

“Eric Williams’ Economic Interpretation of British Abolitionism: Seventy Years after the Publication of *Capitalism and Slavery*”

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Introduction

One of the most significant events in history is the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The topic of the slave trade has been of a special interest to many persons in Britain, the United States, the Caribbean Basin, and elsewhere. During the second half of the twentieth century, and still continuing into the twenty-first, an explosion of publications on this topic has occurred. Part of the story of the trans-Atlantic slave trade has been its abolition and, until recently, the suppression of the slave trade had formed the final chapter in an account of the slave trade, itself. However, beginning in the late twentieth century, the inclusion of a brief chapter on antislavery within a narrative on the slave trade has changed and now many substantive monographs of abolitionism, usually centered on British antislavery, have appeared. This change has been due primarily to the work of two men: Eric Williams and Seymour Drescher. Williams published first, and his *Capitalism and Slavery*, appearing seventy years ago in 1944, has become a classic in the historiography on slavery and British abolitionism. For some, the assessments presented in this book had achieved a new orthodoxy by the 1970s. It achieved this status, in part, because Williams’ economic interpretation of British abolitionism overturned the long-standing interpretation that British humanitarianism was the driving force in the anti-slave trade narrative. Then in 1977, Drescher published *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* as a direct challenge to Williams’ view that Britain had abolished the slave trade for reasons of economic self-interest. Drescher’s challenge to what Howard Temperley has called the “new orthodoxy,”¹ initiated a debate between those who adopted the arguments presented in *Econocide* that British economic self-interest fails to account for British abolitionism and those who still adhered to Williams’ economic interpretation. The clash of interpretations became publicly prominent at a conference held in Bellagio, Italy in May 1984 to honor Williams’ legacy in historiography, forty years after the publication of his famous work.²

It is the purpose of this paper to argue that while certain aspects of the Williams’ legacy should be retained, such as slavery as an economic, not a racist, phenomenon and the importance of the sugar islands’ economies to eighteenth century British economic development, and perhaps even the decline thesis regarding the diminished importance of the sugar islands’ economies to Britain after the American Revolution, the economic interpretation of British abolitionism, as presented in *Capitalism and Slavery*, should be discarded. This paper will show that Drescher’s evidence in *Econocide*, certain inherent weaknesses within the text of *Capitalism and Slavery*, and insightful criticisms of Williams’ research warrant the scrapping of the Williams’ thesis that economic self-interest explains British antislavery during 1788-1838.

¹Howard Temperley, “Eric Williams and Abolition: The Birth of a New Orthodoxy,” in *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams*, ed. Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 229.

²Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman, “Introduction,” in *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams*, ed. Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1, 17-21.

The format of the paper that follows this introduction is structured with these sections: (1) an overview of and commentary on Williams' economic argument in *Capitalism and Slavery*; (2) Drescher's cogent criticism of Williams' work that is presented in *Econocide* and elsewhere; (3) the historians' debate over Drescher's challenge to Williams' work, which shows that Drescher's case has been effectively made; (4) an overview of recent historiography showing that historians generally present a humanitarian interpretation and not an economic one for British abolitionism; and (5) the conclusion, which forcefully states why Williams' economic argument in *Capitalism and Slavery* should be abandoned.

Williams' Economic Interpretation in *Capitalism and Slavery*

In the preface to *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams states that the purpose of his economic history is to show "the role of Negro slavery and the slave trade in providing the capital which financed the Industrial Revolution in England and of mature industrial capitalism in destroying the slave system."³ The first five chapters of his book address the matter of Negro slavery and the Industrial Revolution while chapters six through ten present his case for the decline of the sugar islands' relevance to Britain's economy and hence the reason for the abolishment of the slave trade and then the emancipation of the slaves. These two parts of the book are interconnected for Williams because he insists: "The rise and fall of mercantilism [the economic system under which slave-produced sugar thrived] is the rise and fall of slavery."⁴ The book closes with one chapter each on the British abolitionists and the Caribbean slaves. In the preface, Williams provides the following assessment about his work: "It is therefore first a study in English economic history and second in West Indian and Negro history." It is in the former area that Williams' research and assessments have been found faulty by Drescher and others.

After showing the important role of Negro slavery and the vital place of the Caribbean sugar islands in the British Empire's economy through the opening chapters of the book, Williams shifts to the second purpose of his study, which is to show that Britain ended the slave trade and emancipated the slaves for reasons of economic self-interest. This shift occurs in chapter six which examines the impact on the imperial economy of the loss of the Thirteen Colonies. Much of the work in this part of Williams' book rests on a previous economic study of the West Indies completed by Lowell Joseph Ragatz in 1928. Williams acknowledges his reliance on Ragatz's *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British West Indies, 1763-1833* both in his dedication page and in his annotated bibliography.⁵ Using Ragatz's work, Williams argues that the loss of North America disrupted Britain's system of triangular trade so that the economies of the Caribbean islands declined to the point of being a burden on the imperial economy. Williams couples the supposed decline of the British West Indies with the booming economy of the French Caribbean, especially that of Saint Dominique. The French slave system could produce sugar more cheaply than the British, but French sugar was kept out of Britain through high tariffs so that the people residing in the metropolitan were forced to subsidize a failing enterprise because of a small group of West Indian planters that held seats in Parliament. According to Williams, this group, however, was becoming unpopular in the late eighteenth century because of the economic ideas of Adam Smith and the denunciations of slavery by British abolitionists. Williams sets the outcome of the American War for Independence within the historical context of the diffusion of Smith's ideas and abolitionist propaganda as follows: "American independence destroyed the mercantile system and discredited the old regime. Coinciding with the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, it stimulated that growing feeling of disgust with the colonial system...West Indian slavery was detestable, West Indian monopoly was unpopular, and the united odium of both was more than the colonies could bear."⁶

