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An Abolitionist too late?

James Beattie and the Scottish Enlightenment's lost chance to influence the Slave Trade debate

Glen Doris

The connection between the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers and the popular movement to Abolish the Slave Trade has been treated ambiguously by scholars of both abolition and the Enlightenment. The seemingly progressive and humanistic tendencies of the Enlightenment thinkers has led some to argue that it was their ideas that sparked the abolition debate, however many of the writers cited were themselves ambivalent about eradicating slavery. David Brion Davis argued that neither of the enlightenment notions of empiricism or natural law 'provided the basis for perceiving a single institution as an unmitigated evil.'¹ Studies of slavery have lauded Scottish thinkers such as Francis Hutcheson, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith and others and while it cannot be denied that these University Professors taught their students that slavery was inconsistent with enlightened values, when it came to the public discourse, these men were often reluctant to promote any measures for its removal.

When it came to deliberate action to remove the slave trade, there was hardly a literatus that would put the weight of his opinion in favour of such action. One of the Scottish professors who came closest to making a mark for the cause of antislavery was James Beattie of Aberdeen. As professor of Moral Philosophy at Marischal College, Beattie was a colleague of Thomas Reid and an apologist for what acme to be known as 'common sense' philosophy. It is Beattie whom, toward the end of the eighteenth century, key individuals looked to as a figure to rally the intellectual elite to influence the popular campaign to abolish the Slave Trade. Modern scholars of Beattie have argued that his last major work, the summation of his lectures, *Elements of Moral Science*, gave a full account of his thoughts on the illegality and moral evil that slavery represented. However this detailed critique was only published in 1793, after the crucial period of antislavery activism and lobbying had tried and failed to outlaw the British Slave Trade. Though one Beattie scholar, Roger Robinson,

¹ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (London, 1970), 458.

has argued that his ‘dedication to the abolitionist movement was not in doubt’,² it cannot be asserted that the arguments *Elements* contained were in any way significant to the British debate, considering the author himself had suggested that his thoughts had come out too late to be of any influence.³

What this paper will suggest is that though Beattie had ample opportunity to add his literary weight to the antislavery movement early on, he repeatedly refused to publish anything on slavery despite numerous pleas to do so over an extended period. This refusal to publish removed from the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers the initiative to take the primary action against slavery and removed Beattie from any place of prominence in antislavery consciousness. This paper will examine an early, unpublished antislavery work of Beattie and explore the rationale behind the Aberdeen professor’s refusal to publish what could have been a significant contribution to the early arguments against the Slave Trade.

In the decades before the establishment of the London Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the Scottish literati had been among the first to write against the institution of slavery. Writers such as Francis Hutcheson had, without specifically addressing the enslavement of Africans, undermined the age old legitimacy of slavery first proposed by Aristotle by arguing that the division of humanity into masters and slaves was unreasonable.⁴ Following in Hutcheson’s wake Adam Smith began to address the specific problem of Europe’s use of African slaves as part of his wider philosophical agenda, but as he was not writing against the morality of slavery within British society his arguments were based around an assessment of the unprofitability of the slave system for agriculture. Smith’s protégé John Millar wrote more extensively against the slave system in his treatise on the origin of ranks in European society, adding more thoughts with each new edition of his work. However, Millar’s agenda was not specifically to address the morality of slavery, rather its erosion in Europe over time and through economic forces. For both Millar and Smith, slavery was an institution that had passed its usefulness and lingered on in the Americas due to the ignorance of the slaveholders. If they could be made to understand that their plantations and farms could better be served by using hired labour, as had occurred in Europe during the gradual erosion of the villein system, then modern slavery would become extinct as well. The

² James Beattie, *The Works of James Beattie: Miscellaneous Items* (London, 1996), xviii.

³ James Beattie, *Elements of Moral Science*, Vol. 2 (London and Edinburgh, 1793), 218.

