

## 4 The Breakthrough 1787-92

Many historians of the late eighteenth century, especially of high politics, have been inclined to treat with scepticism the concept of public opinion as an autonomous causal factor.<sup>1</sup> Popular abolitionism, located on the very cusp of the age of the modern social movements, is difficult to fit into a political frame of reference still so generally oligarchic.<sup>2</sup> Yet it was the mobilization of public opinion which ushered in the consciousness that one was in a new period in the history of slavery; not in the sense of inaugurating an era of uninterrupted victories but in the sense that the terms of public discourse about the institution in Britain were dramatically and forever altered:

The core area of the take-off is of special interest to a historical analysis that seeks to link developments of antislavery, capitalism and public opinion. It was the booming industrializing North and, above all, Manchester, which made mass petitioning the principal political weapon of abolitionism. Manchester converted a London committee which was little more than a low-key lobby, like the Protestant dissenters' delegates working against the Test Acts, or the Quakers' representatives handing out pamphlets to MPs at the doors of Parliament, into the prototype of the modern social reform movement. E. M. Hunt gave us the first detailed account of the abolitionist movement in the North of England.<sup>3</sup> His analysis can be extended to emphasize both the critical new social mass which was forming in the North during the 1780s and its changing relationship to national decision-making. The combination of the two made Manchester ripe for abolitionism when Clarkson passed through the city during his first abolitionist tour in the autumn of 1787.

There was undoubtedly a general intensification of British popular politics in the 25 years following the accession of George III. The links between local and national political ideology became more tightly knit with a coalescence of partisan voting and affiliation.<sup>4</sup>

National political crises from Wilkes to colonial embargoes, to the American War, East India reform and the constitutional confrontation of the early 1780s, occurred frequently enough, and were significant enough at even the local level, to mobilize clear choices for an increasingly politicized electorate in each general election after 1780.<sup>5</sup> Unimpeded newspaper reporting on Parliamentary debates after the 1770s gave readers a clearer sense of national policy as a continuous and changeable process, susceptible to external pressures. A French traveller was astonished at an English sailors' pub brawl over Parliamentary speeches by Pitt and Fox. Just two years before the Great Revolution he could not conceive of such an event happening in Paris.<sup>6</sup>

One of the important developments of the late eighteenth century was the silent revolution in the meaning of 'public opinion' in political discourse. Professor J. Gunn has recently traced the accelerated movement of the term into the everyday language of politics in the 1780s. For a time, at least, many commentators assumed in the years after 1784 that an era of benign and informed public opinion had arrived. There was an explicit recognition that participation in the political process extended vaguely but quite broadly beyond the confines of Parliament and even of the enfranchised electorate. On the other hand, the agitation over the major national controversies during the generation before 1787 was not centred in the industrializing North, and certainly not led by it.<sup>7</sup> In the case of abolitionism the organizational linkage between a rising capitalism and antislavery may be more direct than references to various religious and political forerunners implies. It is as tempting to extrapolate abolitionism from the radical political organizations as from the Quaker International of the 1780s.<sup>8</sup> Yet the abolitionist take-off did not emanate from the established radical network of London or Norwich or the Yorkshire gentry any more than it did from the Quaker network.<sup>9</sup>

Lancashire was not particularly active in political reform either before or immediately after the war with America. On the eve of the American Revolution Manchester's principal public concern with Africa was with the need to bolster national protection of British traders against natives and foreign interlopers.<sup>10</sup> Only in isolated pockets like Warrington Academy was there a hint of sustained antislavery opinion.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the early 1780s witnessed an extraordinary burst of capitalist development and interest-based agitation in Lancashire. Immediately after 1783 Britain's imports of raw cotton increased at a faster rate than in any other period of its

dramatic history. Meanwhile a government coping with vastly increased indebtedness sought to enhance its revenues by tapping into this explosive development. When the new Pitt administration attempted to tax the fustian manufacturers, Manchester organized a massive repeal petition in the name of tens of thousands of Lancastrians whose livelihood depended upon the cotton industry. The Prime Minister backed down, significantly acknowledging that his decision was made in direct response to the overwhelming popular reaction, although he himself considered their fears to be economically unfounded.<sup>12</sup>

Lancashire manufacturers also played a leading role in the broader petition campaign against a customs union with Ireland. Here Manchester's interests were aligned with other regional industrialists. Thomas Walker, the leader of the fustian campaign, now joined forces with Josiah Wedgwood of the Potteries to bring maximum extra-Parliamentary pressure to bear upon the government. Again Pitt backed down from his initiative when industrial opinion clearly swung against the measure.<sup>13</sup> This is not to imply the formation of anything like a united industrial interest in the 1780s. The General Chamber of Manufactures which was created in the wake of the coalition against free trade with Ireland immediately disintegrated over the next major issue of political economy, Anglo-French trade liberalization. Walker and Wedgwood split over the treaty of 1787. Indeed Lancashire itself was divided and the government carried the treaty with the support of much of Lancashire. These and other issues of the 1780s revealed that Manchester was by no means the fortress of free trade that it was to become more than two generations later. The abolitionist movement was to be led by Manchester's most consistent anti-free trader of the 1780s and the slave trade, like the French treaty, was to divide rather than to unite the Mancunian manufacturing élite.<sup>14</sup>