Meanwhile, as the West Indian economies declined and the mercantilist system approached a crisis in the late eighteenth century, a new industrial capitalism was emerging in Britain. Not surprisingly, Williams focuses on textile manufacturing in Lancashire during the 1780s and the 1790s that was making the shift from cottage industry to factory production.⁷ He provides some statistical support in the text to illustrate the strong growth of England's industrial economy.

³Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944), vii.

⁴Williams, *Capitalism*, 136.

⁵Williams, *Capitalism*, 267.

⁶Williams, *Capitalism*, 120 & 136.

⁷Williams, *Capitalism*, 127.

This evidence, coupled with some statistics provided to illustrate the troubled economies in the British West Indies, constitutes the modicum of evidence for Williams' insistence that British statesmen, like Prime Minister William Pitt, necessarily acted according to Britain's economic self-interest when they turned against the empire's West Indian slave system. The political acts of Britain's leaders are cursorily handled in chapter eight.⁸ Occasionally, Williams provides some statistical evidence in his endnotes, but this material comes early in the book where he is developing the case for a vibrant Caribbean economy during the first half of the eighteenth century that helped to develop Britain's industrializing economy. Overall, aside from Ragatz's work, Williams has little evidence to support the decline thesis. Moreover, the limited evidence that he does have is rarely specifically applied to show that British statesmen acted politically to promote Britain's economic interests when they turned against the slave trade. Howard Temperley's assessment of *Capitalism and Slavery* is that Williams often makes grand generalizations that do not rest on sufficient factual particulars; he uses hyperbole; and he "fails to demonstrate any plausible connection between the interests of British capitalists and the destruction of the West Indian slave system." As a general assessment, Temperley finds Williams' work to be "impressionistic."⁹ Regarding the use of general claims with little or even no particular support in *Capitalism and Slavery*, there is the following statement: "We have already noticed the readiness with which absentee planters purchased land in England, where they were able to use their wealth to finance the great development associated with the Agricultural Revolution."¹⁰ This statement is made at the beginning of chapter five where, through a mere nine pages, Williams cursorily illustrates the rise of British industry, including England's railroads, because of the strength of the British West Indian economy. Meanwhile, in the previous chapter, Williams does discuss absentee planters and their investments in England, but he does not say anything about the Agricultural Revolution. While not as egregious as this example, there are other instances where Williams makes a vast claim for which there is little or no cogent specific support.¹¹

When Williams wrote *Capitalism and Slavery*, the prevailing interpretation of British abolitionism was the one based on the humanitarian motivation of persons morally convicted that slavery was wrong and, therefore, the government must first abolish the slave trade as the means to strangling the life of Caribbean slavery. Since Williams was putting forth a new interpretation for the end of the slave trade, it is not surprising that he dealt with British abolitionism and the humanitarian interpretation in his book. Much of his consideration of both of these important items is rendered by obliquely delivered words of mockery. For instance, Williams states, "The 'horrors' of the Middle Passage have been exaggerated. For this the British abolitionists are in large part responsible. There is something that smacks of ignorance or hypocrisy or both in the invective heaped by these men upon a traffic which had in their day become less profitable and less vital to England."¹² Such a comment serves two purposes: it reduces in stature persons who had been held up as heroes and it subtly incorporates Williams' contention that Britain, including the abolitionists in Britain, acted in a necessarily economic way. Williams also targets the historians who developed the abolitionist narrative in which William Wilberforce and others are presented as humane heroes as they struggle to end the slave trade. After Williams reduces the importance of the Somerset case, which unlike the Dred Scott Decision in the United States, contributed to the termination of slavery in the country where the case was decided, he slings the following scoff:

Much has been made of this case, by people constantly seeking triumphs of humanitarianism. Professor Coupland contends that behind the legal judgment lay the moral judgment and that the Somerset case marked the beginning of the end of slavery throughout the British Empire. This is merely poetic sentimentality translated into modern history."¹³

⁸ Williams, *Capitalism*, 146-150.

⁹ Temperley, "New Orthodoxy," 240, 246, and 247.

¹⁰ Williams, *Capitalism*, 98.

¹¹ Williams, *Capitalism*, See the little support Williams gives his claim about the Anti-Corn Law League and the Anti-Slavery Society being similar and his claim about the coincidence of the era of free trade and anti-imperialism on pages 137-144.

¹² Williams, *Capitalism*, 34.

¹³ Williams, *Capitalism*, 45.

