

THE ANTI-CORN LAW LEAGUE AND BRITISH ANTI-SLAVERY IN TRANSATLANTIC PERSPECTIVE, 1838–1846*

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ABSTRACT. *This article reassesses relations between the free-trade and anti-slavery movements in the mid-nineteenth century. It places well-known controversies over the removal of preferential import duties on free-grown sugar into the context of a broader and more complex relationship, in which the Anti-Corn Law League borrowed many of the tactics pioneered by the abolitionists, while also attempting to assume anti-slavery's mantle of moral reform. In particular, the article situates the campaigns in a transatlantic context complicated by the domestic agendas of American anti-slavery groups and southern cotton growers, both of whom tried to take advantage of the British free-trade movement for their own ends. Finally, it is argued that the apparent success of the League in forcing the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 not only contributed to the decline of anti-slavery as an effective extra-parliamentary movement, but also ensured that other moral reform campaigns such as the peace movement were forced to adopt the language and tactics of free-trade liberalism to survive, generating a lasting legacy that came to fruition with the emergence of the Gladstonian Liberal Party.*

The year 1838 was an auspicious one for British reform agitations. In August, West Indian planters were forced by a vociferous extra-parliamentary agitation into voluntarily abandoning the hated system of ‘apprenticeship’, which had bound freed-slaves to their former masters since the formal abolition of slavery in British territories in 1833.¹ Collectively, the campaigns for the abolition of the slave trade, slavery, and apprenticeship were the earliest examples of successful mass-mobilization pressure groups in Britain, and the latter in particular has been seen as the expression of a newly militant political consciousness amongst

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¹ A. Tyrrell, *Joseph Sturge and the moral radical party in early Victorian Britain* (London, 1987), ch. 7 passim; idem, ‘The “moral radical party” and the Anglo-Jamaican campaign for the abolition of the negro apprenticeship scheme’, *English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), pp. 481–502; W. A. Green, *British slave emancipation: the sugar colonies and the great experiment 1830–1865* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 151–61.

provincial dissenters.² However, as well as witnessing the culmination of one successful extra-parliamentary campaign, 1838 also saw the germination of another: for in October, an anti-Corn Law association was formed at Manchester in response to a lecture by John Bowring.³ This campaign was also dominated by middle-class dissenters, and its leaders were quick to seize on the advantages of claiming to be successors to the anti-slavery movement, particularly after the formation of the National Anti-Corn Law League in the spring of 1839. Many abolitionists were also hostile to the Corn Laws, believing them to be a sin against the natural order, and it is a truism of nineteenth-century radical history that moral reform campaigns were reliant on a heavily overlapping set of supporters at every level, from grass-roots to executive committees. Nonetheless, despite such ties, it was not unknown for organizations sharing members and underpinned by common principles to come into conflict over differing interpretations of those principles and the priorities that were accorded to them.

This article examines the often difficult relationship between the Anti-Corn Law League and the successor to Joseph Sturge's apprenticeship campaign, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS). Previous accounts of that relationship have focused on disputes over preferential import duties on West Indian sugar.⁴ The first aim is therefore to place these disputes in their broader context. The anti-slavery movement exercised an important early influence on the League's organization and tactics, while at the same time competing with the League for scarce financial and human resources. To build support, the League deliberately set out to appropriate the mantle of the anti-slavery movement as the quintessential vehicle for middle-class moral reform. The second aim is to evaluate the extent to which the League succeeded in this purpose, and how far that success contributed to the collapse of British anti-slavery as an effective reform movement by the 1850s.⁵

The article's final aim is to reveal the hitherto neglected transatlantic dimension to this relationship. Both movements were internationalist in outlook. As its name suggested, the BFASS looked to the global abolition of slavery, while leaders of the League, despite a natural concentration on the benefits of repeal

² Tyrrell, "'Moral radical party'", p. 499. The view of abolitionism as primarily an elite movement has been successfully challenged in S. Drescher, 'Public opinion and the destruction of British colonial slavery', in J. Walvin, ed., *Slavery and British society, 1776-1846* (Basingstoke, 1982), pp. 22-48; idem, 'Whose abolition? Popular pressure and the ending of the British slave trade', *Past and Present*, 143 (1994), pp. 136-66; and J. R. Oldfield, *Popular politics and British anti-slavery: the mobilisation of public opinion against the slave trade, 1787-1807* (London, 1998).

³ For the anti-Corn Law campaign see N. McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League, 1838-1846* (London, 1958); P. Pickering and A. Tyrrell, *The people's bread: a history of the Anti-Corn Law League* (Leicester, 2000).

⁴ C. D. Rice, "'Humanity sold for sugar': the British abolitionist response to free trade in slave-grown sugar", *Historical Journal*, 13 (1970), pp. 402-18; H. Temperley, *British anti-slavery, 1833-1870* (Aylesbury, 1972), chs. 7-8 passim.

⁵ For a suggestion that it did, see H. Temperley, 'Anti-slavery', in P. Hollis, ed., *Pressure from without in early Victorian England* (London, 1974), pp. 27-51, at pp. 46-8.

for Britain's own social and economic wellbeing, were at least partly motivated by a vision of free trade as the first step towards universal peace among nations.⁶ In this context, the United States came to play an important role in the work of each movement. To British abolitionists, the USA was a major field of operation following the emancipation of slaves in British colonies, encouraged by a shared language and strong religious and kinship ties with their American counterparts. The USA was more peripheral to the League's interests, but it played various intermittent and occasionally important roles in League propaganda as a potential economic rival, a market for manufactured goods, a supplier of cotton, a source of cheap corn, and even as a potential military opponent. Both campaigns endeavoured to forge links with supporters in the United States, and both were drawn inadvertently into the mire of American anti-slavery politics.⁷ In the end, however, the League's willingness to co-operate with southern free traders, in the hope of securing reciprocal tariffs and an easing of diplomatic tensions between Britain and the USA over the Oregon boundary question, demonstrated the extent to which it had subverted anti-slavery's moral authority by the mid 1840s.

I

The influence of anti-slavery precedents was clear in the tactics and organization adopted by the League: lecture tours, the mass-publication of tracts and the petitioning of parliament were all techniques of extra-parliamentary pressure borrowed from abolitionism, as was the structure of a centrally co-ordinated federation of local societies, although the League brought these tactics to new heights of efficiency and effectiveness.⁸ Even the great bazaars that were such propaganda and fundraising successes for the League had their precursors in events held to raise money for abolitionist societies in the United States.⁹ But

⁶ See R. F. Spall, 'Free trade, foreign relations, and the Anti-Corn Law League', *International History Review*, 10 (1988), pp. 405–32.

⁷ The links between the League and anti-slavery are long-established in American free-trade historiography, but have been practically ignored by British scholars: T. P. Martin, 'The upper Mississippi valley in Anglo-American anti-slavery and free trade relations, 1837–1842', *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 15 (1928), pp. 204–20; idem, 'Free trade and the Oregon question, 1842–1846', in A. H. Cole et al., eds., *Facts and factors in economic history: articles by former students of Edwin Francis Gay* (Cambridge, MA, 1932), pp. 470–91; more recently S. Meardon, 'From religious revivals to tariff rancor: preaching free trade and protection during the second American party system', *History of Political Economy*, 40 (Annual Supplement, 2008), pp. 265–98. See, however, K. Fielden, 'Richard Cobden and America' (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, 1966), ch. 3 passim.

⁸ McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League*; Pickering and Tyrrell, *People's bread*.