The linkage between Manchester and abolition must be sought within a slightly different context. Although its merchants and manufacturers had by no means become the cutting edge of international free trade which they were to be two generations later, Manchester was as wedded to the practice of international free enterprise as any city in Britain in 1788. Its interest-oriented battles of the mid-1780s created the organizational expertise which could open the sluices of enthusiasm otherwise confined within the narrow institutional boundaries that existed for such popular expression in those times. Manchester was of necessity more inclined to experiment with such

extra-Parliamentary pressure. It lacked both a corporate local government and a representative in Parliament. Thus there was no line between those with qualifications for participation in electoral decision-making and those without it. As a city which had doubled in population between 1774 and 1788 and was to triple by 1800 it was a 'town of strangers', pioneering in the formation of more impersonal organization. It also led in the development of voluntary welfare organizations including one of the earliest and most successful Sunday-school systems in the nation.<sup>15</sup> Nor was the voluntary system confined to philanthropy. Manchester was perfectly poised in the late 1780s to extrapolate the organizational and agitational skills forged in its economic policy battles.<sup>16</sup>

Manchester's mode of petitioning was highly unusual for England in the 1780s. It launched the petition campaign without consulting with the London Committee or the regional Quaker network. As far as can be seen from newspaper accounts it had the most massively subscribed list of local contributors to the first abolition campaign. No other city in England in the immediate pre-abolition period even attempted to gather 10 000 signatures at a time. It also aimed at a mass enrolment of the male inhabitants. In December 1787 the almost 11 000 who signed the Manchester petition formed fully 20 per cent of the total population of the city.<sup>17</sup> Even if, because of migration, the proportion of adult males represented 30 per cent of the city's total population, two-thirds of Manchester's eligible men subscribed to the first petition for the abolition of the slave trade. This conservative estimate is still astonishingly high. National consciousness of the breadth of Manchester's petition reverberated through the subsequent intense discussion.

The new social reform movement moved smoothly along other important channels provided by contemporary economic development. Britain's relatively dense network of provincial newspapers, with their extensive advertisements, fostered a nationalization of the market by innovative entrepreneurs in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> The abolitionists of Manchester innovatively decided to use their subscription fund to purchase advertisements of their own petition in every major newspaper in England, calling for similar actions. At a stroke they placed Manchester on the national map as the pace-setter in popular abolitionism, and gave their resolutions a ubiquitousness usually reserved only for Parliamentary debates and Royal Proclamations.

This position was critical. Before the winter of 1787-8 it was assumed that the industrializing North was wedded to the slave trade. When Manchester's petition was first advertised in London, the city newspapers still carried squibs forecasting that the Manchester petition would certainly be met with countervailing petitions from Liverpool and the other port cities.<sup>19</sup> Similar notices appeared elsewhere, advertising Liverpool's intentions to produce a petition which contained even more signatures than Manchester's. Liverpool's own petition was held back until the following year, and there is some reason to doubt that the figure was nearly as large as the 13 000 or 15 000 promised in the squibs. (The petitions to the House of Lords, which have been preserved, show that Liverpool was never able to mobilize more than one-sixth that many antiabolition signatures between 1792 and 1807.<sup>20</sup>) A putative mass antiabolition petition from Manchester also never materialized.<sup>21</sup>

Where the slaving capital was really overmatched, however, was in the resounding echo Manchester's petition elicited from all parts of England. Liverpool stood virtually alone in its ability to generate other 'inhabitant' petitions in favour of the slave trade. Even in Bristol a large committee petition was signed against the slave trade. Liverpool was simply overwhelmed by Manchester's hundred-and-one unanswered volleys.<sup>22</sup> As far as can be determined from a survey of the Parliamentary Journals, this total was an unprecedented levy of petitions for the decade between the Peace of Versailles and the second abolitionist wave in 1792. Manchester rather than the Quaker religious network pushed Britain across the psychological threshold into the abolitionist era.<sup>23</sup> Setting aside ideological considerations for the moment, this was the manner in which British capitalist development made its first direct contribution to political abolitionism.

The Manchester petition was also significant in another respect. It undermined the policy/morality dualism in British political culture which underlay the response to the Quaker petition, and indeed to all previous suggestions to alter or limit the Anglo-Atlantic slave system. Unlike the Quakers, who could be both praised and discounted by their long tradition of tender conscience and sectarian isolation, Manchester was a hard-nosed manufacturing town. If its economy was not dominated by the African or colonial trades it certainly had a tangible stake in these trades, perhaps a larger share than any other inland city in Britain. One-quarter of its exploding appetite for raw cotton came from Britain's own colonies and fully 70 per cent came

from the African-purchasing colonies of the Americas. (Leading Manchester cotton manufacturers, like the famous Peels, were later able to procure smaller-scale petitions against abolitionist bills from other interested Mancunians for two full decades.<sup>24</sup>) Slave-trade supporters could certainly accuse the Manchester abolitionists of indifference to the interests of their fellow capitalists. They could and did accuse its abolitionist workers of also acting contrary to their own interests. They could not credibly accuse the Manchester signatories of making high moral pronouncements in ignorance of economic principles. If England's most successful boom town of the 1780s could come down so overwhelmingly on the side of abolition, Lord North's worldly-wise response to the Quakers in 1783 no longer appeared axiomatic.<sup>25</sup>