Williams had been a graduate student at Oxford University when Sir Reginald Coupland was the presiding professor there on British colonial history. Either while at Oxford or shortly thereafter as Williams proceeded to rework his dissertation into *Capitalism and Slavery*, he developed an animosity towards Coupland. Temperley believes that in this work and in some of his others, Williams provides “a very misleading representation of Coupland’s views.”¹⁴ Evidence that Williams was misleading to the point of making a false claim can be found in his annotated bibliography where he states that Coupland “used only secondary sources.”¹⁵ Quite to the contrary of Williams’ claim, Coupland made extensive use of primary source material in his biography on Wilberforce,¹⁶ which is one of the secondary sources that Williams cites in *Capitalism and Slavery*. During the second half of the twentieth century, Coupland became the so-called poster boy for revisionist historians as they targeted their ire at the abolitionist narrative with a humanitarian theme. Writing in the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s, the revisionists shared a common goal with Williams; they wanted to eradicate what they considered “the myth” of British abolitionism that served as an “apologia” for British imperialism.¹⁷ To close on the matter of Coupland, the charge leveled against him is twofold: He was an imperial historian who perceived British imperialism as a benefit to those subjected to it and he approved William Lecky’s assessment that Britain’s suppression of the slave trade offers “among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages” in history.¹⁸ For Williams, as well as many revisionists who followed him, those two items made Coupland’s work as a historian seriously suspect. Ironically perhaps, the revisionist Edward Alpers, while severely criticizing Coupland’s work as a historian, used a considerable amount of Coupland’s pioneering work on the slave trade in nineteenth century East Africa when Alpers wrote his own.¹⁹ It is in East Africa that Coupland did considerable original work on the slave trade and the British role to suppress it; much of his work on the trans-Atlantic system merely followed that of nineteenth century historians, which Coupland does admit.

Seymour Drescher’s *Econocide*

In 1977 Seymour Drescher published *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*. Prior to the publication of this book, there had been only one full-length monograph that addressed Williams’ economic interpretation of British abolitionism. That work is Roger Anstey’s *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810*, which appeared in print two years before Drescher’s undertaking. Anstey had already completed the labor on his book as he read through Drescher’s manuscript that would eventually be published as *Econocide*. Anstey acknowledged the importance of Drescher’s work “as a brilliant demolition job” of Williams’ economic interpretation.²⁰ Since Anstey’s work, which is a thorough narrative of the suppression of the slave trade, only makes a few references to Williams, it would be Drescher who became the one to confront, and, for many, to overturn the economic interpretation of British abolitionism.

After a brief overview of the historiography on British abolitionism, Drescher begins his assault on William’s economic interpretation. He does so by first establishing the essence of the Williams’ thesis as having two interconnected parts: The British slave economy diminished as an overall part of the imperial economy and the British slave economy also declined in competition on the world market.²¹

¹⁴Temperley, “New Orthodoxy,” 233-236.

¹⁵Williams, *Capitalism*, 268.

¹⁶Coupland’s *Wilberforce: A Narrative* makes extensive use of parliamentary sources, some letters, and some diary accounts; all of which constitute primary source material. Coupland’s *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* consists of radio lectures that Frank Cass & Sons wanted to publish; it is based on secondary material.

¹⁷George Sochan, “The Afro-Arab Slave Trade in Nineteenth Century East Africa,” *Journal of African Social Sciences and Humanities Studies*, (Winter 2006): 11-14.

¹⁸William A. Green, “Race and Slavery: Considerations on the Williams Thesis,” in *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams*, ed. Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 26-27.

¹⁹Edward Alpers, *The East African Slave Trade* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Publishing House, 1967), 3-26.

²⁰Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810*, (London: The MacMillan Press LTD, 1975), 52.

²¹Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), 15.

He then proceeds to marshal statistical evidence to show that Williams' claims are wrong. The use of considerable statistical evidence with correspondingly insightful analysis that includes penetrating questions runs from the beginning of the text to the end and even proceeds through three appendices. Already into chapter two, the reader can sense how different Drescher's methodology is from that of Williams. Drescher's first task is to demolish Williams' use of the decline thesis, which he does in chapter two. There he shows that contrary to Williams' claims, both the British Caribbean economy and the British slave trade at the end of the eighteenth century and until 1806-07, when Parliament moved to ban the slave trade, were expanding.²² He concludes this section of the book by asserting that the loss of the Thirteen Colonies did not cause a decline in the British slave trade; for instance, Britain was the primary carrier of slaves to the southern states of the USA as the cotton economy began to boom during the 1790s. He concludes the chapter with the following question: "But the more important question remains as to why the war losses of 1775-1783 constitute a turning point, and not the war gains of 1792-1814."²³ The latter period includes the gains Britain made in acquiring Caribbean islands from its European competitors. The rhetorical question closes off chapter two and sets up the rest of the book where Drescher focuses on the British slave trade and British abolitionism during Britain's long war with France. It should be noted that in *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams rarely considers the impact of the varying fortunes of the French Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic Wars on the economies of the Caribbean islands. Drescher does not overlook this important part of the history.

