

Note

A MISATTRIBUTED ABOLITIONIST PAMPHLET OF A LONDON RADICAL: *THE DUTY OF ABSTAINING FROM THE USE OF WEST INDIA PRODUCE (1792)*

The Duty of Abstaining from the use of West India Produce. A Speech, Delivered at Coach-Maker's-Hall, Jan. 12, 1792 (London, 1792) was an anonymous pamphlet (which went through two editions) supporting the boycott of sugar and rum, a popular movement which arose in the early 1790s as part of the campaign to abolish the slave trade. The British Library catalogue incorrectly attributes the pamphlet to William Allen (1770–1843), a Quaker philanthropist, scientist, and abolitionist, based on the fact that the preface is signed ‘W.A.’. Allen was a supporter of the sugar boycott, and in fact had abstained from sugar since February 1789.¹ The British Library’s attribution has been followed by all subsequent historians, including Timothy Whelan, Clare Midgley, G.M. Ditchfield, J.R. Oldfield, and J.L. Holcomb.² However, both internal and contextual evidence show that the author cannot have been William Allen, and that the pamphlet should in fact be attributed to William Allum, a little-known radical figure active in Southwark and later America during the 1790s.

¹ On 22 February 1789, Allen wrote in his diary: ‘One step farther may be taken by me, which is wanting to complete my testimony in this respect [as an “opposer of slavery”], and which, if universally adopted, would inevitably put a stop to this enormous evil, and that is, disusing those commodities procured by the labour of slaves. And as sugar is, undoubtedly, one of the chief, I resolve, through divine assistance, to persevere in the disuse of it until the Slave Trade shall be abolished.’ *The Life of William Allen, with Selections from His Correspondence*, ed. L. Bradshaw (3 vols., London, 1846), I, 7.

² T. Whelan, ‘Martha Gurney and the Anti-Slave Trade Movement’ in E. J. Clapp and J. R. Jeffrey (eds), *Women, Dissent and Anti-Slavery in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (Oxford, 2011), 62; C. Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London, 1992), 35, 38; G. M. Ditchfield, ‘Abolitionism and the Social Conscience’ in A. C. Thompson (ed.), *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions, Volume II: The Long Eighteenth Century c.1689-c.1828* (Oxford, 2018), 292; J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-slavery: the Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807* (London, 1998), 140; J.L. Holcomb, *Moral Commerce: Quakers and the Transatlantic Boycott of the Slave Labor Economy* (London, 2016), 50.

Two facts point to the implausibility of William Allen as the author of the pamphlet. Firstly, the signature to the preface reads ‘W.A., Southwark, January 31st, 1792’ (*Duty*, iv). Allen was born in Spitalfields, London, and in 1792 moved to take up occupation with the chemist Joseph Gurney Bevan in Plough Court, off Lombard Street in the City of London.³ No record exists of him having resided in Southwark, and thus he is unlikely to be the ‘W.A.’ who signed the pamphlet. Secondly, and more conclusively, the back page of the pamphlet (*Duty*, 24) contained an advertisement for a publication ‘by the same author’ entitled *A letter to the Reverend John Martin. Occasioned by his intended speech on the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts* (London, 1790). This pamphlet was signed pseudonymously by ‘No reverend Dissenter’, again with the location given as Southwark (*Letter*, 32). It was a response to a speech opposing the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts published by John Martin (1741–1820), the pastor of Grafton Street Baptist church, which he had intended to give at a meeting of the General Body of Dissenting Ministers of the Three Denominations (he had been unable to do so after being removed from the meeting for abusing the previous speaker).⁴ The *Letter* responded to Martin’s arguments against repeal in a caustic tone, and quoted from radical figures including Capel Lofft and the Baptist pastor Robert Robinson (1735–1790). Considering that this was primarily an internal Baptist dispute—and concerning the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, an issue in which Quakers had little interest—it is unlikely that a twenty-year-old William Allen would have taken up his pen against Martin. Certainly, Allen never expressed concern over the Test and Corporation Acts during 1790 in his diary, and did not hold any radical inclinations which would have led him to quote from the likes of Lofft and Robinson. Moreover, the author of the *Letter* described himself as ‘possessing some knowledge of [Martin’s] character’ (*Letter*, 4), suggesting some personal contact with Martin which Allen, as a Quaker and

³ L. Stephen, ‘Allen, William (1770-1843)’, rev. by G.F. Bartle, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (23 September 2004); H. Hall, *William Allen 1770-1843: Member of The Society of Friends* (Haywards Heath, 1953), 11–14.

