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Henry Dundas: a ‘Great Delayer’ of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

ABSTRACT

Henry Dundas, first viscount Melville (1742–1811), lord advocate in Scotland, MP for Edinburgh and Midlothian, first lord of the admiralty, home secretary and the first secretary of state for war, was one of the most powerful politicians in the eighteenth-century British parliament. His involvement in the gradual abolition of the slave trade after 1792 was amongst the most controversial episodes of his career. His role has attracted much interest in the last few years, although there are two irreconcilable schools of thought amongst historians. This article reassesses Dundas’s role in the gradual abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. His contributions in the houses of parliament between 1791 and 1807 are examined and situated in the appropriate imperial context. Memoirs and published pamphlets reveal how contemporaries viewed Dundas’s activities and motives at the time and since. His parliamentary activities are compared with new insights from his personal correspondence as well as public and private communications from West India societies, merchants and planters. By overlaying parliamentary events with commercial networks, Henry Dundas’s collaboration with the West India interest is revealed, and how this operated and was perceived at the time. This article—the first detailed study of its type—thus illuminates Henry Dundas’s role as a great delayer of the abolition of the slave trade.

Keywords: Scotland, Jamaica, 18th century, Henry Dundas, slave trade, abolition, parliament

From 2015 onwards, Professor Sir Geoff Palmer, Jamaica’s first honorary consul in Scotland, and the human rights activist Adam Ramsay led a high-profile campaign to reword the plaque on Edinburgh’s Melville monument, upon which a statute of Henry Dundas is mounted. The

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rewording, in their view, more accurately reflected his parliamentary actions that delayed the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. After another infamous delay in deciding Dundas's role in 'gradual abolition', a new version was hastily agreed in June 2020:

Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville (1742–1811) ... was the Scottish Lord Advocate and an MP for Edinburgh and Midlothian, and the First Lord of the Admiralty While Home Secretary in 1792 and first Secretary of State for War in 1796 he was instrumental in deferring the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Slave trading by British ships was not abolished until 1807. As a result of this delay, more than half a million enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic In 2020 this was dedicated to the memory of the more than half a million Africans whose enslavement was a consequence of Henry Dundas's actions.¹

Although the wording has not been universally accepted, the plaque was approved on 17 March 2021, by which time the debate had moved beyond Scotland.² The city of Toronto in Canada also initiated an investigation of Dundas Street, named by the first lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada in 1793.³ On 14 July 2021, Toronto city council voted to rename its Dundas Street, citing a 'commitment to confronting anti-Black racism, advancing truth, reconciliation and justice, as well as building a more inclusive and equitable Toronto'.⁴

The debate focuses on Dundas's parliamentary activities, rather than any accusation of profiteering from chattel slavery, for he was one of the most important statesmen in the late eighteenth-century British parliament, and the pre-eminent Scottish politician. Dundas's stellar career is explained by his relationship with his close friend and ally, the prime minister William Pitt the younger. Acting as 'Scottish manager', Dundas dispensed patronage and controlled a personal party of MPs in the house of commons, holding several positions over two Pitt ministries (1783–1801 and 1804–6).⁵ As home secretary (1791–4), Dundas introduced the word 'gradually' to the motion of the leading parliamentary abolitionist, William Wilberforce, in the house of commons on 2 April 1792 that called for the immediate abolition of the

¹ Adam Ramsay, 'Edinburgh to add new plaque to prominent Dundas statue after Black Lives Matter protests', 10 Jun. 2020 [<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/instrumental-in-deferring-the-abolition-of-the-slave-trade-controversial-edinburgh-statue-to-be-given-new-plaque/>; accessed 10 Jul. 2020].

² 'An enormous victory for Edinburgh and the people of Scotland', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 17 Mar. 2020; 'Rewording of Henry Dundas plaque bad history, says Sir Tom Devine', *The Times*, 26 Oct. 2020.

³ Chris Murray, City Manager, City of Toronto, 'Responding to the Dundas Street renaming petition', 8 Sep. 2020 [<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2020/ex/bgrd/backgroundfile-156448.pdf>; accessed 6 Feb. 2021].

⁴ Media Relations, City of Toronto, 'City Council approves renaming Dundas Street', 14 Jul. 2021 [<https://www.toronto.ca/news/city-council-approves-renaming- Dundas-street/>; accessed 19 Jul. 2021].

⁵ D. J. Brown, 'The government of Scotland under Henry Dundas and William Pitt', *History* 83 (1998) 265–79.

slave trade.⁶ Although his intentions remain disputed, the consequences are not. Abolition was eventually passed on 25 March 1807, fifteen years after Dundas's intervention. From 1793, over two thousand more triangular voyages departed from British ports, carrying more than 583,000 African men, women and children—almost 20% of overall British trafficking between 1628 and 1808.⁷ If it is proven that Dundas delayed abolition, he was guilty of a political strategy with catastrophic consequences for African people forcibly trafficked into chattel slavery, a system described as 'institutionalized manslaughter'.⁸

Explanations for the late eighteenth-century rise of British abolitionism, and ultimately the act of 1807, have been grouped under broad headings: ideological or humanitarian principles (evangelicalism, anti-slavery ideals, public opinion) and economic forces that made abolition convenient (the decline of the West Indian economy, free labour ideology), alongside the resistance of the enslaved and the quest for self-emancipation.⁹ The parliamentary battle for the abolition of the slave trade was fought between 1787 and 1807. A subsequent campaign to abolish plantation slavery lasted from 1823 until emancipation in 1834. This article is concerned with the former. Political factors mooted to have contributed to this long delay in the abolition of the slave trade include the lack of cabinet agreement in the Pitt and Addington governments, known royal hostility and the strength of the parliamentary West India interest. Abolitionism also attracted suspicion due to a perceived association with Jacobinism, whilst there was fear of a similar insurrection like in the French colony of Saint Domingue (present-day Haiti) in August 1791. It was considered necessary, by those anticipating a successful British colonial occupation that never came, to prolong the trafficking to rebuild Haiti's sugar estates. However, Dundas described the strategy to possess the colony as a 'war for security' rather than one for riches. Indeed, as Roger Buckley argued, after 1795 the British government, including Pitt and Dundas, sought to prolong the Africa trafficking to enhance the British army's military capability.¹⁰

⁶ *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade, In the house of commons on Monday the second of April 1792* (n.d.), 127; R. G. Thorne, 'Henry Dundas (1742–1811), of Melville Castle, Edinburgh', *History of Parliament Online* (first published 1986) [<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/dundas-henry-1742-1811>]; accessed 10 Feb. 2020].

⁷ *The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* [<http://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>]; accessed: 10 Feb. 2020]. This represented around 18% of the British trafficking total in 8% of the British slave trade era.

⁸ Christer Petley, *White Fury: A Jamaican slaveholder and the age of revolution* (Oxford 2018), 173.

⁹ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; London, 1981). For a recent summary, see C. L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British abolitionism*, (Chapel Hill, 2006), 1–30.

¹⁰ Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810* (Highlands, New Jersey, 1975), 343–63; R. N. Buckley, 'The British army's African recruitment policy, 1790–1807', *Contributions in Black Studies*, 5 (2008) 10–11; David Geggus,

There are two irreconcilable schools of thought regarding Dundas's role in the delay. The pessimist school view his actions in a cynical manner. The distinguished Caribbean historian Eric Williams described Dundas as a determined 'enemy of abolition'.¹¹ Roger Anstey also characterised Dundas's parliamentary activities as anti-abolitionist in nature. Anstey noted Dundas's intervention in 1792, but especially his role in March 1796 when he personally opposed abolition and mobilised Scottish MPs to the cause. For Anstey, Dundas was the 'most important cause of the failure of immediate abolition in the period up to 1796'.¹² Similarly, David Brion Davis viewed Dundas's supposedly abolitionist reforms of 23 April 1792 with suspicion as they preceded 'vehement opposition' to abolition itself.¹³ Historians of slavery and abolition, including Seymour Drescher, endorse versions of the Anstey-Davis interpretation.¹⁴ Most recently, Douglas Hamilton underlined that Dundas was 'no abolitionist'.¹⁵

Dale H. Porter was equivocal when describing Dundas as a far-sighted statesman in 1792 who, 'in a way no abolitionist had dared do ... openly explored the long-range prospects of West Indian society', yet he simultaneously acknowledged that the 'question of his sincerity will never be settled'.¹⁶ An optimist school, mainly biographers, view Henry

¹⁰ (Continued) 'The British government and the Saint Domingue slave revolt, 1791–1793', *English Historical Review* 96 (1981) 286.

¹¹ Eric Williams, *The Economic Aspect of the Abolition of the West Indian Slave Trade and Slavery* (Lanham, Maryland, 2014), 27–8.

¹² Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 308–9, 314–15.

¹³ D. B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca and London, 1975), 432.

¹⁴ Hugh Thomas viewed Dundas as a 'formidable parliamentary opponent for the abolitionists', without whose 'skillful obstructions the slave trade would have been abolished in 1796, if not 1792': *The Slave Trade: History of the Atlantic slave trade, 1440–1870* (London, 1998), 527, 549. Brycchan Carey described how Henry Dundas 'effectively wrecked abolition with his gradualist amendment' of 1792, which gave the West India interest 'room to manoeuvre'. For Carey, gradual abolition effectively meant 'no abolition': *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, sentiment and slavery, 1760–1807* (Basingstoke, 2005), 186, 191. Iain Whyte described Dundas as the proposer of the amendment that 'effectively delayed abolition for nearly two decades': *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756–1838* (Edinburgh, 2006), 89; Stephen Farrell, "'Contrary to the Principles of Justice, Humanity and Sound Policy": the slave trade, parliamentary politics and the abolition act, 1807', *Parliamentary History*, 26 (2007) 141–202. For Roger Buckley, Dundas was one of the 'leading opponents of abolition': 'African recruitment policy', 11; Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British national identity, 1759–1815* (Farnham, 2009), 203–4; Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British slavery in the era of abolition* (1977; Chapel Hill, 2010), 119; Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's circle transformed Britain* (Oxford, 2010), 99.

¹⁵ D. J. Hamilton, "'Defending the Colonies against Malicious Attacks of Philanthropy": Scottish campaigns against the abolitions of the slave trade and slavery', in A. I. Macinnes and D. J. Hamilton (eds), *Jacobitism, Enlightenment and Empire, 1680–1820* (London, 2014), 193–208.

¹⁶ D. H. Porter, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade in England* (Hamden, Connecticut, 1970), 80–3.