⁴ Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy, in Three Books.*, Vol. I (Glasgow and London, 1755), 301..

purpose of their arguments was to persuade the slaveholders that it was in their best interests to free their slaves, however they drew the line at condemning the practice as morally evil. To their own dismay, these men acknowledged that the keeping of slaves held more attraction than just economic gain. Slavery was attractive because of its allowance of undiluted dominance of one human being over another. Smith confessed to his students as early as 1762 that he feared the institution would be perpetual.⁵

James Beattie, having been lionized for his 1770 attack on the sceptical Philosophy of David Hume in his *Essay on the Nature of Truth in Opposition to Sophistry and Skepticism*, a work which won him nationwide fame, an honorary doctorate from Oxford University and a Pension of £200 per year from the King, was, for a time, seen as The popular scholarly voice standing for moral virtues in Britain. Regarded today for his skill as a poet rather than as a philosopher, Beattie has come to be defined by his antagonism toward Hume, rather than any lasting contribution to metaphysical thought. However in recent scholarship his name has become associated with Abolition due to his writings on slavery, certainly his detailed critique in *Elements of Moral Science*, but also as early as in his *Essay on Truth* Beattie had expressed some brief but strong sentiments against the practise and criticized Hume's racially polygenist ideas. After its publication and continued success, the demand for Beattie's work required four further additions, published up until 1776. Beattie found friends in literary circles from Edinburgh to London, the latter being where he became firm friends with the likes of Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, Sir Joshua Reynolds and the actor David Garrick. One of the key friendships formed was with Elizabeth Montagu, organizer of the Blue Stockings society, who encouraged Beattie to turn his literary skill to attacking slavery in the hopes of engaging the public in discussion of its abolition. The material for just such an attack was close at Beattie's hand.

Lecture notes from Beattie's class on moral philosophy, dated around 1764, contained a different kind of argument against slavery from that offered by Smith or Millar. Beattie took the view that slavery was unlawful and that, despite the rationale given for its contemporary usage, nothing could justify its continuation except political and economic expediency; the fact of its continuance cast aside any illusion of the idea of a moral British society.⁶ In

⁵ R.L.Meek, D.D.Raphael and P.G. Stein (eds), Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Indianapolis, 1982), 187.

⁶ James Beattie, "MS 555 Lecture Notes on Moral Philosophy" (Manuscript, James Beattie Papers, Aberdeen University Library, c.1764).

1778 these early ideas were written into an essay intended for publication in his collection *Dissertations Moral and Critical*. However almost immediately after its completion Beattie decided to suppress it. The essay, confusingly titled ‘On the Lawfulness and Expediency of Slavery, especially that of the Negroes’, was never published as a stand alone piece, its arguments only making their way into print as part of the later *Elements of Moral Science*. In a footnote in that work Beattie attempted to account for his disinclination to have his essay published earlier:

These pages on slavery [he recalled] contain in brief the substance of a treatise composed in the year one thousand seven hundred and seventy-eight, from materials which I had gradually been collecting for almost twenty years. I then had thoughts of publishing the whole; but was prevented, partly by my not having at that time access to all the books I wished to consult, and partly by the fear of having misrepresented some things, in consequence of false or partial information. I find however, since this matter, having attracted the notice of the legislature, came to be minutely investigated, that my information was in general but too well founded.⁷

The circumstances of Beattie writing his essay on the Lawfulness (or more particularly the unlawfulness) of slavery are a mystery. In a letter to his friend and later biographer Sir William Forbes written in late 1778, Beattie detailed the essays he had written since March of that year. Forbes and Beattie’s other close friend Robert Arbuthnot were proof readers of much of his work and in the letter the Marischal professor gave an account of three essays written on memory, imagination and dreaming. Beattie also mentions writing a pamphlet on ‘Church musick’ which he wanted, if published, to be anonymous. He mentions writing a total of 370 pages of publishable work, but never mentions the essay on slavery that he described later as being written that year.⁸

The first mention of the essay appeared in a letter to Mrs Montagu dated 21 December 1779 where Beattie mentioned the three treatises already described to Forbes a year earlier but then also made detailed mention of another essay.

I have finished the following treatises. – On Memory and Imagination...
On Dreams... – On Slavery, particularly that of the Negroes... – On

⁷ Beattie, *Elements of Moral Science*, 217–18.