Aside from the general social and religious changes which its residents shared with many others, and which will be discussed later, what was it about Manchester that set it in motion towards petitioning, even before the itinerant Clarkson's arrival, and made it respond to abolitionism so far beyond anyone's expectations?<sup>26</sup> Manchester in 1787 had probably just become the largest inland commercial centre in Britain. As in the case of London and its black poor, there was enough involvement in the African trade to arouse self-scrutiny without also arousing an overwhelming self-interest. Manchester was the commercial and communications hub of an industry whose very day-to-day existence, from procurement of distant raw materials to sales, depended on an international perspective. Each major Parliamentary debate on trade policy since 1784 had occasioned Manchester's active participation. Its élite was therefore market- rather than state- or corporation-oriented. If its principal industrialists were still the opposite of internationalist free traders they had already acquired a deep faith in the rewards of the untrammelled marketplace at home. Still more significantly, many of the Manchester workers agreed with the mercantile élite's faith in the market. The status of trade and industry had a resonance in Manchester which was lacking in areas where tradesmen occupied a more subordinate rung in the hierarchy of honour.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the marketplace, moreover, its workforce was one of the least parochial in Great Britain. Manchester was a town of the uprooted. No other agglomeration could have been so collectively and effectively moved by Clarkson's focus on the peculiar terrors of the slave trade: loss of kin, hearth and community. To be part of a lonely crowd, of a community of the uprooted, even by choice, was to

feel the appeal on behalf of those uprooted by violence, and forever. Manchester had begun its long search for a myth which 'would elevate its citizens above the prosaic level of their daily working life'. The myth ultimately found expression in the ideology of free trade. But half-a-century before that it found its first expression in an ideology of liberty.<sup>28</sup>

Rhetorically Manchester's mass petition did not concern itself with the policy aspects of the slave trade, or with potential economic gain or loss. Manchester, like almost all of its 15 000 sequels during the next 50 years, based demands for action on the offensiveness of such a traffic to humanity, justice and national honour. Policy considerations were left to Parliamentary debate. It is of crucial importance that from the opening salvo until the final abolition of 'apprenticeship' just half a century later, antislavery's direct economic beneficiaries were rarely identifiable. The losers always were.<sup>29</sup>

The combination of political strategies drawn from the everyday economic life of Britons in the 1780s could not have been achieved so casually in the 1680s or even the 1730s, despite the fact that the imperial economy was less dependent on slave production in 1685 or 1735 than in 1785. Some opponents were glumly encouraged by the very commercial techniques used to rivet public attention on slavery. If advertising had made abolitionism fashionable, this year's fad might be succeeded by next, perhaps an attempt to do something about men on the moon. In this spirit one peer denied the need for any response whatever to such a 'five days fit of philanthropy'. There were also early attempts to dismiss abolitionism as an exotic or subversive plot designed to undermine British national greatness.<sup>30</sup>

As Manchester was uniquely poised to take the lead in a petition campaign, it was also able to tap the extensive national acquirer of libertarian ideology and aversion to slavery noted in Chapter 1. In some areas the Quaker network was able to set the process in motion. In others a gathering of the Justices of the Peace at Quarter Sessions was the occasion for launching county petitions. In many places, the Manchester advertisement was sufficient to stir local imitation through debating societies and church meetings.<sup>31</sup> A close reading of the surviving local newspapers demonstrates that Manchester was already part of a broader geographical base of popular petitions during the very first campaign of 1788.

Unfortunately, we have cited numbers of signers from only two cities besides Manchester, but something about the social base may be learned from the way in which petitions were gathered and

TABLE 4.1 *Mobilizations 1769-1824*

<i>Occasion</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>Percentage of petitions restricted to privileged groups (nobility, cor- poration, freemen, etc.)</i>
Wilkes Dismissal	1769-70	Crown	89
of Fox/North	1784	Crown	57
Slave trade abolition	1788	Parliament	30
King's recovery*	1789	Crown	72
Slave trade	1792	Parliament	15
Sedition Bills	1795	Parliament	62 (pro) 16 (con)
Slave trade	1814	Parliament	2
Slave trade	1823	Parliament	3
Slave trade	1824	Parliament	1

\* This was not a petition but congratulations to the King.

SOURCES For applications to the Crown, PRO HO55/1-30.

For applications to Parliament, indices to the *House of Commons Journals* for the appropriate sessions.

presented. Before abolitionism petitions usually designated themselves as emanating from some interest or corporate group (nobility, clergy, freemen, corporation members, and so on), with a qualified public or private right to governmental attention. Less frequently a petition declared that it emanated from the publicly-gathered inhabitants of an area. From even summary self-designations it is clear that those without any kind of special claims to participate in the polity entered into a greater proportion of abolitionist petitions than with any previous question brought before the Parliament of Great Britain.

Table 4.1 shows that of the more than 100 petitions submitted to Parliament in 1788, only 15 per cent were self-designated as emanating from some corporate or special status group: nobility, magistracy, clergy, freemen or 'principal' citizens. The rest entered themselves simply as 'inhabitants' of towns and parishes, or as participants in voluntary associations without political privileges. One may compare the proportion of inhabitant petitions with those of major political campaigns of the previous generation. Between the Wilkes affair in the 1760s and the dismissal of the Fox-North ministry in 1784, each mobilization gathered more than half of its petitions from corporate or enfranchised groups. The division between corporate and unincor-



porated petitioning refers to the self-designation of the petition area and may actually underrepresent the popularity of some 'popular' corporate petitions in 1788. The petitioners of Norwich, submitting a corporation petition, may have had a social profile as representative of their general adult male population as the citizens of York, who petitioned as inhabitants.<sup>32</sup>

Although Manchester's was the most numerous signed petition in 1788, petitioning elsewhere was also quite often a process of canvassing following a large and formal public meeting. This was designed to present the resulting document as a measure of community consensus where possible. In 1788 provincial reporting of local public meetings was still so abbreviated that the record is generally incomplete. Abolition, because it was virtually unopposed in most areas, became a bridge to freer public reporting on local political and contentious activity.<sup>33</sup>

