

## Thomas Carlyle, 'The Dismal Science', and the Contemporary Political Economy of Slavery

---

Peter Groenewegen\*

---

Thomas Carlyle's description of political economy as the 'dismal science' is well known. Several of the classical history of economic thought texts quote him on the subject and, occasionally, mention some of his other pronouncements on economics, particularly his critical outlook on laissez faire. Examples include Cossa (1893, p. 106), Gide and Rist (1949, p. 542) and Schumpeter (1959, pp. 409-11). Bonar (1894, pp. 227-8) mentioned the matter in his article on Carlyle for Palgrave's *Dictionary of Political Economy*. Subsequently, he (Bonar 1922, pp. 230n, 248n) and Robbins's influential *Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (1935, p. 26) drew attention to Carlyle's other 'endearing' epithet for political economy, 'pig philosophy' which, strictly speaking, Carlyle only applied to the contemporary utilitarian version of political economy. In addition, Carlyle sometimes features in the history of economics as a somewhat crucial influence on the social and economic thought of John Stuart Mill<sup>1</sup> or, more generally, as one of a number of 'romantic', 'mystic', mid-nineteenth century critics of political economy, in which case he then tends to be bracketed with John Ruskin.

Few of these references source Carlyle's description of political economy as the 'dismal science' to its origins in an article on 'The Nigger Question'<sup>2</sup>. This had first been published in *Fraser's Magazine* (December 1849) and then, four years later, appeared as a separate pamphlet (1853). Subsequently, it was frequently reprinted as part of his *Latter-day Pamphlets* (1858) and *Miscellaneous Essays* (1888), the version (Carlyle 1849) used here. This essay was written, it may be noted, with the 'dismal impressions' of a visit to Ireland in the summer of 1849 fresh in his mind, and as the first fruit of his 'world weariness' induced by his experiences there, in combination with 'domestic sorrows' and a general discontent with public affairs (Garnett 1895, p. 129). As background to this piece was the abolition of slavery in the French colonies enacted in 1848, following the similar measure for British colonies legislated in England in 1834, the year which also saw the enactment of the new 'poor law'. It also came not long after the abolition of serfdom in Austria (which likewise occurred in 1848) and the many factory reforms enacted in England and France during the 1840s. The last included 1842 legislation prohibiting child and women labour in underground mines, the regulation of their hours of labour more generally in 1844 legislation and the introduction of a ten-hour day for women and children in the textile industry in 1848. By the end of 1849, and also during 1853, the institution of slavery continued as a going concern in many other parts of the world. The cotton plantations of the southern states of the American Republic are a well-known example; as are the plantations of the former (or continuing) Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch colonies in central and southern America and the East Indies, and, more generally, in Africa. Despite its abolition by Britain and France, slavery continued to thrive for some time as a nineteenth-century mode of colonial production, as did the slave trade in Africa which was so frequently its prerequisite. 'The nigger question', to use Carlyle's title, remained a highly topical issue in social and political debate for some time.

In order to place Carlyle's epithet of 'dismal science' clearly within its original context, the first part of this paper summarises the essentials of Carlyle's argument on the 'nigger question' and looks at his views on economics in a wider context as well. The second part of the paper develops some links between contemporary political economy and slavery, by examining aspects of the economic literature on slavery, especially from the middle of the nineteenth century. A final section then presents some conclusions and reflects on the appropriateness of Carlyle's use of the term, 'dismal science', in the light of this background.

Discussing Carlyle and the 'Dismal Science' of Economics may also be an appropriate choice of topic for contributing to a *Festschrift* in honour of Ray Petridis for two reasons. First, I originally presented this paper at the 1998 HETSA Conference at the University of Western Sydney (the eleventh such conference) and hence part of the offspring from that inaugural conference organised at Armidale in 1981 by Ray Petridis, together with John Pullen and John Wood. This conference also spawned the History of Economic Thought Society of Australia and its regular newsletter (now *History of Economics Review*) at a business meeting chaired by Ray Petridis on the afternoon of 9 May 1981. Secondly, this choice of topic is a quite appropriate tribute to Ray's long-standing interests in nineteenth century labour economics.

## 1 Carlyle's Approach to Economics

Carlyle's 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question' was presented in the guise of a report of a public address on some of the consequences of the abolition of slavery in the West Indies. This was given sometime during 1848, and allegedly reported by a Dr Phelim McQuirk, 'whose singular powers of reporting, and also whose debts, extravagances and sorrowful insidious financial operations to the grief of many poor trades peoples [were said to be causing a stir]' (Carlyle 1849, p. 79).

The address itself is introduced as one dealing with the rights of negroes. More generally, it can be said to discuss incentives to labour (both under slavery and in a free society) as disclosed by the laws of supply and demand or according to the 'natural' principles of human order, duty and responsibility. The free labour of liberated negro slaves in the West Indies is here sharply contrasted with the labour to be expected from a system of obligations imposed by slavery. Concurrently, Carlyle strongly suggests that free labour, whether that of the liberated negro slave in the Carribean, or that of British, and especially Irish, 'whites' in its factory and agricultural system, raises issues of social and economic importance even if these concern problems of a different order.

The address opens with the proposition that the 'philanthropists', who, after considerable agitation, induced the emancipation of the slaves, had neither seen nor addressed its potential consequences with any real understanding. Their 'grand association of philanthropic associations' or the 'Universal-Abolition-of-Pain Association' is depicted by Carlyle as being in danger of becoming a 'Sluggard and Scoundrel Protection Society'. This is suggested in a parable placed in the mouth of the speaker to draw attention to some of the unintended consequences of slave emancipation. Such consequences are shown by Carlyle not only to have adverse influences on West Indian affairs (that is, on the prosperity of the sugar plantations) but also to fit uneasily with labour conditions in Britain on ethical grounds.

The crux of the issue for Carlyle arises from the shortage of labour for the sugar plantations following emancipation of the slaves, given the low cost of the negro's staple provisions and the very limited nature of their scale of wants. The free market in such a situation does not provide any real answer, as indeed it fails to do in other, differently endowed parts of the world such as Ireland, where there is also an abundant labour supply but under quite different circumstances.

Carlyle states the essentials of the argument particularly succinctly in the fifth and sixth paragraph of the article, where they are couched in the language of political economy, that is, in terms of 'supply and demand'. In Carlyle's opinion, this is the key phrase of the science which deals with such matters as a special branch of the social sciences. The final sentences of the paragraphs link the West Indian problem to that of Ireland by the simple device of portraying an 'emancipated' West Indies as a 'Black Ireland'. In Carlyle's own words:

The West Indies, it appears, are short of labour; as indeed is very conceivable in those circumstances. Where a Black man, by working about half-an-hour a-day (such is the calculation), can supply himself, by aid of sun and soil, with as much pumpkin as will suffice, he is likely to be a little stiff to raise into hard work! Supply and demand, which, science says, should be brought to bear on him, have an uphill task of it with such a man. Strong sun supplies itself gratis; these are his 'supply'; and half an hour a-day, directed upon these, will produce 'pumpkin which is his 'demand'. The fortunate Black man, very swiftly does *he* settle his account with supply and demand: not so swiftly the less fortunate White man of those tropical localities. A bad case, his, just now. He himself cannot work; and his black neighbour, rich in pumpkin, is in no haste to help him. Sunk to the ears in pumpkin, imbibing saccharine juices, and much at his ease in the Creation, he can listen to the less fortunate white man's 'demand', and take his own time in supplying it. Higher wages, massa; higher, for your cane-crop cannot wait; still higher, - till no conceivable opulence of cane-crop will cover such wages. In Demerara, as I read in the Blue-book of last year, the cane crop, far and wide, stands rotting; the fortunate black gentlemen, strong in their pumpkins, having all struck till the 'demand' rise a little. Sweet blighted lilies, now getting-up their heads again!