Britain's war against France began during the radical phase of the French Revolution, in 1792-93, and continued until 1815 when Napoleon was exiled permanently to St. Helena. Although beginning the war with some setbacks, Britain, by the late 1790s, had become dominant on the seas against France and her allies. While the British controlled the seas and took territories, including some sugar-producing Caribbean islands, from their European rivals, a major rebellion broke out in Saint Dominique. Due to the Haitian Revolution, France ultimately lost this important sugar-producing territory. Drescher's point, regarding the decline thesis, is that even if Britain's eighteenth century Caribbean territories were in economic decline by the 1780s, just twenty years later the British had either conquered their rivals' more proficient sugar producers or the territories' once proficient economy, as in the case of Saint Dominique, had been destroyed in a slave rebellion. War and revolution had made British Caribbean islands, including recently conquered ones, the primary sugar exporters to Europe when wartime conditions allowed for such exportation.²⁴ Drescher uses statistics to show that by the early 1800s, British Jamaica had replaced Saint Dominique as an important exporter of cash crops, which island the French eventually lost when Napoleon abandoned the attempt to reconquer it.²⁵

In *Econocide*, Drescher addresses Williams' argument regarding Britain's shift from a commercial mercantilist economy to an industrial one in two ways. First, Drescher asserts, "In 1790, if industrialization meant cotton, cotton meant slavery. It also meant the slave trade."²⁶ Between 1792 and 1805, just before the passage of An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1807, Britain became more, not less, dependent on slave-grown cotton; by 1803 only 8% of Britain's imported cotton was not slave-produced. Until the cotton boom in the United States, centered on the cotton gin, Britain's West Indian territories were the primary source of cotton for Britain's textile factories. Planters began to have their slaves grow more cotton, and the prospect of cotton expansion increased as Britain took Caribbean islands from the French and the Dutch. Drescher's point is that industrialization did not necessarily mean that Britain's new economy would be divorced from slave labor. Certainly the nineteenth century shows that Britain's textile industry was closely linked to the United States' slave-produced cotton economy, which had an increasing slave population up to the Civil War. Hence, Britain was not necessarily determined by economic developments to abolish the slave trade in 1807 and to emancipate its slaves in 1833 because of the new industrial economy. Drescher also takes issue with the use of the words, new and old. Williams and some supporters of his views refer to the old mercantilist empire that was based on slavery and tariffs and the new industrial empire that was based on free labor and free trade. Drescher looks at literature, both foreign and domestic, in the early 1800s in order to present the perception of Britain's empire held by persons just prior to the abolition of the slave trade.

²² Drescher, *Econocide*, 16-32.

²³ Drescher, *Econocide*, 36.

²⁴ Drescher, *Econocide*, 116.

²⁵ Drescher, *Econocide*, 77-78 and 86-90.

²⁶ Drescher, *Econocide*, 60.

The evidence that he presents cites Britain's Caribbean economy as new and dynamic. "Slavery between 1787 and 1807," Drescher argues, "was not a wasted machine which the British government could phase out like a bankrupt venture accumulating moral capital in return."²⁷ The last phrase of the quoted statement refers to William's contention, shown in this paper as one of his scoffs at British abolitionism, that Britain only turned against slavery when its economic self-interest determined this action and that in turning against slavery it also sought to gain moral approbation.

Unlike Williams who looked at Britain's overseas economy to find the reasons for Britain's suppression of the slave trade, Drescher says that the cause must be found within Britain. He says that within Britain there was only one organized group promoting abolition of the slave trade and that was the abolitionists.

In general, until it can be shown which groups opposed the slave trade, in or out of Parliament, it makes no sense to say that any economically defined group was so aligned and so acted. In the meanwhile, there is less reason for saying that the owners of factories, or of land, or of the national debt, destroyed the slave trade, than for saying that the MPs, as owners of houses and horses, did so."²⁸

In the book's third appendix, Drescher makes an analysis of Parliament's vote on three abolitionist actions: the Bill for Abolition of the Foreign Slave Trade, the Resolution for Total Abolition, and the Bill for Total Abolition of the British Slave Trade.²⁹ Drescher makes this analysis in order to determine an understanding of the action being taken by the members of Parliament and, if possible, a discernment of their motives. He includes the Bill for Abolition of the Foreign Slave Trade with the other two parliamentary acts because this bill was initially introduced as legislation that would serve Britain's economic self-interest, the so-called "humanitarian sheep in the fox's clothing of self-interest of British material interest." Drescher points out that in the debates on this bill, the pretense of self-interest was removed when those opposed to the bill attacked it as humanitarian abolitionism and the prime minister defended the bill as a humanitarian act. This bill passed through Parliament with nearly the same high percentage of votes as the other two acts of Parliament. Moreover, regarding the resolution and the bill to end British slave trading completely, no pretense was made for economic self-interest; rather, the humanitarian motive was put out in the open during the debates. Drescher concludes that in the "point at which the logic of imperial interest conflicted with the logic of humanity," humanitarian sensitivity won.³⁰ It is this type of specific analysis that Williams does not provide in *Capitalism and Slavery*.