Dundas's actions in a more positive manner.¹⁷ In 1933, biographer Cyril Matheson exonerated Dundas by describing him as a defender of 'neither slavery nor the slave-trade', and he claimed that the records of the London Society of West India Planters and Merchants—the most powerful pro-slavery lobbying group in the British Atlantic world—revealed that he often 'resisted their pretensions'.¹⁸ In *The Dundas Despotism* (1992), Michael Fry has become the Dundas defender *par excellence*. Fry claimed, from Dundas's parliamentary contributions, that his political compromise in April 1792 eased abolition into legislation.¹⁹ The well-evidenced charges levelled by Anstey and Davis against Dundas for 1796 were ignored in favour of a positive interpretation of earlier events. Fry's stance has recently been endorsed in a note by Brian Young, although he similarly disregarded Dundas's anti-abolition activities after 1792.²⁰ Fry has recently mounted a high-profile public defence. Dundas's role in gradual abolition was omitted from the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) in 2004.²¹ Fry went further in June 2020, claiming that 'Dundas was a genuine opponent of the slave trade'.²² T. M. Devine endorsed Fry's explanations.²³ In doing so, Devine retracted his written opinion of 2015, when he claimed that Dundas's 'parliamentary intervention in 1792 arguing for gradual abolition effectively killed off reform for a generation ... he received grateful thanks from influential members of the West India interest for his support'.²⁴ In October 2020, Devine publicly recanted from that position: 'the end of the slave trade in the British Empire by British Government decision in the 1790s was well-nigh impossible. Dundas's role in this was either non-existent or peripheral'.²⁵

¹⁷ As is typical of the genre, biographers generally defend Dundas, except Holden Furber, who appears to concede that Dundas acted on Government orders to prolong the trafficking in enslaved people: 'the slave trade was an evil, but the King's Government had to be carried on. Someone had to "get things done", and Dundas was the man to do them'. *Henry Dundas, First Viscount Melville, 1742–1811: Political manager of Scotland, statesman, administrator of British India* (London, 1931), 294.

¹⁸ Cyril Matheson, *The Life of Henry Dundas: First viscount Melville* (London, 1933), 160.

¹⁹ Michael Fry, *The Dundas Despotism* (1992; Edinburgh, 2004), 200.

²⁰ 'A Letter from Brian Young, Professor of Intellectual History at Oxford University. Christ Church, Oxford', 15 Jun. 2020 [<https://medium.com/@bobbymelville1/if-we-pervert-the-facts-of-history-how-can-we-progress-in-our-future-3f07eea5d762>; accessed 11 Jul. 2020].

²¹ Michael Fry, 'Dundas, Henry, first Viscount Melville (1742–1811), politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004 [<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8250>; accessed 14 Jun. 2020].

²² Michael Fry, 'Here's the real truth on Henry Dundas and whether he 'prolonged' slavery', *National*, 16 Jun. 2020.

²³ T. M. Devine, 'Dundas kept saying "now is not the time" to end slavery', *National*, 17 Jun. 2020.

²⁴ T. M. Devine, 'Lost to history', in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past: The Caribbean connection* (Edinburgh, 2015), 31.

²⁵ In Parisa Urquhart, *Scotland, Slavery and Statues* for BBC Scotland, aired on 20 Oct. 2020. See also 'Midlothian slave trader row continues', *Midlothian Advertiser* [<https://www.midlothianadvertiser.co.uk/news/people/midlothian-slave-trader-row-continues-3010312>; accessed 23 Oct. 2020].

The pessimist view of Henry Dundas's role in gradual abolition has a more solid empirical foundation. The activist narrative (that Dundas helped delay abolition) is consistent with historiographical orthodoxy, explaining why this version has been endorsed in civic Scotland. Yet, the optimist view is currently prioritised by biographers, and flourishes due to absences in the *ODNB* and journalistic outputs.²⁶ Given this scholarly paradox and international interest, this article reassesses Henry Dundas's various parliamentary interventions regarding abolition in context. First, his contributions in the houses of parliament between 1791 and 1807 are examined in detail and situated in the appropriate imperial context. Memoirs and published pamphlets then reveal how contemporaries viewed Dundas's activities and motives at the time and since. Importantly, parliamentary activities are compared with new insights from personal correspondence as well as public and private communications from West India societies, merchants and planters. By overlaying parliamentary events with commercial networks, this article illuminates Dundas's collaboration with the West India interest and how this operated and was perceived at the time. In doing so, this article—the first detailed study of its type—clarifies Dundas's role as a 'great delayer' of abolition.

The quakers sent the first abolitionist petition to the British parliament in 1783, although the political movement did not begin for another four years. William Wilberforce led the parliamentary lobby: his first motion in April 1791 was heavily defeated in the house of commons (163:88). Dundas was not present, he did not vote nor did he comment, due to what he later described as 'indisposition'.²⁷ According to John Ehrman, Dundas was already 'against immediate abolition' by this point.²⁸ The diaries of Bishop Beilby Porteus, an associate of Wilberforce, provide insights into parliamentary debates. As bishop of Chester (1776–87) and bishop of London (1787–1808), Porteus was a member of the house of lords during a crucial period. He described the defeat of Wilberforce's first motion in the commons as the 'greatest majority that I believe was ever known in any instance when all the Reason & Justice of the case were all on the other side of the Question'. He attributed this result to the pro-slave trade alliance: 'against these was something more powerful than argument or

²⁶ 'An updated ODNB biography attributes the delay under gradual abolition to the House of Lords'. Michael Fry, 'Dundas, Henry, first Viscount Melville (1742–1811), politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 8 Apr. 2021 [https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8250; accessed 7 Aug. 2021].

²⁷ *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade, In the house of commons on Monday and Tuesday, April 18 and 19, 1791* (London, 1792), 123; *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade, In the house of commons on Monday the Second of April 1792* (n.p., n.d.), 94.

²⁸ John Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt: The years of acclaim* (London, 1969), 399 n. 2.

eloquence; the Influence, Interest & extensive connections of the W. I. Planters, merchants and African Traders'.²⁹

Bishop Porteus's reference to the powerful influence of West India interests—both in metropolitan society and in Parliament—was well founded: they were arguably the most powerful commercial lobby in the pre-reform era.³⁰ Michael W. McCahill's recent analysis suggests that fifty-six to fifty-eight MPs with West India connections sat across the life of the 1784 Parliament. The 1790 Parliament began with fifty-five MPs with West India connections, which rose within the parliamentary term to sixty in 1792, to sixty-four in 1794, then a slight decline to sixty-three in 1796. Thus, West India support increased across both Parliaments.³¹ McCahill's estimates revise understandings of the relative strength of the West India interest. Anstey identified at least eighty-three MPs who voted for abolition at least once between 1791 and 1796, although 'committed abolitionists ... numbered about thirty'.³² Thus, McCahill's estimates for the 1790 Parliament (which saw several votes on abolition up to 1 May 1796) suggests that MPs who tended to side with the pro-slave trade cause were at least as twice as powerful as steadfast abolitionists.

The Society of West India Planters and Merchants provided support to the parliamentary West India interest and *vice versa*. Separate merchant and planter bodies in London combined in January 1775. These groups maintained distinctive identities but organised under the auspices of what has become known as the London West India committee, established in 1782. David Beck Ryden suggests a more appropriate title could have been the Society of *Jamaica* Planters and Merchants as this group dominated the leadership. The executive committee, and several sub-committees established for specific purposes, provided a platform for wider collaboration.³³ The 'Sub Committee Appointed to Oppose the Abolition of the Slave Trade', for example, was established in 1788 and was enlarged four years later with a propagandic function to 'defend the Cause of the Colonies'. In

²⁹ London, Lambeth Palace Library [LPL], MS 2100 (Diaries and Memoranda of Beilby Porteus, Bishop of London, 1791), fos 33–4.

³⁰ G. P. Judd, *Members of Parliament, 1734–1832* (New Haven, 1955), 89; Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 286, 297; Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 430 and n. 77; Andrew O'Shaughnessy, 'The formation of a commercial lobby: the West India interest, British colonial policy and the American revolution', *Historical Journal* 40 (1997) 72–4.

³¹ M. W. McCahill (ed.), *The Correspondence of Stephen Fuller, 1788–1795: Jamaica, the West India interest at Westminster and the campaign to preserve the slave trade* (Chichester, 2014), 47–51.

³² Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 282–3.

³³ D. B. Ryden, *West India Slavery and British Abolition, 1783–1807* (Cambridge, 2009), 81, 191–5; *Public Advertiser*, 11 Jan. 1775. For a brief account, see Douglas Hall, *A Brief History of the West India Committee* (St Lawrence, Barbados, 1971), 3–4. For studies of their lobbying activities, see also Angelina Osborne, 'Power and Persuasion: the London West India Committee, 1783–1833', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Hull, 2014).

1792–3 alone, over £2,000 was spent defending the slave trade, twice the abolitionist budget committed to attacking it.³⁴

The Jamaica planter Simon Taylor returned to England in the summer of 1791 to lobby against abolition, and naturally associated himself with the London West India interest. Although he had been born in Kingston, Taylor was of Scottish descent. And, as Christer Petley notes, Taylor was probably the wealthiest West Indian enslaver of all. Given such prominence, it was unsurprising he cultivated a close relationship with Henry Dundas.³⁵ Taylor invited Dundas to dinner in early January 1792 and, although these conversations are not recorded, offers of mutual assistance would not have been out of place, given how readily the latter dispensed patronage amongst Scots.³⁶ The relationship immediately became more professional. Between January and March 1792, the London West India committee, sometimes with Taylor in the chair, routinely sent communications to Dundas.³⁷ In March 1792, minutes from a general meeting described the state of the sugar trade, no doubt intended to influence parliamentary strategy. In Dundas's surviving records, the minutes sit alongside a petition, suggesting that they were sent simultaneously. Titled the 'Legal claim of the British sugar colonies to enjoy an exclusive right of supplying this kingdom with sugars', it called for the continuation of the slave trade, since, 'being accused of no crime, they should not be compelled to make a sacrifice'.³⁸ Crucially, the West India interest demanded compensation if they were faced with diminishing returns from a decreasing enslaved labour force after abolition.

As the parliamentary West India interest was consolidated, public opposition gathered momentum. Over 500 abolitionist petitions flooded into the British parliament in 1792—according to Seymour Drescher, the most sent to the house of commons on a single subject.³⁹ In his role as MP for Edinburgh, Henry Dundas, transmitted a petition

³⁴ University of London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies [ICS], West India Committee Records, M915, Reel 11: Sub Committee of West India Planters & Merchants appointed to oppose the abolition of the slave trade minutes; Lowell Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763–1833* (New York, 1928), 268; Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 292.

³⁵ Petley, *White Fury*, 3, 19, 141, 262.