⁹ D. G. Hansen, *Strained sisterhood: gender and class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Amherst, 1993), ch. 6 passim; S. Morgan, 'From domestic economy to political agitation: women and the Anti-Corn Law League, 1839–1846', in K. Gleadle and S. Richardson, eds., *Women in British politics, 1760–1860: the power of the petticoat* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 115–33, at pp. 124–5, 127–8; Pickering and Tyrrell, *People's bread*, pp. 126–7, 208–12; P. Gurney, "'The sublime of the bazaar': a moment in the making of a consumer culture in mid-nineteenth-century England", *Journal of Social History*, 40 (2006), pp. 385–405.

the League's debt to anti-slavery was ideological as well as practical, and was particularly apparent in arguments used to rally wealthy middle-class dissenters to the cause. The importance of capturing the moral high-ground was recognized from the outset. On 25 October 1838, John Benjamin Smith declared that the Manchester Anti-Corn Law Association

had been established on the same righteous principle as the Anti-Slavery Society. The object of that society was to obtain the free right for negroes to possess their own flesh and blood – the object of this was to obtain the free right of the people to exchange their labour for as much food as can be got for it.¹⁰

Richard Cobden, the League's unofficial leader, wrote in 1840 to metropolitan radical Peter Alfred Taylor senior, urging his associates to appeal to the 'religious and moral feelings ... the energies of the Christian World must be drawn forth by the remembrance of the Anti-Slavery, and other struggles'.¹¹ However, it was difficult to keep this message central during the League's early years, when violent confrontations with Chartists and engagement in the seamier aspects of parliamentary elections threatened to embroil it in the disreputable side of popular politics.¹²

The solution was to establish free trade as a moral question, drawing on the argument that the Corn Laws were not only an unjust tax on the poor man's loaf, but also an unwonted interference with the natural (and therefore divine) law of free trade: a law designed to bring nations into peaceful and prosperous intercourse for the benefit of all classes. The influence of such reasoning on the Evangelical mind has been discussed extensively elsewhere.¹³ While the League's anti-establishment rhetoric meant that it had little appeal for Anglican Evangelicals, for similar reasons it proved supremely effective at attracting their dissenting counterparts. To facilitate this it procured the services of George Thompson, a prominent anti-slavery lecturer who had attained heroic status amongst abolitionists during his controversial tour of the United States in 1834–5. While Cobden later boasted of his own ability to appeal to the religious sensibilities of audiences, it was Thompson who made the greatest contribution to making the Corn Laws a moral question.¹⁴ A specialist in addressing female audiences, Thompson also helped organize a conference of religious ministers at Manchester in 1841, echoed by similar gatherings at Edinburgh and Caernarfon. As Cobden explained, 'Henceforth we will grapple with the religious feelings of the people – Their veneration for God shall be our leverage to upset their

¹⁰ Quoted in A. Prentice, *History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (2 vols., 1853; London, 1968), 1, p. 75.

¹¹ Cobden to P. A. Taylor, 4 May 1840, printed in R. Garnett, *The life of W. J. Fox* (London, 1910), pp. 258–9.

¹² McCord, *Anti-Corn Law League*, pp. 87–9, 99–103.

¹³ B. Hilton, *The age of atonement: the influence of Evangelicalism on social and economic thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford, 1988), ch. 2 passim. For Evangelicalism and anti-slavery see R. Anstey, *The Atlantic slave trade and British abolition, 1760–1810* (Basingstoke, 1975), ch. 8 passim.

¹⁴ For example Cobden to George Combe, 1 Aug. 1846, Cobden papers, British Library, Add. MS 43660, fos. 57–60 (hereafter Cobden papers).

reverence for the aristocracy Once rouse this organ of veneration in Englishmen, & all other appeals are vain.¹⁵

The Manchester conference, modelled on the precedent of the 1840 Anti-Slavery Convention, was attended by 644 ministers, the vast majority from dissenting churches. Although Pickering and Tyrrell have demonstrated that this support was not evenly spread across denominations, it was nevertheless the case that the League thereby gained influence over a large section of the dissenting community, particularly those with experience of political involvement through anti-slavery. It also greatly facilitated the involvement of women, enhancing the League's reputation for respectability and allowing it to use female agency as an effective means of fundraising.¹⁶ We now know far more about the significance of women in the British campaigns against slavery, particularly their decisive contribution to the move away from gradualist approaches to emancipation to a more militant demand for the 'total and immediate abolition' of slavery by the 1830s.¹⁷ The League itself used the phrase 'total and immediate repeal' from 1841, although it sometimes substituted 'abolition' for 'repeal', as in Charles Pelham Villiers's anti-Corn Law motion of 1843. As Cobden explained: "'immediate abolition" ... is stronger language than *total and immediate "repeal"*, if possible. It means all that the English language can express, and it is the old anti-slavery *shibboleth*.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the co-option of the anti-slavery constituency and assumption of the anti-slavery movement's mantle of moral reform was by no means smooth and uncontested. This was largely because anti-slavery itself was still very much alive and kicking, as the League soon discovered. Three separate societies emerged in 1839, each aiming to ameliorate the continued existence of slavery outside British territories by different means. The British India Society was founded by George Thompson and Joseph Pease of Darlington partly with the aim of encouraging the production of Indian sugar and cotton for the British market, in the hope that this would undermine the economic rationale for slavery in the Americas.¹⁹ Thomas Fowell Buxton's African Civilization Society aimed to destroy slavery at its source, by encouraging the development of Africa's agrarian economy in order to make agricultural exports more remunerative than slaves. The most influential, however, was the BFASS, which enlisted the support of

¹⁵ Cobden to Charles Pelham Villiers, 6 June 1841, printed in A. Howe, ed., *The letters of Richard Cobden* (4 vols., Oxford, 2007–), 1, pp. 223–4.

¹⁶ This paragraph draws on Pickering and Tyrrell, *People's bread*, chs. 6–7; also A. Tyrrell, '“Woman's mission” and pressure group politics', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library*, 63 (1980), pp. 194–230; Morgan, 'From domestic economy to political agitation'.

¹⁷ C. Midgley, *Women against slavery: the British campaigns, 1780–1870* (London, 1996).

¹⁸ Cobden to Duncan McLaren, 13 May 1843, West Sussex Record Office (hereafter WSR0), Cobden papers 71, fos. 16–17.

¹⁹ J. H. Bell, *British folks and British India fifty years ago: portraits of Joseph Pease and his contemporaries* (Manchester, 1891).

Thomas Clarkson himself as a firm link with the heroic period of anti-slavery endeavour.²⁰

Buxton's society collapsed after the failure of its attempt to establish a model farm on the upper reaches of the Niger.²¹ The British India Society was effectively absorbed by the League in 1841, when Thompson began to lecture against the Corn Laws with the agreement of both societies. Thompson was apparently converted to Corn Law repeal by the Biblical text of famine overtaking Jacob and his household, when 'all countries came into Egypt to buy corn', used by Archibald Prentice as the basis of a short free-trade tract.²² However, relations between the League and the BFASS were to prove far more problematic. Initially, there were encouraging signs that the two movements might be able to co-exist and even to be mutually supportive. In particular, there was considerable overlap in personnel between the BFASS and the League; Joseph Sturge, for example, was a member of both organizations from the outset. An Evangelical Quaker from Birmingham, who had built up a successful corn merchant's business with his brother Charles, Sturge was at the forefront of what has been termed 'moral radicalism' from the 1830s to his death in 1859, embracing a closely interwoven network of progressive causes: anti-slavery, free trade, peace, education, and extension of the suffrage.²³ Sturge's commitment to these causes was very much a product of his religious beliefs. By the late eighteenth century, the Society of Friends, traditionally a quietist movement, had developed what Anstey describes as 'a clear testimony against the slave trade', partly due to the increasing influence of Evangelicalism among its supporters.²⁴ Sturge played an important role in driving that nascent activism in new directions, greatly expanding the range of public causes that his fellow Quakers could endorse. The campaign against the Corn Laws was a case in point and Quakers such as Joseph Christy, Edward Hall, and Henry Ashworth, not to mention the ubiquitous John Bright, were some of the League's most active supporters.²⁵

Following the abolition of apprenticeship, Sturge had briefly corresponded with Villiers and Lord Brougham over the possibility of launching a popular campaign against the Corn Laws, so it was inevitable that he should become involved in the new movement.²⁶ Sturge's status as a veteran agitator meant that he was well placed to offer advice on organization and tactics, and Cobden later credited him with advising the League to tie their standard to the demand for

²⁰ For repeal movements after 1838, see Temperley, *British anti-slavery*; Midgley, *Women against slavery*; D. Turley, *The culture of English anti-slavery, 1780–1860* (London, 1991).

