his reception in the United States is open to question but he would certainly have been aware of the close ties that bound together British and American abolitionists, if only from reading local newspapers. Abolition was never purely a parochial British affair. In a telling comment, Thomas Clarkson said of his close friend Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville that 'he was no patriot in the ordinary acceptation of the word, for he took the habitable globe as his country, and wished to consider every foreigner as his brother' [CLARKSON 1808, II, p. 166]. James Pemberton, president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, aspired to the same cosmopolitan ideal, as did Granville Sharp. Indeed, what united British and American activists was their sense that their activities had a global reach and significance. Time and shifting political currents would disrupt these Atlantic affinities, particularly after 1792. Nevertheless, they proved highly durable, providing an essential (and much valued) backdrop to the abolitionist campaigns of the late eighteenth century.

For all that, Rushton's *Letter* was unusual, not least in its very direct approach to Washington. In the main, early abolitionists tended to proceed cautiously. As John Stauffer astutely observes, 'they compromised effectively and worked across sectional, and occasionally racial, divisions' [STAUFFER 2012, p. 71]. Rarely did they make personal appeals to leading political figures, and certainly not to key officeholders. To understand Rushton's actions (and, indeed, his frustration) we need to understand the sometimes conflicted place of the United States in British anti-slavery thought. At the risk of over generalization, the related questions of slavery and the slave trade had been debated in the American colonies since at least the 1760s, largely thanks to figures such as Anthony Benezet, who led the fight to rid the Society of Friends of slaveholding. For obvious reasons, the American Revolution intensified these debates about the future of slavery in the United States, particularly in a nation vociferously committed to the natural rights of mankind. The contradictions inherent in this position eventually led some states to take action against the slave trade. Between 1774 and 1783, no fewer than seven of them banned the further importation of slaves, either permanently or temporarily. Moreover, several states, including Vermont, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, went further by abolishing slavery itself, a movement that accelerated even more rapidly after 1783 [DAVIS 2006, p. 152]. Most states, however, stopped short of immediate emancipation, favouring instead some form of gradualism.

In other words, by the time groups such as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society were organised, abolition -- at least in legislative terms -- was already far advanced in the USA, certainly when compared to Britain and France. For this reason, America was often held up as an example for others to follow, certainly in these early years. To take an example, in May 1788 the London activists arranged for the *Morning Chronicle* to print the report of the Pennsylvania

Assembly relating to the slave trade, and this was followed in July by details of the legislation passed against the slave trade by the states of Rhode Island and Massachusetts [OLDFIELD 1995, p. 45] . Undoubtedly, these items were chosen because they gave abolition an important international dimension, setting it in a very different political context. Perhaps just as important, they also thrust Britons into a competitive humanitarian market that identified abolition with progress and a belief in benevolent Christianity. Recent events – principally the loss of the American colonies – gave these debates a highly partisan character. Here, in other words, was an opportunity for the nation to redeem itself and at the same time to assert its national superiority.

Yet, at the same time, there was a significant flaw in America's position. As critics pointed out, the various laws passed between 1774 and 1783 were *state* laws. At the federal level, there was no getting away from the fact that the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 had agreed to leave the slave trade and, by implication, slavery intact until 1808. How this proposal had come to be adopted, first at Philadelphia and later by the ratifying conventions, bewildered British abolitionists. 'After all their repeated respect to the natural and unalienable rights of mankind', George Dillwyn wrote to his cousin James Pemberton, 'how can such a provision be considered otherwise, than as a designed sanction to every crime that trade involves' [OLDFIELD 2013, p. 73]. American activists were deeply sensitive to such criticisms, yet their attempts to circumvent the Constitution by appealing directly to Congress proved unsuccessful. The ensuing debate determined the broad lines of Congressional action for the next eighteen years. On 23 March 1790 the U.S. House of Representatives affirmed that it could neither interfere with the slave trade, at least not before 1808, nor take any action

affecting the emancipation of slaves. The Constitution, in others words, meant exactly what it said.

The net effect was that while many states, particularly those in the North, continued to chip away at the institution of slavery, the position of slaveholders in the South remained unassailable. Perhaps the deeper irony here was that the ranks of these slaveholders included figures such as Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, and George Washington, who as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army and then first president of the United States (1789-1796) had some claim to be regarded as the 'father of the nation'. It also added greatly to Washington's heroic status that having served two terms as president he returned Cincinnatus-like to the simpler pursuits of farming at Mount Vernon, his plantation in Virginia. But there was no getting away from the fact that Washington was one of the largest slaveholders in Virginia. Indeed, at his death in 1799 Washington owned 123 slaves and had oversight of many more, including those belonging to his wife, Martha [MORGAN 2005, p. 404].