It has been possible to gather evidence of at least 27 public meetings in 1788, more than a quarter of the recorded petitions. Almost all of the larger towns in England were represented. The total number of signatories was rarely mentioned, but Sheffield weighed in with 2000 signatures and York with 1800. Urban public meetings were usually followed by a wide circulation for signatures. Manchester's petition was left in ten public places, Sheffield's in four and the Northampton petition was left in twelve market towns. Nottingham also sent its petition out to surrounding towns. Shrewsbury had two separate meetings, a general county meeting for the freeholders of Shropshire and an open town meeting for the rest of the population. Exeter and Birmingham had two general meetings. According to the newspaper accounts, Birmingham citizens held their second mass meeting specifically to counter an opposition resolution which might have been subsequently advertised as an inhabitants' petition. The Leeds meeting appealed to 'the rough sons of lowest labour'. Where the petition was not circulated it was usually left, as in Bristol and Oakham, at the meeting place for further adhesions.<sup>34</sup>

We have accounts from enough areas to conclude that Manchester's plea for a broad base was heeded. York's 1800 signatures represented up to 40 per cent of the adult males and may have rivaled Manchester for the maximum proportion of adult male signatories. Falmouth was satisfied with the unanimity of those at the public meeting. Northampton county went for large numbers of adhesions and gathered about 2000 signatures. Most meetings followed Manchester's lead in advertising their own resolutions in both

regional and London newspapers. These towns were well aware that Manchester had created a competitive humanitarian market. Along with its 2000 signature harvest, Sheffield announced that it had already been first in humanity.<sup>35</sup>

Abolitionism broke through unevenly in 1788. Popular petitioning was not yet a casual form of collective activity. The average annual number of public petitions sent up to the House of Commons between 1785 and 1789 was still only 176 per session. In 1788 more than half the 200 petitions received by the Commons were those dealing with the slave trade. Not all areas felt equally free about the propriety of inhabitant petitioning. It was easier for communities already politicized by contested electoral struggles to respond to Manchester's call for a speedy mobilization. John Phillips has recently noted that of four Parliamentary boroughs he studied between 1760 and 1800 the two most electorally active (Norwich and Maidstone) were the most petition prone. They petitioned against the slave trade in 1788. By contrast, Northampton and Lewes, relatively unpoliticized, rarely petitioned the Commons. Antislavery itself, however, provided a bridge to mobilization. While the normally unroiled borough of Northampton did not petition against the slave trade as a borough in 1788, its inhabitants did join in the county petition. In the second and more systematically organized appeal of 1792 all four of Phillips's towns petitioned against the slave trade. Even the bashful boroughs did not have to be asked more than once.<sup>36</sup>

There were other inertial constraints on petitioners during the abolitionist take-off of 1788. In some cases the activity itself was thought to be beyond the legitimate role of constituted bodies. The Scottish Presbytery and Oxford University demurred, the latter much to the embarrassment of its representative, Sir William Dolben. One small inland town was uncertain whether its insignificant petition would help or hurt the general cause. Petitioning to Parliament in the 1780s was still more 'private' than public, traditionally tied to the claims of specific injured parties or beneficiaries.<sup>37</sup> The novel appearance of 'disinterested' petitions in a matter of trade involved an aggressive redefinition of propriety. At the beginning of 1788 the abolitionists' most difficult task was to get the public to make the leap from an economic to a humanitarian political frame of reference. The agent for Jamaica was himself completely disconcerted by these outlandish dabblers in the imperial economy who gathered in unprecedented numbers, although 'stating no grievance or injury of any sort, affecting the Petitioners themselves'. Lord Hawkesbury, the

very model of the mercantile perspective of the Privy Council and Board of Trade, knew that the proper question in all economic legislation was who was injured and who benefited.<sup>38</sup> From the outset the petitioners were breaking this cardinal rule of capitalist interest petitioning. Their grounds of complaint were therefore as unsettling as their economic base was unfathomable. Moreover, instead of beginning with a motion in Parliament, they were 'blowing up the flame first, and then telling you for what purpose afterwards'.<sup>39</sup>

Quite aside from the unsettling nature of the demands, many potential signers felt diffident about any agitation whatever. In smaller towns the élite might decide that a petition emanating from the 'principal' residents was as good, or better, than an inhabitant petition. The Kendal meeting was described as including all of the 'principal inhabitants' of the town. At Olney it was the freeholders who met to congratulate their MP on his proabolitionist stance. At Stamford only the gentlemen of the county met to consider the petition. In the South-west most of the 'principal inhabitants' of Swansea signed. In Falmouth the 'principal inhabitants' included 'none but tradesmen and creditable inhabitants', which leaves the social boundaries rather indeterminate; although it probably meant householders only. In this area, a rotten borough heaven, there seemed to be more attention to social gradation and a mayor might be more hesitant to sanction a petition meeting.<sup>40</sup>

There were clear geographical limits to the first campaign. Almost a third of the petitions came from the 'new' industrial area north of the Severn, between Worcester in the south-west and Yorkshire in the north-east. Smaller clusters came from the area between Bedford and Norwich, and from the Southern towns in the triangle between Southampton, Plymouth and Bristol. Petitioning spilled over into Scotland but only as far as Edinburgh's élite Chamber of Commerce and some Scottish synods and universities. Perhaps because Manchester limited the scope of its advertisement campaign there was no surge of inhabitant response in Scotland or Wales comparable to those in England. Subsequent campaigns reached out to more distant locations. Except for some county magistrates, the campaign was an urban phenomenon. Petitions were circulated through satellite market towns. The general network of commercial communication was the abolitionist channel of 1788.