The Historians' Debate

Eric Williams died in 1981, just four years after Drescher had published *Econocide*. During these years Williams did not offer any public, significant rebuttal to Drescher's attack of his interpretation that is based on economic self-interest. Perhaps, this is because during the late 1970s, Williams had already made the switch from historian to prime minister of Trinidad. Nonetheless, already in the early 1980s, *Econocide* had elicited responses from those who supported Drescher's work and others who continued to uphold Williams. This division became clear in Bellagio, Italy at the conference to celebrate Williams' legacy in 1984. Three years after the conference in Bellagio, the proceedings were published in *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams*. To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Capitalism and Slavery*, a second conference was held at the University of the West Indies in 1996. At the opening of the next millennium, the proceedings of the second conference were published as *Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later: Eric Eustace Williams--A Reassessment of the Man and His Work*. The reassessment showed that the controversy over Williams' work still existed with the critics having gained considerable ground rebutting the economic interpretation of British abolitionism. In the introductory chapter, the editors of *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery*, Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman, list the following four areas of Williams' legacy: (1) that slavery was an economic phenomenon; (2) that the British West Indies caused, or at least contributed, to Britain's industrialization; (3) that the British West Indies were in economic decline during the late eighteenth century; and (4) that Britain abolished the slave trade for reasons of economic self-interest.

²⁷Drescher, *Econocide*, 165.

²⁸Drescher, *Econocide*, 181.

²⁹Drescher, *Econocide*, 214-223.

³⁰Drescher, *Econocide*, 222.

According to Solow and Engerman, the areas that have received most debate were about British industrialization and British abolitionism.³¹ Even a quick read of the book shows that after the publication of *Econocide*, only qualified support was being given to Williams in the 1980s; moreover, by the 1990s, support had dropped considerably. For instance, a supporter of Williams' work opens his contribution to Solow and Engerman's book with this statement:

No history is timeless. Works inspired by the exigencies of contemporary politics are least likely to enjoy enduring acclaim. Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* is a politically inspired book, and it has, at long last, begun to exhibit advancing age.³²

In the next few pages Green, like others who contributed to this book, discuss some of Williams' life in British Trinidad, his studies at Oxford with scholars like Coupland, and his subsequent career; all of which seem to indicate that perhaps E. H. Carr was correct when he advised learning about the historian before reading the historian's book.³³ Regarding *Capitalism and Slavery*, some historians found that there were two Williams, one who was an academic historian and the other who was a purveyor of rhetoric. Even defenders, like Colin Palmer, indicated that Williams' scholarship may have been unduly biased as shown by statements as: "Historical writing and interpretation have never been politically neutral even if the dominant historiographical schools and privileged interpreters of the past have so maintained."³⁴ Temperley's judgment is less generous. He suggests that Williams' purpose in writing about the past was not the quest for the truth but rather "to emancipate his compatriots" and to eliminate a "servile mentality."³⁵ At least in one case, the assessment is that Williams' legacy would endure primarily as a purveyor of rhetoric.³⁶

Two key participants at the conference in Bellagio were Drescher and Selwyn H. H. Carrington. Beginning at that conference and continuing into the twenty-first century, they have taken opposite sides regarding Williams' legacy and through their publications have debated each other primarily over the decline thesis. In *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775-1810*, Carrington marshaled much more statistical evidence than Williams did in his work. Drescher has responded to Carrington's criticisms of his attack on the Williams' thesis in such works as *From Slavery to Freedom: Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery* and *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective*. Since Carrington has put such considerable effort into defending at least the decline thesis of William's legacy, the debate now has become Drescher vs. Carrington replacing that of Drescher vs. Williams.³⁷ In an effort to resuscitate Williams' decline thesis, Carrington presents a very bleak picture of planters' misfortunes in the British West Indies during the late eighteenth century. In the chapter on British Caribbean slavery and abolitionism, he enumerates capital losses, declining sugar prices, diseases, hurricanes, the loss of vital supplies from the newly independent states in British North America, and slave revolts or at least the threat of revolts.³⁸ The nightmarish tribulations that the British colonies endured at the end of the eighteenth century and into the next one seem so overwhelming that Britain had no recourse but to opt for abolition of the slave trade and then the emancipation of Caribbean slavery in order to save the imperial economy. Quite simply, the plantations just could not produce cash crops economically for the empire.

³¹Solow and Engerman, 1.

³²Green, 25.

³³E. H. Carr, *What Is History?*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 26.

³⁴Colin Palmer, "Eric Williams and His Intellectual Legacy," in *Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later: Eric Eustace Williams—A Reassessment of the Man and His Work*, ed. Heather Cateau and Selwyn H. H. Carrington (NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000), 88.

³⁵Temperley, "New Orthodoxy," 252.

³⁶Seymour Drescher, "Capitalism and Slavery: After Fifty Years," in *Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later: Eric Eustace Williams—A Reassessment of the Man and His Work*, ed. Heather Cateau and Selwyn H. H. Carrington (NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000), 91.

³⁷David Beck Ryden, "Does Decline Make Sense?: The West Indian Economy and the Abolition of the Slave Trade," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31 (Winter 2001): 347-374. These pages provide a good overview of the debate between Drescher and Carrington.

³⁸Selwyn H. H. Carrington, *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775-1810*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 192-217.