²¹ Temperley, *British anti-slavery*, ch. 3 passim.

²² A. M. Stoddart, *Elizabeth Pease Nichol* (London, 1899), pp. 124, 134–5; Prentice, *Anti-Corn Law League*, 1, pp. 197–9.

²³ See Tyrrell, *Joseph Sturge*; C. Hall, *Civilizing subjects: metropole and colony in the English imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago, IL, 2002), chs. 5–6 passim.

²⁴ Anstey, *Atlantic slave trade*, ch. 9 passim, esp. pp. 233–4.

²⁵ Pickering and Tyrrell, *People's bread*, pp. 99–102.

²⁶ H. Richard, *Memoirs of Joseph Sturge* (London, 1864), pp. 270–1; Tyrrell, *Joseph Sturge*, p. 94.

‘total and immediate repeal’.²⁷ Their correspondence reveals the great sympathy between the two men, but also highlights crucial differences between their approaches to reform issues, which are central to understanding the controversies which developed between the anti-Corn Law and anti-slavery movements. In particular, while Cobden was fixated on the achievement of free trade before attention could be turned to any other question, Sturge believed in advancing reform across a broad front, as exemplified by the ‘Complete Suffrage’ campaign that he began late in 1841 in order to woo the moderate wing of the Chartist movement, and also by a continued propensity to divide his time between his favourite causes. Although Cobden was not as hostile to Complete Suffrage as he was to other campaigns he viewed as competitors to the League, he lamented the dissipation of Sturge’s energy at key moments. Remarkably, despite the often vitriolic nature of these disputes, the friendship survived until Sturge’s death: partly a testament to Cobden’s personal charm, which frequently won him the admiration of political opponents, but probably more to Sturge’s need for Cobden’s support in other causes close to his heart.

The differences between Sturge and Cobden over free trade may be summarized as follows. Sturge’s business interests meant that he was acutely aware of the economic arguments in favour of free trade, particularly the instability caused by the sliding scale of duties, when corn held in bond could be dumped on to the market when prices were at their highest. However, his main objections were religious and he always viewed the Corn Laws from a moral standpoint. Meanwhile, although perfectly aware of the moral arguments and ready to urge them on the faithful when appropriate, Cobden was convinced that the only way to carry the case in parliament and with hard-headed Lancashire businessmen was to promote what he regarded as the practical economic imperatives of repeal. The limits of Cobden’s sympathy with Sturge’s Evangelical impulses may be seen in his failure to understand why the latter consistently privileged anti-slavery over free trade. Cobden frequently admonished Sturge for expending his energies on ameliorating the suffering of black slaves in foreign lands, instead of focusing on the ‘white slaves’ suffering under the economic bondage of the Corn Laws. In February 1841, he exhorted Sturge to abandon his projected anti-slavery tour of the United States to attend a gathering of anti-Corn Law deputies in London, on the erroneous assumption that the conference would be able to extract concessions from the tottering Whig government: ‘Don’t, I entreat you turn your back upon us at such a crisis – By remaining over our meeting of deputies, you will help most effectually to strike the shackles from the slave in America, & from our *white slaves* here at the same time.’²⁸

Initially Cobden was hopeful that the two movements could be brought into fruitful co-operation, emphasizing the common ground between himself and

²⁷ Cobden to Henry Richard, 12 Oct. 1862, Cobden papers, Add. MS 43659, fos. 210–12; Richard, *Joseph Sturge*, p. 275; Tyrrell, *Joseph Sturge*, p. 95.

²⁸ Cobden to Sturge, 20 Feb. 1841, reprinted in Howe, ed., *Letters of Richard Cobden*, 1, pp. 214–16.

Sturge on the peace issue. Despite his subsequent image as the high-priest of an amoral *laissez-faire* capitalism, one of Cobden's primary aims in campaigning for repeal of the Corn Laws was to bring about a system of peaceful international relations based on freedom of trade, which would make countries so interdependent as to render war impossible.²⁹ This resonated with Quaker pacifism and appealed to Evangelical millenarianism, providing an important impulse towards the League.³⁰ Cobden emphasized the importance of these common beliefs, helping to organize peace gatherings in Manchester and addressing a meeting on the Niger expedition in 1840, where he attacked the hypocrisy of keeping a naval squadron off the west coast of Africa to intercept slave-ships, whilst the Navy actively protected slave traffic in the eastern Mediterranean.³¹ In 1842, Cobden told Henry Ashworth that 'it would be well to try to engraft our Free trade agitation upon the *peace* movement', while Ashworth replied by mooted an ambitious scheme for a conference to discuss the creation of 'one general organization of enlightened philanthropy' which might encompass the Anti-Slavery, Peace and Aborigines Protection societies, all 'having reference to "Free Trade" as an acknowledged means'.³² These activities are indicative of Cobden's attitude that free trade was the key issue, to which other campaigns should be subordinated.

II

As well as the peace issue, by 1840 British free traders were able to take advantage of developments in American anti-slavery to try to draw the two campaigns closer together. From 1839, elements of the American abolitionist movement had become convinced of the need to develop a more politically active approach towards emancipation. By November 1839, Joshua Leavitt, editor of the *New York Emancipator*, had reached the conclusion that it was necessary to form an independent anti-slavery party. This put Leavitt and his friends at odds both with quietist elements and with the more militant followers of William Lloyd Garrison. The latter eschewed electoral politics, while engaging in militant anti-slavery activity, promoted the active participation of women in the cause, and attracted charges of infidelity for their boycott of pro-slavery churches. Facing opposition within the movement and recognizing the need for a broader platform from which to appeal to the electorate, Leavitt developed an economic critique in

²⁹ M. Ceadel, *The origins of war prevention: the British peace movement and international relations, 1730–1854* (Oxford, 1996); idem, 'Cobden and peace', in A. Howe and S. Morgan, eds., *Rethinking nineteenth-century liberalism: Richard Cobden bicentenary essays* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 189–207.

³⁰ A. Tyrrell, 'Making the millennium: the mid-nineteenth-century peace movement', *Historical Journal*, 21 (1978), pp. 75–95, at pp. 90–1.

³¹ *Manchester Times*, 31 Oct. 1840; Cobden to Sturge, 31 Oct. and 2 Nov. 1840, Cobden papers, Add. MS 50131, fos. 24–5, 26–7; the latter is reprinted in Howe, ed., *Letters of Richard Cobden*, 1, pp. 206–7.