⁸ Letter James Beattie to Sir William Forbes, Aberdeen UL MS 30/1/154.

the Principle of Marriage.—On Language and Univeral Grammar.—On Sublimity in Writing—The last is not yet finished. . . . If all these things were to be printed, they would make two pretty good octavos. But some of them I fear it would be better to suppress than to publish; particularly the discourse on slavery; of which there is reason to apprehend that, it would rather create enemies to the author, than promote justice and benevolence. It is indeed the keenest remonstrance I have ever attempted: but though written with a good intention toward White men as well as Negroes, I dare not hope, that it would obtain a candid hearing, except from those who have no concern in the subject. . . .⁹

The reasons given to Mrs Montagu in 1779 for suppressing this work make no mention of lack of assurance of his information, nor of a fear of misrepresentation of the facts. To his close friend Beattie admitted that it was to avoid the enmity that such a treatise would bring to himself that he desired to suppress the essay. It is unclear why Beattie would only give detailed mention of his slavery essay to Mrs Montagu and not to Forbes, however the letter to Mrs Montagu presents us with an aspect of Beattie's character that prevents him from taking on controversial views, particularly if he is unsure of the weight of public opinion.

This seems to have been a common trait. At various times his letters describe a desire to avoid potential conflict or anything that might subject him to negative attention. His first and only dalliance with controversy was his essay against Hume, a work written in full confidence of the unpopularity of the sceptical philosophy. However even standing on the sure ground of popular support Beattie felt keenly the resulting persecution at the hands of Hume's supporters, something he was entirely discomfited by. His letters describe repeatedly a desire to be at peace with the world and to avoid any sort of renown that might also draw the unwanted attention of those who in his words, 'have been pleased to let the world know that they do not wish me well'.¹⁰

Beattie's *Essay on Truth* brought him fame, but not fortune and he earnestly sought some sort of remuneration for his work, particularly in the form of a stipend from the crown. However he would not sacrifice his peaceful life for such a reward. In 1773 his fame brought him to the notice of the University

⁹ James Beattie, 'Letter to Mrs Montagu, 21 December, 1779'. Aberdeen UL MS 30/1/177.

¹⁰ Margaret Forbes, *Beattie and His Friends* (Altrincham, 1990), 103.

of Edinburgh, where the chair of Natural Philosophy had become vacant due to the death of Dr James Russell. The Town Council asked Sir William Forbes to approach Beattie with the offer of the chair, or, once he had agreed to take the post, to encourage Dr Adam Ferguson to exchange the Chair of Moral Philosophy for that of Natural Philosophy in order to allow the Aberdonian the role more suited to his experience.¹¹ Beattie refused the offer, not once but twice, each time giving the reason that his peace and quiet was worth more to him than even the greater pay and easier workload the Edinburgh Chair would guarantee him. Additional pressure was brought to bear on the subject a year later when Ferguson's rumoured retirement brought renewed vigour to the Edinburgh Town Council's desire to fill the post with Beattie. Requests for a positive answer came from as far afield as London, but Beattie's firm view that any offer, should it be made, would be refused 'for private reasons'¹² ensured that, in this situation, the Marischal professor would be left alone. His experience of controversy after the publication of the *Essay on Truth* did little more than accelerate his growing fear of making enemies, and it is in this personal climate of fear that Beattie now decided that any of his writings which had the slightest chance of ruffling feathers should be either published anonymously or suppressed entirely.

The manuscript of Beattie's essay *On the Lawfulness and Expediency of Slavery, particularly that of the Negroes* exists among his papers in the Aberdeen University Library. It is possibly a later handwritten copy of his original as the subscript 'written in the year 1778' is appended to its title. The small handwriting is clearly Beattie's own and its seventeen numbered pages are neatly laid out as if ready for submission to a publisher. It contains a clear argument on the nature of contemporary African slavery and presents clear and logical arguments for its unlawfulness. It is remarkable for its passionate attack while still maintaining a strong philosophical logic and avoidance of emotive appeals to the sentiments, as was the mainstay of most antislavery works of the time.

Beattie's essay did not begin with a condemnation of slavery but a philosophical justification for the honest rankings in society of master and servant, the latter being hired to 'cooperate' in the endeavours of the former. He acknowledged that such rankings are as much a work of providence as a result of the 'natural effect of the diversity of character.'¹³ In true philosophical

¹¹ Ibid., 102

¹² Ibid., 104

¹³ James Beattie, "On the Lawfulness and Expediency of Slavery, Particularly that of the Negroes, Written in the Year 1778." in Roger J. Robinson (ed.), *The Works of James*

form, he introduced the idea of slavery with a definition of its various forms and effects on the individual. The title of the work is drawn from his desire to answer the positive assertions that slavery was both lawful and expedient made even by some members of the philosophical elite in Britain.