⁴ B. Waddell, ‘John Martin (1741-1820)’ in M. A. G. Haykin and T. Wolever (eds), *The British Particular Baptists, 1688-1910* (5 vols., Springfield, MO, 2000-2019), V, 219, 233–5.

moving in a very different social milieu, is unlikely to have had, making it even more improbable that he was the author.

With the implausibility of Allen's authorship of both *The Duty of Abstaining* and *A Letter to the Reverend John Martin* established, it remains to ascertain the true authorship of both works. The *Letter* is attributed to 'Allum of Southwark' by Baptist historian W.T. Whitley in his *Baptist Bibliography* and by the *Dictionary of Anonymous and Pseudonymous English Literature*, and a copy of the pamphlet in the Bodleian Library has 'W. Allum of Southwark' pencilled on the title page.⁵ While the evidence which led Whitley and others to this conclusion is unclear, there are no contextual reasons to doubt this attribution and much circumstantial evidence in favour of Allum's authorship.

William Allum (whose dates of birth and death are unknown) was a resident of Southwark and active in both the world of popular radicalism and the Baptist churches of London during the early 1790s. In 1790, he subscribed to a volume of sermons by leading Baptist theologian Dr John Gill (1697–1771), in which his address was listed as 'Borough', an alternative name for Southwark.⁶ In December 1791, he was baptised and became a member at Maze Pond Baptist church in Southwark.⁷ He had clearly been attending Maze Pond for some time before this because in October 1790 he had signed, along with fourteen other members of the congregation, a letter to the pastor of the church, James Dore (1763–1825), which praised the French Revolution as 'the wonderful Revolution, that a neighbouring Nation heretofore groaning under ecclesiastical and civil Tyranny has so recently experienced' and requested Dore to prepare 'a Course of Lectures on the principles of Nonconformity, and of civil and religious Liberty'.⁸ 'Civil and religious liberty' was

often used a shorthand for a range of reforms including repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, and this evidence of Allum's support for repeal and political reform, alongside his residence in Southwark and his Baptist affiliation, suggests that he is the 'Allum' referenced by Whitley and others, and forms a strong circumstantial case for his authorship of *A Letter to the Reverend John Martin*.

Contextual information supports the implication that Allum, as the author of the *Letter*, was also the author of *The Duty of Abstaining*. The pamphlet contained the text of a speech delivered at Coachmakers' Hall, the venue of a leading debating society in London. Debating societies were a popular form of 'rational entertainment' accessible to artisans and shopkeepers, and by late 1791 had become a venue for the expression of radical opinions. John Thelwall (1764–1834), the manager of the Coachmakers' Hall debates, recalled that 'the abilities and the decisions... were almost uniformly on the democratic side', and this may have been what attracted Allum to the debates.⁹ The debate under consideration, addressing the question, 'Is it not the duty of the people of Great Britain, from a principle of moral obligation and regard to their national character, to abstain from the consumption of West India produce till the Slave Trade is abolished and measures are taken for the abolition of Slavery?', took place on two evenings over consecutive weeks, 5 January and 12 January 1792. Only the most popular debates continued over multiple weeks, and nearly six hundred people were present for the final unanimous vote in the affirmative.¹⁰ On the first evening of the debate, an iron mask which slaves were forced to wear was displayed (the *Duty*, 19, described it as 'an IRON argument, which no friend to freedom can resist'). According to an annotation in a copy of the pamphlet owned by Elizabeth Gurney, another member of the Maze Pond church, this mask was displayed by Richard Hillier, who also exhibited some traditional African fabrics.¹¹ Hillier was similarly a member of Maze Pond, having joined the church in July 1791, and was the author of *A Vindication of the Address to the People of Great-Britain, on the use*

⁵ W. T. Whitley, *A Baptist Bibliography* (2 vols., London, 1916–1922), II, 25; S. Halkett and J. Laing, *Dictionary of Anonymous and Pseudonymous English Literature*, rev. by J. Kennedy, W. A. Smith and A. F. Johnson (7 vols., Edinburgh, 1926–1934), III, 307. The annotated Bodleian copy of this pamphlet has the shelfmark 8° X 230 (1) BS.

⁶ J. Gill, *Sermons on Important Subjects; Preached by the Late Rev. and Learned John Gill, D.D.* (London, 1790), iv.

⁷ Oxford, Angus Library and Archive, C/London/Maze Pond/1/6 (Church Minutes of Maze Pond Baptist Church, Southwark, 1784–1821): 18 November 1791, 12 December 1791.