³² Cobden to Ashworth, 7 and 12 Apr. 1842, in Howe, ed., *Letters of Richard Cobden*, 1, pp. 266–8; Ashworth to Cobden, 14 Apr. 1842, Cobden papers, Add. MS 43653, fos. 19–20.

which the British Corn Laws played a central role in upholding slavery, by excluding free-grown American corn while allowing the untrammelled importation of slave-grown cotton. Leavitt's commitment to free trade was a largely pragmatic policy aimed at securing electoral support in the rapidly developing agrarian states of the north-west, suffering from low agricultural prices and the scarcity of credit following the American banking crisis of 1837. Leavitt argued that the latter problem was also exacerbated by the Corn Laws, as they meant that southern plantations were more attractive investments for northern bankers than western farms. Free trade therefore became a core policy of the newly founded Liberty Party and Leavitt was determined to disseminate these theories at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840.³³ Although he was thwarted by the organizers, who thought the issue too controversial, it was inevitable that they would eventually come to the attention of the League, and especially of Cobden, who took a keen interest in American affairs.³⁴

From an early date, the League's press had carried reports of abundant harvests in the United States to demonstrate the vast reserves of corn that would be available should the Corn Laws be repealed.³⁵ In July 1840, however, the *Anti-Corn Law Circular* carried an excerpt of a letter to the *Patriot* on the connections between the Corn Laws and American slavery. The *Circular's* editorial drew the connection between the suffering of American slaves and the British poor:

We need not say that we hail this overture of alliance with much satisfaction, and that we are most anxious that true philanthropists of all denominations should naturally understand each other, and make common cause against the common enemy of the human race, the oppressor and the tyrant, whether he forge the fetters for the negro, or draw his unhallowed and accursed wealth from the blood and bones of exhausted Britons.³⁶

For Cobden, these arguments provided an opportunity to demonstrate beyond doubt the contiguity of the anti-Corn Law and anti-slavery movements, not only helping with the co-option of the latter's supporters, but also proving that free trade itself was part of a divine Providential order. In October 1840, the *Circular* carried an article by Cobden attacking Lord Sandon as an opponent of slavery and upholder of the Corn Laws and restating the argument that slavery was encouraged in the American south by prohibiting free labour produce from the northwest. Cobden used his detailed geographical knowledge of the United States (a device he frequently employed to establish his authority as an expert) to emphasize the facility with which American grain could supply the British market: 'Nature and art have thus combined to connect the free states of the great western

³³ H. Davis, *Joshua Leavitt: Evangelical abolitionist* (Baton Rouge, LA, and London, 1990), pp. 148–57, 168–70; Martin, 'Anglo-American anti-slavery and free trade relations'; Meardon, 'Religious revivals to tariff rancor'; Leavitt to James G. Birney, 19 May and 1 June 1840, printed in D. L. Dumond, ed., *Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831–1857* (2 vols., Gloucester, MA, 1966), I, pp. 574–5, 580–2.

³⁴ See Fielden, 'Cobden and America'.

³⁵ *Anti-Corn Law Circular* (hereafter *ACLC*), 9 July, 20 Aug., 15 Oct. 1839.

³⁶ *ACLC*, 30 July 1840; letter excerpted from the *Patriot*, 20 July 1840.

valley by a direct water communication with Britain; and there is no natural cause why New York should not be as much a port of England, for supplying her with food, as Liverpool or Hull.³⁷ The article evidently attracted Leavitt's attention, and by December the League was in possession of the documentation that had been suppressed at the Anti-Slavery Convention in June. Thus armed, Cobden returned to the theme in the *Circular*, with the addition of an argument which he had first made in his 1835 pamphlet *England, Ireland and America*: that tariffs on American grain denied American merchants the foreign exchange with which to purchase British manufactured goods, thereby supplying an incentive to domestic manufacturers who then competed with their British counterparts in international markets.³⁸ A delegation from the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, led by the League's president, J. B. Smith, advanced similar arguments to ministers and opposition leaders the following spring.³⁹

This new line of League propaganda seemed perfectly suited to appeal both to pragmatic Manchester manufacturers and to pious Evangelicals. In the meantime, Leavitt was promoting the formation of anti-Corn Law associations in the north-western states, and submitted his 'Wheat Memorial' to Congress, claiming that the low price of agricultural produce in the north was a direct result of the exclusion of American grain from British markets.⁴⁰ In 1841, the Liberty Party sent John Curtis of Ohio to lecture across Britain on behalf of the League, including the conference of ministers at Manchester in August.⁴¹ Curtis published a pamphlet setting out the party's views on the connections between the Corn Laws and slavery and demonstrating the immense production capacity of the north-western states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin.⁴² There was initial interest from the BFASS committee in these proceedings and the issue was discussed at a meeting attended by George Thompson on 4 June 1841. No agreement was reached, however, and whilst a sub-committee was appointed to enquire further into connections between the Corn Laws and American slavery, the matter was effectively shelved.⁴³

It is notable that the League never established official links with William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society, despite winning support from British Garrisonians such as Thompson and the Peases. Communication between the two movements relied primarily on private correspondence, although the fortunes of the League were followed with broad approval in Garrison's *Liberator*,

³⁷ 'Negro slavery upheld by the Corn Laws', *ACLC*, 22 Oct. 1840.

³⁸ 'Slavery in America upheld by the British Corn Law', *ACLC*, 31 Dec. 1840.

³⁹ Account of the deputation in the Manchester City Archive, J. B. Smith papers, MS 923/2 S338, fo. 3.

⁴⁰ Martin, 'Anglo-American anti-slavery and free trade relations', p. 219; Joshua Leavitt, *Memorial ... praying the adoption of measures to secure an equitable and adequate market for American wheat* (Committee on Agriculture in Congress, 1841).

⁴¹ Prentice, *Anti-Corn Law League*, 1, p. 241.

⁴² J. Curtis, *America and the Corn Laws* (Manchester, 1841).

⁴³ Minutes of the BFASS, Anti-slavery papers, Rhodes House, MSS Brit. Emp. 20 E2/6, fos. 403-5.

particularly through the letters of Edward Search.⁴⁴ Privately, however, Garrison believed that free trade was a mere palliative measure for Britain's social and economic distress.⁴⁵

III

Despite common ground on the issue of peace and the development of free-trade abolitionism in the United States, there remained a major stumbling-block to straightforward co-operation between the League and the BFASS. From its inception in 1839, the society's rules contained a clause committing it to supporting prohibitive duties on slave-grown produce, as a practical means of discouraging the slave trade.⁴⁶ Cobden had been aware of this stipulation, and was careful to confirm the society's position with Sturge when the latter tried to persuade him to join early in 1841, but the issue erupted into open controversy on a number of occasions, notably in 1841, 1843, and 1844.⁴⁷ In 1841 the trigger was the waning Whig government's plan to adjust the discriminatory duties on colonial sugar, which saw the anti-slavery lobby in the House ally with their erstwhile foes, the West Indian planters, since both were anxious to preserve the West Indian sugar economy from competition with slave-labour plantations in Cuba and Brazil.⁴⁸ In 1843, the League took advantage of the second World Anti-Slavery Convention to try to force the BFASS to endorse free trade by reversing its earlier commitment to fiscal restriction.⁴⁹ This led to the formation of a dissident free-trade society led by the Revd Thomas Spencer, George Washington Anstie, and W. T. Blair. There was then a lull until Peel introduced a bill to reduce the differential duty between colonial and non-colonial sugar in 1844, whilst in April of that year, the dissident committee published a circular calling for the BFASS to renounce fiscal measures.⁵⁰ This was the cue for the League to launch an aggressive attempt to commit the BFASS to free trade by passing an amendment to this effect at the society's annual meeting. Although this was later reversed at a meeting strictly limited to members of the BFASS, the public damage was done.⁵¹

⁴⁴ See, for example, *Liberator*, 19 May 1843, 26 Jan., 29 Mar., 10 and 17 May 1844.