In contrast to Carrington's bleak picture, Drescher has these statistics: The British West Indies constituted 20.8% of the empire's economy in 1803-1807, but the highest percentage achieved by these islands in the first half of the eighteenth century for a comparable four year period was only 17.7%.³⁹ Regarding sugar production, he presents these statistics: In 1787, Britain provided 36.7% and France provided 43.3% of the Atlantic market, but in 1805-06 the statistical comparison is 58.4% for Britain and only 10.2% for France.⁴⁰ Finally, in 1790, Britain's slave population in the Caribbean was only 2/3 of France's, but in 1805 Britain held twice as many as France had and approximately half the total of all slaves held by European states in the Caribbean Basin.⁴¹ During the wars and slave revolts of the 1790s and the early 1800s, Britain did relatively well. While the slave revolution in Saint Dominigue destroyed France's prized sugar colony, Britain acquired many possessions from its European competitors. In a lengthy compilation provided by Jeremy Black, Demerara, Tobago, and Guadelupe tally only a few in his list.⁴² So then, in the years just prior to Parliament's passage of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, in 1807, Britain had become the dominant producer of sugar, the biggest carrier of slaves to the Western Hemisphere, and the owner of the largest number of slaves in the Caribbean Basin. In the copiously documented *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern*, Robin Blackburn dismisses, with a mere citation, any economic decline in the British West Indies, beginning as early as 1783, as a "myth that has been demolished by Seymour Drescher, J. R. Ward, and Michael Craton."⁴³

Even if Carrington has revitalized the decline thesis, Williams' economic interpretation of British abolitionism has not necessarily been proven. It is not enough to assert as Williams does in *Capitalism and Slavery* that "when British capitalism depended on the West Indies, [the capitalists] ignored slavery or defended it. When British capitalism found the West Indian monopoly a nuisance, they destroyed West Indian slavery as the first step in the destruction of West Indian monopoly."⁴⁴ To make the connection between an alleged decline in the British West Indies and a British abolitionism moved by economic interests, specific capitalists or groups of capitalists must be examined to show that they acted politically to promote economic interests. In *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams does not do this. According to Temperley, Williams' methodology is impressionistic in which he makes general claims that are followed by heavily footnoted particulars that are irrelevant to the matter under consideration.⁴⁵ Regarding the political action of industrial capitalists, Blackburn presents the following interesting information that contradicts the supporters of the economic interpretation:

It is, perhaps, significant that when the slave trade became a centre of controversy in British politics, leading textile manufacturers were willing to defend it on the grounds that it was a valuable component of national trade. Thus the fustian manufacturers of Manchester rallied to the unpopular cause of slave trafficking in 1791, while as late as 1806 the leading concerns of both Robert Peel and William Clegg subscribed to a petition in its defense.⁴⁶

In his citation for this claim, Blackburn references petitions to the House of Lords in 1806: the one for May 7 lists 82 signatures and the one for May 13 has 113. In comparison to the petitions for the abolition of the slave trade and then for the emancipation of slavery, these numbers are paltry. Drescher has put forth numbers consisting of hundreds and sometimes thousands of petitions with signatures totaling hundreds of thousands, and in one case more than a million.⁴⁷ His analysis of the petitions shows strong support from artisans, colliers, miners, and laborers.

³⁹Drescher, *Econocide*, 16.

⁴⁰Drescher, *Econocide*, 77.

⁴¹Drescher, *Econocide*, 90-91.

⁴²Jeremy Black, "Suppressing the Slave Trade," in *British Abolitionism and the Question of Moral Progress in History*, ed. Donald A. Yerxa (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 35.

⁴³Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern*, (London: Verso, 1997), 577N.

⁴⁴Williams, *Capitalism*, 169.

⁴⁵Temperley, "New Orthodoxy," 254.

⁴⁶Blackburn, *New World Slavery*, 550.

⁴⁷Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 92-94.

Drescher asserts that antislavery coincided with the artisanal and outwork phase of early industrialization.⁴⁸ In *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams misrepresents industrial changes in England when he asserts: “But if household production still survived, it had ceased to be typical.”⁴⁹ In *The Making of the Working Class*, still considered a classic with its examination of socio-economic changes during England’s industrial revolution, E. P. Thompson discusses the so-called golden age of the handloom weavers when their numbers as independent, small-scale producers were still great even if their livelihood was becoming increasingly difficult.⁵⁰ The point is that during the first decades of England’s industrial revolution, which is the same time that the country mobilized against the slave trade, the few industrialists tended to oppose abolition while the many artisans strongly supported it. According to Drescher, independent artisans signed antislavery petitions because they opposed slavery just as they resisted the factory discipline of the newly emerging industrial England and had long withstood the paternalism of the old, landed England.