Science, however, has a remedy still. Since the demand is so pressing, and the supply so inadequate (equal in fact to nothing in some places, as appears), increase the supply; bring more Blacks into the labour-market, then will the rate fall, says science. Not the least surprising part of our West-Indian policy is this recipe of 'immigration'; of keeping-down the labour-market in those islands by importing new Africans to labour and live there. If the Africans that are already there could be made to lay-down their pumpkins, and labour for their living, there are already Africans enough. If the new Africans, after labouring a little, take to pumpkins like the others, what remedy is there? To bring in new and ever new Africans, say you, till pumpkins themselves grow dear; till the country is crowded with Africans; and black men there, like white men here, are forced by hunger to labour for their living? That will be a consummation. To have 'emancipated' the West Indies into a Black Ireland; 'free' indeed, but an Ireland, and

Black! The world may yet see prodigies; and reality be stranger than a nightmare dream. (Carlyle 1853 1888, vol. 7, pp. 82-83)

The two *bêtes-noires* in Carlyle's depiction of the West Indies as a potential 'Black Ireland' are introduced in the next two paragraphs. They are, first of all, the 'Exeter Hall philanthropists', or the nonconformist religious sects such as Quakers and Baptists which generated the push for emancipation of the slaves in the British Empire. Their philanthropy underpins the misery ensured by an economic policy advocated by a second group of people, which seeks to leave alone all things economic. Their unity, as the speaker through whom Carlyle speaks, indicates, brings into existence 'unnamable abortions, wide coiled monstrosities' of a type never seen before. The two paragraphs which introduce these two agents of misery also deserve full quotation because they contain Carlyle's famous description of political economy as the 'dismal science':

Our own white or sallow Ireland, sluttishly starving from age to age on its act-of-parliament 'freedom', was hitherto the flower of mismanagement among the nations: but what will this be to a Negro Ireland, with pumpkins themselves fallen scarce like potatoes! Imagination cannot fathom such an object; the belly of Chaos never held the like. The human mind, in its wide wanderings, has not dreamt yet of such a 'freedom' as that will be. Towards that, if Exeter Hall and science of supply and demand are to continue our guides in the matter, we are daily travelling, and even struggling, with loans of half-a-million and such like, to accelerate ourselves.

Truly, my philanthropic friends, Exeter-Hall Philanthropy is wonderful. And the Social Science, - not a 'gay science', but a rueful, - which finds the secret of this Universe in 'supply and demand', and reduces the duty of human governors to that of letting men alone, is also wonderful. Not a "gay science", I should say, like some we have heard of; no, a dreary, desolate, and indeed quite abject and distressing one; what we might call, by way of eminence, the dismal science. These two, Exeter-Hall Philanthropy and the Dismal Science, led by any sacred cause of Black Emancipation, or the like, to fall in love and make a wedding of it, - will give birth to progenies and prodigies; dark extensive moon-calves, unnamable abortions, wide-coiled monstrosities, such as the world has not seen hitherto! (Carlyle 1853 1888, vol. 7, pp. 83-4)

The remainder of Carlyle's discourse on the 'nigger question' moves on two levels: establishing the negro's natural inferiority to the white man and, as corollary, the satisfactory nature of the relationship between them in the form of a slavery which secures subsistence for the negro in return for the work of which he is capable and of which the white man has need. Carlyle, for example, devoted much space to depicting the negro, 'Quashee' as he is called after the type of food he is said to enjoy in the West Indies, as an idle, myopic individual. In every way, this 'Quashee' is inferior to the white man who has brought him to his tropical paradise of plenty. After all, the negro could have not discovered such a paradise for himself. For Carlyle, the negro is born to serve the white man, who is his natural master.

Moreover, for Carlyle the state of slavery, defining the natural relationship between negro and white man, provides the security, stability of employment and general care secured by the life-long contract it entails. This is, in his view, superior

to the far more limited work contract of a few weeks, or a month, which characterises 'free' European and British master-servant relationships in factory, on the farm, or in domestic service. The work contract, Carlyle at one stage argued by analogy, should be considered to be as sacred as the marriage sacrament. Marriage by the month has, of course, often been tried and such practice is continuing. In such a form, however, it is invariably found wanting. Marriage should be a permanent state. Permanence in the work contract is equally virtuous. It harks back to medieval notions of mutual social interaction, for example, that of the serf bound to the soil and the lord of the manor. It need hardly be added that Carlyle's views of feudalism and of the contemporary American and West Indian plantation systems were highly idealised, romanticised ones, not in line with more recent historical research on these subjects.

Carlyle's argument, in short, indicates a trade-off between the security of long (in fact, life-time) contracts as entailed by contemporary slave-and former feudal-relationships and the freedom, often to starve, bestowed on labour in contemporary industrial society by the political economy principle of 'laissez faire'. For Carlyle, Ireland and its citizens illustrate the spurious blessings of such freedom. 'Observe', he invites his readers, 'the unsold, unbought, unmarketable Irish "free" citizens dying in a ditch after their brutal eviction by absentee landlord and sheriff; or the herds of ragged Irish tramping the London streets, with a child on each arm, seeking their livelihood through begging.' If this is the freedom proclaimed by the political economy gospel of 'laissez faire', and fought for by the nonconformist philanthropists of Exeter Hall in the case of the abolition of slavery, then Carlyle much prefers the less free, but more secure world of a feudal past or, with respect to the negro, or their equivalent form in the 'Dutch blacks' of Java, the permanent security given by indentured labour, serfdom, or slavery.

In addition, Carlyle's article highlights the dubious value of a cash nexus for society. This is a second prized quality of the free, unregulated world of political economy. For the purpose of Carlyle's major argument, such a 'cash nexus' underlies the free labour contract of modern industrialised society, which eliminates all social responsibilities for the contemporary employer. This also is in sharp contrast with the master's role in feudal, or even in slave society. Emphasis on a 'cash nexus' is ridiculed through comparing Jesus with Judas enriched by his thirty pieces of silver. Is the status of Judas raised because he has the cash? This is the question Carlyle wants his readers to consider. Only political economists, whose 'dismal science' makes them blind to claims to virtue other than money, award merit in this way. Carlyle's defence of slavery serves to highlight his reservations on the values in contemporary society brought about by political economy and invites consideration of returning to the social structure of a feudal or ancient world.