In arguing against slavery, it may perhaps be thought that I dispute without an opponent; for that no man in his senses could ever be so absurd, as to offer reasons for vindication of a practice so unjust and inhuman. But they who think so are mistaken. I myself met with a native of Great Britain, a person of some rank and learning, who maintains, that the lower orders of people in this country ought still to be, as they once were, slaves; and to be annexed ... to the soil, and bought and sold along with it.¹⁴

In making this accusation, Beattie quotes from a source referred to in a footnote as 'Lord M-----o', the barely disguised Lord Monboddo, whose identity as the provider of the quote was revealed privately in a letter to the bishop of Chester Bielby Porteous.¹⁵ While Monboddo was hardly representative of the scholarly consensus, his opinions on slavery were shared by some and Beattie set out to demonstrate that any justification for holding slaves was illegitimate, and that slavery was not only unlawful and immoral, but (echoing Smith), inexpedient.

The argument tracks the history of slavery from antiquity but makes clear that the issue at hand is not merely to critique the past, but to address the present justifications for the enslavement of Africans. Beattie addressed all of the contemporary apologists of the slave trade who cited not only classical arguments for slavery as a natural state, but also the legalists who professed the legitimacy of enslaving captives taken in wars, the most common justification for the buying of African slaves. His words convey the atmosphere of the classroom, not the pulpit, and his work avoids descriptions of the horrors of slave conditions. The purpose of his argument was to undermine the moral and legal justification of the slave state in British colonial society, just as the ruling in the Knight vs Wedderburn case of 1778 had established the legal precedent for abolishing it in Scotland.

Beattie: Miscellaneous Items, (London, 1996), 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6

¹⁵ James Beattie, 'Letter to Bielby Porteous, dated 17th December 1779'. Aberdeen University Library MS 30/1/176.

Beattie's words are not merely a dry dissertation of the facts and his lively literary style makes the essay highly readable. While his argument resounds with an obvious passion, he made clear that passion alone would not win the slaves their freedom.

In protesting against such a practice [that of holding slaves], it is not easy to preserve that lenity of language and coolness of argument, which philosophy recommends: and a certain author¹⁶ has not sought to preserve it, but explicitly declares, that he who can argue seriously in vindication of slavery deserved no another answer than the stab of a poniard. I am not, however, so bloody-minded; and shall endeavour to justify what I have said by an appeal to the reason, rather than the passions of the reader.¹⁷

Beattie's prose presents the reader with a clear argument boiling with passion but maintaining a focus on the facts of the nature of slavery. As in his essay against Hume's scepticism, the power of his writing is not in its originality but in the popularizing of the ideas of the more esoteric philosophies and thinkers of his day and before. Beattie's ideas reflect those of Hutcheson, Smith and Montesquieu, the latter from whom he drew much of his foundational critique of slavery. He also drew upon more recent material such as Abbé Raynal¹⁸ and particularly John Wesley's *Thoughts upon Slavery*, a source the essay acknowledges at its conclusion. The possibilities of the influence that this essay could have had cannot be known, of course, but it should be noted that Beattie wrote this seven years before Thomas Clarkson's prize-winning essay on the slave trade that started the popular antislavery movement in Britain. Such an essay had the potential to draw Beattie into the limelight yet again, a fact that may have been influential in his decision not to publish at the time.

If, as he stated in 1793, his concern for the accuracy of his sources prevented publication, it is apparent that the gathering of additional sources was not a high priority as the essay was not touched or mentioned again for the next ten years. In an inventory of Beattie's books, written mostly in his

¹⁶ Abbé Raynal.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6

¹⁸ The quote about stabbing with a poniard is from Abbé Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*. Translated from the French by J. Justamond, M.A., Vol. 3 (London, 1776), 166. As Beattie uses the word 'poniard' instead of 'dagger' as in this edition, it is possible that he read it in the original French or he received the quote in some other way.

own hand, no mention is made of any antislavery titles.¹⁹ However, contained within the notebook listing the books in his personal library, is a small scrap of paper with the superscript, 'A list of books and pamphlets relative to the Slave Trade'. This list, written in another hand (possibly after Beattie's death) is a list of items belonging to the Aberdeen professor to be sold to a bookseller. This separate document lists Wesley's pamphlet along with several others, including a book written by his friend and antislavery activist James Ramsay. It is unclear why these books were not included in the main library list, but their presence nonetheless adds to a picture of man conflicted between his feelings toward injustice and his desire to avoid controversy, even in his own private world.