Abolitionism was also grafted on to other everyday practices of commercial capitalism. For Josiah Wedgwood, slavery in 1788 was no less promising an object for ceramic commemoration than the Peace

Treaty with France, John Wesley, or Captain Cook.<sup>41</sup> So while the pottery workers of Staffordshire were signing up against the African traffic, their principal employer, an early member of the London Abolition Society, was trafficking in a new line of medallions (with a generous seeding of free samples): the famous jasper figure of the kneeling slave asking, 'Am I not a man and a brother?' What was unusual about the slave medallion was the anonymity of the figure, an everyman of a mass age.

From the printing press came the most famous pictorial representation of all the slave-trade campaigns, Clarkson's schematic plan of a loaded slave ship. It was far cheaper to print and to sell than even Wedgwood's medallion. If we may credit the cartoonist's instincts for background realism, the slave ship soon hung in homes throughout England.<sup>42</sup> The initial outburst of abolitionism therefore stimulated its most striking and enduring popular iconography. Two generations later an aging Birmingham orator movingly recalled how his social conscience had first been awakened when his father unrolled the picture of the slave ship before his gathered family.<sup>43</sup>

The campaign of 1788 not only tested the resilience of petitioning as an instrument of public mobilization; it also began to extend the boundaries of political participation. Even the most widely-signed petitions were confined to adult males. One place or another might exclude illiterates, paupers, non-householders, those who were not members of the local corporation or not regarded as principal citizens. Yet the public agitation also created room for other kinds of intervention; in 1788, abolition suddenly became a ubiquitous topic within the formal debating societies. Some discussions, held over from one session to another by popular demand, were also directed at female audiences. On at least one occasion women were the principal speakers. In these debates many English men and women may have seen black public speakers for the first time, describing their personal experiences in the slave system.<sup>44</sup>

By 1791 another abolitionist technique emerged, again without the instigation of the London committee. It brought women and children directly into the orbit of the campaign. A nationwide boycott of slave-grown sugar was begun. It was as closely related to the new sense of consumer power as Wedgwood's capitalist philanthropy was to his pottery. It made the abolitionist élite uncomfortable because it was launched not merely as a symbolic means of pollution avoidance, but as an instrument of economic power.<sup>45</sup>

There is no way of knowing just how many people participated in the slave-sugar abstention (antisaccharite) movement at its height in 1791-2. Clarkson claimed that 300 000 families were involved. In the light of my rough estimate of petition signers in the second slave-trade campaign of 1792, this is not an unreasonable guess. The newspapers confirmed its national breadth. In England it extended from Cornwall to Carlisle. It also spread to the main urban centres of Scotland and even beyond the petition zone into urban Ireland and Wales. Since abstention was a family-oriented strategy, special appeals were directed towards women, emphasizing their otherwise excluded status from the political arena.<sup>46</sup>

As a weapon of consumer capitalism the sugar boycott achieved some peripheral successes. Dealers advertised 'free sugar' in British towns from Ipswich to Edinburgh and Wales. The sugar interest from Bristol to Liverpool acknowledged that abstention had some effect on sugar prices at the height of the petition campaign of 1792.<sup>47</sup> As a political weapon, however, the free-grown sugar movement could hardly have come at a worse time. The St Domingue Revolution of 1791 had produced a sharp upward surge in prices. Throughout the campaign British sugar refiners were complaining about a devastating shortage rather than a glut. Although British sugar consumption may have dropped by up to a third from its pre-French Revolutionary level during the abolitionist campaign of 1792, it remains unclear how much of this was due to abolitionist abstention and how much to rising Continental demand. During the same period the rate of re-exports of British colonial sugar to Europe almost tripled.<sup>48</sup> What is abundantly clear is that the British tropical planters were feeling no profit squeeze whatever in 1791-2. Moreover, while British consumer mobilization was adding a new weapon to the social reform arsenal, Parisian crowds were blending revolutionary rhetoric with the traditional moral economy of the food riot to force French colonial sugar on to the market.<sup>49</sup> On balance, the consumers of Europe easily cancelled out the abstainers of Britain. Even over the long term it would be impossible to determine how much of lowered British home consumption was produced by high prices and how much by high principles. Sugar prices remained buoyant for almost seven more years. Thus the first decade of the abolitionist era coincided with the best average prices sugar growers had seen for at least a century.<sup>50</sup> There was a later attempt to use abstention during the emancipation phase, but its impact remains equally unclear.

The second petition campaign was co-ordinated from London. Agents were sent through England and Scotland to stimulate sympathetic local organization. They were very scrupulous to avoid activities which might support charges that they orchestrated or even initiated local petitions. Typically, a private meeting was called by sympathizers. The agent passed out an edited volume of Parliamentary evidence on the slave trade. Even if the local organizers immediately suggested a petition they were told first to circulate the evidence and to draw up their own resolutions. There was to be no basis for accusations of mindless conformity.<sup>51</sup>

The localities were only asked to time their public meetings so that the petitions would converge on Parliament just as Wilberforce renewed his abolition motion in 1792. The presenters would be able visually to maximize the impression of the *vox populi* as the sheepskin petitions piled up on the table of the House of Commons. In most respects the pattern of 1788 was repeated, but on a more comprehensive scale. The abolitionists capitalized on their virtual monopoly of popular support. The total number of petitions quintupled from 102 to 519, the largest number ever submitted to the House on a single subject or in a single session.<sup>52</sup> Every English county was now represented, although the most massive support still seemed to emanate from the North.<sup>53</sup> In 1788 petitions from north of the Tweed had represented only corporate Scotland: presbyteries, synods, universities, and a chamber of commerce. In 1792 Scotland arrived in full force: municipalities, parishes, professions and trades.<sup>54</sup> No distinction was permitted between backwaters and large towns or between principal and general inhabitants. Popular petitions were explicitly preferred. Towns were warned against submitting only one signature in the name of the community. Single signatures were simply no help. The more open the petition, the greater was the leverage it would exert in Parliament. In some areas trade and friendly societies were specifically invited to intervene. Efforts were more concentrated on canvassing than producing written publicity. Propaganda could be matched by counter-propaganda; signatures could not.<sup>55</sup>