⁴⁵ Garrison to Elizabeth Pease, 28 Feb. 1843, in W. M. Merrill, ed., *The letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, III: 1841–1849 (Cambridge, MA, 1973), pp. 123–6 at p. 125.

⁴⁶ Minutes of the BFASS, 27 Feb., 17 and 18 Apr. 1839, fos. 3, 13, 16.

⁴⁷ Cobden to Sturge, 15 May 1839, where Cobden accused Sturge of 'adopting a system of monopoly here, by way of putting down a similar evil elsewhere!'; and 26 Feb. 1841, both in Howe, ed., *Letters of Richard Cobden*, I, pp. 165–6, 216–17. See Sturge's letter on 'the use of free grown produce in preference to slave-grown, and the promotion of fiscal regulations in favour of the former', *British Emancipator*, 23 Jan. 1839.

⁴⁸ This account is informed by Rice, "'Humanity sold for sugar"'; Temperley, *British anti-slavery*, chs. 7–8 passim; N. Gash, *Sir Robert Peel: the life of Sir Robert Peel after 1830* (London, 1972), pp. 252–8, 445–53.

⁴⁹ *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, vol. 4, 21 June 1843, p. 104.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 3 Apr. 1844, p. 53.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 29 May and 12 June 1844, pp. 96–108, 110–16; *League*, vol. 1, 1 and 8 June 1844, pp. 574, 589.

Arguments on both sides remained relatively consistent. The BFASS contended that opening British markets to slave-grown sugar would stimulate the slave trade, which was regarded as the primary evil of the slave system. Moreover, the increased competition would devastate the already fragile West Indian economy, retarding the cause of emancipation in countries whose governments would believe that the British emancipation experiment had been a failure. The League countered by arguing that any attempt to discourage the slave trade using fiscal measures against slave-grown produce was economically naive, as the complex nature of global trade meant that such measures would be circumvented by re-exporting goods from third countries, and that any trade with slave-holding countries would indirectly stimulate their slave economies.⁵² Secondly, if free trade and free labour were both part of a system of divinely ordained natural law, as many Leaguers believed, free labour would always triumph over slave labour *as long as* the free labour economy was allowed to buy in the cheapest market: thus West Indian plantations could be made more efficient than their slave-labour competitors if the system of colonial protection was entirely dismantled and they were allowed to obtain goods freely from the United States.⁵³ Finally, it was contended that the colonial preference was designed to uphold the interests of a single class, the West Indian planters, at the expense of the British people as a whole, resulting in high prices that had already put sugar beyond the reach of the poorest.⁵⁴

Opinion is divided over how successfully the League managed to convert the majority of anti-slavery opinion to its views. Rice has argued that most British abolitionists put anti-slavery before free trade, while Green believes that ‘many if not all’ of them ‘had been seduced from their allegiance by Cobden and Bright’.⁵⁵ These polarized conclusions reflect both the vehemence of the controversy and the conflicting rhetoric of the two sides. In 1841, anti-slavery societies from major cities such as Leeds, Glasgow, and Manchester rejected the protectionist line of the BFASS; even Birmingham affirmed free-trade principles, though it hurriedly recanted once Sturge returned from America. Cobden was confident that, out-of-doors, the BFASS had ‘been repudiated by the anti slavery body generally, & its moral power is at an end ... Whatever scattered force exists of the anti slavery party may be turned into our groove.’⁵⁶ After the 1843 conference, Bright told Sturge that ‘the discussion at the Convention when Cobden was there is held by the public to have been most prejudicial to your views & I am greatly misinformed if a division would not have left you in a minority’.⁵⁷ In April 1844, Sturge’s reply to the dissident society’s free-trade circular prompted

⁵² *League*, vol. 2, 4 Jan. 1845, pp. 227–8.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 23 Nov. 1844, 8 Feb. 1845, pp. 130–1, 306. The history of the free labour argument is explored in S. Drescher, *The mighty experiment: free labor versus slavery in British emancipation* (Oxford, 2002).

⁵⁴ *League*, vol. 2, 30 Nov. 1844, p. 146; Drescher, *Mighty experiment*, p. 158.

⁵⁵ Rice, ‘“Humanity sold for sugar”’, pp. 417–18; Green, *British slave emancipation*, pp. 158–9.

⁵⁶ Cobden to Frederick Cobden, 15 May 1841, in Howe, ed., *Letters of Richard Cobden*, 1, pp. 220–3.

⁵⁷ John Bright to Sturge, 1 Sept. 1843, Sturge papers, British Library, Add. MS 43845, fos. 12–15.

numerous letters of support for the society's position, many of which were printed in the *Reporter*.⁵⁸ Their biggest coup came when W. T. Blair, one of the authors of the free-trade circular, publicly announced his conversion to Sturge's view that any reduction of the duties on slave-grown sugar would stimulate the slave trade, at least in the short term.⁵⁹ The Society immediately published his letter in the *Reporter* and forwarded copies to government ministers.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, free traders could point to a pamphlet published in May by James Ewing Ritchie, pastor of Wrentham Independent Church, in which he warned the BFASS that 'by the course you are pursuing ... you are losing the sympathies of the popular mind'.⁶¹

Although Rice sees the loyalty of most provincial societies as proof of the free traders' failure, the decisions of local committees often masked fractures and disagreements which divided long-term friends and collaborators. The dissentient committee included Thomas and William Morgan of Birmingham, both close friends and associates of Sturge.⁶² Letters appeared in the *League* from disgruntled abolitionists such as Joseph Reynolds, of the Bristol auxiliary of the BFASS, who announced his withdrawal from the society due to its stance on sugar.⁶³ Hints of dissent also surface in the BFASS correspondence files, such as the letter from Thomas Brewin, secretary of the Cirencester Anti-Slavery Society, admitting that two members of his committee 'lean to Spencer's view of the duties Question'.⁶⁴ Others, like Samuel Lucas junior, repudiated the free traders' tactics, while endorsing their principle.⁶⁵ J. Ferguson of Carlisle probably spoke for many when he wrote: 'let us not exalt the principle of free trade above the holier principles of justice and humanity, but rather let us make it subordinate to them; for, if kept each in its proper place, they may be made, instead of opponents, most powerful auxiliaries to each other'.⁶⁶

The precise extent of defections from the BFASS over free trade may remain obscure, but this is less significant than the controversy's wider impact. Both the League and the anti-slavery movement were aiming at a broader public beyond

⁵⁸ For Sturge's comments, *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, vol. 5, 3 Apr. 1854, p. 51; for letters of support see 10 and 17 Apr., pp. 55, 59–60, 68; also the additional refutation of the circular on 17 Apr., pp. 61–3.

⁵⁹ Blair to Scoble, 15 and 23 Apr. 1844, Anti-slavery papers, MSS Brit. Emp. S. 18 C13/139–40.

⁶⁰ *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, vol. 5, 1 May 1844, p. 73; minutes of the BFASS, 26 Apr. 1844, Anti-slavery papers, MSS Brit. Emp. S. 20 E2/7, fos. 175–6.

⁶¹ J. E. Ritchie, *Thoughts on slavery and cheap sugar, a letter to the members and friends of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society* (London, 1844), p. 3. Ritchie was apparently converted by Cobden: Green, *British slave emancipation*, p. 143.

⁶² Committee list contained in G. W. Anstie to John Scoble, Anti-Slavery papers, MSS Brit. Emp. S.18, C12/114.

⁶³ *League*, vol. 1, 21 Sept. 1844, p. 835. Also letters from E. S. Abdy and John Southall: *League*, 8 and 15 June 1844, pp. 596, 612.