³⁶ D. J. Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750–1815* (Manchester, 2005), 171–7; ICS 120, Taylor Family Papers, 13/A/1: Robert Taylor to Simon Taylor, 28 Dec. 1791.

³⁷ See, for example, ICS, West India Committee Records, M915, Reel 3: West India Planters and Merchants minutes 1785–1822, 19 Mar. 1792.

³⁸ Edinburgh, National Records of Scotland [NRS], GD51/1/361/1-15 (Papers of the Dundas Family): Documents relating to the price of sugar and the regulations governing the sugar trade, 13 Jan.–23 Mar. 1792. Lowell Ragatz, *A Guide for the Study of British Caribbean History, 1763–1834*, (Washington, 1932), 255.

³⁹ Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British mobilization in comparative perspective* (Oxford, 1986), 80.

on behalf of the Edinburgh abolition committee.⁴⁰ Dundas delivered the petition on 2 April 1792—the very day that Wilberforce again raised the question of immediate abolition in the house of commons.⁴¹ Wilberforce opened by noting that the ‘real nature’ of transatlantic trafficking had been revealed in parliamentary inquiries (1788–90) and that the house of commons should avoid sanctioning ‘the continuance of this infernal traffick’.⁴² Dundas noted the irreconcilable positions: the continuance of trafficking from Africa forevermore, or immediate abolition. As home secretary, he argued for the middle ground of gradual abolition which included reforms ‘with a view of putting an end to hereditary slavery, and relieving the condition of the slaves’. Dundas’s supposed aim was ‘gradually and experimentally to prove the practicability of the Abolition of the African Trade, and to provide the means of cultivation, and to increase the population’.⁴³ The gradual abolition of Africa trafficking would have complemented the simultaneous emancipation of enslaved people, which was dependent upon the agreement of West India planters. These were more ambitious than the plans proposed by Wilberforce, although they were not viable. In 1798, Rev. Thomas Gisborne, a member of the Clapham sect, described Dundas’s earliest suggestions as ‘so clogged with extreme difficulties’, especially the emancipation of enslaved children, that they would have alarmed the ‘self-interested feelings of the planters’ even more than immediate abolition of the trade.⁴⁴ Dundas’s suggestions never materialised into serious proposals.

Henry Dundas’s parliamentary rhetoric, however, allowed him to position himself in favour of abolition. But in the same evening, he inserted the cataclysmic word ‘gradually’ in the proposed legislation. It consequently read: ‘the Slave Trade ought *gradually* to be abolished’.⁴⁵ After an overnight debate, the house of commons voted to defeat Robert Banks Jenkinson’s motion to adjourn (234 to eighty-seven), and Dundas’s amendment gained a majority (193 to 125). The gradual resolution was carried by 230 to eighty-five votes (a majority of 145) at around 6.00am on 3 April 1792.⁴⁶ But no bill was yet passed. On 4 April, Wilberforce asked Dundas what he intended to do. The response

⁴⁰ NRS, GD51/5/637/1 (Papers of the Dundas Family): Letters, with enclosures, from James Stirling, Lord Provost, Edinburgh, to Henry Dundas, 7 Mar. 1792. For wider context, see Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery*, 89, 93.

⁴¹ *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade, In the house of commons on Monday the Second of April 1792*, 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁴ Thomas Gisborne, *The Principles of Moral Philosophy Investigated, and Applied to the Constitution of Civil Society*. 4th Edition, to which is added a new edition, being the 5th, with an appendix of remarks on the late decision of the house of commons reflecting the abolition of the slave trade (London, 1798), 425.

⁴⁵ *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade, In the house of commons on Monday the second of April 1792*, 127.

⁴⁶ William Cobbett (ed.), *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, 36 vols (London, 1806–20), xxix (1817). 1158. William Wilberforce gave

came that it was not necessary for him to declare his intentions, and he challenged Wilberforce to proceed. The abolitionist MP Charles James Fox described Dundas's compromise as a 'disgrace to the House, and an insult to the country', whose passage was now dependent upon colonial legislatures dominated by enslavers. Dundas reiterated that their co-operation was 'absolutely necessary to give effect to the mode of abolition which he conceived to be the most eligible'.⁴⁷ The debate would resume in the house of commons on 23 April.

At a meeting on 5 April, the 'London Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade' thanked William Wilberforce, William Pitt and Charles James Fox. If Dundas really was widely praised for his work, as claimed by Michael Fry, it was not evident in this committee's minutes.⁴⁸ Instead, this committee resolved that the 'gradual Abolition of the Slave Trade is not an adequate Remedy for its injustice and Cruelty; neither can it be deemed a compliance with the general wishes of the People'. Furthermore, 'the interval in which the Slave [trade] shall be permitted to continue affords a prospect of redoubled Cruelties and Ravages on the Coast of Africa'.⁴⁹ By 9 April, Wilberforce was privately scathing about Dundas: 'nobody thinks well of him—duplicity and artifice are esteemed parts of his character' although overall, 'matters have turned out better than I expected, and I am thankful for what we have obtained'.⁵⁰ With hindsight, Wilberforce would change his mind on the implications of gradualism.

Imperial economics were central to Henry Dundas's strategy. Eric Williams famously argued that abolition in 1807 and emancipation in 1834 became convenient as the West India economy was in decline after the American revolution (1775–83), whilst the actions of abolitionists were but a minor force.⁵¹ However, it is now almost universally accepted that the 'decline' of the West India economy did not occur until the next century.⁵² Indeed, the years 1790–99 were a boom time for the sugar trade, and abolition in 1807 has been described as 'econocide'.⁵³ Dundas's biographer Michael Fry publicly claims that the motives behind Dundas's delay were indeed economic: 'there was no point in having an economy which had previously been based on slavery collapse. That would have served nobody's interests at all'.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ (*Continued*) the majority as 238 to 85: R. I. Wilberforce and S. Wilberforce, *The Life of Wilberforce*, 5 vols (1838; London, 1839), i. 346.

⁴⁷ Cobbett, *Parliamentary History*, xxix. 1174–6.

⁴⁸ Fry, *Dundas Despotism*, 200.

⁴⁹ London, British Library [BL], Add. MS. 21256 (Proceedings of the Committee for Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1790–1819), fo. 54: 5 April 1792.

⁵⁰ Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *Life of Wilberforce*, i. 347.

⁵¹ Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*.

⁵² Trevor Burnard, *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2020), 231.

⁵³ Drescher, *Econocide*.

⁵⁴ Channel 4 News, 'Edinburgh council debating new plaque on monument of former colonial secretary Henry Dundas's', 12 Aug. 2018 [<https://www.channel4.com/news/edinburgh-council-debating-new-plaque-on-monument-of-former-colonial-secretary-henry-dundas>; accessed 9 Jul. 2020].

This phrasing ignores African people and prioritises the interests of merchants and planters, some of whom were Dundas's parliamentary allies. On 4 April 1792, Sir Adam Fergusson, third baronet of Kilkerran, the absentee owner of Rozelle estate in St Thomas in the East, Jamaica, from 1773 to 1804 and MP for Ayrshire (1774–80, 1781–4, 1790–6) and Edinburgh (1784–90),⁵⁵ wrote to his manager on the island:

The Resolution as pass[e]d is in general satisfactory; at least to all those, among whom I profess myself to be, and always to have been one, who think that, a reasonable equality between the sexes being established, a proper attention being given to the Relief and ease of Women with Child ... there can be no reason to doubt that the numbers may be kept up among the Negroes in the West Indies as among any other Human Creatures on the globe.⁵⁶

Thus, Dundas's close parliamentary ally immediately conveyed the news to Jamaica, where the principle of delaying abolition to increase the enslaved population was well established. Fergusson later voted, as expected, against abolition.

Gradualism was a transatlantic strategy and, as it evolved, Stephen Fuller had an instrumental role. A West India merchant and agent for Jamaica in London, he was a member of the sub-committee to oppose abolition.⁵⁷ Fuller bridged the gap between colony and metropole, working with the Jamaica legislature. In 1788, the Jamaica assembly held a series of investigations to ascertain the implications of potential abolition. With the island's economy supposedly under threat, the assembly noted the enslaved population could not be self-sustained. Indeed, Fuller's report of the investigation concluded that women comprised under half of the island's enslaved population of 250,000. According to Colleen A. Vasconcellos, Jamaica planters subsequently preferred Africa's 'breeding wenches' rather than enslaved men. The assembly resolutions noted that due to 'disproportion between the sexes', abolition would prohibit the growth of the enslaved labour force and ultimately decrease the value of the slavery-based economy. Moreover, the assembly simultaneously resolved, amongst other things, to pursue compensation from the British parliament if trafficking was discontinued. Opposing any form of abolition, gradual or otherwise, the assembly effectively prioritised the importation of more enslaved

⁵⁵ Edith, Lady Haden-Guest, 'Sir Adam Fergusson (1733–1813), 3rd Bt. (1733–1813), of Kilkerran, Ayr', *History of Parliament Online* [<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/member/fergusson-sir-adam-1733-1813>; accessed 5 Feb. 2021].

⁵⁶ Edinburgh, National Register of Archives for Scotland, NRAS3572/3/28/24 (Fergusson Family, Baronets, of Kilkerran, Ayrshire): Letter from Adam Fergusson to Archibald Cameron, 4 Apr. 1792. I am grateful to Alex Renton for an advance reading of his book on the Fergussons of Kilkerran, *Blood Legacy: Reckoning with a family's story of slavery* (Edinburgh, 2021) and providing a copy of this letter.

