



Franklin and Slavery By Lady Reid

The year 2007 marked the 200th Anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Britain. Franklin and his views on the subject went through four periods: acceptance, ambivalence, atonement and abolitionist.

There is no doubt that Franklin advertised slaves for sale and rewards for capturing runaways in his Philadelphia newspaper. He was proprietor and the advertisements were good business. Very few people considered slavery unethical, especially as the unskilled or convicted lived under some kind of bondage. Quakers were the first to feel guilty about humans owning others, and they exerted a strong influence on developments in Pennsylvania. Franklin was not in the vanguard of this initiative and he and his wife Deborah owned slaves for a number of years. Snippets on their wellbeing are sprinkled through Franklin's letters, but several years passed before he began to question the economic or other viability of slave ownership. The years 1730-54 for Franklin were those of acceptance.

By 1757, Franklin had come to London with his son William and his two black slaves, Peter and King. He had composed a will before leaving Philadelphia freeing them in the event of his death. These years constitute a long period of his ambivalence: his writings highlight the uneconomic future of purchased labour vis-à-vis wage-paid staff, rather than the humanitarian issues of liberty and equality. Yet his moral questioning of slavery was gathering momentum. Many of Franklin's merchant acquaintances were part of the pro-slavery lobby, but gradually he moved toward supporting the anti-slavery activists among his dissenting and Enlightenment friends.

The 1772 Somerset Case, decided by Lord Mansfield, was key to his change of attitude. It is often wrongly supposed that this judgment outlawed slavery in Britain. In fact, the declaration of freedom it bestowed was limited to one slave, James Somerset. Somerset had run away from his owner, been captured and was to be taken back to the West Indies to be sold once more. With the help of anti-slavery activists, he applied to the courts claiming he should be declared "free" and not removed from Britain. The court agreed but also ruled every case should be considered on its own merits, thus the remaining roughly 5000 slaves domestic slaves in Britain were not set free. The case, however, raised public concern about the morals of slavery, and Franklin joined in the debate.

From 1776-1784, Franklin resided in France. Although caught up in endless negotiations between the colonies and the French foreign service, he became friends with France's enlightenment thinkers. Alongside visions of liberty and fraternity, the

French condemned slavery, abolishing it in 1779 and driving forward the anti-slavery movement. For Franklin, this was his period of atonement, when he expunged his years of non-engagement: he could no longer juxtapose slavery with his visions of equality. He now articulated his fear for slavery's long-term consequences on the united colonies.

He returned to Philadelphia in 1785. The War of Independence had been won and he was immediately appointed President of Pennsylvania. He also accepted the Presidency of the new Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. One of his last public acts was signing a petition to the Pennsylvania congress calling for a law to outlaw slavery. When he died in 1790, Franklin was a true abolitionist. Quintessentially pragmatic, Franklin reflected the fluctuating and polarizing opinions of the day when the battle was almost won, he advocated change until death halted his belated leadership. It would take almost another century for a second drive toward essential liberty in the United States.