Ignoring Carlyle's offensive views on racial inferiority in this defence of slavery, questions need to be asked about the basis for Carlyle's strong dislike of political economy's individualistic perspectives. The effects of these he claimed to have seen strikingly illustrated in Ireland when he visited that country not long before the publication of his 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question'. He sharply criticised these effects in that article through comparing the selfishness of a 'laissez faire' society based on the cash nexus with the high regard for social responsibility he so strongly identified with the nature of feudal and slave societies. Whether Carlyle's identification of the two was accurate or historically valid cannot

be entered into; he had earlier made such comparisons in his acclaimed *Past and Present*, published six years previously.

How solidly Carlyle's critique of contemporary political economy was grounded in actual knowledge of the literature of political economy needs to be addressed. Few clear answers are provided on this matter from the historical record. However, these have to be looked at to assess the kind of authority attributable to Carlyle's critique of the subject. Firstly, the 1849 Irish tour had elicited economic discussion with Sir Charles Duffy, as well as someone called Wrixon who, among other things, had shown Carlyle the results of an eviction following reorganisation of one of Lord Limerick's estates (Wilson 1927, pp. 154-6; Duffy 1892, pp. 118-22). Carlyle commented on such aspects of his Irish visit in a letter to Emerson written shortly after his return to England:

What the other results of this Irish Tour are to be for me I cannot yet in the least specify. For one thing, I seem to be farther from *speech* on any subject than ever: such masses of chaotic ruin everywhere fronted me, the general fruit of long-continued universal falsity and folly; and such mountains of delusion yet possessing all hearts and tongues: I could do little that was not even *noxious*, except *admire* in silence the general 'Bankruptcy of Imposture' as one there finds and sees it come to pass, and think with infinite sorrow of the tribulations, futile wrestlings, tumults and disasters which yet await that unfortunate section of Adam's Posterity before any real improvement can take place among them. Alas, alas! The Gospels of Political Economy, of *Laissez-faire*, No-Government, Paradise to all Comers, and so many fatal Gospels, - generally, one may say, all the Gospels of this blessed 'New Era', - will first have to be tried, and found wanting. With a quantity of written and uttered Nonsense, and of suffered and inflicted Misery, which one sinks fairly dumb to estimate! (Carlyle to Emerson, 13 August 1849, in Slater 1964, p. 455)

It is more difficult to discover where Carlyle learned his economics. Via John Murray, the publisher, Carlyle had come into early contact with McCulloch, as he mentioned in a letter to his brother Alexander in 22 December 1822. An earlier encounter with McCulloch in January 1821 at a supper arranged by Murray had apparently been aborted, because McCulloch had been sick and could not come (Thomas to Alexander Carlyle, 10 January 1821, in Marris 1968, p. 59). Their encounter in late December 1822 elicited the following comment from Carlyle. This also indicated Carlyle's awareness of Smith and Ricardo, about whose doctrines McCulloch was to give his Ricardo Memorial Lectures in London in 1824:

The other day I went with Murray to call upon Macculloch [sic!] the Scotsman. He was sitting like a great polar bear, chewing and vainly trying to digest the doctrines of Adaam [sic!] Smith and Ricardo which he means to vomit forth again next spring in the shape of lectures to the 'thinking public' in this city. (Thomas to Alexander Carlyle, 22 December 1822, in Marris 1968, p. 129)

Further meetings between the two led Carlyle to describe McCulloch as 'A hempen man but *genuine* hemp', while McCulloch judged Carlyle to be 'a gentleman, and a man of sound sense and discernment' (in O'Brien 1970, p. 99 n. 4).

With the exception of Mill<sup>3</sup>, Nassau Senior was the only other economist of note whom Carlyle appears to have met personally. They encountered each other at Addiscombe in July 1845, and Carlyle recollected the event as follows:

Senior, seeing me there [i.e. at Addiscombe], came up in the most cordial manner to shake hands, and we even had a quantity of smoking together and philosophical discoursing together - by motion of his - with unabated aversion of mine. Peace to him! (in Froude 1897, I p. 378)

Carlyle's antipathetic reaction to Senior is explicable by Marian Bowley's remark (Bowley 1937, p. 53) associating Carlyle-inspired Tory criticism of Senior's opposition to the ten-hour movement, on 'laissez faire' grounds, with Carlyle's more general loathing of the industrial policy with respect to factory legislation so strongly endorsed by economists like Senior.

It may be more fruitful to examine what is known of Carlyle's acquaintance with economics when a student at Edinburgh University. Although largely occupied with mathematics at this time, he was also said to be reading 'incessantly, Hume's *Essays* [including presumably those on economic subjects] among other books' (Froude 1882, I p. 36). Wilson (1923, p. 41) states that Carlyle 'assimilated' Smith's *Wealth of Nations* as well at this time. Carlyle's high opinion of this book and its author can be inferred from a letter to Robert Mitchell (31 March 1817, in Norton 1886, pp. 48-49). Contemporary letters to Mitchell and James Johnstone more generally indicate reading of history and politics, mainly from Scottish authors. It included Hume's *History of England* and its continuation by Smollett, work by Robertson (his *History of Scotland? History of Charles V?*), John Millar's *An Historical View of the English Government* and, a special favourite, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Norton 1886, pp. 61, 64, 68-70, 118). In addition, there were novels, including 'Godwin's powerful but unnatural and bombastic novel', *Mandeville*, Walter Scott's *Rob Roy* and the essayists Hunt and Hazlitt in the *Edinburgh Review* (Carlyle to Mitchell, 16 February 1818, in Norton 1886, p. 70). The economics, on this evidence, seems limited, but not insignificant.

More than likely, Carlyle was introduced to economics by practical issues. His father had made him initially aware of the deteriorating position of the poor, including the 'working poor', during the years of depression which followed the battle of Waterloo in 1815. More importantly, Edward Irving, a fellow student at Edinburgh, habitually conversed with Carlyle on 'the condition of the people' (Froude 1882, I p. 65).

In 1819, Edward Irving had joined Thomas Chalmers, the evangelist and writer on population and commercial depressions. His correspondence with Carlyle at this time therefore frequently raises economic issues. A letter in 1818 mentions Lauderdale and the Bullion Report (Froude 1882, I p. 70). A later letter presupposes Carlyle's familiarity with Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* on the 'encumbrances from the commercial system', while others raise radical politics issues concerning the plight of the poor. Irving had also brought Carlyle into personal contact with Chalmers. This produced praise from Carlyle for one of Chalmers's sermons, as well as more general admiration for the qualities of this noted figure in Scottish society (Froude 1882, I pp. 73-74, 82-6). Other letters supplement this picture. In a letter to Mitchell (25 May 1818) Carlyle criticised Chalmers's article on the causes and cure of pauperism as 'disjointed and absurd - and his language a barbarous jargon' (in Norton 1886, p. 74). Correspondence with

brother Alexander, however, emphasises a growing interest on Carlyle's part in the miserable condition of the working classes (in Norton 1886, pp. 124-5). By the mid-1830s, they comment on the deplorable condition of the industrial working class in Birmingham and note the enormous London obsession with 'cash' (*ibid.* pp. 312-13, 320). When writing to Johnstone (4 February 1822, in Norton 1886, p. 199), Carlyle comments critically on both the philosophy of Robert Owen of Lanark and his Irish schemes for providing potato plots and a cottage to paupers ('not likely to succeed') and on schemes of emigration as remedies for general distress among the poor. The social critic and reformer was gradually evolving during 1827, and Carlyle could write sarcastically of political economy in his note book:

Is not political economy useful? And ought not Joseph Hume and Macculloch to be honoured of all men? My cow is useful, and I keep her in the stable, and feed her with oilcake and 'chaff and dregs', and esteem her truly. But shall she live in my parlour? No; by the Fates, she shall live in the stall. (Carlyle, Notebook, January 1827, in Froude 1882, I, pp. 373-4)

Not long afterwards, Carlyle's critique of political economy as a do-nothing philosophy at a time when the problem of the poor demanded urgent action, began to flow easily in the general form it tended to take in his public writings. An early example is his 'Signs of the Times' (Carlyle 1829) with its sarcastic summary of Smith and Hume in the statement that 'all is well that works quietly' (Carlyle 1829, p. 246) and its profound disagreement with the gross inequalities in wealth generated by the 'age of machinery' and the moral philosophy of utilitarianism<sup>4</sup> and 'laissez faire' (Carlyle 1829, pp. 274-8). Similar views appeared in the text of Carlyle's 'Corn Law Rhymes', published in the *Edinburgh Review*, in which Carlyle preached not only his anti-self interest and anti-laissez faire doctrines but also his general pro-work and pro-rights to subsistence views (Carlyle 1832, esp. pp. 190-1, 195, 203, 210-11). Such views can also be found in Carlyle's only published novel, *Sartor Resartus* (1838), in his long pamphlet on 'Chartism' (Carlyle 1839, e.g. pp. 117-18, 120-21, 143-4, 151-4), and in the volumes on *Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) and *Past and Present* (1843). They reached a veritable crescendo in the 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question' of 1849.

Carlyle's celebrated friendship with Mill coincided with much of that writing on economics and eventually ensured the final break between the two when Carlyle's article on the 'nigger question' was published<sup>5</sup>. The record of this friendship shows little evidence that Mill greatly assisted in Carlyle's further economics education, although in the field of political economy, as more extensively in other fields, Mill very occasionally offered to procure books required by Carlyle to assist in his researches. The only example of such lending in economics comes from Mill's letter to Carlyle (January 1834), which promised to lend him Babbage on machinery. Whether Carlyle took advantage of this offer is not certain since Mill had to repeat the offer in a letter of early March (Mineka 1963, pp. 203, 217). In fact, apart from assisting Carlyle with the occasional query (for example, the authorship of Perronet Thompson's articles on the Poor Laws and the Corn Laws in the *Westminster Review*), and some general discussion of the Poor Laws (see Carey 1923, pp. 19, 74, 142-4) economic issues appear not to have been raised in the Mill - Carlyle correspondence.

This is all that can be gleaned from the record on Carlyle's specific knowledge of economics. None of this assists in providing background to the 'nigger question' article with respect to the political economy of slavery, to which McCulloch and Mill, as well as nearly every other economic writer with whose work Carlyle was acquainted, can be said to have contributed. The contents of this literature and its potential impact on Carlyle as critic of political economy need, therefore, to be discussed in the next section.

## 2 The Political Economy of Slavery

Most books on the principles of political economy from the mid-eighteenth century found room for some discussion of the economics of slavery, at least until the 1860s. Specialist literature devoted to this topic was also produced on both sides of the Atlantic. Given the details of Carlyle's economics 'education', as presented in the previous section, it seems appropriate to start the discussion with a summary of the views on slavery of David Hume and Adam Smith, before proceeding to more a general elucidation of the views on this topic by political economists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with special reference to work by McCulloch and John Stuart Mill.

The major discussion of slavery by Hume occurs in his essay, 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations'. It starts with a declaration befitting an enlightenment philosopher. After indicating that the abolition of slavery for some centuries through the greater part of Europe is an important demonstration of the growth of freedom, Hume is happy to state that the ancients' practice of domestic slavery reflected their 'barbarous manners', and that '[t]he remains which are to be found of domestic slavery, in the American colonies, and among the European nations, would never surely create a desire of rendering it more universal' (Hume 1752, pp. 112-13). For civilised countries which profess to love freedom, slavery is no longer appropriate, according to Hume.

In the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith deals with slavery in ancient times, that is, among the Greeks, Cretans and Romans, as well as with the practice of slavery in modern times. In the context of his general discussion of labour and its rewards in Book I, chapter VII, Smith boldly states the proposition that slave labour was more expensive than that of free men, on grounds explained in the single paragraph which broaches the topic:

The wear and tear of a slave, it has been said, is at the expense of his master; but that of a free servant is at his own expense. The wear and tear of the latter, however, is, in reality as much at the expense of his master as that of the former. The wages paid to journeymen and servants of every kind must be such as may enable them, one with another, to continue the race of journeymen and servants, according as the increasing, diminishing, or stationary demands of the society may happen to require. But though the wear and tear of a free servant be equally at the expense of his master, it generally costs him much less than that of a slave. The fund destined for replacing or repairing, if I may say so, the wear and tear of the slave, is commonly managed by a negligent master or careless overseer. That destined for performing the same office with regard to the free man, is managed by the free man himself. The disorders which generally prevail in the economy of the rich naturally introduce themselves into the management of the former:

The strict frugality and parsimonious attention of the poor naturally establish themselves in that of the latter. Under such different management, the same purpose must require very different degrees of expence to execute it. It appears, accordingly, from the experience of all ages and nations, I believe, that the work done by freemen comes cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves. It is found to do so even at Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, where the wages of common labour are so very high. (Adam Smith 1776, pp. 80-81)

This proposition is restated more strongly in Book III, chapter II, where in conditions of normal, European, agricultural production, the use of slaves is described as an unprofitable investment, largely from lack of motivation on the part of slaves to produce much above the share of the product destined for their maintenance. The position is quite different in the West Indies. There the high price paid for sugar, and to a lesser degree tobacco, ensures the profitability of slavery even when negro slaves are used. The relevant passages can be quoted in full:

The pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to persuade his inferiors. Wherever the law allows it, and the nature of the work can afford it, therefore, he will generally prefer the service of slaves to that of freemen. The planting of sugar and tobacco can afford the expence of slave cultivation. The raising of corn, it seems, in the present times, cannot. In the English colonies, of which the principal produce is corn, the far greater part of the work is done by freemen. The late resolution of the Quakers in Pennsylvania to set at liberty their negro slaves, may satisfy us that their number cannot be very great. Had they made any considerable part of their property, such a resolution could never have been agreed to. In our sugar colonies, on the contrary, the whole work is done by slaves, and in our tobacco colonies a very great part of it. The profits of a sugar-plantation in any of our West Indian colonies are generally much greater than those of any other cultivation that is known either in Europe or America: And the profits of a tobacco plantation, though inferior to those of sugar, are superior to those of corn, as has already been observed. Both can afford the expence of slave cultivation, but sugar can afford it still better than tobacco. The number of negroes accordingly is much greater in proportion to that of whites, in our sugar than in our tobacco colonies.