If Beattie wanted a life of peace and friendship with all the world, his desire would be sorely tested a decade later as the mainstream antislavery movement gathered adherents from many of the elite social circles in Britain. By January 1788 the attention of the antislavery activists was turned toward Aberdeen and to James Beattie. If the nascent Slave Trade Abolition Bill promoted by Wilberforce was to be effective it would require the best and brightest minds to be recruited to the cause, and in this the London committee and its adherents felt they had a ready ally in the Aberdeen literatus. In a letter to Beattie dated 21 January 1788, Thomas Percival, chairman of the Manchester Abolition Society outlined the antislavery movement's desire to recruit the cooperation of the British Universities:

The committee established in Manchester for the relief of the oppressed Africans are extremely anxious to avail themselves of the aid and cooperation of the Universities in England and Scotland. Your authority and influence at Aberdeen, might be of singular advantage in promoting their humane and laudable views.²⁰

In reply Beattie evidently mentioned his yet unpublished essay, prompting Percival to encourage the pamphlet's publication as soon as possible:

Your very friendly and most welcome letter arrived yesterday and I feel it as a debt to justice and humanity, and consequently as a duty incumbent upon me to urge the publication of the interesting and valuable work you have in view. The petitions which are now preparing in various

¹⁹ Aberdeen University Library MS 30/2/47.

²⁰ Thomas Percival, 'Letter to James Beattie, 21st January, 1788', Aberdeen University Library MS 30/2/560.

Counties, Cities and Burroughs, will doubtless be presented during the present session of Parliament. But this ought to be no objection to the prosecution of your important undertaking. And I hope it will rather serve to forward the execution of it.²¹

In what must have been a rapid correspondence in which Beattie appears to have hesitated to commit his essay to publication, Percival pleaded again a week later on 8 February, 'Permit me again to urge the speedy publication of your tract on the Lawfulness of Slavery.'²²

Abolitionism had also attracted the attention of the Blue Stockings Society for Beattie's friend and London patron Mrs Montagu also wrote to address his apparent reluctance to commit his work to print. Writing in March of the same year, she pressed him to use his literary talents to help in the cause:

As I am very zealous, in the cause of slavery, I regretted that you did not publish what you had written on the subject. Few like you have the power of convincing, & the art of persuading. You think logically and you write eloquently. I know you will be glad to hear that the zeal of those who engage in the scheme for the abolition of slavery is temper'd by prudence, so that there is reason to hope the measures will be as beneficial, & as permanent as the perverse conditions of human things, & the weakness of human wisdom will allow.²³

A little further on her letter Mrs Montagu addressed what she felt to be a cause of his reluctance: 'I cannot think so ill of the age as to believe that profit and honour would not attend any thing you should publish. Will you be partial enough to me to think I am worthy of one copy of your work?' Beattie's own reasons for refusing to publish are given in a letter to Montagu in June of the same year. Addressing the issue of Sir William Dolben's successful bill regulating the middle passage and other Jamaican reports of reform of slave ownership, Beattie wrote of his disregard for his own work:

²¹ Thomas Percival, 'Letter to James Beattie, 4th February, 1788', Aberdeen University Library MS 30/2/562. This letter was written on the fly leaf of a printed circular letter from Granville Sharp, Chairman of the London Abolition Committee, dated 15th January, 1788.

²² Thomas Percival, 'Letter to James Beattie, 8th February, 1788' Aberdeen University Library MS 30/2/564.

²³ Mrs Montagu, 'Letter to James Beattie, March 22nd, 1788', Aberdeen University Library MS 30/2/566.

My papers on the Slave Trade would now appear too late. The legislation seems to have engaged in an investigation of that business with a generous alacrity which does them infinite honour, and will undoubtedly bring on such regulations as would make my zeal and my arguments both unnecessary and unreasonable.²⁴

Beattie's essay did not address the abuses that Dolben's bill sought to regulate and it is hard to believe that whatever reforms he may have heard about would mitigate his central thesis; that slavery was unlawful and inexpedient. This excuse was appropriately swept aside by Mrs Montagu:

The Slave Trade has undergone some slight corrections, by which the zeal of humanity, before much warm'd in favour of the unhappy, would be in such a degree cooled if not quenched, thus it is much to be wished it should be rekindled, for the publication of your work on the subject I am therefore very desirous. You may expunge such parts as have already been redressed.²⁵