⁸ 'A Diaconal Epistle, 1790', *Baptist Quarterly*, viii (1936), 216. Contrary to the assumption of historians and the letter's misleading published title, the church records show that only three of the signatories were deacons of Maze Pond, and seven (including Allum) were not members of the church when the letter was sent.

⁹ M. Thale, 'London Debating Societies in the 1790s', *The Historical Journal*, xxxii (1989), 59, 62.

¹⁰ *London Debating Societies, 1776–1799*, ed. D.T. Andrew (London, 1994), 318.

¹¹ This is held in the Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford, with the shelfmark 43.b.8(f).

of *West India Produce*, a pamphlet published in 1791 in support of William Fox's seminal *Address to the People of Great-Britain*, which had sparked the abolitionist sugar boycott. Maze Pond was, in fact, a nucleus of boycott activity: William Fox had close connections to the church through his business partner, Martha Gurney (1733–1816), a member of the church and the leading female bookseller/publisher of abolitionist works.¹² Richard Hillier may have first read Fox's pamphlet as it was circulating in manuscript form through the congregation.¹³ Moreover, Martha Gurney sold the *Duty*, in addition to Fox's *Address* (which may have sold up to 300,000 copies) and Hillier's *Vindication*. Discussion of and support for the boycott thus pervaded the congregational community of which Allum was a part, and provides important context for his engagement with the topic at the debate.

The Coachmakers' Hall debates may also have been where Allum met John Thelwall. In addition to his role as manager of the debates, Thelwall was a leading London radical and was later put on trial for treason for his involvement with the London Corresponding Society (LCS). Thelwall lived in Maze Pond in the early 1790s, and, in view of the fact that he professed himself to be a 'sermon hunter', he may have attended the Maze Pond Baptist church on occasion.¹⁴ Allum and Thelwall's relationship was established through their mutual involvement in the Southwark Society of the Friends of the People, a radical association founded in April 1792 and affiliated with the LCS. According to Thelwall's biographer, he and Allum 'particularly exerted themselves to rally the friends

of the people in Southwark' in the wake of the Royal Proclamation against seditious meetings in November 1792.¹⁵ A sense of Allum's radical sentiment comes through in the *Duty*. In the preface he spoke darkly of an 'INFLUENCE' in Parliament which counteracted the clear evidence of the inhumanity of the slave trade, and wrote, 'Considering the present state of the Representation of the People, this inattention to the voice of reason and humanity, cannot be matter of much surprise' (*Duty*, iii). In the speech, he sarcastically described Parliament as the 'true Representative' and the 'virtuous Legislature' for having ignored and mocked evidence showing the inhumanity of the slave trade, and declared that 'it is time then that the PEOPLE shew themselves', taking abolition into their own hands by boycotting slave-grown sugar in order to cause the trade to wither (*Duty*, 21). This radical political attitude, in addition to his association with Thelwall and the connections between Maze Pond and the boycott of slave-grown produce, explains Allum's presence at the debate and his support for the boycott, and presents a convincing contextual and circumstantial case for his authorship of the pamphlet.

In April 1793, following the government's repression of radical organisations, Allum fled to America. He arrived in New York on 30 May, having borne 'the rough passage remarkably well for a young sailor', and travelled to Philadelphia to meet Dr William Rogers (1751–1824), a prominent Pennsylvania Baptist who regularly corresponded with British Baptists. Rogers introduced him to George Washington, with whom he conversed about the political situation in Europe.¹⁶ He also carried a letter to Washington from Robert Bowyer, a painter and printer in London, which described Allum as 'a Gentleman who has been persecuted by the despotic Aristocrats of this Country on Acco[un]t of his opposition to Tyranny & oppression—he hopes to find an Assylum [sic] in America where the Sons of Freedom can Sit under their Vines & Fig trees without the fear of informers, or imprisonment, for alas if ever these days were Known in England, they are certainly now at an end.'¹⁷ Once in America, he established

¹² T. Whelan, 'William Fox, Martha Gurney, and Radical Discourse of the 1790s', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, xlii (2009), 397–411; T. Whelan, 'Martha Gurney and William Fox: Baptist Printer and Radical Reformer, 1791–1794' in J.H.Y. Briggs (ed.), *Pulpit and People: Studies in Eighteenth-Century Baptist Life and Thought* (Eugene, OR, 2009), 165–201.