⁵⁷ 'Stephen Fuller (?–1799)', *Legacies of British Slave-ownership database* [<http://www.depts-levi.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146645307>; accessed 13 Feb. 2020].

women from Africa from 1788 onwards.⁵⁸ Thus, the Jamaica assembly's consolidated slave law passed that year intended to maintain rather than abolish chattel slavery.⁵⁹ As early as November 1791, Fuller urged Dundas to ensure a speedy conclusion.⁶⁰

Stephen Fuller's correspondence offers a transatlantic perspective on gradualism. On 4 April 1792, he communicated the 'unwelcome news' to the Jamaican committee of correspondence that gradual abolition had been carried.⁶¹ Tallying up expenses for 1792, Fuller's accounts revealed that, despite sending cards 'to all our Friends in the H. of Commons' to attend Wilberforce's motion of 2 April, 'the word gradual [was] introduced by surprise' which immediately necessitated the memorial to Dundas. This suggests that the West India interest were neither privy to nor approved of Dundas's solution of 2 April.⁶² Yet, Fuller's correspondence to the Jamaica committee on 6 April underlines that whilst gradualism was initially viewed as a triumph for abolitionists, an opportunity arose: 'Victory is not of quite so much consequence as it appeared to be at first sight, when the conquerors themselves know not what to do with it'.⁶³ Srividhya Swaminathan's position that Dundas's insertion of 'the term "gradual" as a qualifier of abolition' was a 'major victory' for pro-slavery forces is only partially accurate; it was not intended as a victory, but vested interests worked to ensure that it became one.⁶⁴

Gradualism was not initially a joint strategy but that quickly changed. Henry Dundas does not seem to have been collaborating with the metropolitan West India interest before 2 April 1792. He was not mentioned in that month's minutes of the London West India standing committee, or the sub-committee to oppose abolition, although a private strategy simultaneously unfolded.⁶⁵ On 7 April, George Hibbert, London West India merchant and sub-committee member, replied to Simon Taylor, then still in the capital, acknowledging that 'I am glad the negotiation is begun with Mr Dundas. I think it may be the means of escaping our entire destruction'.⁶⁶ Recent research by Christer

⁵⁸ Stephen Fuller, *Report, Resolutions, and Remonstrance, of the honourable the council and assembly of Jamaica, at a joint committee on the subject of the slave trade, 20 October 1789* (London, 1790), 9, 11; C. A. Vasconcellos, *Slavery, Childhood and Abolition in Jamaica, 1788–1838* (Athens and London, 2015), 4.

⁵⁹ Melanie Newton, 'Henry Dundas: naming empire and genocide', *History Workshop Online*, 11 Nov. 2020 [<https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/henry-dundas-naming-empire-and-genocide/>; accessed 6 Feb. 2021].

⁶⁰ Geggus, 'The British Government', 293.

⁶¹ McCahill, *Correspondence of Stephen Fuller*, 185–6.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 196.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 187–8.

⁶⁴ Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, 203–4.

⁶⁵ ICS, West India Committee Records, M915, Reel 3: West India planters and merchants minutes 1785–1822; ICS M915, Reel 11: sub-committee of West India planters & merchants appointed to oppose the abolition of the slave trade minutes.

⁶⁶ ICS 120, Taylor Family Papers, 17/A/2: George Hibbert to Simon Taylor, 7 Apr. 1792. For a recent account of Hibbert, see Katie Donington, *The Bonds of Family: Slavery, commerce and culture in the British Atlantic World* (Manchester, 2019).

Petley and Katie Donington noted this negotiation, Petley claiming that Dundas was seen as a 'valuable ally' by the West India interest.⁶⁷ Thus, within a few days of gradualism entering the parliamentary record, Dundas was negotiating with the London-based Jamaica interest to avoid what opponents of abolition described as their downfall.

In the house of commons on 23 April 1792, Henry Dundas showed his hand. Representing himself as morally opposed to the slave trade, he revealed that he had 'formed his opinion upon the propriety and justice' of abolition from privy council evidence several years previously. The evidence informed his opinion that the slave trade 'ought not be continued'—but neither did he think it would be 'safe suddenly to put an end to it'. He argued that if it were immediately abolished it would continue through foreign countries, so abolitionists should 'not to insist upon too short a period' for the 'sake of humanity'. He similarly warned the parliamentary West India interest that gradualism should not endure too long since the 'country had been already expressed upon the subject'.⁶⁸ However, Dundas's private negotiations with members of the sub-committee to oppose abolition from 7 April 1792, and, given that he never associated himself with the cause, undermines this benevolent self-characterisation.

On 23 April, Henry Dundas introduced a programme in the House of Commons with end dates for both the British and Foreign slave trade. He moved away from a strategy of staggered emancipation and instead offered twelve resolutions to regulate trafficking: 1. the end of British involvement with the transatlantic slave trade on 1 January 1800; 2. the end to the slave trade from Africa, and inter-colonial trafficking between British colonies to foreign powers—almost half the traffic the previous year—from 1 May 1793; 3. no British ships, or ships from British colonies, were to be involved with the transatlantic slave trade, unless they had previously been employed as such, from 1 May 1792; 4. from 1 May 1793, British ships could not take a greater proportion of male than female Africans; 5. the maximum age of transported African people was twenty years old for males, and sixteen for females; 6. a comprehensive regulation about departure points was to be introduced from 1 May 1792, enforced by customs officers in Great Britain and the colonies and guaranteed by financial sureties; 7. from 1797, financial duties were to be introduced for each imported slave, implemented by customs officers, which would generate income for colonial legislatures; 8. from 10 October 1792, it was to be unlawful for any British merchants to import slaves to America; 9. from 1 May 1793, the tonnage of ships leaving from London, Liverpool and Bristol for the coast of Africa was to be restricted; 10. the British parliament would indemnify any losses incurred by British merchants involved with the slave trade due to the preceding resolutions; 11. exemplary punishments were introduced for

⁶⁷ Petley, *White Fury*, 262 n. 53; Donington, *Bonds of Family*, 112.

⁶⁸ Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History*, xxix. 1204–5.

any British subject found guilty of mistreating Africans on ships or on the continent itself; and 12. King George III was to be addressed to gather support for negotiations to be opened with foreign powers for the 'final and complete' abolition of the trade (that is, not just British involvement). 'Accomplishing this important object' was dependent upon 'the prudence and wisdom of respective colonial legislatures' and subject to their approval.⁶⁹ The last resolution reiterated one impenetrable barrier to abolition and introduced another. First, as discussed in detail below, the most influential colonial legislatures had no intention of countenancing amelioration for the enslaved, let alone abolition. Second, the last resolution implied that King George III would support complete abolition, yet he privately supported the pro-slavery cause.⁷⁰

William Pitt perceptively noted that Dundas's proposals could be offered under a programme of *immediate* abolition.⁷¹ William Wilberforce gave credit to Dundas but remained committed to immediatism. Charles James Fox went further, registering his disgust that Dundas endorsed the trafficking of women and children to promote the increase of the enslaved population. He also argued that Dundas had 'gone much too far' on the question of compensation and accused him of introducing the concept of gradualism, then devising propositions to effect it. Dundas responded it was the other way around: his opinions on abolition were formed three years ago in the privy council, the arguments came first, then the propositions.⁷² If the secret negotiations with the West India interest around 7 April 1792 were made public, the parliamentary abolitionists would have been more sceptical. As Katherine Paugh describes, gradualism allowed 'planters and their allies to claim the mantle of abolitionism whilst postponing the end of the Atlantic slave trade indefinitely with schemes for promoting fertility among Afro-Caribbeans'.⁷³

How to assess Henry Dundas's ambitious programme of regulation and reform on 23 April? If implemented, these would have ended British trafficking in enslaved people in 1800, seven years earlier than it was abolished. However, on both 2 and 23 April, Dundas stated that colonial enslavers should have a voice in the abolition debate.

⁶⁹ Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History*, xxix. 1214–7.

⁷⁰ In March 1795, Stephen Fuller communicated to the Jamaica committee of correspondence that the king was a 'true friend to the colonies' and that they 'owe more to him than is generally known in regard to the defeat the absurd attempt of abolishing the Slave Trade'. McCahill, *Correspondence of Stephen Fuller*, 227.

⁷¹ Based on a survey of admittedly limited correspondence between Henry Dundas and William Pitt, it does not appear that they privately discussed the concept of gradual abolition between 1793 and 1805, though they corresponded on concerns about the defence of the West Indies. University of Manchester, John Rylands Library, Pitt Collection, GB 133 Eng MS 907 (Correspondence between Henry Dundas and William Pitt).

⁷² Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History*, xxix. 1217–25.

⁷³ Katherine Paugh, *The Politics of Reproduction: Race, medicine, and fertility in the age of abolition* (Oxford, 2007), 53–4.

The pillars of Dundas's gradualism were consistent with the Jamaica assembly's resolutions in 1788 and the West India interest petition of March 1792. Dundas's proposals on 2 April allowed for the continuation of trafficking to allow 'natural increase', whilst it evolved on 23 April to promote the importation of enslaved women, especially children under the age of sixteen, and ratified the principle of compensation. It is only possible to view them as a path to abolition if it is accepted colonial assemblies would have agreed, and these were dominated by planters who would never have conceded.

The question is: what choice did Dundas, and by extension the government, have? In the aftermath of the American revolution, the dynamic in West Indian colonial governance altered with power shifting from colonial assemblies to parliament. D. J. Murray attributed this change to the anti-slavery movement, citing new forms of crown colony governance (such as Trinidad, 1797) as well as abolition (1807) and emancipation (1834). Buckley notes that this process began with the establishment of West India regiments in 1795.⁷⁴ In an era in which the initiative was shifting towards the government, Dundas reiterated the rights of assemblies on the question of prolonging the slave trade, but his strategies in matters of colonial security infringed upon their perceived rights when required (for instance, with West India regiments). In other words, if abolition had aligned with imperial interests, he, and the government, would have supported it in the mid- to late 1790s. As it happens, immediate abolition threatened colonial security, partially explaining Dundas's opposition.

Henry Dundas's twelve resolutions were never implemented. On 27 April, resolution 1 was submitted to the committee. The next day Sir Edward Knatchbull's amendment moved the terminal date from 1 January 1800 (as intended by Dundas) to 1 January 1796.⁷⁵ In response, Dundas withdrew from proceedings. Bishop Porteus recorded Dundas's private view that the 'W. I. Planters & Merchants would have acquiesced in the Annihilation of the Trade in the year 1800'.⁷⁶ This statement, if accurate, suggests that Dundas's inability to implement a schedule that was not pre-agreed with parliamentary West Indians was behind his withdrawal. David Brion Davis reasoned the shortened period offered less time for planters to stock their estates and less scope for colonial legislatures to further delay abolition.⁷⁷ Ultimately, Dundas's proposals did not go forward. William Pitt was a long-term opponent of indemnifying slave-traders and modified the bill—removing all references to compensation—which passed the lower house and went

⁷⁴ Roger Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: British West India regiments, 1795–1815* (New Haven and London, 1979), 41; D. J. Murray, *The West Indies and the Development of Colonial Government* (Oxford, 1965), ix–31.

⁷⁵ R. R. Pearce, *Memoir of the Most Noble Richard Marquess Wellesley*, 3 vols (London, 1847), ii, 46–50.

⁷⁶ LPL, MS 2100, 25 April 1792, fo. 58.