Yet, however much Mrs Montagu might have wished that Beattie's reluctance to publish was a temporary moment of indecision, it is clear from other correspondents that such was not the case. Writing to Beattie in April, William Forbes laments, 'I am sorry you abandoned your idea of publishing something on that horrid and disgraceful commerce, the African Slave Trade and perhaps you still may resume it. It may do much good.'²⁶

Other antislavery activists also wrote to encourage Beattie to publish, including Bielby Porteous, now bishop of London and hence a member of the House of Lords. Porteous sought a response to a pro-slavery tract written by former Jesuit Raymond Harris and turned to Beattie as one who was most able to respond to the arguments that the Bible authorized slavery. Again Beattie refused. So averse to having his views on slavery aired publicly, Beattie even begged his friend and correspondent the duchess of Gordon not to show anyone the copy of the essay he had given to her, lest it 'be seen by

²⁴ James Beattie, 'Letter to Mrs Montagu, 23rd June, 1788', National Library of Scotland Acc.4796. Box 92. F2.

²⁵ Mrs Montagu, 'Letter to James Beattie, August 20th, 1788', Aberdeen University Library MS 30/2/569.

²⁶ William Forbes, 'Letter to James Beattie, 26th April, 1788', National Library of Scotland Acc. 4796 Box 98/2. Transcript by Iain Whyte.

any eyes that are not very partial to the writer'.²⁷ He wrote to her that he felt his words and descriptions of abuses were not true any longer, as regulations in the colonies had 'mitigated the sufferings of the Negroes'. Beattie was regularly in contact with key activists in the abolition movement who regularly updated him with the facts of both the Slave Trade and the ploys of the pro-slavery lobbyists. To believe that he credulously accepted the propaganda of the planters in their statements regarding the pleasant lot of African slaves, seems to stretch the imagination. It is particularly hard to accept considering the fact that Beattie had his own inside source of information on the true state of colonial slavery.

However Beattie may have wished for anonymity when it came to abolitionist activism, his reputation as a partisan for the cause extended beyond his circle of friends. In January 1788 a letter arrived that challenged the Marischal professor to take action in the cause. Written by the modern equivalent of a whistle blower on the plantation establishment, the writer who styled himself 'Africanus' gave Beattie an honest account of the horrors perpetrated against slaves in the West Indies. Africanus was himself a member of the planter establishment, having to hide his true identity for fear of persecution at the hands of his fellow colonists. The long letter detailed the lies that had been told about the slaves' conditions in response to the parliamentary inquiry and should have certainly given an intelligent man like Beattie adequate reason to doubt the optimistic reports from the Caribbean newspapers. Africanus' purpose in writing was to ask Beattie, and others of his reputation, to take up the pen in the cause of abolition.

I therefore submit it to you, Sir, and to some other eminent men in your Church and Universities, to whom I am writing on this occasion, whether Petitions, from your very respectable and learned Bodies could not be promoted and expedited, so as to be presented to Parliament, along with the rest ... At the same time ... writing a kind of circular letter to the most distinguished literati, in the kingdom ... suggesting to them the idea of either writing expressly on the subject of slavery, or of mentioning it in their publications and discourses with the detestation becoming indignant Britons.²⁸

²⁷ James Beattie, 'Letter to the Duchess of Gordon, 20th November, 1788', National Library of Scotland, Acc.4796. Box 92. Transcript by Iain Whyte.

²⁸ Africanus, 'Letter to James Beattie, 26th January, 1788', Aberdeen University Library MS 30/2/561.

Whether Africanus did indeed write to other literati in Scotland is not known as no other letters from the anonymous whistle blower have been uncovered, but Beattie was apparently moved by the letter enough to encourage Marischal College to draft an antislavery petition to Parliament within a few months of receiving it. However if Africanus had hoped that his request would rouse the literati to put their skill to work tackling slavery, he must have been disappointed. Despite some of the Universities sending petitions, none of the Scottish Enlightenment writers published a single word in support of the Slave Trade bill. Beattie's own desperate attempts to avoid having his name publically linked to abolition went as far as professing to believe the propaganda of the plantation owners that slavery was no longer the problem he seemed, once, passionately to believe it was.

