

Freedom, Equality and the Americas

The Americas collections at the British Library cover a long history but two of the most intriguing elements of these materials are how they can be used to trace the evolving idea of freedom in the New World and the growing desire for equality across racial, religious and social groups. Interestingly, many of the actors in this history are interconnected in some way, even if they move in different circles and live on different continents. The selection of material below hopes to illustrate this interconnection which has driven the long march to freedom and equality in the United States and the rest of the Americas.

John Graves Simcoe and the abolition of slavery in Canada

Dropmore Papers Vol. CCCLXXXII, An account of the country of Canada by Capt. John Simcoe (1760), to which are appended the thoughts of his son, Lieut. Gov. John Graves Simcoe (1790) [Add MS 59236]

The Simcoe family had extensive contact with Canada in the eighteenth century, Captain Simcoe being in charge of a ship at the siege of Quebec while, later, his son, Lieut. Gov. Simcoe was placed in administrative control of Upper Canada (today's Ontario). Lieut. Gov. Simcoe is remembered as the 'man who brought Magna Carta to Canada', declaring it should be governed by the same laws and statutes as England, but more significantly he was also the first British administrator to abolish slavery on the American continent. In this manuscript Simcoe discusses how North America has changed since his father fought here as a result of, 'that unhappy incident', the American War of Independence, for which he blames both sides. He notes that to prevent a similar event occurring again British North America should be free under the law, represented in parliament and at liberty to trade freely, with no monopolies given. Simcoe's vision is not limited to the British either, his plans are also at pains to chart out the rights and liberties of America's First Peoples (ff. 16-17, f. 27), and, taken as a whole, the document sets the stage for Simcoe's ideals of enabling a 'Great Charter' in Canada and enshrining the liberty of all those who live there.

Letters from Haiti, Henri Christophe and Thomas Clarkson

Clarkson Manuscript Papers Vol. VI, Haiti and Jamaica [BL Add MS 41266]

This volume contains many articles of correspondence that were relevant to the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, including a number from independent Haiti's ruling elite. There are letters between King Henri Christophe and his youngest son, Jacques-Victor Henri Christophe, as well as extensive correspondence between King Christophe and Thomas Clarkson. King Christophe's letter (f.27, with duplicates in the volume) is a reply to one sent by Thomas Clarkson, presumably with the school masters and professors discussed in the letter. King Christophe details the reasons for the rebellion on Haiti (the tyranny of the French plantocracy) and implores Clarkson to continue his good work to defend the, 'rights of Ha[iti] and fellow Africans'. Noting that, 'I am sensibly touched by the great interest which you take in the cause of Africans and their descendants,' Christophe goes on to discuss the effectiveness of the British teachers (perhaps sent due to Clarkson's lobbying) and the 'Lancaster' system they brought with them; 'I am astonished at the effects of this new system... [and] I consider the sending of these masters the greatest benefit my friends have conferred upon me.'

Olaudah Equiano and London's abolitionists

O. Equiano, 'The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano' New York: 1791 [BL: 10880.aa.16]

Africa Association, 'Plan of the Association' London: 1788 [147.f.9(7)]

S. Parkinson, 'A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas, in His Majesty's ship, the *Endeavour*' London: 1773 [BL: 456.g.15]

Olaudah Equiano is one of Britain's best known abolitionists due to his narrative (in which he is enslaved, buys his freedom, almost forced back into slavery, travels to the Arctic and much more) and his extensive London connections. In 1789 (just before his narrative was published) this led Equiano to the Africa Association, of which Sir Joseph Banks (one of the Library's founder collectors and a potential sponsor of Equiano's work) was a patron. Equiano sought to volunteer for one of the Africa Association's missions to explore the interior, something abolitionists, a number of whom sat on the Association committee, hoped would provide information to undermine the slave trade. The Banks family had worked with the abolitionist movement previously to this too. While Joseph Banks was on the *Endeavour* expedition his mother enlisted Granville Sharp to help free one of her servants, a recently liberated man, who had been kidnapped and was about to be sent back to the Caribbean.

Mr. Dickens on slavery

C. Dickens, 'American Notes, for general circulation' London: 1842 [BL: 1431.e.3]

Dickens's travels in America, during early 1840, maintain much of the sense of informative fun found in some of his other writings. Covering cities, natural wonders and the people he meets in detail at the end of the narrative Dickens breaks from the established structure of travel literature to provide a whole chapter on American slavery. He is scathing in his critique, illustrating how vile the process of hunting down escaped persons is and pointing out how at odds the enslavement of people is in a nation which proclaims to be based on freedom. One of his later lines is particularly prophetic, '[there are those who would] gladly involve America in a war, civil, or foreign, provided that it had for its sole end and object the assertion of their right to perpetuate slavery.'

The Underground Railroad - in the Lake District

W. W. Wells, 'Narrative of William W. Brown, an American slave', London: 1850 [BL: 10880.a.6]

W. Craft, 'Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom', London: 1860 [BL: 10880.a.39]

H. Martineau, 'Guide to Windermere', Windermere: 1854 [BL: 10351.b.21]

The Underground Railroad was not just known to nineteenth century Americans but to many British Victorians too. Authors of accounts of the journey to freedom often found their way to the UK to promote their books and the circuit was extensive, even finding its way to country areas like the Lake District. This is due to the continuing work and interest of British abolitionists who now devoted themselves to world-wide abolition and, like in the earlier nineteenth century, were predominantly women. Wells and the Crafts, shown here, promoted their work in the Lake District and stayed in the small town of Ambleside, living with author Henrietta Martineau. This connection was unearthed by the work of our PhD student working on Canadian narratives about slavery, Ellie Bird.

Civil Rights in the twentieth century

E. Hooper, 'Martin Luther King' play script, Greenwich, 1969 [BL MPS 231]

This play script of 'Martin Luther King' is an original from the Greenwich Theatre. The play, first performed on 21st October 1969, a year and a half after Martin Luther King Jr.'s death, was performed as a gala piece to mark the reopening of the Greenwich Theatre. Greenwich Theatre had been marked for demolition in 1962 but Ewan Hooper, who also wrote this play, took centre stage in fundraising to save the building. No record exists as to why Hooper wrote this play to open the theatre but the statement of aims (bound in the back) provides clues. It states the theatre shall be a venue for new and critical theatre, aiming to stimulate creativity and thought in the Greenwich area. 'Martin Luther King' covers many of the notable acts in the Civil Rights campaign and ends with King's assassination, the last line stating that it is the 'quality of one's life, not the quantity' that matters.