To the slave cultivation of ancient times, gradually succeeded a species of farmers known at present in France by the name of *metayers*. They are called in Latin, *Coloni Partiarii*. They have been so long in disuse in England that at present I know no English name for them. The proprietor furnished them with the seed, cattle, and instruments of husbandry, the whole stock, in short, necessary for cultivating the farm. The produce was divided equally between the proprietor and the farmer, after setting aside what was judged necessary for keeping up the stock, which was restored to the proprietor when the farmer either quitted, or was turned out of the farm.

Land occupied by such tenants is properly cultivated at the expence of the proprietor as much as that occupied by slaves. There is, however, one very essential difference between them. Such tenants, being freemen, are capable of acquiring property, and having a certain

proportion of the produce of the land, they have a plain interest that the whole produce should be as great as possible, in order that their own proportion may be so. A slave, on the contrary, who can acquire nothing but his maintenance, consults his own ease by making the land produce as little as possible over and above that maintenance. (Adam Smith 1776, pp. 365-6)

The case for, and against, slavery in the *Wealth of Nations*, is therefore argued by Smith on economic rather than on moral grounds. Although the text implies that slavery among the ancients, and in the West Indies, was, and is, harsh, even when compared with feudal serfdom which developed out of slavery, Smith gives no general condemnation of slavery in the manner of Hume. It is, therefore, not surprising that the slave trade is analysed simply as part of colonial trade or as a particular branch of commerce (Adam Smith 1776, pp. 537, 545, 701, 703) and that the action by the Quakers of Pennsylvania to liberate their slaves 'may satisfy us that their number cannot be very great.' (Adam Smith 1776, p. 365).

Much of this resembles Smith's position in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, though there, in one of the preserved accounts, the observation is also made as a self-evident proposition that 'the state of slavery must be very unhappy to the slave himself.' (Smith 1978, p. 185). The other preserved account elaborates on this, by indicating, among other things, that the master of slaves has 'the power of life and death over them', that they cannot marry although for breeding purposes they may mate. Smith added that, in the British West Indies, 'female slaves are all prostitutes, and suffer no degradation by it' (Smith 1978, pp. 450, 451), a particularly interesting value judgement for a Scottish moral philosopher. This record of Smith's *Lectures* also reports the sentiment that slavery is inimical to 'improvement in the arts', including the invention of machinery (Smith 1978, p. 526).

A decade or so before Smith was giving his lectures at Glasgow, Malachy Postlethwayt discussed aspects of the slave trade in his *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*. After suggesting that making slaves of negroes is a policy not becoming to nations 'that assume to themselves the name and character of Christians', and claiming that the European poor would make better servants in the colonies of America, Postlethwayt praised the profits which the slave trade generates and the training for seamen this African trade provides. Both these consequences of the slave trade are 'certainly very beneficial to this kingdom [i.e., Britain]' (Postlethwayt 1774, article 'Africa').

The first *Principles of Political Oeconomy*, by Sir James Steuart, also raised slavery as an important topic in the subject, devoting in fact a chapter specifically to this topic (Steuart 1767, Book I, chapter 7). This linked slavery to population growth and to employment, argued that slavery in ancient times had initial advantages in the saving of lives (war captives were sold rather than killed) and was an effective means to force people to labour when wants were necessarily limited. The last advantage of slavery for the ancients is sharply contrasted with the contemporary situation where Steuart argues that the great multiplicity of wants now forces men to labour far more effectively (Steuart 1767, pp. 50-51, 104, 169). Hence, in 'modern times', free men are much superior in industry to slaves (Steuart 1767, p. 169).

Steuart distinguished the relative merits of slavery in agriculture and in manufacturing and industry. Slavery is generally beneficial in the first but difficult to apply in the second; in fact, at one stage, it is claimed that slavery is contrary to the advancement of private industry (Steuart 1767, pp. 148, 206). This contrast

between agriculture and industry in the appropriateness of using slaves has an interesting implication for Steuart. The necessity of using slaves in the sugar colonies, and in the growing of different crops in other colonies, ensures the specialisation of these colonies in agriculture. This is of benefit to their mother country, which can import the raw materials, and manufacture them, hence creating valuable employment opportunities. Steuart's argument implies that the institution of slavery in colonies is an effective system of protection for manufacturing employment in the colonial power (Steuart 1767, pp. 147-9).<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere Steuart distinguished the employment of slaves in ancient times, indicating that in addition to agriculture, they were also used in primitive industry and in public works (Steuart (1767 pp. 378, 383), and argued that eventually in the course of progress, slavery was replaced by feudal labour relations, a change he attributed to the growing influence of Christianity in Europe (Steuart 1767, p. 207).

Before looking at the views on slavery of McCulloch and J.S. Mill, one<sup>7</sup> earlier nineteenth century view on the topic needs to be examined. This is of particular interest because it sought to controvert Adam Smith's account of a colonisation in which the relevance of slavery was largely suppressed. The author in question was Edward Gibbon Wakefield, the work his *A Letter from Sydney* (1829) in which aspects of colonisation policy relevant to the Australian colonies of New South Wales and Tasmania were set out. Smith's description of classical Greek colonisation is there criticised because it omits any reference to the crucial role of slaves in establishing these Greek settlements in Italy, Sicily and elsewhere (Wakefield 1829, pp. 154-55). Hence, despite his former dislike of slavery in America, Africa and in the Spanish colonies, Wakefield argued that slavery had much to contribute to the development of agriculture in new colonies with a great deal of land at their disposal. This position was clearly developed in the following remarks, which can be quoted in full:

But this state of things is not without many precedents. It has occurred in every waste country, settled by emigrants from civilized countries. In most other new countries, it has been partially remedied by means of slavery, and a time may come when its evils will be mitigated here in the same way. For, seeing that this colony would never be anything but a half-barbarous, Tartarian, ill-cultivated poverty-stricken wilderness, until in the course of nature, some hundreds of years hence, the population should become more dense, I began to hanker after what, till then, I had considered the worst of human ills — the institution of slavery. How often, in my presumption had I cursed the memory of Las Casas, for bribing the first planters of Hispaniola to spare the inhabitants of that island, by suggesting that they might obtain slaves from Africa! How scornfully in my ignorance of cause and effect, had I abused the Democrats of North America for cherishing the horrors of slavery! In moments of weakness, how I had sighed, and even shed tears of compassion and anger, at the damnable cruelties which I saw inflicted upon Blacks at the Cape of Good Hope! And yet, in spite of my reason and every better feeling of my nature, I brought myself to find excuses for the Spaniards, Africans, and Dutch, aye, even to think that a few thousand Negroes would be a great acquisition to New South Wales! So they would; and they would conduce to the wealth and — deny it who will — even to the *civilization* of these colonial landowners. What made Lord ---- a rich, well-educated and a greeable gentleman? —