⁷⁷ Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 432 n. 82.

to the house of lords for scrutiny.⁷⁸ Dundas's activities still attracted public support from those opposed to immediate abolition. David Evans of Lambeth wrote applauding his prevention of 'many thousands of respectable subjects [falling] into *certain ruin!* From which you alone have *respired them*'.⁷⁹

The motives of some in the house of the lords were more transparent. On 3 May 1792, the modified resolutions relative to abolition were considered. Viscount Stormont immediately called for more evidence, whilst the duke of Clarence, son of King George III and later William IV, argued that it 'ought not be abolished at all' due, amongst other reasons, to the 'great property' and 'immense commerce' connected with the trade. As Richard Pares noted, the lords disliked 'all change' and in this case abolition was opposed by the royal family itself. On 8 May, Stormont proposed an investigation (with witnesses under oath) into the African trafficking, the sugar trade and West Indies more broadly. Stormont's motion carried by sixty-three to thirty-six and an investigation via a committee of the whole house was established.⁸⁰ This was the opportunity the West India interest had been waiting for. The nature of the strategy to delay abolition was laid out in a private set of instructions (undated, but around early May 1792) that Stephen Fuller sent to barristers Edward Law, Robert Dallas and the attorney-general for Jamaica, Robert Sewell:

Mr F[uller] would advise a descant upon the fatal dangerous word *Gradual*. The proposer [Henry Dundas] knew not what he meant by it, nor the extent, nor the consequences of it. And those that voted for it, voted more from curiosity than any other motive—viz.—to see what was meant by it. Immediate Abolition would not have been carried—Gradual more dangerous to the Colonies.⁸¹

Thus, according to Fuller, immediate abolition would never have carried but gradualism established an important precedent. At the same time, the house of lords investigation was the first step in the long, tedious playing out of the inevitable. Before the bar of the house of lords on 14 May 1792, Edward Law, counsel for the West India planters and merchants, eloquently laid out the case against abolition, echoing many of the points advised in Fuller's instructions.⁸² Evidence was taken from witnesses, including Simon Taylor, over six days before the session ground to a halt on 5 June. There was no vote taken on Pitt's resolution

⁷⁸ Porter, *Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 84. Pitt vocalised his opposition to compensation for losses incurred by 'the people of Liverpool' in the event of abolition in 1789: Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History*, xxviii (1816). 78.

⁷⁹ University of Oxford, Weston Library, Special Collections, GB 0162 MSS.W.Ind.s.8 (Correspondence of Henry Dundas and Robert Saunders Dundas): Letter to Henry Dundas, 30 Apr. 1792, vol. 2, fos 171–5.

⁸⁰ Richard Pares, *King George III and the Politicians* (Oxford, 1953), 42; Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History*, xxix. 1349–1355.

⁸¹ McCahill, *Correspondence of Stephen Fuller*, 190–2.

⁸² BL, Add. MS 12433: Law's Speech on the Slave Trade, 14 May 1792.

and the momentum was lost when it was delayed into the next session. It was the house of lords that extinguished abolition in 1792.

Was there an alternative in 1792? Contemporaries and historians are divided. Bishop Porteus argued that Wilberforce should have moved for his own version in April 1791: 'my own opinion is that it would have been better to have moved for a *gradual* abolition at *first*. But greater & Wiser Men thought otherwise'.⁸³ This approach would have allowed Wilberforce to define a fixed term and draw in undecideds. Echoing this, and based upon the consistent numbers of voters who supported abolition in April 1791 (eighty-eight), who voted to adjourn on 2–3 April 1792 (eighty-seven), and those who voted against gradual abolition on the same date (eighty-five), Judith Jennings endorsed James Walvin's position that a better parliamentary manager than Wilberforce would have attracted moderate voters and as a result abolition could have passed as soon as 1793.⁸⁴ On the other hand, Stephen Fuller discussed with the Jamaica committee of correspondence what gradual abolition meant for the pro-slave-trade lobby. Deciding on 2 May 1792 that the West India interest now 'had no chance' of preventing abolition, the agent reckoned that without Dundas's intervention, MPs sympathetic to the West India cause would have prevailed: 'I am persuaded that if it had not been for Mr Dundas's amendment by adding the fatal word *gradual*, we should have had a majority in the House of Commons'.⁸⁵ Wilberforce also agreed that immediate abolition would not have passed in April 1792: 'We found there was no chance of getting any Bill through the Lords'.⁸⁶ The irresistible conclusion is that the insertion of gradual into the parliamentary record was an important precondition for abolition itself. Nevertheless, whilst it set a precedent, it provided scope for years of delay. Indeed, since 'gradual abolition' subsequently meant blocking Wilberforce's attempts at parliamentary motions rather than passing any legislation, the term is a historiographical misnomer.

By late 1792, parliamentary opposition to abolition had consolidated in the aftermath of the French Revolution and rising anti-Jacobinism. The abolitionists' petition campaign was viewed suspiciously as a cover for unpatriotic subversion.⁸⁷ On 1 February 1793, France declared war on Britain, whilst William Pitt had banned seditious meetings and publications the previous year. Abolitionists became associated with reform politics, and the movement became discredited by perceived connections with revolutionary France. Even though international

⁸³ LPL, MS 2100, 1791, fo. 36.

⁸⁴ Judith Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade, 1783–1807* (London and Portland, 1997), 72; James Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom 1776–1838* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1987), 114.

⁸⁵ McCahill, *Correspondence of Stephen Fuller*, 188; Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 430.

⁸⁶ Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *Life of Wilberforce*, i. 352.

⁸⁷ John Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The mobilisation of public opinion against the slave trade, 1787–1807* (London, 1998), 60.

affairs had made the prospect of abolition less likely and with the lords' investigation seemingly in stasis, Wilberforce again attempted to renew his campaign in the 1792–3 session. With opponents of abolition in the administration and declining support amongst allies, proposing the abolition of trafficking to foreign colonies represented the most realistic prospect of success. However, the parliamentary West India interest was organised enough to defeat it.⁸⁸ On 7 February 1794, Wilberforce again re-introduced the resolution to suppress trafficking to foreign ports. By this point, Dundas openly admitted in a letter to Wilberforce that he was practically opposed to abolition:

I do not dispute that a great deal of very good reasoning can be offered on the principles you state; but I know with absolute certainty that the Bill will be considered by the colonies as an encroachment upon their legislative rights, and they will not submit to it unless compelled. Upon this ground I have used all the influence I possess to prevent any question on the subject being agitated, at least during the war. My opinion does not prevail, and therefore the only thing to which I can reconcile myself is being perfectly quiet on the subject; and even to that I should feel it very difficult to reconcile myself, if I did not believe that your Bill will not pass the House of Lords.⁸⁹

In Dundas's own words, he used all his influence to prevent abolition being raised. However, the enemies of abolition in the commons could not, in wartime, seriously argue for the continuation of trafficking to foreign powers. Wilberforce's bill passed by a vote of fifty-six to thirty-eight in the lower house. Nevertheless, Dundas's prediction that the house of lords would not countenance any abolition was proven accurate. According to Porter, most peers were opposed to a partial abolition whilst the big question remained unresolved, even if that meant supplying enemy powers.⁹⁰

On 26 February 1795, William Wilberforce again introduced a motion calling for the house of commons to conclude their own resolution (of April 1792), which meant abolition on 1 January 1796. During this debate, Henry Dundas explained why he had adopted a 'middle line': abolition 'required time in order to effect it completely and without injury to those persons whose property was embarked to a large amount'. He admitted he was 'extremely concerned' that abolition would occur four years earlier than he intended. In doing so, Dundas effectively confirmed why he had withdrawn from the April 1792 proceedings. Indeed, abolition in 1796 instead of 1800 would not have provided 'sufficient time for merchants and planters to arrange their affairs, so as not to be injured by the event'. Dundas argued that delay was required to enable planters to import 'such a number

⁸⁸ Porter, *Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 89–91.

⁸⁹ Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *Life of Wilberforce*, ii. 49–50.

⁹⁰ Porter, *Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 93.

of slaves as would be necessary as to their future population'. He confessed that he did not have the 'courage to agree to the abolition' and although 'no man could doubt' the propriety of the cause, it must be done gradually—over an undefined period—so that it would not have severe consequences. William Pitt, whose friendship with Wilberforce had suffered due to the relentless abolition bills, nevertheless came out in support. Sir William Young, an absentee Tobago planter, claimed that only the colonists could approve abolition, and since they had supposedly implemented ameliorative measures it would no longer be required. The motion for abolition in 1795 was adjourned (seventy-eight to sixty-one).⁹¹ George Canning suggested that Dundas voted against abolition: 'of leaders, you know, Pitt is one way and Dundas the other'.⁹²

The pseudonymous 'Howard' (likely an abolitionist) publicly accused Henry Dundas of working with the West India interest in the House of Commons in February 1795:

While then you stand forward, fighting the battles of an unfeeling tribe of merchants, who would sell and buy their God, as they do his creatures, to increase their incomes, and to provide for the luxuries of their table—you must be convinced, that your heart, if it be in the bosom of a human being, and not of a monster, must execrate and abhor the cause which you espouse.⁹³

'Howard' compared Dundas to the anti-slavery politician, Charles James Fox:

Think how odious you must appear by contrast!—the one, the defender of the vilest institution of human enormity—the other, the eloquent asserter of the RIGHTS OF ALL! . . . Mr Dundas, the disguised oppressor of the human species!⁹⁴

Whilst polemical in nature, Howard's accusation is corroborated in Fuller's correspondence. On 4 March 1795, Fuller reported the successful delaying of Wilberforce's motion to the Jamaican committee of correspondence:

Mr Dundas was absolutely & positively with us; which tends still further to convince me, that his former motion for a gradual abolition, was a sudden thought & had never undergone his serious consideration.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History*, xxxi. 1321–45.

⁹² Peter Jupp (ed.), *The Letter-Journal of George Canning, 1793–1795* (London, 1991), 215.

⁹³ 'Howard', *A Letter to the Right Hon. Henry Dundas, on his speech delivered in the house of commons on the twenty-sixth day of February 1795, on Mr. Wilberforce's motion for the abolition of the slave trade* (London, 1795), 13. I am grateful to Ryan Hanley for a copy of this pamphlet.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

⁹⁵ McCahill, *Correspondence of Stephen Fuller*, 226–7.

Henry Dundas placated the West India interest in more direct ways. The Fedon uprising of March 1795 decimated the island of Grenada in the southeast Caribbean. The island's merchants petitioned parliament for relief, and the British government provided £1.5 million in loans, of which approximately one-third went to firms operated by Scots.⁹⁶ These loans restarted the slave economy on Grenada, and Dundas was described by claimants as the 'promoter and supporter of the bailout'.⁹⁷ In August 1795, the Glasgow firm Alexander Houston & Co. (in which William McDowall, MP for Glasgow Burghs, was a co-partner) solicited support from Dundas, who acted as guarantor for some of their loans.⁹⁸ Thus, Henry Dundas's strategy to delay abolition was implemented in close alignment with the West India interest in a *quid pro quo* relationship that advanced imperial concerns and attracted public critique.