⁶⁴ Brewin to Scoble, 18 Apr. 1844. The society's delegate to the 1844 convention, Edward Bewlay, voted with Spencer at the meeting. However, see Brewin's relieved letter of 25 May, bringing news of Bewlay's recantation and the committee's newfound unanimity on sugar. Anti-slavery papers, MSS Brit. Emp. S. 18 C14/30–1.

⁶⁵ Lucas to Scoble, 2 June 1844, Anti-slavery papers, MSS Brit. Emp. S.18 C19/62.

⁶⁶ *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, vol. 5, 17 Apr. 1844, p. 68.

their core constituencies and, as Ashworth observed, the key question was ‘whether the people prefer *dear* sugar or *cheap Bread*’.⁶⁷ To achieve the League’s primary aim of increasing pressure on the legislature to make free-trade reforms and, eventually, to repeal the Corn Laws, it was unnecessary to convert every single abolitionist. Instead, it was sufficient to generate enough controversy and confusion to enable Cobden to proclaim convincingly to the House of Commons that the League represented popular opinion more accurately than the BFASS.⁶⁸ The price of this tactic was a legacy of bad feeling, with Cobden telling Sturge he was ‘mad past recovery’ on slavery.⁶⁹

IV

While the League moved to a position of open warfare with the BFASS, its relationship with American free-trade abolitionists also cooled. It has been claimed that anti-slavery propaganda ‘vanished’ from League publications around the spring of 1842.⁷⁰ Although not strictly the case, thereafter references to slavery were usually made in the context of debates over sugar. The League’s abandonment of the argument that free trade in corn would undermine slavery in the southern United States therefore requires explanation. The answer lies in developments that gave political power to southern sectional interests anxious to promote free trade with Britain, while keen to reject external meddling with the South’s ‘peculiar institution’. The League was willing to exploit such developments, not just because they seemed to offer a more immediate prospect of changing US tariff policy, which might prompt reciprocal concessions on the Corn Laws, but also because the southern free-trade policy was accompanied by a stated desire to avoid conflict between Britain and the United States over the Oregon question.⁷¹

The League were attracted by the apparent free-trade inclinations of US president John Tyler, demonstrated by the arrival in Britain of his emissary Duff Green, charged with negotiating a tariff reduction on British manufactures in return for the lowering of duties on American grain.⁷² Green quickly contacted Cobden, who secured him a hearing from the Manchester Chamber of Commerce – though in the event he chose to communicate by letter – and coached him on the arguments best suited to different interest groups. Mancunian manufacturers, for example, were mainly concerned to protect and extend their American markets, while the ‘gentlemanly capitalists’ of the City of London

⁶⁷ Ashworth to Cobden, 7 May 1841, Cobden papers, Add. MS 43653, fos. 1–2.

⁶⁸ As he did in a sugar debate on 24 Feb. 1845: *Hansard*, 3rd ser. LXXVII, cols. 1127–36, at 1128–9.

⁶⁹ Cobden to Sturge, 20 June 1844, Sturge papers, Add. MS 50131, fos. 110–11.

⁷⁰ Fielden, ‘Cobden and America’, p. 156.

⁷¹ This also concerned the League’s northern friends: Bradford R. Wood to Cobden, 27 Jan. 1845, WSRO, Cobden papers 1, fo. 100.

⁷² W. S. Belko, *The invincible Duff Green: Whig of the west* (Columbia, MS, and London, 2006), ch. 21 passim.

would be more interested to hear that a reciprocity treaty would enable American states to repay interest on British loans incurred before the financial crash of 1837.⁷³ Green apparently persuaded the League of Tyler's free-trade intentions; the *Circular* turned its attention away from using free trade as a route to abolition and began to campaign for a reciprocity treaty with an administration led by a pro-slavery southerner.⁷⁴ The change of tack seemed to be vindicated by Tyler's veto of a protectionist tariff in June. However, Tyler's opposition to the tariff actually stemmed not from commitment to free trade, but from Congressional insistence on maintaining the distribution of revenue from government land sales among the individual states, despite a provision in the Land Act of 1841 that the federal government would retain such revenues when duties rose above 20 per cent. According to a recent biographer, Tyler was afraid that this measure would lay him open to charges of inconsistency, which was anathema to his interpretation of the southern honour code, as well as depriving the government of funds at a time when it was almost bankrupt.⁷⁵ This only became apparent when Tyler allowed the heavily protectionist 'black tariff' to pass in October, shorn of the offensive distribution clauses: effectively putting paid to Green's reciprocity mission and leaving Cobden pinning his hopes on the Corn Laws being ended by another winter of economic distress.⁷⁶

This was, however, just the start of the League's dalliance with southern slaveholding interests. During his visit, Green had become convinced that the British government's campaign against slavery was simply the humanitarian cloak for a plan to extend Britain's global commercial dominance, by ending the supply of cheap labour to those areas which competed with British colonies in growing sugar and cotton.⁷⁷ He feared that the culmination of this policy would be open war with the United States and, in contradistinction to Leavitt and the Liberty party, he saw in free trade a way to buy Britain off by providing a market for her manufactures, while strengthening slavery and guaranteeing the economic survival of the South. Green returned to Britain the following year determined to forge an alliance against the Corn Laws between British free traders and southern sectionalists, particularly potential presidential candidate John C. Calhoun.⁷⁸ These efforts were given impetus by the developing crisis over the Oregon

⁷³ Proceedings of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, 13 Sept. 1842, Manchester City Archives, M8/2/4, fos. 224–5; Cobden to Duff Green, 28 Aug., 1, 7, and 13 Sept. 1842, Library of Congress, Duff Green papers, box 2 (7 Sept. reprinted in Howe, ed., *Letters of Richard Cobden*, 1, p. 289).

⁷⁴ See for example the editorial on the US tariff in the *Anti-Bread Tax Circular* (hereafter *ABTC*), 6 Oct. 1842.

⁷⁵ D. Monroe, *The republican vision of John Tyler* (College Station, TX, 2003), ch. 5.

⁷⁶ Cobden to Duff Green, 11 Oct. 1842, Duff Green papers, box 2.

⁷⁷ D. Green, *England and the United States* (London, 1842). Interpretations of anti-slavery as based on self-interest are now largely discredited: Temperley, *British anti-slavery*, pp. 75–6; J. Walvin, 'Introduction', in Walvin, ed., *Slavery and British society*, 1–21, pp. 14–15.

⁷⁸ Belko, *The invincible Duff Green*, ch. 22, at p. 367; C. M. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun, sectionalist, 1840–1850* (New York, 1968), p. 73. For example Duff Green to Calhoun, 29 Sept. 1843, in C. N. Wilson, ed., *The papers of John C. Calhoun* (28 vols., Columbia, SC, 1969–2003), xvi, p. 471.

territory and fears about British intervention in Texas, backed by some abolitionists, which allowed Green to appeal to the League's peace principles.⁷⁹ Green also took advantage of the rancour between free traders and the Anti-Slavery Society over sugar duties to press his case, arguing: 'it is palpable to all the world that under the mask of humanity to the black race [Britain] seeks to enslave the white – that under the pretence of opposition to slave labour she seeks to make all the world dependent upon her for the supply of sugar coffee rice &c.'. ⁸⁰