Rushton, therefore, chose his target carefully, although he was hardly overawed by Washington's status and reputation. Characteristically blunt, he met the former president head-on, attacking his (Washington's) public attachment to an institution that, if his apologists were to be believed, he knew to be wrong. 'If we call the man obdurate who cannot perceive the atrociousness of slavery', Rushton wrote, '[then] what epithets does he deserve who, while he does perceive its atrociousness, continues to be a proprietor of slaves' [RUSHTON 1797, p. 14]. But this was not all. To Rushton's mind, Washington, like all American slaveholders, was guilty of denying to others those rights which they held dear to themselves. 'Prosperity perhaps may make nations as well as individuals forget the distresses of other

times', he wrote, 'yet surely the citizens of America cannot so soon have forgotten the variety and extent of their own sufferings . . . you are boastful of your own rights – [yet] you are violators of the rights of others, and you are stimulated by an insatiable rapacity, to a cruel and relentless oppression' [RUSHTON 1797, pp. 15-17]. Here, Rushton spoke of the generality of American slaveholders but in the closing pages of his letter he turned his sights once again on Washington, castigating him for his complicity in the oppression of others. 'Shame! Shame!' Rushton exclaimed, 'that man should be deemed the property of man, or that the name of Washington should be found among the list of such proprietors'. 'In the name of justice', he went on, 'what can induce you thus to tarnish your own well-earned celebrity, and to impair the fair features of American liberty, with so foul and indelible a blot?' [RUSHTON 1797, pp. 19, 23]

Searching to rationalise Washington's conduct, Rushton dared to suggest that the former president might be motivated by 'avarice' or 'some lurking pecuniary considerations'. If this were the case, Rushton adjudged, 'then there is no flesh left in your heart; and present reputation, future fame, and all that is estimable among the virtuous, are, for a few thousand pieces of paltry yellow dirt, irremediably renounced' [RUSHTON 1797, pp. 23-4]. As these few details suggest, Rushton did not pull his punches. In effect, he was accusing Washington of being hypocritical, selfish and grasping. By implication, he was also demanding that Washington free his slaves, presumably with immediate effect. It says a great deal about Rushton that he imagined such an approach might be appropriate, or, indeed, that it might work. As will be obvious, Rushton had no time for the 'art' of politics or for political bargaining. Rather, his attack on Washington was ideologically motivated, in the sense that it was driven by a profound sense of the exploitative nature of slavery and its role in denying those enslaved

basic human rights. Significantly, Rushton made no reference in his *Expostulatory Letter* to religion, save to note Washington's own 'pious reflections', although he did end with an appeal to notions of individual and national honour.

It is worth stressing that Rushton was speaking here for a very small minority of abolitionists. In Britain, at least, activists had very early made a distinction between abolishing slavery, on the one hand, and abolishing the slave trade, on the other. As Granville Sharp explained to James Pemberton in 1788, 'emancipation [that is, the abolition of slavery] was entirely beyond the business of our Society, the sole purpose of whose institution is the abolition of the African trade' [OLDFIELD 2013, pp. 77-8]. Over the years, this approach – attacking slavery through the slave trade – would become a British orthodoxy. If they thought about slavery at all, British abolitionists favoured a gradual approach, as did their American counterparts. Reactions to France's decision to abolish slavery in her colonies in 1794 spoke volumes about the preoccupations of many British and American activists. To their way of thinking, a 'sudden' emancipation of this kind was likely to lead only to 'individual stress and general commotion'. In short, the French decree represented a flawed experiment, a dangerous counter-example that flew in the face of everything they held most dear [OLDFIELD 2013, p. 105]. Rushton, therefore, was staking out an advanced position in his *Expostulatory Letter* and one calculated to cause alarm among those with one eye on events in the Caribbean.

What did Rushton hope to achieve? It is tempting to see his *Letter* as an act of desperation, and in a sense it was. By 1797 the British movement was becalmed. The London society closed its office in 1795 and thereafter met only intermittently – twice in 1796 and twice again in 1797 – before ceasing operations altogether. Wilberforce, meanwhile, continued to present his annual motions against the slave trade but with little hope of success or of gaining a

hearing from his fellow MPs. Small wonder, then that radicals such as Rushton grew increasingly frustrated or that they looked to America for support. At one level, his was a personal appeal intended to prompt Washington into deliberate action, thereby setting an example for others to follow. (In this sense, the *Letter* links Rushton with figures such as William Lloyd Garrison, who similarly put faith in the idea of 'moral suasion'.) But it is also conceivable that Rushton's *Letter* had a wider purpose, namely to kick start the international anti-slavery movement and give it a very different focus, this time with Washington as its head. Either way, it was a bold strategy and one that sheds important light on abolitionist thought in the late eighteenth century.

Not surprisingly, Washington returned Rushton's letter 'under cover' without a reply [RUSHTON 1797, p. 4]. Rushton assumed with a degree of satisfaction that he had succeeded in irritating the former president but what he cannot have known is that Washington had already made up his mind about American slavery, or, at least, his part in it. Washington's thinking on slavery evolved over time, partly in response to his own shifting priorities. As Philip Morgan points out, a key turning point was Washington's decision in the early 1760s to abandon the cultivation of tobacco, a decision that left him with more slaves than were strictly necessary for his various agricultural enterprises [MORGAN 2005, p. 413]. Yet it is also undoubtedly the case that the American Revolution led him to reassess his attitudes to blacks and to black capabilities. It was about this time, really from the 1780s, that Washington began to take a closer interest in writings about slavery and anti-slavery. Recently, Francois Furstenberg has drawn attention to a series of pamphlets that Washington had bound into a volume entitled 'Tracts on Slavery', among them Thomas Clarkson's *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (1788), which not only questioned the profitability of slavery (a matter of major concern

to Washington) but also its impact on notions of national prestige and honour [FURSTENBERG 2011].