¹³ This is how Timothy Whelan interprets Hillier's comment, 'I have not the honour of being the author of the well-timed and spirited Address, to the People of Great Britain; but my conscience was certainly asleep, as far as related to its contents, till I saw it in manuscript.' R. Hillier, *A Vindication of the Address to the People of Great-Britain*, on the use of *West India Produce*. *With some Observations and Facts Relative to the Situation of Slaves*. In *Answer to a Female Apologist for Slavery*, 2nd edn (London, 1791), 3; Whelan, 'Martha Gurney and the Anti-Slave Trade Movement', 59.

¹⁴ J. Mee, *Print, Publicity and Popular Radicalism: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge, 2016), 169, 171.

¹⁵ *The New, General and Complete Weekly Magazine*, i (1796), 29; Mee, *Print, Publicity and Popular Radicalism*, 173, 233; J. Barrell and J. Mee (eds), *Trials for Treason and Sedition, 1792–1794* (8 vols., London, 2006–2007), VIII, 343.

¹⁶ J. Evans, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. William Richards* (Chiswick, 1819), 273–5.

himself as a prosperous merchant in the East India trade in partnership with William Talbot and James Lee, and was elected a member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society alongside several other British Baptists including James Dore and William Fox.¹⁸ He also continued his radical activities, becoming the secretary of the ‘Republican Natives of Great Britain and Ireland resident in the city of New York’. This group welcomed Rational Dissenter Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) when he similarly emigrated to America in 1794 by sympathising with his ‘fruitless opposition to corrupt and tyrannical government’ and declaring their ‘full persuasion that a republican representative government was not merely best adapted to promote human happiness, but that it is the only rational system worthy the wisdom of man to project, or to which his reason should assent.’¹⁹ Allum also maintained his connection with John Thelwall, writing in 1794 to accuse him of renegeing on the cause of liberty, which provoked a defensive response from Thelwall in which he assured Allum of his radical commitments by avowing that he was ‘a Republican, a downright sans culotte’.²⁰ The draft of this letter subsequently became crucial prosecution evidence in Thelwall’s trial for treason.

Details of Allum’s life after 1794 are very limited. In 1798, the Allum, Talbot and Lee firm dissolved, and in 1799 Allum was removed from the membership of Maze Pond for a ‘most Detestable crime’, confirmation of which had to be obtained from William Rogers.²¹ The nature of this crime remains uncertain, but it may have been theological,

because in 1804 an ‘Elder William Allum; formerly a Baptist minister’ is mentioned as having ‘become a member and preacher in the Halcyon Church’.²² This was a heterodox sect formed in 1801 which denied the orthodox creeds and the doctrine of the Trinity and was led by Abel M. Sarjent, a peripatetic former Baptist who began claiming to have had visions and to be a new messenger from God.²³ It seems likely that this was the same William Allum because the Halcyon Church held to a radical, millennial-inspired condemnation of oppression and the privileged classes which would have appealed to his political sentiments.²⁴ Following this involvement with the Halcyon Church, no mention of Allum has been found, and it is unclear where and when he died.

The same individual was the author of both *The Duty of Abstaining* and *A Letter to the Reverend John Martin*, and it is highly implausible that this could have been William Allen. On the other hand, there is no reason to doubt the attribution of the *Letter* to William Allum, and strong circumstantial evidence connects Allum to both works. It seems clear, therefore, that the *Duty* has been mis-attributed, and should instead be credited to this little-known Baptist and active radical.

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¹⁷ Robert Bowyer to George Washington, 19 March 1793, *The Papers of George Washington* (Digital Edition), <https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN> (08/05/2025).

¹⁸ D.T. Valentine (ed.), *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York for 1859* (New York, 1859), 598; *Act of Incorporation and Constitution of the Pennsylvania Society, for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1860), 22.

¹⁹ J. Priestley, *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, ed. J.T. Rutt (25 vols., London, 1817–1832), I/ii, 235, 252.

²⁰ Mee, *Print, Publicity and Popular Radicalism*, 175–6.

²¹ Valentine (ed.), *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York*, 598; Oxford, Angus Library and Archive, C/London/Maze Pond/1/6: 22 July 1799, 19 August 1799, 18 November 1799.

²² ‘The Destruction of the Beast in the Downfall of Sectarianism’, *The Athenian Critic*, i (1804), iv.

²³ D.R. Broadhurst, ‘The Halcyon Churches of Rev. Abel M. Sargent’, *The Spalding Research Project*, <https://solomonspalding.com/SRP/saga/saga01b.htm> (15/05/25); H. Adams, *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations* (Boston, 1817), 102.

²⁴ N.O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (London, 1991), 76.

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