What of Dundas's motives? Ryan Hanley described his anti-abolition stance in 1795 as 'politically canny', from Dundas's perspective, as it placated the West India interest in parliament and maintained support for the campaign to recapture Saint Domingue.⁹⁹ Roger Buckley argues that Pitt and Dundas ensured the continuation of trafficking as the government depended upon African enslaved labour to support military operations in the West Indies. In early 1795, both supporters and opponents of abolition in the cabinet agreed to use enslaved men in West India regiments, despite opposition from resident planters. Between 1795 and 1808, around 13,400 enslaved people were purchased for regiments (almost 4% of all those transported in British ships to the British Caribbean across that period).¹⁰⁰ Earl Grey estimated the size of force required to defend the British Leeward and Windward islands was 11,500, and it is no exaggeration to state that enslaved recruits secured the British West Indies at a time of grave danger.¹⁰¹ As Buckley noted, Dundas and others participated

⁹⁶ Douglas Hamilton, 'Scottish trading in the Caribbean: the rise and fall of Houston & Co.', in N. C. Landsman (ed.), *Nation and Province in the First British Empire: Scotland and the Americas, 1600–1800* (Bucknell University Press, 2001), 116. See also Nicholas Draper, 'The British state and slavery: George Baillie, merchant of London and St Vincent, and the Exchequer loans of the 1790s', Working Papers 15029, Economic History Society (2015) [<https://ideas.repec.org/p/ehs/wpaper/15029.html>]; accessed 11 Jun. 2021].

⁹⁷ NRS, GD51/1/499 (Papers of the Dundas Family): Letter from George Baillie to Henry Dundas, 17 Sep. 1795.

⁹⁸ St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, The University of the West Indies, The Alma Jordan Library, SC89 6/3 (West India Committee Records): Minutes of the Board of Commissioners for the Issue of Exchequer Bills, Jun. 1795–1 Sep. 1797, fos 88–9.

⁹⁹ Ryan Hanley, 'Slavery and the British Working Class, 1787–1833', paper read at the Institute for Historical Research, Senate House, London, 7 Feb. 2017.

¹⁰⁰ Buckley, 'African recruitment policy', 4. Between 1795 and 1808, 366,357 African people were transported on British ships to the British Caribbean: *The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* [<http://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>]; accessed 10 Feb. 2020].

¹⁰¹ Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 24; Claudius Fergus, 'Dread of Insurrection': abolitionism, security, and labor in Britain's West Indian Colonies, 1760–1823', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 66 (2009) 766.

‘in all stages of the development and implementation of the policy of purchasing slaves as recruits for the British army’ as the government became the ‘largest individual buyer of slaves and, consequently, the major promoter of the wretched trade’. Furthermore, Dundas explicitly blocked the ‘universal practice’ of emancipating slaves after military service because, in his own words, of ‘the great alarm it would excite amongst the planters’.¹⁰² As secretary of state for war, Dundas led a strategy dependent upon the acquisition of enslaved people to strengthen the government’s war effort. His motivations in delaying abolition after 1793 were grounded in imperial defence: the delay prolonged the trafficking in enslaved people which improved the military capability of the British army. The broader purpose was the prosecution of war against revolutionary, antislavery France, in which the British state supported the continuation of slavery.

William Wilberforce introduced another motion for immediate abolition on 18 February 1796, arguing that the house of commons had already ratified the move. That same day, Dundas abruptly cut short a letter to Lord Courtown (James George Stopford, MP for Great Bedwyn) and revealed: ‘I must go to oppose the propositi-on for the abolition of the slave trade’.¹⁰³ After various contributions, Dundas spoke: he opposed abolition as it would ‘endanger the peace of the country’. He cited the wars with the French, especially in the West Indies. A motion was introduced to delay, but ultimately leave was given to bring in an abolition bill which passed with a majority (ninety-three to sixty-seven).¹⁰⁴ General Tarleton introduced the bill for its second reading on 3 March—an attempt to quash it with few abolitionists present in the chamber—but Wilberforce managed to thwart the ploy and it was carried by sixty-four to thirty-one votes. On 7 March, the bill was sent to committee by a vote of seventy-six to thirty-one.¹⁰⁵

Any abolitionist success, however, had to overcome a consolidated West India interest and Henry Dundas in the house of commons. Ostensibly playing the middle ground on 15 March 1796, Dundas acknowledged ‘injustice and inhumanity’ but argued that it was not the ‘proper time for the abolition’. However, in the anti-abolition manifesto that followed Dundas effectively became the voice of the West India interest. First, and consistent with his previous public utterances,

¹⁰² Buckley, ‘African recruitment policy’, 11; Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 26.

¹⁰³ NRS, GD224/30/3/3 (Papers of the Montague-Douglas-Scott Family): Mr Dundas to Lord Courtown, 18 Feb. 1796. I am grateful to the Duke of Buccleuch estate for permission to quote this letter. According to King George III, Dundas’s handwriting was ‘the worst and most ungentlemanlike he had ever met with’: Thorne, ‘Henry Dundas’. Indeed, there is a slight ambiguity in the term ‘propositi-on’, which is spread over two lines, and could be ‘proposals on’. In the context of the full sentence, this author finds the former interpretation more appropriate. In any case, the meaning of both terms are similar in this instance and signify Dundas’s opposition to immediate abolition *on this occasion* which corroborates his opposition on others.

¹⁰⁴ Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History*, xxxii. (1818), 737–63.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 862–5.

Dundas argued the 'cordial cooperation' of the West India planters was required for abolition. Second, since trafficking from Africa would supposedly continue afterwards amongst nations that did not 'carry it on with so much mildness as we did', he was opposed to unilateral British abolition. Third, he defended the West India planters as a 'respectable body of men' and reiterated claims for compensation. Fourth, he underlined the commercial value of the revenues from the West India trades, as well as their strategic importance to the empire. Finally, Dundas reiterated that trafficking should be restricted to people aged under twenty, and abolition delayed indefinitely, because 'to give the planters only a little longer time would be doing no good to them, but much injury to the country'.¹⁰⁶ With such persuasive arguments from the now secretary of state for war, support in the lower house was perhaps less than expected. The bill was defeated at the third reading by a narrow margin: seventy-four to seventy.¹⁰⁷

How can Henry Dundas's actions in this episode be explained? Inexplicably, Michael Fry's *Dundas Despotism* is silent on these events in 1796—even though Anstey's text is cited in the bibliography—instead accepting Dundas's parliamentary contributions in April 1792 at face value and taking a positive view of his intentions. By ignoring Dundas's subsequent collaboration with the West India interest and practical anti-abolitionism, Fry's error of omission is the foundation upon which the representation of Dundas as a 'genuine opponent of the slave trade' partly rests.¹⁰⁸ Instead, there is compelling evidence that Dundas helped to ensure its continuation. Indeed, Anstey levels two charges against him in 1796: his persuasive oratory on the political and economic importance of West Indies compelled others to vote against the bill, and his mobilisation of Scottish votes, as a Government election agent.¹⁰⁹ Two records of votes on abolition bills in the house of commons in the 1790s exist: a partial list of abolitionists in 1791, and the list of voters (both for and against) on 15 March 1796.¹¹⁰ There is no written evidence that Dundas voted for or against abolition on either date. However, since voting was tight, as in March 1796, the effect of abstaining was not dissimilar to a vote against. According to the print press (see below), Dundas's oratory also influenced the vote, although some of the bill's seventy-four opponents required little encouragement. Whilst it is estimated that sixty-three MPs had West India connections in

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 874–81.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 901.

¹⁰⁸ Fry, *Dundas Despotism*, 199–201, 392; Fry, 'Here's the real truth on Henry Dundas'.

¹⁰⁹ Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 309–10.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols (London, 1808), ii. 338; William Woodfall, *An Impartial Report of the Debates That Occur in the Two Houses of Parliament, in the course of the sixth session of the seventeenth parliament of Great Britain, called to meet at Westminster on the Thursday the 29th of October 1795*, 4 vols (London, 1796), iii. 453–5. There is a discrepancy in the Woodfall record between the listed votes and names of voters.

the house of commons in 1796, only twenty-three have been identified amongst the 74 who voted against abolition on 15 March.¹¹¹ Some of the remainder had colonial connections, however, including 10 to 14 with interests in the East Indies, which according to Anstey, would have compelled them to resist any perceived attack on imperial order.¹¹²

Almost no MPs from Scotland deviated from the committed anti-abolitionist stance of the Scottish manager, Dundas. As G. M. Ditchfield notes, it was 'largely due to Dundas that only one Scottish member—as far as is known—voted for abolition in 1791 or 1796'.¹¹³ In the vote of 15 March 1796, Anstey identified that eleven MPs within the group of seventy-four opponents were closely associated with Dundas, including his son Robert Saunders Dundas, MP for Hastings. Only one, Robert Barclay Allardice was a 'West India' MP. Henry Dundas, therefore, likely mobilised at least ten extra anti-abolition votes.¹¹⁴ However, Anstey underestimated the strength of the Dundas phalanx. Twelve Scottish MPs are listed as voting against abolition (including Sir Adam Fergusson), although Anstey only records nine. In fact, all twelve Scottish parliamentarians—also including Patrick Heron, John Callander and Duncan Davidson—were aligned with Dundas, making a total of thirteen MPs supporting his position.¹¹⁵ On 15 March 1796, Dundas had the support of West India interest MPs and the Scottish phalanx who were able to defeat even a full strength group of committed abolitionists (thirty MPs).¹¹⁶ When colonial MPs and undecideds persuaded by Dundas's oratory were added, this well-drilled group was more than a match for the loosely organised supporters of abolition. As Wilberforce famously said, ten or twelve MPs who had previously offered support were absent in country estates or at the opera. Whilst the abolition cause might have succeeded with better management, there is no question who contemporaries blamed. The Anglo-Irish parliamentarian and abolitionist ally, William De Burgh, wrote to Wilberforce on 15 March: 'against Dundas, I recommend, and will cultivate in myself, a propensity to direct hostilities'.¹¹⁷

The West India interest were universal in their public approbation for Henry Dundas, whose actions were popularly perceived to have influenced voting. On 31 March 1796, the *True Briton* announced West India merchants were so enamoured with Dundas's 'admirable

¹¹¹ This figure is arrived at by cross-referencing the Woodfall list with McCahill's list of West India interest MPs: McCahill, *Correspondence of Stephen Fuller*, 229–33.

¹¹² Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 307 n. 72.

¹¹³ G. M. Ditchfield, 'Repeal, abolition, and reform: a study in the interaction of reforming movements in the parliament of 1790–6', in Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (eds), *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform: Essays in memory of Roger Anstey* (Folkstone, 1980), 113.