Drescher’s examination of petitions reveals that another important category championing British abolitionism was religious. He notes three massive petitioning campaigns against the slave trade (1788, 1792, and 1814) and three against slavery in the colonies (1823, 1830, and 1833). The latter three campaigns, according to Drescher, were especially driven by religious forces. While British abolitionism was more than a mere spin-off of Protestant Evangelicalism, British abolitionism peaked with a simultaneous surge in the Nonconformist denominations, especially the Wesleyan Methodists.⁵¹ The period of British abolitionism, 1790-1850, was also the time of British overseas missions, including those to the British slave colonies. For the thirty year period, 1790-1820, Drescher has the following statistic: Of the twenty-eight overseas missions established during these years twenty-two were British.⁵² Drescher’s stated purpose in his works, published during the 1990s, was to push British abolitionism beyond the narrow confines of Parliament and the Clapham Saints. However, the following statement shows that Drescher is still close to his predecessors, like Coupland, who saw the work of the “Saints,” like William Wilberforce, as God-inspired acts:

Behind the words of Wilberforce flowed the greatest wave of petitions in his country’s history. This was the tide in the affairs of ‘men and brothers’, that swept the British evangelical to glory in the name of God and humanity.⁵³

An Overview of Recent Historiography

In 2000, editors Heather Cateau and Selwyn H. H. Carrington introduced their book, *Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later: Eric Eustace Williams—A Reassessment of the Man and His Work*, with the following comments:

Fifty years represents a long time for a first study to be assailed, analyzed, vilified, even thrown upon the dung heap. But like the Phoenix in Greek mythology, it rises again from the ashes to assume its rightful place among the premier scholarly works of the period....No one seems to have the final word.⁵⁴

Is this, however, really the state of study on antislavery, in particular British abolitionism, at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

⁴⁸Drescher, *British Mobilization*, 129-130.

⁴⁹Williams, *Econocide*, 127.

⁵⁰E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 297-311.

⁵¹Seymour Drescher, *From Slavery to Freedom: Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery*, (NY: New York University Press, 1999), 59 and 38—41.

⁵²Drescher, *British Mobilization*, 130-132.

⁵³Drescher, *Comparative Studies*, 52.

⁵⁴Heather Cateau and Selwyn H. H. Carrington, “Introduction,” in *Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later: Eric Eustace Williams—A Reassessment of the Man and His Work*, ed. Heather Cateau and Selwyn H. H. Carrington (NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000), 17 and 5.

Crediting the work of “David Eltis, Roger Anstey, Seymour Drescher, and others,” Eric Arnesen asserts that Williams’ economic interpretation is flawed and suggests that Williams, himself, “has been largely dispatched to the historiographical dustbin.”⁵⁵ Arnesen is not alone in making such claims. David Ryden, a supporter of the economic interpretation, regrettably stated: “Today’s antislavery scholarship ignores the importance of the West Indies and is Britain-centric in approach, focusing on such issues as English humanitarianism, the growth of capitalism, and the rise of consumer consciousness.”⁵⁶

If, since the publication of Drescher’s *Econocide*, historians have discarded Williams’ economic interpretation, have they returned to Coupland’s position of a “moral crusade”?⁵⁷ For David Brion Davis, one of the prominent historians in the study of slavery and antislavery, Britain’s abolition of the slave trade and the emancipation of its slaves in the Caribbean colonies constitutes “something more than an endless contest of greed and power.” It was “a moment of collective rebirth and transfiguration.”⁵⁸ The “transfiguration,” however, needs to be set within a historical context. For Davis, as well as many other historians since the 1980s, that historical context is industrial capitalism, but not in a materialistic sense as used by those who support an economic interpretation. To show that British abolitionism “reflected the ideological needs and of various groups and classes,” Davis has focused on the Quakers, moral sentiments, Protestant Evangelicalism, and antislavery.⁵⁹ His examination has revealed the hegemony of new groups, like Quaker businessmen, and their ideals of freedom in a society that does not treat humans as commodities. While British abolitionists sometimes effectively used economically based tactics to achieve their goals, Davis believes, in the words of James Stephen, that Britain’s campaign against the slave trade and slavery was “concerted in the cabinet of heaven to bring forth its long oppressed, degraded children with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm.”⁶⁰

Although distancing himself from Coupland’s apparently excessively high regard of the British Empire, Davis and other contemporary historians have nonetheless approached the topic with Coupland’s recognition that humanitarian sentiments, not economic self-interest, constituted the motivating force of British abolitionism. J. R. Oldfield’s examination of British antislavery is similar to Coupland’s *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* because both historians gave considerable attention to the “emancipators” like Thomas Clarkson.⁶¹ Recent popular histories also show the return to the humanitarian narrative of “saints” triumphing over the economic interests. Eric Metaxas’ *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* reads like an updated version of Coupland’s biography. The title of Adam Hochschild’s popular history on British abolitionism, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves*, reveals how close his position is to the traditional historiography that saw the abolitionists in religious terms. In Hochschild’s book, the term, rebels, refers to the Caribbean slave rebellions, especially the one in Saint Dominigue.⁶² Other than the four chapters about the slaves and their rebellious acts, however, most of *Bury the Chains* (nineteen chapters) reads like Anstey’s *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolitionism, 1760-1810* and Temperley’s *British Antislavery, 1833-1870*.

⁵⁵Eric Arnesen, “The Recent Historiography of British Abolitionism: Academic Scholarship, Popular History, and the Broader Public,” in *British Abolitionism and the Question of Moral Progress in History*, ed. Donald A. Yerxa (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 101.

⁵⁶David Ryden, “Planters, Slaves, and Decline,” in *Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later: Eric Eustace Williams—A Reassessment of the Man and His Work*, ed. Heather Cateau and Selwyn H. H. Carrington (NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000),

⁵⁷Arnesen, “Recent Historiography,” 101-103.

