

The Transatlantic Slave Trade

The Abolition

Activity : The Real Abolitionists

Most people in Britain don't know very much about what is happening in the Caribbean. Most have heard of slavery but they don't really know how it involves them.

Tell students to imagine that it is the year 1774. The slave trade and slavery are just beginning to trouble public opinion and arouse opposition. Mary Prince, the first black British woman to escape from slavery, has just published her book *'The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, related by herself'* (see excerpt on p19).

Task A: *Imagine the following scenario*

You are a journalist. You hear Mary Prince reading an excerpt from her book at a public meeting in the Town Hall.

This is the first time you have heard someone talking in this way about slavery in connection with England. You were deeply moved and you want to write an article about Mary Prince and the slave trade for a national newspaper.

You will need to think of a headline to make people interested in the article. The aim of the article is to make as many people as possible in the country aware of who Mary Prince is and the plight of her and many others who have been, or still are enslaved to white masters.

Task B:

Design a poster to advertise Mary Prince's book. You want as many people as possible to buy a copy and read her story. So try to make the advert clear and simple but also thought provoking and relevant.

AIM:

This activity is designed to make students think both about the theme of resistance to slavery and the contribution of women to the anti-slavery campaign. Mary Prince is one of many women who fought hard against slavery and helped to bring about its abolition.

The role of white male activists often dominates the history of the abolition movement.

But women played a vital role in shaping the movement and influenced the activities, organisation and policies of the campaign.



'Am I not a Woman and a Sister', Anti-Slavery Emblem'

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Mary Prince

“Oh the horrors of slavery! - How the thought of it pains my heart! But the truth ought to be told of it; and what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave - I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they break our chains, and set us free...

I am often much vexed and I feel great sorrow when I hear some people in this country say, that the slaves do not need better usage, and do not want to be free. They believe the foreign people, who deceive them and say slaves are happy. I say, Not so. How can slaves be happy when they have the halter round their neck and the whip upon their back? And are disgraced and thought no more of than beasts? - and are separated from their mothers and husbands, and children and sisters, just as cattle are sold and separated?

Since I have been here I have often wondered how English people can go out into the West Indies and act in such a beastly manner. But when they go to the West Indies, they forget God and all feeling of shame, I think, since they can see and do such things. They tie up slaves like hogs - moor them up like cattle, and they whip them, so as hogs, or cattle, or horses never were flogged; - and yet they come home and say, and make some good people believe, that slaves don't want to get out of slavery.

But it is not so. All slaves want to be free - to be free is very sweet. I have been a slave myself - I know what slaves feel - I can tell by myself what other slaves feel and by what they have told me. The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery - that they don't want to be free - that man is either ignorant or a lying person. I never heard a slave say so. They can't do without slaves, they say. What's the reason they can't do without slaves as well in England? Let them work ever so hard in England, they are far better off than slaves. If they get a bad master, they give warning and go hire another.

They have their liberty. That's just what we want. We don't mind hard work, if we had proper treatment, and proper wages like English servants, and proper time given in the week to keep us from breaking the Sabbath. But they won't give it; they will have work - work - work, night and day, sick or well, till we are quite done up. This is slavery and I tell it to let English people know the truth and I call loud to the great King of England, till all the poor blacks be given free, and slavery done up for evermore.”

taken from *'The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, related by herself'*, London, 1831

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Mary Prince Case Study

Mary Prince was born into slavery in 1788 on a farm in Bermuda, at the time a British colony off the coast of Virginia, USA. When she was 12, she was sold for £20 to owners who treated her brutally; her mistress would frequently punch her head and it is thought that these blows may have led to Mary Prince's near blindness later on in life. She was also regularly flogged, sometimes while tied to a ladder and she finally ran away when her master struck her in the small of her back as violently as he could and lashed her until she could no longer stand. She never fully recovered from this beating. Five years later she was sold to a new owner and taken to Turks Island, where she witnessed murders and was repeatedly stripped naked, hung up by her wrists and beaten.

Throughout her enslavement, Mary Prince had always shown a spirit of resistance and protest. As she was both born and sold into slavery in Bermuda, she had avoided the ordeals experienced by African slaves such as kidnapping, the Middle Passage, the period of 'seasoning' before being sold and the gruelling plantation work. Apart from cultivating and selling crops she had also learned other skills such as milking cows, herding sheep and cattle, feeding animals, taking care of children, cooking for a family and doing the household chores. In this way she became extremely useful to her owners and through this gained courage and a sense of self worth that led her to freedom. The last period in her life that she spent as a slave was with a Bermudan merchant, John Wood and his wife, who took her to Antigua. A period of ill health initially dominated Mary Prince's life and caused her many problems with her new owners. They had heard that Mary Prince was a hard worker, but found themselves unable to exploit her as much as they had intended.

Throughout their constant complaints about her job performance, the punishments, the floggings and probably the sexual harassment (as Mr Woods would have seen Mary Prince not just as his slave but also as his sexual property), Mary Prince stood up to the Woods. Without telling them of her plans, she married a religious and dedicated free black man, Daniel James, a carpenter and musician. This infuriated the Woods because it showed refusal to accept her role as a slave. Mary Prince also used her time with the Woods to save for her freedom. By selling coffee, yams and other provisions to Ship's captains and washing clothes for money she eventually found herself in a position to negotiate her freedom.

When the Woods travelled to London in 1828, Mary Prince saw an opportunity for her freedom and asked if she could accompany them. They agreed to this and indeed she did eventually find freedom in England, but the battle was long and gruelling and worsened Mary Prince's health considerably. The Woods continued to be as persistent and dominating towards Mary Prince, but unfortunately for them, their cultural arrogance, feelings of white superiority and fear blinded them to Mary Prince's intelligence. And although they did manage to prevent a discussion in the House of Commons about their behaviour as slave owners and delay the presentation of a petition gathered by Mary Prince (the first anti-slavery petition by a woman to the British Parliament), the Woods left England for Antigua without her. The case of Mary Prince had become public and the Woods were forced to give up their struggle to avoid any more embarrassment.

Survival in London was a challenge for Mary Prince. She had very little money, she missed her husband and old friends and her health was getting her down. Eventually she heard of the Anti-Slavery Society who she turned to for help. She wanted desperately to return to Antigua but the Society told her that the laws of England could do nothing to ensure her freedom in Antigua.

Finally, in December 1829, after a series of different jobs and lodgings Mary Prince was employed by the Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, Thomas Pringle and his wife. The Society helped Mary Prince as much as they could by offering her money from time to time and also by trying, although unsuccessfully, to persuade Mr Woods to let her return a free woman to her husband in Antigua. When this failed, Mary Prince decided she would write her autobiography to tell people in England the truth about slavery.

Mary Prince was the first black British woman to write and publish an autobiography, an angry account of slavery. Her 'History' also formed a central part of the British anti-slavery campaign and offered an important narrative to world history, because it was not only a story of suffering and human indignity but also one of the strengths and triumphs of the human spirit.