Antiabolitionist strategies of detraction only reinforced the evidence of popularity. After the vigorous vindication of Manchester's 10 000 workers and tradesmen in 1788, no one attempted a similar assault on the reported 20 000 subscribers to the Manchester petition of 1792. Manchester's 50 sheets might be punned away as 'sheepish names on sheepish skins', but no one challenged their authenticity.

No abolitionist responded to sneers at the Nottingham stocking workers or Cornish miners for signing petitions or abstaining from sugar on behalf of people who worked in far less hazardous situations than themselves. Abolitionists objected only when their enemies took the opposite tack, and attempted to keep the poor away from the 'skins' with rumours that signing entailed a financial pledge. In some communities adhesion was so complete that prominent individuals who did not sign were singled out for special mention. One town reported that only six members of the clergy refused to sign. Another announced that only one refused. Olney's William Cowper, already famous as an abolitionist poet, felt obliged to issue a lengthy public statement explaining why his name did not appear on the Olney petition.

In 1792, the abolitionists were more concerned with accusations of excess than paucity. In Parliament, Liverpool's Colonel Tarleton attempted to discredit a few of the petitions, including the major one from Edinburgh. Tarleton claimed that schoolboys had signed its petition.<sup>56</sup> Tarleton's observation was both correct and misleading. A private report to Clarkson on the Edinburgh subscription by a petition-watcher informed him that the skins had been kept open and in his sight for three days and not sent from house to house. No one under 14 years of age was allowed to sign. When some boys did get at one sheet the watcher had cut their names off, at the expense, he sadly concluded, 'of twenty-six good names with them'.<sup>57</sup>

Tarleton's list of frauds also included Ipswich. Ipswich was also one of the few examples of a local challenge. The rebuttal revealed that the canvasser was familiar with every name on the petition. All in all 715 housekeepers had been signed up and others had offered themselves. The signing was public and in the presence of hundreds of witnesses. The defender of the Ipswich petition challenged the anonymous denouncer to offer a single false name. As in Edinburgh, open and public signing apparently had been chosen in anticipation of exactly the sort of challenges levelled in Parliament. In Northampton a resident challenger reported in triumph that a pauper had, in fact, signed the petition. With equal triumph abolitionists cited this accusation as evidence against any massive misrepresentation of the Northampton signatures. Given the heavy preemptive precautions taken by the abolitionists, it is not surprising that only ten petitions were named as fraudulent in Parliament, and those in the vaguest terms. Of those few for which contemporary discussion is available, all seem to have been scrupulously monitored. The probability of

more than insignificant fraud seems extremely low. The year 1792 marked the last gasp in Parliament of challenges to the authenticity of any abolitionist petitions.<sup>58</sup>

The contemporary discussion of who signed or who might have signed also affords us some idea of the ever-disputed boundaries of eighteenth-century legitimacy. In 1792, as in 1788, we have no clear idea of the number of signatures at the national level. Neither the London abolitionists nor MPs seem to have been particularly interested in the grand total. An outstanding number such as Manchester's signers in 1787 or in 1792 might be widely publicized. Otherwise figures were reported only for local consumption. For 1788 it has only been possible to uncover reports for three Northern towns out of a total of 102 petitions. Manchester's 10 639 is the only one purporting to be exact. Manchester, Sheffield, York and two other petitions accounted for over 15 500 signatures. These five petitions together represented, of course, less than 5 per cent of the total. If they represented even as much as five times their proportionate share of the total *signatures*, over 60 000 signed the 1788 petition. The only contemporary claim I have come across was 100 000. It is worthwhile noting that this easily could be the case if the 15 000 signatures represented by the known 5 per cent of the petitions counted for as little as 15 per cent of the signatures.

For 1792 we are on somewhat firmer ground. From a survey of the provincial press it was possible to ascertain figures for 44 petitions. The numbers given would have to be taken as low estimates for their areas since some figures were reported as interim totals while the petitions were still being signed. The 44 known petitions represent one in twelve (8.5 per cent) of the total of 519. They accounted for 97 800 signatures.<sup>59</sup> If the 44 represented even three times as many signatures as they did petitions (that is, one-quarter of the signatures), 390 000 signed in 1792. This figure does not seem unreasonably high. In 1814, in far more hurried circumstances, the abolitionists claimed 750 000 names on 800 abolitionist petitions.<sup>60</sup>

The 1814 total was the first for which Clarkson advanced even a round figure. In 1788-92 the number of localities representing the geographical breadth of petitioning was more significant to the abolitionists than the total number of signers. Only with the coming of counter-mobilizations on other issues in the mid-1790s did more precise numbers of signers appear salient to the protagonists. In November 1795 Manchester's two petitions to the House of Commons on Pitt's Sedition Bills carried 11 654 signatures (7 351 loyalists



as against 4 303 opponents). A month later Manchester's maximum canvass of petitions to the Lords attracted 30 011 signers (12 185 loyalists as against 17 826 opponents). At the national level the petitions to the House of Commons on the Sedition Bills was tabulated at 161 206 (29 922 loyalists as against 131 284 opponents).<sup>61</sup> Exact totals therefore became important when claims to 'public' opinion were actually contested. Manchester's total number of petitioners in 1795 (to the Lords) easily exceeded the abolitionists' 20 000 in 1792, but the anti-sedition mobilization also appears to have been more localized. The abolitionist national mobilization of 1792 was certainly more than double the combined total of 160 000 on the sedition petitions.