¹¹⁴ Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 308.

¹¹⁵ *Houses of Parliament Online* lists these three additional individuals as aligned with Henry Dundas [<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/>; accessed 11 July 2020].

¹¹⁶ Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 282–3.

¹¹⁷ Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *Life of Wilberforce*, ii. 142.

speech', which 'clearly influenced the decision of the House', it was to be published so it might be 'disseminated through the Country'.¹¹⁸ John Petrie, agent for Tobago in London, forwarded an address to Dundas to which he added his 'vote of thanks and to entreat that you will persevere in your endeavours to protect property and oppose the wild schemes of visionary reformers'. Tobago's enslavers were convinced that abolition would have passed without Dundas's 'well-timed, sensible and animated conduct'.¹¹⁹ William Craig Harbone, a slaver of some thirty years' experience, wrote in March to congratulate him 'on the success you experienced in defeating that Quixote scheme of abolition', noting that he had never heard 'sounder reasoning' than in Dundas's parliamentary speeches.¹²⁰ However, with such a small majority, moderates realised that a more subtle phase of gradual abolition was required. The House of Lords could not directly block it again, so it fell to MPs to ensure continuation.

On 22 March 1796, the Society of West India Planters and Merchants passed a vote of thanks for Henry Dundas's 'able and constitutional speech' and for the 'effectual opposition he thereby gave to the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade'. The committee also asked Dundas to send them the 'outlines of his plans for the future regulation of the Slave Trade'.¹²¹ These minutes and request were sent to Dundas by Robert Milligan, a Scottish enslaver in London.¹²² Milligan revealed that the basic principles of Dundas's propositions on 15 March met with their approval: 'I have now no doubts of their coming forward in a proper manner in support'.¹²³ This was a key moment: the West India interest endorsed Dundas's gradualism as a joint strategy after March 1796. Any notion of neutrality in the supposed fixer was over. Robert Taylor conveyed the good news to Simon Taylor in Kingston, outlining Dundas's role and endorsing his authenticity: 'Mr Dundas has justly merited his thanks of the W. I. Interest, for his very able speech upon the occasion, and I really believe him sincere in the opinion he delivered'.¹²⁴ Before he left government in 1801, the sincerity of Dundas's gradual abolition was tested. He was not always a committed ally of planters—purchasing Africans for West India Regiments in Jamaica attracted opposition—but he publicly

¹¹⁸ *True Briton*, No.1018, 31 Mar. 1796, 2.

¹¹⁹ NRS, GD51/1/517/1-2 (Papers of the Dundas Family): Letter from J. Petrie to Henry Dundas, 21 Jul. 1796.

¹²⁰ NRS, GD51/1/667 (Papers of the Dundas Family): Letter from William Craig Harbone to Henry Dundas, 23 Mar. 1796.

¹²¹ ICS, West India Committee Records, M915 (West India Planters and Merchants minutes 1785–1822), Reel 3, 22 Mar. 1796.

¹²² Katie Donington, 'Milligan, Robert (1746–1809), merchant, slave owner, and dock promoter', *ODNB* (Oxford, 2016) [<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/109520>; accessed 11 June 2021].

¹²³ NRS, GD51/1/514 (Papers of the Dundas Family): Robert Milligan to Henry Dundas, 23 Mar. 1796.

¹²⁴ ICS 120, 13/A/59 (Taylor Family Papers): Robert Taylor to Simon Taylor, 6 Apr. 1796.

championed the rights of colonial assemblies and combined with the metropolitan West India interest when agendas aligned. In April 1796, Dundas joined with West India MPs to oppose a bill introduced by Peter Francis in the House of Commons which sought to increase the enslaved population; it was opposed due to the perceived infringement on colonial affairs.¹²⁵ Francis publicly rebuked Dundas, noting his shift in position from 2 April 1792, when ‘from that moment and from that station, in my judgement, he has done nothing but descend’. Indifferent about personal reputation, Dundas confirmed that ‘unless we had the concurrence of the colonies themselves, all that we could do in the way of internal regulation was not worth a straw’.¹²⁶

Henry Dundas claimed to be a moral opponent of slavery in theory, whilst allying with the parliamentary West India interest to delay abolition in practice. On 6 April 1797, the absentee Jamaica planter Charles Ellis introduced a motion in the House of Commons supposedly intended to end the slave trade. The amelioration of conditions, including improvements in religious provision, labour and food supplies, was proposed.¹²⁷ In the spirit of the collaboration revealed in the Milligan correspondence, William Young and Charles Ellis submitted the motion to Dundas for ‘his consideration’.¹²⁸ Wilberforce and Fox opposed it in the lower house, but it quickly passed both. Abolitionists had every right to be suspicious. Ellis’s motion was informed by a secret report of December 1796, based on communications with planters in St Vincent and the parliamentary West India interest. These communications approved several conclusions, including a strategy:

For the joint purposes of opposing the plan of Mr Wilberforce, and establishing the character of West India Body, it is essential that they should manifest their willingness to promote actively the cause of Humanity by such steps as shall be consistent with . . . the general interest of the colonies.¹²⁹

This was a West India ploy—in discussion with Dundas, disguised as an ameliorative strategy—to stave off full abolition for as long as possible. Wilberforce understood the duplicity of the ‘abominable motion’. In a letter of February 1797, he wrote to Thomas Babington: ‘[colonial assemblies] must at least *appear* to act, if they would be safe from the interference of the British parliament’.¹³⁰ In the house of commons on 6 April, Dundas approved this version of gradual abolition, proposed by enslavers as it ‘afforded him an opportunity of agreeing to a

¹²⁵ Porter, *Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 96–7.

¹²⁶ Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History*, xxxii. 944–92.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxiii. 251–94.

¹²⁸ *Papers Presented to the House of Commons of the 7th May 1804, Respecting the Slave Trade &c.* (London, 1804), 261: ‘St Christopher’, 14 December 1796, 60.

¹²⁹ These are reprinted in full in Porter, *Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 96–9.

¹³⁰ Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *Life of Wilberforce*, ii. 195–6.

final abolition' with colonial assemblies. Fox instantly saw through the charade which was intended to 'perpetuate the slave trade ... the support to it given by Mr Dundas, was proof to him of its object, as that gentleman had always opposed the abolition'.¹³¹ For Dale H. Porter, the Ellis address discouraged proposed abolitionist legislation up to 1804 (though Wilberforce attempted in 1797, 1798, 1799 and 1802).¹³² Wilberforce's diary reveals the practicalities of delay. In February 1800, he was deterred from entering a motion as the 'West Indians talked of a compromise', which entailed a five- to seven-year suspension of the trafficking of African people. However, Pitt 'listened too easily' to the West India proprietors, who initially suggested they were willing to support his motion but backtracked at a meeting during which a 'strong anti-abolition spirit was manifested'. Even without the approval of enslavers, Wilberforce hoped Pitt would still come forward but expected nothing from Dundas:

I wished Pitt to come forward with the measure notwithstanding, and tried to prevail on Dundas to support us in it. But the latter, though extremely angry at the Jamaica people, who, in a report recently come over, talk big and dispute our right to abolish, &c. will not, I fear, consent to support us now.¹³³

Dundas was therefore presented with the opportunity to fulfil his earlier proposal of fixed term abolition (on 1 January 1800), but his collaboration with the West Indians meant that no parliamentary motion could ensue. Devolving responsibility for the reform of slavery to enslavers was the most insidiously effective way of delaying abolition up to 1804.

To progress the ameliorative strategy in 1797, the duke of Portland, a leading opponent of abolition and the colonial secretary, was given responsibility in the house of lords to communicate officially with West India councils and assemblies.¹³⁴ Responses to the Portland communications from colonial legislatures allow the prospects of success to be measured. No ameliorative policies were implemented in an eight-year period. In October 1804, Lord Camden wrote to colonial governors to ascertain progress, if any. Jamaica and the Bahamas did not respond, whilst Dominica did not provide adequate information. The Leeward islands, Grenada and St Vincent outlined the difficulty in implementing such policies. Only Barbados had attempted token ameliorative legislation by that point.¹³⁵ The latter colony provides a

¹³¹ Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History*, xxxiii. 293–4.

¹³² Porter, *Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 102; Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 321.

¹³³ Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *Life of Wilberforce*, ii. 367–8.

¹³⁴ For an explanation of Portland's anti-abolitionism, see David Wilkinson, *The Duke of Portland: Politics and party in the age of George III* (Basingstoke, 2003), 70.

¹³⁵ *Substance of the Debates on a Resolution for Abolishing the Slave Trade: Which was moved in the house of commons on the 10th June, 1806, and in the house of lords on the 24th June, 1806* (London, 1806), 158–160.

case study of gradual abolition in colonial form. In 1800, Lord Seaforth, a Scottish MP aligned with Dundas from 1793, was appointed by the duke of Portland as the governor of Barbados. Although the author of a recent Seaforth biography misinterpreted the cynical nature of gradual abolition, the work reveals how Governor Seaforth, who simultaneously became an enslaver in Berbice, attempted to implement ameliorative policies in the Barbados assembly at the behest of the government. Seaforth's introduction of the 'Slaves Protection Bill' in July 1801 brought him into conflict with the island's planters. This bill passed eventually in May 1805, although the failure of colonial assemblies without a Portland placeman to pass legislation is more representative of futile Government policy.¹³⁶ Thus, metropolitan defenders of the slave trade combined with Portland and Dundas to implement a strategy to provide plantation slavery with a more acceptable profile in order to delay full abolition, having accepted amelioration as a lesser evil; yet even this was resisted by colonial legislatures.

The viability of Dundas's gradual abolition can be measured by posing one simple question: would colonial legislatures ever have acquiesced? Given that amelioration proved impossible, the abolitionist parliamentarians were sceptical. Charles James Fox asked on 15 March 1796, if the consent of the planters was required, 'what ground of hope have we, even from their professions, that they will ever be induced to give their consent to such a measure?'¹³⁷ As late as 1806, the abolitionist MP Sir Samuel Romilly noted in the house of commons that, 'whenever we have expressed a desire to abolish the Slave Trade, the aim of the Colonies has been to disappoint us in the attainment of that object'.¹³⁸ There is ample evidence to support Romilly's position. The 1796 address from Tobago colonists to Dundas warned that abolition would lead to the 'inevitable ruin' of the West Indies and cautioned against the arbitrary sacrifice of a 'useful set of men to gratify the Mistaken Philanthropy'.¹³⁹ In response to the Portland enquiries from 1797 (although these responses were not known until 1804), the Jamaica Assembly underlined that the fact that the 'right of obtaining labourers from Africa is secured to your Majesty's faithful Subjects in this Colony by several British Acts of Parliament'. They further emphasised that members of the assembly and their ancestors had emigrated 'under the most solemn promises of this (absolutely necessary) assistance, and they can never give up, or do any act that may render doubtful this essential right'. The same body reiterated this position in 1800. In 1798, the General Council of the Leeward Islands also noted:

¹³⁶ Finlay McKichan, *Lord Seaforth: Highland landowner, Caribbean governor* (Edinburgh, 2018), 145, 208, 212; see also Stephen Mullen, 'Review: Lord Seaforth: Highland landowner, Caribbean governor', *Innes Review* 71 (2020) 286–93.