The sweat, and blood, and tears of his and his father's slaves in Jamaica! Had slavery never existed, he would in the natural course of things, have been a little West Indian farmer, perhaps scarcely able to read – certainly not fit to be a member of civilized society. What made the most able public men of North America? Even their slaves, which conferred upon them riches, leisure, and instruction. Slavery has not produced any distinguished men in South Africa; because slavery, there, is of a gentle kind – domestic, not predial. But the African farmer is highly civilized, when compared with some of the descendants of Spaniards who inhabit the Pampas of the Rio de la Plata; and he owes whatever distinguishes him from the Tartar to the cheap labour of his slaves. In my heart I abhor the very name of slavery; but this is my adopted country, and when I contemplate its future condition, I can conceive that slavery was revived for something else than the gratification of man's worst propensities. Slavery exists, not to gratify the hearts of cruel men, but to fill the pockets of those who, without slavery would be poor and insignificant. It will never be abolished by appeals to the hearts of slave-owners. You might as well expect to make Mr. Buxton and Mr. Macaulay live upon vegetables, by showing them the cruelties of Smithfield. It is wonderful, but true, that, notwithstanding the great exertions of the abolitionists, the number of slaves owned by Christians is increasing every day. But why should we wonder? What was the sole cause of the revival of slavery by Christians, but the discovery of waste countries, and the disproportion which has ever since existed to those countries between the demand and supply of labour? And what is it that increases the number of slaves to Christian masters, but the increase of Christian capitalists wanting labourers, by the spreading of Christian people over regions heretofore waste? (Wakefield 1829, pp. 112-13)

McCulloch's views on slavery are clearly expressed in Note XXIII to his edition of the *Wealth of Nations* with respect to the colonial system (McCulloch 1850, pp. 605-13, esp. p. 613). Following Smith in part, this suggests that although free labour is, generally speaking, cheaper than slave labour, this is not the case in the sugar plantations of the West Indies. The climate there is unsuitable for European labour, and Negroes, for whom it is suitable, can only be secured for the hard labour involved in sugar plantations through slavery, given their limited wants and the cheapness of necessities in these parts. This is demonstrated as follows. Since the abolition of slavery in the British and French West Indian colonies, while slavery remains in force in the Spanish and Portuguese territories of Cuba and Brazil, the first no longer produce any sugar while the latter, with slave labour, do. McCulloch's conclusion on the subject is worth quoting:

The production of sugar has greatly fallen off in our West Indian colonies since the abolition of slavery; and the colonists have loudly complained of the difficulty of obtaining a sufficient supply of labour, and of its high price. But it is believed by many that this state of things will be temporary only; that free is always in the end cheaper than slave labour; and that in no very lengthened period, wages will be lower and labour more abundant in our islands than in those where slavery is maintained. This, however, though a popular, is a very doubtful conclusion; and we are inclined to agree with those who hold that a

supply of some sort of compulsory labour is indispensable to the profitable raising of sugar in the New World. (McCulloch 1850, p. 613) In short, McCulloch reaches the same conclusion on the subject of West Indian slavery (and slavery in general) as Adam Smith, though for rather different reasons.

Mill's *Principles* devoted considerable space to the topic of slavery in its various editions, including a separate chapter (Book II, chapter 5). The discussion is replete with critical references to this institution as cruel, inimical to freedom, and inefficient. More specifically, slavery is described as 'an abuse of private property' (Mill 1848, pp. 232-3); while the abolition of slavery in the West Indies is twice mentioned as one of the most 'beneficent' collective actions by a nation in recorded history (Mill 1848, pp. 19, 233). Later editions of the work, therefore, record with pleasure that slavery had been gradually abolished in most parts of the world, together with its equally abominable historical offshoot in the form of serfdom. Mill, however, had to record that some other deplorable forms of forced labour (as that used by the Dutch on Java) regrettably remained in operation (Mill 1848, pp. 250-1).

Mill unequivocally endorsed the generally accepted position of political economists that slave labour, or that by serfs for that matter, was invariably less efficient (or 'more expensive' as Mill tended to put it) than free labour. Like Smith and McCulloch, Mill implicitly made an exception here for the West Indian sugar colonies. He did this by endorsing the compensation paid to their slave owners on abolition, and by conceding that it may not have been enough given the high profitability of slave labour in sugar production (Mill 1848, pp. 247-9). Mill's views on compensation are in harmony with his position that although slaves can never be properly included among national or social wealth, they are a part of private capital (Mill 1848 p. 9). These views, however, seem to be somewhat in conflict with his already-quoted opinion that ownership of slaves was an abuse of private property.

Although there were many contemporary authors on political economy of this period who touched upon the subject of slavery (e.g. Richard Jones 1831, pp. 50-51; Longfield 1834, pp. 70-72), much of their thrust was similar to that of the views already summarised. To complete this selective survey of the political economy of slavery in the nineteenth century, two specialist books can be briefly considered. The first of these is Carey's 1853 study of *The Slave Trade, Domestic and Foreign*; the second is J.E. Cairnes's important study of *The Slave Power* (1862), as his endeavour to 'explain the real issues involved in the American contest', that is, the civil war between the northern and southern states. Although neither of these could have exerted any influence on Carlyle's opinions on 'the nigger question', unlike the views of authors like Smith, McCulloch or J.S. Mill, they form an appropriate conclusion to this section of the paper, devoted as it is to the political economy of slavery.

Carey's work is interesting because it constitutes an attack on slavery and a desire for its abolition which rejects the views of orthodox political economy on the subject and yet is based on economic argument. Carey's main argument is that slavery in the 'colonies' acts as a protective device for English manufacturing industry, a proposal partly illustrated with the case of the West Indian sugar plantations but drawing as well on examples taken from other parts of the world. The argument can be summarised as follows. A colony like the West Indies, which specialises in the export of raw produce, gradually exhausts its lands in the process. It then maintains production and export income through a continuously

increasing supply of cheap labour from slaves, which enables it to generate competitive advantage from low prices for its exports, to the benefit of the importing country (Carey 1853, p. 170; cf. pp. 92-95, 105-6). This concentration of its resources on producing a major crop for export like sugar, both diminishes local demand for the crop (a further cause of its low price) and leaves no ability to generate a manufacturing sector. This makes the colony fully dependent on exports from the mother country. More generally, Carey's argument tries to link the slave trade with the manufacturing dominance of England. The last is secured both by England's colonial policy in prohibiting manufacturing activity in her dependencies and by the encouragement given to agricultural specialisation in its colonies through the system of slavery. The English principle of free trade thereby maintains this system of its manufacturing dominance and the concomitant competition among raw produce exporting countries, which needs to be sustained by the low cost of production that only slavery can bring. A protection policy for native manufacturing can break this cycle of dependence and hence the necessity of slavery for these countries exporting raw produce. In short, Carey manages to relate the possibility for eliminating slavery to securing a reduced dependence on raw produce exports, which is only obtainable through a manufacturing sector developed by protection (Carey 1853, pp. 363-7, 375-82). The last also enables rising living standards through rising wages. As noted earlier, the argument resembles Steuart's analysis in linking slavery with agricultural development at the expense of manufacturing industry, but differs in the greater stress it gives to protection as a way out for countries whose industries are dependent on slavery.<sup>8</sup>

Cairnes's analysis of the slave power in the southern, confederate states of the American republic presents a quite different picture. His economic analysis of the basis for slavery argues that the successful maintenance of slavery requires abundance of fertile soil and a crop the cultivation of which demands combination and organisation of labour on an extensive scale (Cairnes 1862, p. 158). Such conditions, however, are invariably temporary, since sooner or later the land is exhausted, and the economic defects of slavery – its labour is given reluctantly, it is unskilled, and it lacks versatility – become dominant, thereby making slavery uneconomic (Cairnes 1862, pp. 42-4, 62-3). More positively, Cairnes argued that the emancipation of slaves eventually leads to beneficial economic results for the emancipating nation, as shown by the experience in the West Indies, by then nearly thirty years long. Although the initial impact of emancipation is frequently detrimental (Cairnes 1862, p. 300 n.\*), the eventual outcome is generally favourable. This is illustrated for Jamaica as follows:

