

Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846)

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Charles Turner, after Alfred Edward Chalon, Thomas Clarkson, mezzotint, ca. 1807.

Thomas Clarkson was one of the architects of the British anti-slavery movement, and was instrumental in gaining the passage of two major pieces of legislation: the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807, which made trading slaves illegal, and the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act, which gave slaves their freedom.

The anti-slavery movement was Clarkson's life's work, but his passion for this cause was almost accidental-or fate, depending on your point of view-in that it emerged from a writing assignment at school. As a student at Cambridge University in England, he entered an essay contest on the topic "Is it right to make men slaves against their will?" Though he had not previously thought much about the question, he was a diligent student, and began to do research on the issue. Among the books he read was one by Anthony Benezet about the slave trade in Guinea, published by the Society of Friends (Quakers). Clarkson won the essay contest, and was asked to read it aloud to the University Senate. On his way home on the train, he said he had a revelation from God that he should spend his life

working to abolish the slave trade.

Clarkson was a member of the Church of England, and the oldest son of the headmaster of the school in the town of Wisbech, where he was born. His father was a dedicated and religious man who spent many hours visiting the poor and the sick. He died when Thomas was six years old, leaving very large shoes for his son to fill. After attending both the local grammar school and then St. Paul's School, Thomas won a place at St John's College at Cambridge, where he obtained a degree in math and intended to study to become a clergyman. His work on the slavery essay, and his revelation on the train, changed the course of his life.

He became friends with many of the Quakers who were involved in the abolition movement, including Benezet's former assistant, William Dillwyn, who taught him the history of the anti-slavery movement in England, particularly the work of the Quakers. In 1787, Clarkson and others formed the Society for the Abolition of Slave Labor, which launched a broad campaign to raise awareness of the moral, economic and social arguments against slavery.

The Society used pamphlets, slogans, visual aids and dramatic demonstrations and speeches to get their message across. Among these were three items that had a powerful and widespread effect. The society used a wax seal with an image of a chained African man and the words "*Am I Not a Man and a Brother?*" to close its correspondence. The image of the kneeling African soon appeared in leaflets, medals, snuffboxes, and even cufflinks. Much like a campaign button, the compelling image became an icon of the message that slavery must be abolished.



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Antislavery token: Am I Not a Man and a Brother? copper, England, ca. 1800.



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Clarkson's third contribution to the anti-slavery campaign was his so-called African Box. After interviewing many sailors in the docks at Bristol and Liverpool who were involved in the slave trade, and looking at the arts, textiles, produce and souvenirs they had brought back from Africa, Clarkson became convinced that, in addition to the moral arguments for abolishing slavery, there were very strong *economic* arguments to be made against slavery. On the negative side, he used numbers and analysis to show that slavery was actually quite costly in practical monetary terms, in loss of seamen's lives and in the number of slaves who died in the Middle Passage and from the harsh conditions on the sugar plantations; on the positive side, he argued that Africa had tremendous economic potential and a complex and vital economy, and that England could make a more fruitful economic connection with Africa by developing it as a source of raw materials and goods, and as a market for manufactured goods from England. In his speeches, Clarkson used his African Box, filled with the crafts, plants and natural resources of Africa as a kind of visual aid to demonstrate Africa's economic potential.

In the middle years of his life, Clarkson and his wife became friendly with the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, who often visited them in their home in Bury St Edmonds. When the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act finally passed, Wordsworth wrote this sonnet in his honor:

*Sonnet, To Thomas Clarkson, On
the final passing of the Bill for the
Abolition of the Slave Trade, March,
1807.*

*Clarkson! it was an obstinate Hill to climb:
How toilsome, nay how dire it was, by Thee
Is known,-by none, perhaps, so feelingly;
But Thou, who, starting in thy fervent
prime,
Didst first lead forth this pilgrimage sublime,
Hast heard the constant Voice its charge
repeat,
Which, out of thy young heart's oracular seat,
First roused thee.-O true yoke-fellow of
Time
With unabating effort, see, the palm
Is won, and by all Nations shall be worn!
The bloody Writing is for ever torn,
And Thou henceforth wilt have a good Man's
calm,
A great Man's happiness; thy zeal shall find
Repose at length, firm Friend of human
kind!*

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

1. What movement was Thomas Clarkson's "life's work"?

2. One of Clarkson's contributions to the anti-slavery movement was his essay against slavery. Describe one other contribution Clarkson made to the anti-slavery movement.

Support your answer with evidence from the text.

3. What is the main idea of this text?

4. Clarkson's Society for the Abolition of Slave Labor used visual aids to help get their message across. Describe one visual aid they used to communicate their anti-slavery message.

Support your answer with evidence from the text and image.