⁵⁸David Brion Davis, “Slavery, Emancipation and Progress,” in *British Abolitionism and the Question of Moral Progress in History*, ed. Donald A. Yerxa (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 13 and 23.

⁵⁹David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 42-48.

⁶⁰Davis Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1984), 172.

⁶¹J. R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilization of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807*, (London: Routledge Publishers, 1998), 70-95.

⁶²Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 241-296.

The debate over the end of the slave trade and the emancipation of the slaves has shifted from economic self-interest versus humanitarian sentiments to whether the Europeans, especially the British, actually emancipated the slaves or the slaves freed themselves.⁶³ As the title suggests, Christopher Leslie Brown's *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* shares a view of the abolitionists similar to that of the historians who propagated the abolitionist narrative with a humanitarian theme. While Brown distances himself from "the ghost of Coupland's past," both the heavily documented footnotes and the thoroughly developed text of *Moral Capital* are much closer to Coupland's school of historiography than to Williams' economic interpretation.⁶⁴

In 2012, the University of South Carolina Press published *British Abolitionism and the Question of Moral Progress in History*. The editor, Donald A. Yerxa, assembled fourteen historians, "without presuming any outcomes in advance," to determine whether progress can be discerned in history and, in particular, whether British abolitionism presents an obvious act of moral progress in recent history. He introduces the book with the following statement:

A great deal of ink has been spilled assessing the relationship of antislavery to capitalism and free market ideology. The upshot of this research is the conclusion that the antislavery impulse went against British economic interests, both real and perceived. So how do we explain the successes of a humanitarian movement advocating reforms that could have precipitated economic disaster? Davis argues that while it is important to appreciate the complex interplay of economic, political, and ideological factors, we must recognize the significance of a moral vision that "could transcend narrow self-interest and achieve genuine reform."⁶⁵

Both the book's title and the stated purpose strongly show how far removed historiography is from an economic interpretation at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

In John Tosh's *The Practice of History*, Sir Geoffrey Elton argues that over time, when enough factual evidence of the past has been correctly assembled to interpret the past as it essentially had happened, certain historical interpretations will be dropped leaving only the ones that accurately re-present the past.⁶⁶ This is what has happened to Eric Williams' economic interpretation of Britain's campaign against both the slave trade and slavery. In *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*, Seymour Drescher has assembled significant particular evidence to show that Williams' economic interpretation, as presented in *Capitalism and Slavery*, is untenable. Apparently, many historians have accepted Drescher's demolition of Williams' economic interpretation of British abolitionism because they are not seeking to explain this phenomenon in economic terms; rather, they are looking for it in popular movements that sent hundreds, sometimes even thousands, of petitions to Parliament demanding an end to the slave trade and slavery. To some extent, the study of the British suppression of the slave trade and the emancipation of the slaves has resumed the earlier work of Reginald Coupland. While contemporary historians do not present their work as advocates of the British Empire and sometimes seem reticent to give too much emphasis to religious inspiration, they are nonetheless looking at popular acts, motivated by humanitarian sentiments, and not economic self-interest. While some historians still defend certain aspects of Williams' legacy, there are no unqualified endorsements of the economic interpretation. Even Selwyn H. H. Carrington is only defending the decline thesis, which, even if proven valid, does not necessarily mean that the people of Britain demanded the abolishment of the slave trade because the British Caribbean economy was in a prolonged downturn.

⁶³Seymour Drescher and Pieter C. Emmer, Preface," in *Who Abolished Slavery?: Slave Revolts and Abolitionism: A Debate with João Pedro Marques*, ed. Seymoure Drescher and Pieter C. Emmer (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), vii-viii.

⁶⁴Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 14-30.

⁶⁵Donald A. Yerxa, "Introduction," in *British Abolitionism and the Question of Moral Progress in History*, ed. Donald A. Yerxa (Columbia: SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 5.

⁶⁶Josh Tosh, *Historians on History*, (London: Longman, 2000), 57-58.

Williams' economic interpretation of British abolitionism should be discarded not only because Drescher has made such a strong case against it. In regards to presenting an economic interpretation of British abolitionism, *Capitalism and Slavery* makes a weak one. Many of the generalizations that Williams asserts are, as Howard Temperley has noted, not supported by sufficient evidence. Too often missing is a coherently constructed essay of generalizations that rest firmly upon pertinent evidence, presented in a step-by-step argument, which is supposed to be an essential feature of good historical writing.⁶⁷ Unlike Drescher in *Econocide*, Williams does not provide a study at close range of the actors and their actions that contributed to the end of the slave trade and slavery. Moreover, Williams ignores too many historical events, like the British conquest of the Caribbean Basin during the French wars, as if they are only incidental to the history of the slave trade and its suppression. In the place of sufficient factual particulars to make his case, Williams relied too much and too often on insincere jeering. In the case of Coupland, he even misrepresented this historian's contribution to the historiography on the topic. For all of the aforementioned reasons, Williams' interpretation of British abolitionism should be relegated to historiography as a work with an economic interpretation that for a short time seemed to be creditable by some scholars.

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⁶⁷Richard Marius and Melvin E. Page, *A Short Guide to Writing about History*, Sixth Edition, (NY: Pearson/Longman, 2007), 14.

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