A very important contribution to our knowledge on the working of emancipation in the West Indies has just appeared from the pen of Mr. Edward Bean Underhill, from whose work, *'The West Indies, their Social and Religious Condition'* I extract the following testimony of Captain Darling, the present governor of Jamaica, to the capacity of the Negro for freedom: - 'The proportion of those who are settling themselves industriously on their holdings, and rapidly rising in the social scale, while commanding the respect of all classes of the community, and some of whom are, to a limited extent, themselves the employers of hired labour, paid for either in money or in kind, is, I am happy to think, not only steadily increasing, but at the present moment is far more extensive than was anticipated by those who are cognizant of all that took place in this colony in the earlier days of Negro

freedom. There can be no doubt, in fact, that an independent, respectable, and, I believe, trustworthy middle class is rapidly forming. If the real object of emancipation was to place the freed man in such a position that he might work out his own advancement in the social scale, and prove his capacity for the full and rational enjoyment of personal independence secured by constitutional liberty, Jamaica will afford more instances, even in proportion to its large population, of such gratifying results, than any other land in which African slavery once existed. Jamaica at this moment presents, as I believe, at once the strongest proof of the complete success of the great measure of emancipation as relates to the capacity of the emancipated race for freedom, and the most unfortunate instance of a descent in the scale of agricultural and commercial importance as a colonial community.' (Cairnes, 1862, p. 294 n.)\*

For Cairnes, the process of time and development itself gradually destroys the usefulness of slavery to countries where originally the practice may have been highly advantageous and profitable. In addition, the emancipation of negro slaves, after an interval, produces beneficial results for the emancipating country's development, as West Indian experience is claimed to have shown. Hence, 'gradual, but sure progress' eventually removes 'the greatest blot on modern civilization', to generalise the thrust of Cairnes's more limited conclusion on the inevitable end of slavery on North American soil (Cairnes 1862, p. 304).

Much of this later economic discussion of slavery therefore gives little support to Carlyle's position on the issue, as Mill's direct reply to Carlyle had indeed maintained in his article pointedly called 'the Negro question' (Mill 1850), even if its argument had relied extensively on the moral case against slavery. However, earlier thought, including that especially of Smith and McCulloch, showed the profitability of slavery despite its inherent disadvantages, in endeavours and in locations which were appropriate for this type of exploitation, as was believed to be the case in the West Indian sugar colonies. These, it has been shown, were also major early influences on Carlyle's political economy.

### **3 Conclusions**

Given the somewhat divided testimony from the political economy of slavery, what is to be made of Carlyle's defence of slavery in his 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question' in the course of which political economy is saddled with the epithet of 'dismal science'? As shown in the first part of the paper, making any definite or final judgement on the matter is not easy. Nevertheless, the following points relevant to such a judgement would be difficult to controvert.

The thrust of Carlyle's occasional discourse is to present criticism of the consequences of 'laissez faire' and a free market, the key propositions of political economy identified by him virtually from the beginnings of his acquaintance with the subject. Whether in Ireland, the West Indies, or Britain itself, these consequences were to be deplored since in general they involved growing poverty, indolence and a wrong set of values from an undue emphasis on the cash nexus. Moreover, the individualistic ethos fostered by political economy contravened Carlyle's firm belief in the desirability of a sense of mutual obligation and responsibility of people towards each other. Such a perspective of mutual obligation Carlyle saw reflected in the political economy of feudal society and,

admittedly to a lesser extent, in the political economy of slavery. No thorough study of political economy on Carlyle's part appears to have underpinned this view of the science. Work by McCulloch and Smith, probably in the form of McCulloch's edition of the *Wealth of Nations*, appear to have been the more prized of his economics teachers; this is a point of considerable interest, given their views on the political economy of slavery which have been documented, as noted at the end of the previous section.

What made Carlyle write the 'nigger question' when he did? The most visible source of inspiration is perhaps to be found in the contemporary policy initiatives with respect to slavery listed at the start of this paper, together with the coinciding measures to regulate the domestic labour market with respect to the employment of women and children. The real adversary in Carlyle's article may perhaps then be identified as political economy's dogmatic advocacy of economic freedom which, in the article, is twice damned. Domestically, it is damned because of its opposition to reform legislation designed to improve the lot of the working poor, especially women and children. Its triumph in the abolition of slavery is likewise damned from Carlyle's reading of the evidence, which suggested abolition's bad consequences for the character of the negro and for the enterprise of the white plantation owners. The contrast with Carlyle's preferred social arrangements, involving mutual obligation and responsibility, heighten the case against 'laissez faire' and the 'dismal science'. Using the 'nigger question' may therefore have been a powerful rhetorical device on Carlyle's part to draw attention to the failures of political economy on matters concerning economic freedom.<sup>9</sup>

This view is sustained by some, but not by most commentaries on Carlyle's notorious 'discourse'. Examples of the two types of response can be given from the large Carlyle literature. Grierson (1933) sees Carlyle's paper on the Negro issue as directly linked to the 'cause of the poor'. This was an abiding and early concern for Carlyle, taught to him initially by his own youthful poverty and responsible for his eventual departure from 'his friends, the whole Manchester School of laissez-faire and the radicals'. On the other side of the fence, August (1972) sees Carlyle's growing pre-occupation with 'might' as a major influence, and depicts the contents of the discourse as a precise, composite picture of five of Carlyle's latter-day beliefs: 'disbelief in sentimental Christianity' (the Exeter Hall philanthropists); 'hostility towards political economy'; 'the gospel of work'; 'hero-worship'; and racial theory stereotyping the Negro as an inferior human being (August 1972, pp. xiv-xvi; the quotes come from the last page). With this type of response, August is by far the more representative commentator on Carlyle's discourse, and it is difficult to disagree with his summary of the article's contents except to note that references to 'hero-worship' are rather difficult to find in it.

Can the classical political economy of slavery add to our understanding of Carlyle and 'the nigger question'? The brief survey of the economic literature presented in section II does so in two ways. It backs up Carlyle's general view of the indolent Negro, who has to be forced to labour, and his argument on the profitability of slavery in the West Indies. In varying degrees, both views can be found in the writings of Smith, McCulloch and, somewhat more surprisingly, in J.S. Mill. More recently, Carlyle's 'sour emphasis on the West Indian labourer's relative affluence' has been granted support from the facts by contemporary economic history research (Ward 1988, p. 278). Only in his pessimistic depiction of the consequences of emancipation in the West Indies did Carlyle not follow the findings of political economy, as reported by (and quoted in) Cairnes's 1862

volume on the slave power. Nevertheless, and particularly among the political economy with which he may have been familiar, a detrimental side of the economics of freedom in terms of the abolition of slavery was clearly visible in some of the political economy of the day.