In response, the *Anti-Bread Tax Circular* published articles demonstrating the impact of high tariffs on Britain's trade with the United States, and in September 1843 favourably noticed Calhoun's critical report on the USA's commercial policy, talking up his chances as a presidential candidate.⁸¹ When Calhoun declined to stand, the League transferred its support to James Polk. Polk's election was greeted enthusiastically, with only a few mild admonitory remarks about his pro-slavery views which did not extend beyond the assertion that free trade 'must, in its results, lead to the perfect emancipation of industry in all its forms' and the pious hope that Polk and his supporters would come to this realization 'before it is forced upon them'.⁸² The League also followed the campaign for the moderate Walker Tariff of 1846, which was supported by southern free traders such as Calhoun and George McDuffie of South Carolina, whose efforts were honoured by the Council of the League.⁸³ Articles on American trade policy were reproduced from British and American journals, while free-trade meetings in southern states were reported with approval.⁸⁴ When the tariff was finally passed in the summer of 1846, Cobden personally congratulated Calhoun on the advance of free trade in the United States.⁸⁵

It is difficult to get a sense of how much disquiet was caused by the League's cosy relationship with the southern free traders. Cobden weeded his League correspondence during the 1850s and the *League* was hardly likely to publish hostile letters.⁸⁶ However, there is evidence that not all of the League's supporters were happy with the situation. George Thompson found himself defending its actions to his American associates, claiming that the correspondence with Calhoun and McDuffie was 'the act of two or three in the Council of Manchester ... I had nothing to do with it', and averring that 'they have at all events encouraged me ... to express my opinions fully upon the subject of slavery on their platforms, & I have followed Cobden, after he has been eulogizing

⁷⁹ Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, ch. xviii passim; Martin, 'Free trade and the Oregon question'; Drescher, *Mighty experiment*, pp. 169–71.

⁸⁰ Green to Abel Upshur, 17 Oct. 1843, printed in *Calhoun papers*, xvii, pp. 575–82, at p. 579.

⁸¹ *ABTC*, 30 May, 25 July, 1 Aug. and 5 Sept. 1843. ⁸² *League*, vol. 2, 30 Nov. 1844, p. 147.

⁸³ Wilson to Calhoun, 5 Dec. 1844, *Calhoun papers*, xx, p. 485; Calhoun to Wilson, 24 Mar. 1845, *Calhoun papers*, xxi, pp. 444–5. Calhoun's reply was printed in the *League*, vol. 2, 3 May 1845, p. 503; for McDuffie's see vol. 3, 22 Nov. 1845, pp. 99–100.

⁸⁴ *League*, vol. 2, 20 Sept., 27 Sept., and 4 Oct. 1845, pp. 821, 834, 853; for a meeting in Charleston, see 'Free traders the friends of peace', *League*, vol. 2, 5 July 1845, p. 642.

⁸⁵ Clement C. Biddle to Calhoun, 6 July 1846, *Calhoun papers*, xxiii, pp. 272–3.

⁸⁶ Cobden to Joseph Parkes, 15 Sept. 1851, Bodleian Library, MS Eng.lett.e.120, fos.138–9.

Southern free traders, with the strongest phillipics [sic] against them as slave-holders'.⁸⁷ Elsewhere, he tried to distance himself from the League, telling an unidentified correspondent that 'they overrate the zeal of the Polk party in the cause of free trade, and do not look sufficiently close at the views entertained by that large class of politicians on other questions'.⁸⁸

Undoubtedly Thompson's association with the League helped to deflect some of the criticism which might have come their way, but the League's courting of Calhoun and McDuffie was too much for some. Irish free trader James Haughton remonstrated with George Wilson over accepting southern contributions to the League's £100,000 fund, arguing that the cause was injured by a connection 'with men who are so polluted by their conspicuous & determined sustainment [sic] of a system that is utterly vile'. He reminded Wilson that O'Connell's Irish Repeal Association had previously rejected similar gifts.⁸⁹ During the American Civil War, Irish abolitionist Richard D. Webb scorned Bright's emergence as an anti-slavery champion, citing the League's decision, nearly twenty years earlier, to place busts of Calhoun and McDuffie in their board room, 'as good staunch Free Traders'.⁹⁰ These men were firm believers in the benefits of free trade, who nonetheless felt that abolition was paramount and brooked no compromise. The lack of a major outcry from the League's supporters is, however, remarkable when compared to the controversy over southern donations to the Free Church of Scotland in 1844–6.⁹¹

To make sense of the League's apparently ambivalent attitude towards the anti-slavery issue, it is necessary to consider the position of its acknowledged leader, Richard Cobden. Although Cobden had witnessed the plight of American slaves at first hand in 1835, his non-intervention principles meant that he did not feel justified in engaging in a moral reform campaign in another country.⁹² Any suggestion that the League's change of tack over slavery was simply the result of political opportunism would, however, underestimate the remarkable coherence of Cobden's guiding political philosophy, which was heavily influenced by the work of phrenologist George Combe, and predicated on the existence of a system of natural laws that individuals and nations transgressed at their peril.⁹³ Under this

⁸⁷ Thompson to Maria Weston Chapman, 2 Oct. 1845, in C. Taylor, ed., *British and American abolitionists: an episode in transatlantic understanding* (Edinburgh, 1974), pp. 238–9.

⁸⁸ Thompson to unknown recipient, n.d. [probably 12 Dec. 1844], reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 233.

⁸⁹ Haughton to Wilson, 27 June 1845, Wilson papers, Manchester City Archives, M20 vol. 8. The League refused to print Haughton's letters on this affair, but see the *Liberator*, 25 July and 28 Nov. 1845.

⁹⁰ R. D. Webb to the Westons, n.d., Taylor, ed., *British and American abolitionists*, pp. 456–9.

⁹¹ G. Shepperson, 'The Free Church and American slavery', *Scottish Historical Review*, 30 (1951), pp. 126–43.

⁹² E. H. Cawley, *The American diaries of Richard Cobden* (Princeton, 1952), pp. 93–4, 95, 101; on non-intervention: Cobden to Sturge, 16 July 1851 and 18 Apr. 1853; Cobden papers, Add. MS 43656, fos. 211–12, 333–4. Bright defended his own position in similar language: Bright to Sturge, 18 Apr. 1853, Sturge papers, Add. MS 43723, fos. 18–19.

⁹³ For Combe's influence, D. Stack, 'Phrenological friends: Cobden and his "father confessor" George Combe', in Howe and Morgan, eds., *Rethinking nineteenth-century liberalism*, pp. 23–38. These

system, slavery, as an unnatural institution, would either wither under free-trade conditions or produce a cataclysm such as the American Civil War as the result of a self-acting Providence. The West Indies provided an opportunity to demonstrate the greater efficiency of free-labour, but this could only be achieved if their monopoly of the British market was ended and the colonies themselves opened up to free imports from the United States: 'Let our own West Indies be subjected to that wholesome competition which is necessary to kindle the emulation & stimulate the energies of Free-Men, and they will be found able to compete with the free-labourers of other countries, and to undersell the productions of slaves.'⁹⁴ Although this view was founded on a total lack of understanding of conditions in the West Indian colonies, at least one abolitionist acknowledged to the BFASS that the anti-slavery movement needed to shoulder some of the blame for the schism, since they themselves had argued for the increased productivity of free labour prior to emancipation.⁹⁵

Moreover, it is possible to argue that the apparent switch of allegiance from the Liberty Party to the southern sectionalists was not quite the pusillanimous *volte face* it appears. For Cobden, free trade was inextricably linked to the quest for international peace. Just as Leavitt and James Birney of the Liberty Party coupled free trade with the anti-slavery question, Green and Calhoun sold it as a means to keep Britain and the United States from war over Oregon or Texas.⁹⁶ Settlement of these questions around the same time as the Walker Tariff and repeal of the Corn Laws seemed a triumphant vindication of this policy.⁹⁷ It was not until the United States was torn apart by civil strife that tensions within Cobden's system of thought became apparent, as a free-trade slave-labour South fought to secede from a free-labour protectionist North. Stephen Meardon has explored Cobden's complex and uncertain response to this conundrum suggesting that, although Lincoln's emancipation proclamation helped to draw Cobden into open support of the North, this support remained lukewarm and his main priority was to prevent Britain recognizing the South or even intervening in the conflict militarily.⁹⁸ In 1846, however, it seemed that the abolition of American slavery could safely be left to the inevitable workings of the free market: it was not a question of choosing between anti-slavery and peace, because both causes would be served by free trade in the long run. This was a key difference with Sturge, whose stance

ideas were developed most fully in Combe's *Constitution of man* (Edinburgh, 1826); see also Hilton, *Age of atonement*, pp. 189–202.