By the late 1780s, if not before, Washington had come round to the idea that slavery should be abolished. The question was how? This was not simply a personal matter. As president of the United States, any decision Washington made about the future of slavery was bound to have far reaching political consequences, especially if it alienated Southern slaveholding interests. The very fabric of the young American republic was at stake here. Privately, at least, Washington seems to have endorsed a legislative programme providing for the gradual abolition of slavery. Here, Washington was aligning himself with American abolitionists in the North who at this date resisted all calls for immediatism (a stance implicitly endorsed by Rushton), instead favouring gradual emancipation laws that in freeing new-born children tied them to terms of service, often until they were in their twenties. In economic terms, gradualism, as it was usually called, offered slaveholders obvious benefits, but, at the same time, it also reflected a widespread belief that ex-slaves needed to be 'trained' for freedom. It is no coincidence that most of the authors included in Washington's 'Tracts on Slavery' endorsed this gradualist approach, adopting what many within the American abolitionist movement regarded as a 'safe and sane' solution to the problems of 'race' and slavery [FURSTENBERG 2011, p. 273]. Put another way, Washington's thinking on abolition was essentially pragmatic, favouring neither immediatist nor pro-slavery views.

Viewed in this light, it is easy to understand why Washington returned Rushton's letter, which must have seemed to him an example of exactly the kind of ideologically driven arguments that he sought to distance himself from. (Of course, it is also easy to understand that Washington might have considered Rushton's letter discourteous, even inflammatory.) While

it seems probable that by this date (1797) Washington had already made up his mind what to do with his slaves, nevertheless he still hesitated. Though committed to gradual emancipation, he stopped short of freeing his slaves during his own lifetime. Instead, he made provision in his will that they would be emancipated after his wife, Martha's death. In the meantime, they were 'to be taught to read & write; and to be brought up to some useful occupation' and then freed at the age of twenty-five. Elderly slaves were to be 'comfortably clothed & fed by my heirs while they live'. Only one slave, William Lee, was freed immediately upon Washington's death in 1799 [FURSTENBERG 2011, pp. 273-4]. Though it might not have satisfied Rushton, this was precisely the programme favoured by anti-slavery activists in the North and the course they hoped that other slaveholders might take. In this sense, at least, Washington proved himself friendly to abolition, as well as an advert for the abolitionist cause, but, in truth, his decision to free his slaves amounted to an empty gesture. By 1800, slavery was more deeply rooted in the South than ever before.

Edward Rushton's *Expostulatory Letter to George Washington* provides a fascinating insight into abolitionist activity in the late eighteenth century. In recent years, there has been growing interest in abolitionist networks, some of them official, others personal. Washington's 'Tracts on Slavery', to take one example, has been used by Francois Furstenberg to plot a transatlantic conversation that connected Washington (if only by association) with Clarkson, Brissot de Warville, Mazzini and Lafayette. Rushton was part of this same transatlantic conversation; not at its heart, admittedly, but an important figure nonetheless whose writings were part of 'circuits of knowledge' that stretched from Liverpool to Mount Vernon and back across the Atlantic. That Rushton dared to write to Washington, the fact that it occurred to him to do so, should remind us the abolition was never merely a parochial

British affair. Rather, it transcended national boundaries, creating dense networks that linked activists in large metropolitan centres with those in more remote outposts like Chestertown, Maryland, or Washington, Pennsylvania.

The timing of Rushton's letter was also important. By the late 1790s the international anti-slavery movement was in retreat. This is not to say that abolitionist activity disappeared, rather that it tended to find other modes of expression. On both sides of the Atlantic, revolution – or, to be more precise, reaction against revolution – created a much harsher political climate in which national agendas increasingly took precedence over universal values and principles. As a result, the distinctiveness of groups such as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society came to be 'less related to their position in a global revolution against slavery than to their distinctive success in dealing with slavery in their own area' [DUN 2011, p. 99]. Put a different way, the tense and highly partisan atmosphere of the late 1790s seemed to encourage a narrower mental outlook, a kind of drawing in. Yet, Rushton's letter hints at a rather different set of priorities and a different narrative arc. Here, by contrast, was someone trying to reconnect with the idealistic internationalism of the late 1780s and, in the process, to breathe fresh life into the British anti-slavery movement. It was in many ways a daring strategy, particularly given the tone of Rushton's letter, but its very existence suggests that during a period of retrenchment some brave souls still took a larger view of the anti-slavery struggle, even if that meant taking the fight into the lions' den.

¹ These details are extracted from the catalogues of the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Library of Congress. For the ongoing impact of Rushton's *Expostulatory Letter* on American abolitionists, see DELLAROSA 2014, pp. 186-207.

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