The hostile witnesses of the opposition to abolition in 1788-92 demonstrate why the petitioners of 1792 did not have to tally signatures as carefully as the antagonists of 1795. The abolitionists were satisfied with having conveyed the sense of an overwhelming national consensus. In newspapers, pamphlets and in Parliamentary discussions, the slave interest questioned the policy, the efficacy, the sincerity, the humanity and even the sanity of the abolitionists, but not their popularity. Whether the people should be listened to was one thing. Whether they had spoken was another. Most defenders of the trade began with the defiant assertion that they were bravely taking the unpopular side. Their private assessments were no different from the public ones in this respect. The West Indians were stunned and demoralized. In 1788 John Pinney of Nevis vowed never to invest another pound in his West Indian estates. The agent for Jamaica acknowledged that the colonists had been wrong to believe that they could rely on 'policy' alone.<sup>62</sup>

One problem faced by the slave interest was the growing tendency of Parliamentary leaders during the 1780s to accept petitioning as a mode of integrating public opinion into the legislative process. Abolitionism, as we have indicated, was the most logical nominee for such an innovation, having accumulated the most abundant harvest of petitions to Parliament in the 1780s and early 1790s. The overall pattern of acceptance was not entirely smooth or automatic. In the case of the Gordon riots of 1780, petitioning was a preliminary stage of an episode of shattering collective violence. In its wake there were demands for curbing mass petitions. Large political gatherings for any purpose continued to arouse official anxiety. At the abolitionist petition meeting of 1792 in Edinburgh, which attracted more than 3500 people, the magistrates placed the castle troops, the town guard

and two troops of horse on alert despite the solemn order with which the meeting was called.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, no one was more aware than the Prime Minister that the public petition had proved as valuable to the Government as to the Opposition. In 1784 Pitt made effective use of overwhelming petitioning against the Fox-North coalition in order to strengthen his claim to national support. When Pitt demanded some immediate legislative response to the abolition petitions in 1788 he was simply extending a perspective which had served him well.<sup>64</sup> Again, in April of 1792, Pitt issued the last threat of his Parliamentary career to go to the country if the House of Commons voted to postpone gradual abolition for as much as eight years.

In 1788-92, popular national petitioning was still an imponderable element of political behaviour. The ever-cautious Wilberforce discouraged any public meeting by the London Society and the abolitionist petition campaign of 1788 developed beyond his control. Mass abolitionist petitioning was unleashed again only after Parliament's negative vote of 1791, and thereafter not for 20 more years. The campaign of 1788 provoked references to the anti-Catholic campaign of 1780, when petitioning climaxed in London's worst riot of the century. Finally, as the fear of Jacobinism gathered steam during 1792, abolitionism was yoked to emerging British radicalism and attacked as the Trojan horse of political and religious revolution.<sup>65</sup>

Besides raising thorny questions about the legitimacy and weight of petitions in the political process, mass petitioning opened up volatile questions about who was a legitimate signatory. From the early debates in Parliament it seems clear that criminals and children under 14 were not regarded as legitimate signatories. They were assumed, on all sides, to delegitimize petitions. By and large, working men seem to have been acknowledged as legitimate signatories from the outset. Even when working men alone submitted a petition, they were designated by MPs as 'numerous and respectable'. When a West Indian MP challenged the general right of workers to petition (on another matter) in 1794, his motion was immediately rejected. The right to petition the legislature was designated as one of the distinguishing characteristics between free men and slaves.<sup>66</sup>

Signatures of independent working men were one thing; paupers were another. From the controversy over the Ipswich petition it is clear that paupers were not sought out by the petition sponsors, nor did opposition to signatures of paupers necessarily come from conservatives. Radicals denounced signatures obtained by agents of the

government from the dependent poor. It is only in 1814 that one finds evidence of an account of a town's dependent poor signing its petition against the slave trade. It may well be that by then the virtual consensus on abolition of the slave trade ensured that no one would challenge the names on ground of dependency to the powerful in the community.<sup>67</sup> After 1788 communities were never left in doubt that what was wanted was signers unlimited.

Women were the principal group whose status as potential signers changed during the age of abolition, and indeed in response to it. In 1788 there was not even public speculation that women should sign petitions, although they were listed as subscribers of funds and vigorously participated in debates.<sup>68</sup> In 1792 their disbarment from petitioning was cited as an injustice by the radical Methodist propagandists of Manchester. Norwich radicals went as far as suggesting the signing of a separate female petition. The gender line was breached at least once, in England at Belford, and a separate women's petition was reported from Scotland.<sup>69</sup> The fear of delegitimation generally outweighed calls for unlimited female signatures. By 1807 women were prominently canvassing in Yorkshire's famous slave-trade election, but in 1814 a news item still reported that a woman had shed tears of frustration at her inability to subscribe to the abolition petition. By 1830 women were signing separate petitions in considerable numbers, and at the climax in 1833 they presented Parliament with the largest antislavery petition of them all. A huge coil signed by 187 000 'ladies' of England was carried into the House of Commons by four MPs. The unrepresented beyond the line of freedom had come to be represented by the unrepresented beyond the line of gender.<sup>70</sup>

What was the result of the abolitionist breakthrough in 1788-92? It was certainly not the immediate abolition of slavery nor even of the slave trade. The only unequivocal political result was the regulation of that trade on terms which still allowed it to reach its all-time peak in the decade after 1788. The man-trade still had a great deal of Parliamentary support, as abolitionists were bitterly to discover during 20 long years. The most significant immediate result was rather the emergence of a new attitude towards slavery and the slave trade.