For Beattie, the protection of his reputation and desire for a quiet life superseded all other concerns and he resisted all requests for his words to be put to the service of abolishing the Slave Trade. While it is certainly evident that those on various Scottish and English abolition committees used his ideas, the evidence of the various letters about the publication of his essay demonstrates that Beattie, while heartily supporting the cause in his private letters, used every manner of excuse to avoid publishing something specifically on slavery. In a letter to Mrs Montagu (at this time a member of the London Antislavery Committee), congratulating her on the presentation of the Slave Trade bill in 1789, he also sought to remind her of his own anti-slavery credentials:

The truth is, I have been collecting materials on that subject for upwards of twenty-five years; and as far as my poor voice could be heard, have laboured, not altogether unsuccessfully, in pleading the cause of the poor Africans. This, at least, I can say with truth, that many of my pupils have gone to the West Indies; and, I trust, have carried my principles along with them, and exemplified those principles in their conduct to their unfortunate brethren.²⁹

It is not without reason that C. Duncan Rice, in his book *The Scots Abolitionists* dismissed this optimism as 'whistling in the dark'.³⁰

²⁹ Sir William Forbes, *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie LL.D.*, Vol. 2 (New York and Philadelphia, 1806), 441–2.

³⁰ C. Duncan Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists 1833–1861* (Baton Rouge and London, 1981), 19.

The significance of the delay in finally putting a detailed critique of slavery into print was not lost on Beattie in the end. The explanatory footnote in volume 2 of *Elements of Moral Science* previously mentioned, continued further as the author struggled to justify the delay in publishing.

It may be said that these remarks of mine come too late now (1792) when the commons of Great Britain have passed a vote for the abolition of the *slave-trade*. But, as *slavery* is not yet, nor likely to be soon, abolished; and as I think myself responsible, first to my own conscience, and secondly to the publick, for what I teach, I wish to be known what for these thirty years and upwards I have been publickly teaching on the subject of slavery.³¹

It was only when he was sure that public opinion was clearly in favour of Abolition that he allowed his thoughts to be published; all the while assuring his readers that he had always been a supporter of the cause. At the time of writing, Beattie was then not to know that the 1792 Slave Trade bill was first amended so as to include the key term 'gradual abolition' and then finally stopped entirely in the House of Lords, so that, effectively, it was defeated. After the tremendous public support for abolition attained in 1792, the war with France subsumed all hopes for abolishing the Slave Trade, as any form of protest against the government, whether by petition or campaign, was seen as sedition. The window of opportunity closed for a further fifteen years before peace finally allowed discussion of abolition to resurface. Beattie never lived to see the final success of Wilberforce's Bill as he died in 1803 after a long battle with illness.

James Beattie has been labelled an abolitionist due to his writings, largely contained in *Elements of Moral Science*, however their publication in 1793, after the crucial defeat of the Slave Trade bill in 1792 meant that his public support came too late to be of any use to the activists. While his letters to friends and abolitionist contacts outlined his unpublished essay, Beattie demurred in the face of their earnest requests to add his name to the nascent corpus of published antislavery material. The essay copy that exists contains philosophical insights that his friends considered invaluable to their cause, but despite their numerous and repeated requests, he declined to publish, all the while never letting them forget that he had the essay in his possession. While

³¹ Beattie, *Elements of Moral Science*, 218.

it can never be known for sure why he refused to publish when it would do the most good, his many letters describing the essay give the impression of wanting to be seen in private as an abolitionist, but not wanting to tell the world until he could be sure his words could not hurt his public reputation. Beattie's letters repeatedly describe his fear of being judged by enemies for what he wrote, as anything that hinted at possible controversy was either suppressed or published anonymously. In seeking a life of peace and calm he refused the mantle of the hero and denied even the opportunity for his work to be put to good use.

Finally in 1793 Beattie nailed his colours to the mast and declared himself an abolitionist, albeit in the midst of his general philosophical textbook. However his courage came too late, and even then he worried that he had said too much. In a letter to Mrs Montagu discussing the second volume of *Elements* he wrote: 'And on the slave-trade I have expiated much more than some would think I ought to have done in a book of Elements'.³² Even after the publication Beattie's anxieties regarding his reputation clouded his vision of doing right.

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³² James Beattie, 'Letter to Mrs Montagu, 10th January, 1793', Aberdeen University Library MS 30/1/335.