

*Zachary Macaulay 1768-1838:
The Steadfast Scot in the British Anti-
Slavery Movement*
by Iain Whyte

Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2011.
(ISBN: 978-1-84631-696-8). 263pp.

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The historiography examining Scotland's connections with transatlantic slavery is in its infancy, although studies such as Douglas Hamilton's *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750-1820* (2005) have shed new light on the pervasive role of Scots in the West Indies. Until recently, Scottish involvement in the abolitionist campaigns has been similarly disregarded and Iain Whyte, alumnus of the University of Glasgow and Honorary Post-Doctoral Fellow of the University of Edinburgh, continues to transform understanding in this area. In the text reviewed here, Whyte follows on from his pioneering work *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838* (2006) with a biography of Zachary Macaulay, one of the most influential Scottish abolitionists. As the foreword by Lord Steel of Aikwood points out, this is a timely account of one of the nation's 'unsung heroes'. Whilst David Livingstone was mostly praised during his lifetime for his missionary explorations in Africa and has remained a national hero, Macaulay has been almost forgotten. In this impressively researched account, Whyte places Macaulay in his rightful place as a prolific campaigner involved in the abolition of the slave trade and plantation slavery in the British colonies.

This critical biography addresses the historiographical oversight through an examination of Macaulay's imperial career, which was defined by a period spent on a slave plantation before he turned against the system and became an abolitionist. The chapters are chronologically structured across his life from his origins in Inverary, his apprenticeship in Glasgow, employment in the West Indies and Sierra Leone as well as commercial and abolitionist activities in London and France. There are also chapters dedicated to his private life as well as a discussion of his contribution to the abolitionist cause. Douglas Hamilton has outlined that up to 20,000 young Scotsmen travelled to the Caribbean in the late eighteenth century and in this study, Whyte traces the unique path of one such sojourner. The text describes how, in 1784, he removed himself from a Glasgow counting house across the Atlantic to Jamaica, where he spent nine years as a book-keeper and overseer. There are very few details known about the formative years and Whyte has addressed this by meticulously scouring archive material including Macaulay's journal, now stored in Huntington Library, California.

On his return from Jamaica, the damaged young man behaved with all the boorishness associated with West Indian planters. However, his life changed when he met his sister's husband, Thomas Babington, who was involved with the leading abolitionists in Great Britain, the 'Clapham Saints', including William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson. After spending time at the Babington estate, Rothley Temple, also the spiritual home of the movement, Macaulay went through a conversion in mind-set and became a committed abolitionist for the rest of his life. It is perhaps appropriate that Iain Whyte, a Church of Scotland minister and former Chaplain at the University of Edinburgh, reclaims the history of Macaulay, himself a son of the manse, given the strong connections of each

with the Scottish Kirk. The atonement for past sins is a strong theme and Whyte alludes to a 'divine guiding hand' leading Macaulay which was a 'little shaky in its grip at times' (p.29).

Whyte does not shirk from scrutinising the flaws of this complex character. Although the author is clearly sympathetic in language and tone, there is little bias evident in the examination of the apparent contradictions across the imperial career. For example, Macaulay was opposed to sedition yet had a fascination with revolutionary France where he eventually lived and became involved in international diplomacy. Moreover, Whyte describes some examples of his commercial activities as 'grotesque hypocrisy' (p.213). As a London merchant, Macaulay imported sugar from Mauritius and possibly the West Indies. Perhaps most intriguing was his exit from Sierra Leone to England in 1795 when he chose to travel on a slave ship via Barbados (p.175).

Although records of Macaulay's mercantile activities are limited, the lack of contextualisation surrounding his commercial activities is a slight weakness. Indeed, the text might have benefitted from a general discussion of the role of counting house apprentices. Similarly, Whyte examines Macaulay the East India merchant in detail but questions remain about the proposed importation of sugar from Jamaica in 1807 as well as his earlier role in the colony. A discussion concerning the practicalities of the role of a book-keeper as described in B.W. Higman's *Plantation Jamaica 1750-1850* (2005) would have added understanding about status, remuneration and duties. This is secondary to the main focus of the text, however, and the activities of Macaulay the abolitionist are covered at length.

Macaulay found his true calling as one of the key figures in the movement for 'The Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery' in London after 1823. The movement aimed to abolish not only the

maritime trade in slaves but also the practice of slavery in the British colonies. As founder and editor of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, Macaulay adopted a unique role as the ‘encyclopedia’ of the abolitionists (p.220) and his periodical was closely tied up with the anti-slavery cause, which was by this time led in Parliament by Thomas Fowell Buxton, William Wilberforce’s successor. Whyte draws contemporary parallels throughout and compares the *Reporter* to the *Anti-Apartheid News* in the late twentieth century. Macaulay fought a long and ultimately successful battle against the West India interest; slavery in the British colonies was officially abolished on 1 August 1834. After the conclusion of the ‘great business’ of his life, he died on 13 May 1838, aged 71 (p.230-8).

In this long overdue account, Whyte has gathered an impressive collection of diverse primary sources which he has weaved into a well written and accessible narrative that should remain seminal for a long time to come. The use of archive material located in Scotland, England, Jamaica and the United States represents a key strength of this work. Moreover, this text provides a rare biographical account of a prominent Scot in London in the abolition movement. This text is of a very high standard and will appeal to the general reader as well as historians interested in imperial careers and the British abolition movement. There are several black and white illustrations throughout, including likenesses of Macaulay as well as reproduced images from his diary in 1794. According to Whyte, Zachary Macaulay is not immediately recognised as a key figure in the history of the anti-slavery movement. The author, therefore, has taken the first step in reclaiming the forgotten story and the reader shall decide if he fully redeemed himself. Only the harshest critic would condemn Macaulay after he spent over forty

years of his life working in a movement intent on ending the horrors of chattel slavery.

The Kelvingrove Review
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