The arrival of the abolitionist mentality can be documented at a number of levels. Before 1788 even those who were most hostile to slavery tended to be either fatalistic or apocalyptic about the chances of altering the Atlantic economies. When Adam Smith cautioned his students that unfree labour was likely to characterize most of the earth for a long time to come he was merely projecting on to a world scale

the hundreds of years required to complete the evolution of Western European labour from largely bound to largely waged or independent labour.<sup>71</sup> On the eve of popular abolitionism the Abbé Raynal's passionately anti-imperialist history of European expansion reflected a sense of global impotence about patterns of overseas behaviour. He still saw only two possible sources of change: a maroon Spartacus in the colonies or a consensus of crowned heads in Europe. Even this involved the intervention of a *deus ex machina* from outside the previous pattern of historical development: 'Isn't the future splendour of these colonies a dream, and wouldn't the happiness of these regions be a still more amazing phenomenon than their original devastation?'<sup>72</sup> It was precisely in the light of such eighteenth-century projections that their reversal was to appear so extraordinary. Even those who condemned slavery root and branch on religious grounds saw no hope of dramatically altering the system before the age of abolition. On the very eve of popular abolitionism in 1787 John Wesley preached at Manchester on one of his last tours, apparently unaware that his path had crossed that of Thomas Clarkson on his first abolitionist journey. A year later Wesley was enthusiastically including abolitionism in his sermons at Bristol and pledging his support to the new crusade.<sup>73</sup>

No better example can be found of sailing with the new wind than in the writings of Arthur Young. In 1772 the quantifier and geographer of liberty and slavery had classified Britain's African trade as intrinsically 'of very great importance; but, besides these circumstances, the immense article of our American colonies on it, renders it to the highest degree advantageous'. In 1788 the same author, reviewing Samuel Estwick's reprinted economic defence of the slave trade (first published in 1773), now dismissed the very thought of such a defence: 'To offer any remarks on such [a] position, and towards the close of the eighteenth century,' he solemnly intoned, 'would be paying a very poor compliment to the understanding of my readers.'<sup>74</sup> Young was neither the first nor the last who would imply that they had known for an age what they had discovered only yesterday.

Reviewing the cultural artifacts on the slave trade produced by the British Parliament during the eighteenth century it is evident that in the case of the slave trade we are not dealing with the cumulative outcome of a slowly shifting moral/economic boundary. On the evidence one would be hard pressed to produce even faint harbingers in Parliament of the cultural revolution of 1787-92. Before 1787

Britain had built up an intricate network of trade relations with various West African rulers and factors and almost nothing else. The last pre-abolitionist Parliamentary enquiries into the conditions of the African and sugar trades were focused exclusively on overhead costs of fortification and threats of international competition. The governmental political enquiries in 1788-92 operated within an entirely new framework. The old economic and demographic questions were extended and even systematized. But entirely new fields of enquiry were now opened: the exact role of British traders in the total transoceanic trade; the motives for intra-African wars resulting in slaves; the relative sources of slaves produced by breeding, capture, or judicial proceedings; African incentives and disincentives to labour; the variety of African political and religious systems; the ways in which slaves viewed their European carriers; relationships between European buyers and African sellers; the antiquity and origins of the slave trade; the nature of property relations in Africa; the nature of African religion; and conditions on the middle passage and in the West Indies.

Reviewing this new pattern of enquiry David Davis has been particularly struck by its cathartic and action-avoiding functions: 'From a psychological perspective, the investigations can be seen as a ritual of expiation that temporarily exorcised the slave trade's worst evils.' The 'calling of witnesses, quite apart from the timing of votes, helped to prolong a public catharsis'.<sup>75</sup> Yet, compared with the half-century before 1788, the cognitive impact of the investigation was far more significant than any putatively affective dalliance. What was psychologically new was the entire investigative format. The questioners treated the slave trade as part of a social system with significant political, religious and communal impacts. What had changed, and permanently so, was a cognitive world-view, whether one deals with it in terms of its psychological or its political dimensions. For the first time the political system raised issues revealing concern with Africa and the West Indies as human communities rather than purely trading units. And the range and nature of the questions, even where they highlighted differences between European and African standards, implied that to accept West African standards regarding the slave trade, even beyond the line, was to allow Europeans to accept standards of behaviour rejected by Europeans among themselves.

In the new political atmosphere, when proslave-trade witnesses cited conviction for 'witchcraft' as one of the sources of enslavement

in Africa, they were announcing that they accepted West African juridical standards which the European legal community now contemptuously rejected as barbarous.<sup>76</sup> Every African person convicted of witchcraft was *ipso facto* an innocent victim of criminal superstition. On issue after issue the non-economic standards of two worlds collided suddenly and starkly, dogged by the implicit new question: by which set of standards ought British subjects to conduct business around the world? By 1788 witchcraft was already distant enough from educated European culture to be dismissed with contempt. Stunned by this new wave of expansive Eurocentrism, the African traders tacked futilely towards cultural relativism. The Privy Council and Parliamentary hearings on the slave trade between 1788 and 1792, like public discourse out of doors, represented a paradigmatic leap in the relationship between the British metropolis and the Atlantic slave system.<sup>77</sup>