¹³⁷ Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History*, xxxii. 882.

¹³⁸ *Substance of the debates*, 24.

¹³⁹ NRS, GD51/1/517/2 (Papers of the Dundas Family): Letter from J. Petrie, agent for Tobago in London to Henry Dundas, 21 Jul. 1796.

[W]e conceive that the West India islands never could have been, nor ever can be, cultivated to effect, without the right, of which we trust no power will endeavour to deprive us, of obtaining labourers from Africa.¹⁴⁰

Similarly, members of the general assembly of Barbados warned in October 1801 against Seaforth's 'interference between the white inhabitants of the island and their slaves'.¹⁴¹ Thus, as expected, the most powerful island assemblies in the late eighteenth-century British West Indies were unequivocally opposed to both amelioration and abolition, gradual or otherwise. Dundas's proposals, dependent upon the cooperation of enslavers from the outset, would never have been approved by colonial legislatures. Given his long-term private and professional collaboration with the West India interest, as well the correspondence he received from colonists, he was aware of this. As Michael Taylor recently noted, delegating the reform of slavery to colonial assemblies, even as late as the 1820s, 'in practice, meant nothing would be done'.¹⁴² By providing enslavers with a veto, Dundas's strategy prolonged the transatlantic slave trade which facilitated an increase of the enslaved population. And, from his point of view, it was successful in doing so.

Yet, William Wilberforce offered redemption. Henry Dundas was out of government in 1801 but remained an MP, taking a 'leading role' in the government's election in the summer of 1802, but, after being raised to a peerage as Viscount Melville that December, he slowly drifted out of political life. Henry Addington, prime minister (1801–4) dispensed with Dundas as Scottish manager in June 1803.¹⁴³ Dundas returned to government with the second Pitt ministry on 10 May 1804, taking office as first lord of the admiralty.¹⁴⁴ On 13 June, Wilberforce directly appealed to Dundas to negotiate with the West India interest to effect abolition. Whilst noting the 'friendly regard' in which they still held each other, Wilberforce lamented that 'it has long been matter of great pain to me that in the grand object of my Parliamentary existence you should have been the person to oppose & defeat my wishes'. He offered Dundas the benefit of the doubt:

I am sure my dear Lordship, you must yourself be sensible that the West Indians have greatly mistaken your real meaning & while they ought to have considered you as only wishing to prevent their sufferings from a sudden change, they have on the contrary conceiv'd you to have been defending the present system as meaning that it should continue forever.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ *Papers Presented to the House of Commons of the 7th May 1804, Respecting the Slave Trade &c.* (London, 1804), Jamaica, 5; *ibid.*, Leeward Islands, 34.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Barbados, 6.

¹⁴² Michael Taylor, *The Interest: How the British establishment resisted the abolition of slavery* (Penguin, 2020), 96.

¹⁴³ Brown, 'Government', 275.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 275–8.

¹⁴⁵ NRS, GD51/1/435 (Papers of the Dundas Family): Letter from William Wilberforce, 13 Jun. 1804.

Wilberforce's abolition bill was introduced on 30 May 1804 and passed through three readings in the Commons up to 25 June. Pitt revealed to Wilberforce that the cabinet, of which Dundas was part, agreed 'the subject to be hung up till next year'.¹⁴⁶ The next bill of February 1805 was defeated at a second reading (77: 70). Wilberforce commented on the vote: 'some Scotch I believe, who last year neutral, voted against us' which Anstey attributes to Dundas.¹⁴⁷ If this really was his doing, it was his last act in delaying abolition. He was impeached on 8 April 1805 and, although acquitted the next year, his career in the house of commons was over.¹⁴⁸ The act for the abolition of the slave trade was given royal assent on 25 March 1807 and passed onto the statute books on 1 May.

Prominent abolitionists had a low opinion of Henry Dundas, some barely rising above contempt. In 1808, the leading abolitionist Thomas Clarkson described gradual abolitionists as the 'most dangerous enemies of our cause', naming Jenkinson (Lord Hawkesbury), Addington (Lord Sidmouth) and Dundas (Lord Melville).¹⁴⁹ When looking back on earlier events in 1823, Wilberforce described Dundas as the 'avowed advocate of the colonies'.¹⁵⁰ He also understood that gradualism had been an underhand tactic:

Our opponents, except a very few, who were directly interested by their property or political connexion with certain towns, professed to concur with us in design, but to adopt a more moderate, and as they contended more effectual, method of accomplishing our common purpose; so that many who could not avowedly oppose us became our most dangerous enemies.¹⁵¹

In the same passage, the editors of Wilberforce's diaries, his two sons, represented Dundas as the chief enemy of abolition:

The apparent honesty and warmth of heart which marked his [Dundas's] speeches, enabled him to turn aside what he knew well how to represent as a false and sickly humanity. Oppression could not find a kinder advocate, or abuses a more honest patron.¹⁵²

The abolitionist view of Dundas was unambiguous: he was the main barrier to their aims and his successful strategies meant no abolition whilst he retained influence.

¹⁴⁶ Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *Life of Wilberforce*, iii. 180.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 212; Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 346.

¹⁴⁸ G. D. Hutchison, "'The Manager in Distress': reaction to the impeachment of Henry Dundas, 1805–7", *Parliamentary History*, 36 (2017) 198–217.

¹⁴⁹ Clarkson, *Rise, Progress and Accomplishment*, ii. 486–7.

¹⁵⁰ William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in behalf of the Negro slaves in the West Indies* (London, 1823), 37.

¹⁵¹ Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *Life of Wilberforce*, i. 351.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

Presciently, in the parliamentary debate of 15 March 1796, Henry Dundas noted that 'the world must decide upon the conduct of those who took different sides upon this great question'.¹⁵³ On the one hand, the introduction of the word 'gradual' on 2–3 April 1792 set an important precedent for full abolition. On the other hand, Dundas's private and public activities described here demonstrate an instrumental role in delaying abolition afterwards. These two claims are not mutually exclusive and his role in the former cannot be separated from the latter. When the evidence is considered in its entirety, the characterisation of Dundas as a genuine opponent of the slave trade is simply not sustainable as an historically informed position. He wielded significant political power and influence in the house of commons, and he was instrumental to the delay of abolition in order to protect British economic, imperial, strategic and military interests. This necessarily involved the continuation of private enterprise in the transatlantic slave economy—slavers, merchants, planters—and Dundas collaborated with their representatives when required, to effect joint aims.

Historians have tended to consider the sincerity of Henry Dundas's *introduction* of the principle of gradual abolition but the focus should really be on his actions across the entire era. Dundas may have been sincere about gradual abolition on 2–3 April 1792. Indeed, if Stephen Fuller is to be believed, the West India interest did not initially approve. But whether Dundas was initially sincere in theory is irrelevant: his strategies were always qualified. In a time of growing public support for abolition, Dundas never presented an unrestricted path to effect it at any point. His proposals were always dependent upon the co-operation of West India enslavers and he reiterated the rights of colonial legislatures time and again, during an era when the power gradually moved to the British government. As Fox and others expressed at the time, Dundas's proposals were not for an abolition in line with the aims of the anti-slavery movement. Rather, he designed a gradual abolition to suit the needs of enslavers and the British state. This was classic Dundas: a middle-ground solution cloaked in humanity to suit government and propertied interests whilst making it appear that it was for the benefit of all parties, though none fully approved.

This article's argument goes further than the Anstey-Davis interpretation. From 7 April 1792, Dundas sometimes worked with the West India body in general, and the metropolitan Jamaica interest in particular: all combined in Parliament to ensure the continuation of the slave trade longer than it might have. Dundas's stance was reinforced with imperial events and he was anti-abolition in practice until his political career ended. The opening of war with revolutionary France in February 1793 and the French republic's abolition of the slave trade in 1794 provided the British government with an opportunity to bolster military capability via enslaved West India regiments. From

¹⁵³ Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History*, xxxii. 881.

December 1796, Dundas worked in tandem with the parliamentary West India interest, led by absentee Jamaica planter Charles Ellis, to provide plantation slavery with a more acceptable profile, with the aim of staving off abolition. The former policy was unsuccessful, while the latter was successful to an extent. It was certainly a useful collaboration for the powerful Jamaica body: between 1793 and 1808, over a third of the African enslaved people trafficked on British ships were shipped to just one island. Jamaica was the leading recipient of enslaved people under Dundas's delay.¹⁵⁴

How to quantify Dundas's delay? It is a matter of the historical record that his insertion of gradual delayed the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade from 1792 until 1807. All that remains is a hypothetical discussion about how long his strategies prolonged the trafficking. Regardless of Dundas's motives in April 1792, it seems unlikely that immediate abolition would have passed in any case. The West India interest were confident of victory in the house of commons, and Wilberforce privately accepted that his plans had no chance of passing the house of lords. Yet, after the outbreak of war in February 1793, Dundas used his influence—notably in March 1796—to delay indefinitely. Dundas's power was on the wane after being deposed as Scottish manager by Addington in 1803, and Wilberforce claimed that Scottish MPs were neutral on abolition in 1804 but voted against it a year later. Thus, Dundas's delay arguably lasted from 1796 to 1805 (it would likely have extended to 1806, given the time abolition took to implement). This period is close to the eight-year term suggested in his own proposals of 23 April 1792. The remainder of the delay was ensured by other British parliamentarians.

Gradual abolition was not an executive decision: it was the collective will of the British parliament, whilst it was merchants who trafficked African people. However, that should not detract from Dundas's significant, individual role in the house of commons. Without his practical opposition, immediate abolition could have passed earlier. Given the global interest, this article goes beyond the assessment of the one man's parliamentary culpability and offers substantiated clarity to inform international debate. Modern re-contextualisation can never convey the full story of parliamentary affairs nor the horrors of the transatlantic trafficking in enslaved people but this article elucidates the activities of an individual who helped prolong its continuation in an era when many in British society considered it an odious evil. Henry Dundas was a 'great delayer' of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.

¹⁵⁴ Around 217,145 African enslaved people were shipped to Jamaica between 1793 and 1808, 37 percent of the overall British total of 583,348. See *The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* [<http://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>; accessed 10 Feb. 2020].