⁹⁴ Cobden to Joseph Pease, 26 June 1843, WSRO, Cobden papers 21.

⁹⁵ Thomas Brewin to Scoble, 25 May 1844, Anti-slavery papers, MSS Brit. Emp. S. 18 C14/31.

⁹⁶ Martin, 'Free trade and the Oregon question'; Fielden, 'Cobden and America', pp. 165–70.

⁹⁷ *League*, 'Free trade and peace', vol. 3, 7 Mar. 1846, p. 402; S. C. James and D. A. Lake, 'The second face of hegemony: Britain's repeal of the Corn Laws and the American Walker Tariff of 1846', *International Organization*, 43 (1989), pp. 1–29; D. M. Pletcher, *The diplomacy of annexation: Texas, Oregon and the Mexican War* (Columbia, MI, 1973), pp. 417–20.

⁹⁸ S. Meardon, 'Richard Cobden's American quandary: negotiating peace, free trade and anti-slavery', in Howe and Morgan, eds., *Rethinking nineteenth-century liberalism*, pp. 208–26.

over sugar assumed that even a short-term boost to the slave trade was unacceptable.

V

The relationship of the Anti-Corn Law League to the anti-slavery movement, as represented by the BFASS, moved from initial emulation, through attempted co-option, to outright hostility. While the League gained much from anti-slavery in terms of moral authority, organizational experience and personnel, the sugar issue remained a key point of contention. The League's leaders, particularly Cobden, saw free trade as a natural law, deviation from which was fraught with danger for the national interest. However, these debates also revealed the very different priorities of the two movements. For the Evangelical dissenters of the BFASS, free trade was secondary to an overriding concern with the spiritual and physical salvation of slaves and their masters. For the radicals of the League, the spiritual and temporal suffering of slaves in distant plantations was subordinate to the need to root out aristocratic monopolies such as the colonial preference, which guaranteed high prices to the West Indian planters at the expense of the British poor, or the Corn Laws, which restricted British manufacturing by denying it markets in the United States. Free trade was a limited aim in itself, but was portrayed as having far-reaching consequences that would benefit a range of progressive causes, including both peace and anti-slavery.

It is also notable that the very term 'slavery' was contested and remoulded by free traders. The language of slavery provided an important rhetorical trope for those arguing against various forms of oppression, ranging from exploitation of factory workers to the subjection of women.⁹⁹ For the League, the anti-Corn Law campaign provided an opportunity to appropriate the rhetoric of 'white slavery' from Tory factory reformers such as Richard Oastler, who had used it to attack employers of child-labour, many of whom were now Leaguers.¹⁰⁰ While for factory reformers white workers were wage-slaves of the cotton-masters, free traders recast them as fiscal bondsmen of the aristocracy.¹⁰¹ Such rhetoric was not necessarily incompatible with concern for the welfare of black slaves, as research on the connections between abolitionism and Chartism has shown, but it did leave abolitionists open to charges of hypocrisy.¹⁰²

Regarding the long-term impact on the anti-slavery movement, there is no doubt that the main outcome of its encounters with the League was demoralization

⁹⁹ For the latter, see L. E. N. Marshall, 'The rhetorics of slavery and citizenship: suffragist discourse and canonical texts in Britain, 1880–1914', *Gender and History*, 13 (2001), pp. 481–97.

¹⁰⁰ J. T. Ward, *The factory movement, 1830–1855* (London, 1962), p. 34; R. Gray, *The factory question and industrial England 1830–1860* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 37–47.

¹⁰¹ *ACLC*, 'Unholy alliance between the slaveholders of America and the British bread-taxers', 25 Feb. 1841.

¹⁰² B. Fladeland, "'Our cause being one and the same": abolitionists and Chartism', in Walvin, ed., *Slavery and British society*, pp. 69–99; see *ACLC*, 'Black slaves and white slaves', 25 Mar. 1841.

and division. This was demonstrated as much by the failure of Thompson's free-trade 'Anti-Slavery League', formed in July 1846 in direct imitation of the Anti-Corn Law League, as by the token resistance put up by the BFASS to the equalization of sugar duties the same year, and the lack of significant protest against the League's flirtations with pro-slavery free traders. Subsequently, the BFASS toned down its support of fiscal restrictions and instead tried to promote the voluntary consumption of free-labour produce: despite moments of excitement such as the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the campaign languished in the 1850s.¹⁰³ Other factors, however, underlay this decline. As noted earlier, the American anti-slavery movement was in a fissiparous state by the early 1840s, divided over engagement with politics, the role of women, and boycotts of churches that supported slavery. The 1840 Anti-Slavery Convention revealed the extent of these divisions to a British audience. The controversies over women's participation in 1840 were symptomatic of how such divisions were transferred to Britain, with representatives of rival groups proselytizing throughout the country over the succeeding decade.¹⁰⁴ The willingness of anti-slavery societies in large towns to break with the BFASS over sugar duties may also reflect resentment at a parvenu metropolitan society setting itself up as representative of British anti-slavery opinion. Nonetheless, the free-trade debates injected vitriol into these wounds, and were perhaps embittered by the close ties between the two movements.

This article has illuminated the turbulent relationship between two major reform campaigns of the 1840s, and the extent to which that relationship was enriched and complicated by a significant transatlantic dimension. It is clear that both the League and the BFASS were keen to establish links with colleagues striving for similar aims in the United States, but that such ties were not always a source of strength as American debates over slavery and free trade occurred in vastly different social, political, and economic contexts. For erstwhile Leaguers, such as Cobden and Bright, the contradictions which this engendered for their faith in free trade as a global force for good did not become fully apparent until the outbreak of the American Civil War, when the danger of Britain being dragged into the conflict brought them under intense pressure to provide moral leadership to British radicals. Before that, the transatlantic dimension in British reform continued with the formation of the League of Universal Brotherhood by Elihu Burritt, the American 'learned blacksmith'. Burritt's campaign provided the basis of future co-operation between former Leaguers and leading members of the BFASS, particularly Sturge, in the cause of peace. However, it was Cobden who became the dominant figure, ensuring that the campaign's emphasis shifted from spiritual to economic considerations.¹⁰⁵ Although temporarily eclipsed by the Crimean War and Palmerston's subsequent ascendancy, the League's effective

¹⁰³ M. Taylor, *The decline of British radicalism, 1847–1860* (Oxford, 1995), p. 183.

¹⁰⁴ B. Fladeland, *Men and brothers: Anglo-American antislavery cooperation* (Urbana, IL, 1972), ch. 12 passim.

¹⁰⁵ Ceadel, 'Cobden and peace'; Taylor, *Decline of British radicalism*, pp. 173–9.

subordination of moral reform to free-trade economics would have a profound influence on the development of Gladstonian Liberalism in succeeding decades.¹⁰⁶ Henceforth, moral reform would be firmly embedded in the material world.

¹⁰⁶ E. Biagini, *Liberty, retrenchment and reform: popular liberalism in the age of Gladstone* (Cambridge, 1992); A. Howe, *Free trade and Liberal England, 1846–1946* (Oxford, 1997).