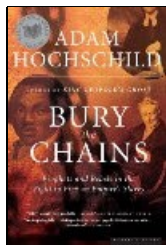


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Book Review

Bury the Chains

Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves

by [Adam Hochschild](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer
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Bury the Chains is one of the best books you could give to a disillusioned activist. In absorbing detail, it tells the story of what may be the first human rights campaigns in history — and one of the most successful.

The effort to end the slave trade in the British Empire not only succeeded against what seemed to be impossible odds, but it was the catalyst for ending slavery itself, and it provided the tools and example that made it possible to win rights for other oppressed people.

In 1787, when twelve men met in a printing shop in London to start work against the slave trade, slavery was accepted without question by almost every Briton. One reason was that the sugar trade in the Caribbean, based on the unpaid labor of African slaves, was one of the surest ways to get rich. Many members of Parliament owned sugar plantations, and even the Church of England had its own plantation in Barbados, which prided itself on the fact that its slaves were healthy enough to increase in number. More than two million slaves were brought into the British West Indies overall, and when slavery ended there, only 670,000 survived. "The Caribbean was a slaughterhouse," notes Hochschild.

In the fight against the British slave trade, activists developed many of the tools we use today: petitions (an especially important tool at a time when few people had the right to vote), boycotts, speeches, debates, book tours, exhaustively researched reports, and compelling graphics. When Caribbean sugar was boycotted, concerned tea drinkers used the "fair trade" (relatively) alternative of Indian sugar. The famous diagram of the slave ship *Brookes*, showing how slaves were packed in closely packed rows of shackled bodies, became a powerful organizing tool.

In response, proslavery forces used tactics and arguments that are still familiar, including "our economy depends on it" and "if we don't do it, someone else will." In 1807, when the slave trade finally ended, they insisted that the government's action came not because of pressure — it had nothing to do, they said, with twenty years of activism and the bloody rebellions in the Caribbean — but because of the government's enlightened kindness.

At a time when many European countries dealt in slaves, why were the British first to abolish the slave trade? Hochschild cites a number of reasons. The improved roads and compact size of Britain made organizing easier, as did newspapers, and the coffeehouses where newspapers could be read and discussed. But most important, he believes, was British outrage over the forced pressing of sailors into service with the British navy. Knowing that a father and husband could be seized from his home without warning and taken to sea for a dangerous journey that might last years may have sensitized the public to the similar fate of African slaves. Never before, according to Hochschild, had masses of people organized to fight for someone *else's* rights.

If most of us associate any name with the antislavery movement in England, it is that of William Wilberforce, the spokesperson for the movement in Parliament. Hochschild is careful to give credit to the Quakers, who took up the cause long before anyone else, and to Olaudah Equiano, an ex-slave whose memoir was one of the few firsthand accounts of what it was like to live as a slave. Most of all, though, he honors Thomas Clarkson, a clergyman with strong Quaker sympathies, who crisscrossed the country repeatedly to research every sordid detail of the slave trade, interview sailors who had served on slave ships, and collect thousands of signatures. Though Wilberforce was the respected public face of the antislavery movement, Clarkson was its engine.

About the Reviewer

[Geoff Wisner](#) is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at



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