For Carlyle, the 'dismal' science of economic freedom and 'do nothing' had fully earned this qualifying adjective from the nature of its offspring (described in an earlier quoted passage from the 'nigger question' as 'unnamable abortions' and 'wide-coyled monstrosities'), which were abundantly visible in the industrial cities of the Midlands, the Irish countryside and among the emancipated Negro slaves in the West Indies. Indolence for the liberated Negro slave, and unprofitability for the 'dispossessed' plantation owners, were the offspring in the last case, highlighted by Carlyle in his 1849 discourse, an off-spring ironically endorsed by the views of some of political economy's highest mid-nineteenth century authorities, Smith, McCulloch and J.S. Mill. Although the racial venom dispensed in the discourse will find few present-day supporters, the bad consequences of economic freedom ('rationalism'?) that Carlyle depicted may strike far more sympathetic chords in contemporary society and give new meaning to the qualifier, 'dismal', in this context. The last is a contentious addendum quite irrelevant to the purpose of this paper. After all, this only sought to clarify the background to Carlyle's depiction of political economy as a 'dismal science' within the context of his discourse on the 'nigger question'. However, Ray Petridis, who is honoured in this *Festschrift*, probably shares at least some of these views by doubting the value of some of the blessings which economic freedom is said to have bestowed on the public during the twentieth century.

---

\* Department of Economics, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia 2006. Paper first given at the 11<sup>th</sup> HETSA Conference in 1998. Subsequent revision has benefited greatly from comments of a referee.

## Notes

1 Mill and Carlyle enjoyed friendly relations from the early 1830s, when Carlyle had sought out Mill as a kindred spirit and fellow mystic after the publication of his articles on the spirit of the age. Various reasons have been advanced for the ending of the friendship during the 1830s. Hayek (1951, pp. 79-89, esp. pp. 88-9) attributes Carlyle's propensity to gossip about Mill's, essentially platonic, relationship with Mrs Harriet Taylor as a key factor in the termination of the friendship when Mill became aware of the fact. He also indicates that the friendship had already cooled considerably by the late 1830s, subsequent to Mill's accidental destruction of the manuscript of the first volume of Carlyle's *French Revolution* and his subsequent review of the book when published in 1837. However, the 'final breach' came, as Leslie Stephen (1900, III p. 42) put it, with Carlyle's treatment of the anti-slavery agitation in the 1849 essay on the 'nigger question' after which, according to Stephen, 'all intercourse ceased.'

2 Grampp (1973, p. 367 n. 20) is an exception. In dealing with Carlyle as a critic of political economy, largely in terms of the arguments in *Past and Present* (Carlyle 1843), and 'Chartism' (Carlyle 1839), Grampp notes in passing that he used the term, 'dismal science' first in his 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question'. It may also be noted here that the strong criticism of Malthusianism in 'Chartism' (Carlyle 1839, p. 183) describes it as 'dreary, stolid and dismal'.

3 During his early years in London, Carlyle had also met the two women writers who had contributed primers in political economy, that is, Mrs Jane Marcett and Miss Harriet Martineau, but what record there is makes it unlikely that they conversed on political economy (Froude 1897, I pp. 57, 103, 137-8).

4 Carlyle's combination of distaste for gross wealth inequalities with criticism of utilitarianism indicates the lack of deep thinking and unsystematic study which characterised his views on political economy. After all, the logic of linking a utilitarian position to taxation leads to steeply progressive tax rates and a strong egalitarian stance on distributive issues. See Musgrave (1959, chapter 5).

5 Apart from the references in note 1 above, those interested in examining the Carlyle-Mill relationship should consult Neff (1924) and August (1972, pp. vii-xxxii) with special reference to their break over 'the nigger question'.

6 As shown below, this argument resembles Carey's (1853) position, which supported the abolition of slavery as the only possible way to allow the development of manufacturing industry in colonies.

7 Ricardo did not deal with the topic of slavery in his writings on political economy. However, befitting the husband of a Quaker, he confessed that 'he was inclined to blush with shame, to hide his face, when West-India slavery was mentioned', and he deplored slavery as an 'infamous', 'shocking' and 'abominable' system in an address (19 March 1823) before the general court of directors of the East India Company (Ricardo 1952, V p. 483). He made similar, but less elaborate critical remarks on the practice of slavery in a speech to Parliament during the 1823 debate on West and East Indian Sugar duties (Ricardo 1952, V pp. 297, 300).

8 Genovese (1967, p. 211 n. 22) indicates some support for Carey's hypothesis in the action of northern businessmen who built up manufacturing in American border states with a view to undermining slavery there.

9 It may perhaps be argued that satire (in the depiction of Quashee) is part of Carlyle's literary armoury in the discourse, comparable to its use by Jonathan Swift, an author whom Carlyle greatly admired. Swift's 1729 *Modest Proposal* is an example because it treats a serious social problem in a manner which would now be considered in many circles as being in very bad taste.

## References

- August, Eugene R., ed. (1972) *Thomas Carlyle, The Nigger Question, John Stuart Mill, the Negro Question*, New York, Appleton – Century Crofts, Crofts Classics.
- Bonar, James (1894) 'Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881)' in *Dictionary of Political Economy*, edited by R.H. Inglis Palgrave, London: Macmillan, Volume 1, pp. 227-8.
- Bonar, James (1922) *Philosophy and Political Economy*, London: George Allen and Unwin, third edition.
- Bowley, Marian (1937) *Nassau Senior and Classical Economics*, London: Allen and Unwin.
- Cairnes, J.E. (1862) *The Slave Power*, London: Parker, Son and Bourn.
- Carey, Alexander, ed. (1923) *Letters of Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, John Stirling and Robert Browning*, London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- Carey, H.C. (1853) *The Slave Trade, Domestic and Foreign, Why It Exists and How It May Be Extinguished*, Philadelphia, Hart.

- Carlyle, Thomas (1829) 'Signs of the Times', *Edinburgh Review*, no. 90 in *Miscellaneous Essays*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1888, vol. II, pp. 230-52.
- Carlyle, Thomas (1832) 'Corn Law Rhymes', reprinted in *Miscellaneous Essays*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1888, vol. 4, pp. 184-211.
- Carlyle, Thomas (1838) *Sartor Resartus. The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröck*, London: Oxford University Press, 1947.
- Carlyle, Thomas (1839) 'Chartism', in *Miscellaneous Essays*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1888, vol. 6, pp. 109-186.
- Carlyle, Thomas (1841) *Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1893 reprint.
- Carlyle, Thomas (1843) *Past and Present*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1893 reprint.
- Carlyle, Thomas (1849) 'The Nigger Question', in *Miscellaneous Essays*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1888, vol. 7, pp. 79-110.
- Cossa, Luigi (1893) *An Introduction to the Study of Political Economy*, translated by Louis Dyer, London: Macmillan.
- Duffy, Sir Charles Gavan (1892) *Conversations with Carlyle*, London: Sampson, Lowe, Marston and Company.
- Froude, J.A. (1882) *Thomas Carlyle, A History of the First Forty Years of His Life*, London: Longmans, Green and Company, 2 volumes.
- Froude, J.A. (1897) *Thomas Carlyle, A History of His Life in London*, London: Longmans, Green and Company, 2 volumes.
- Garnett, Richard (1895) *Life of Carlyle*, London: Walter Scott.
- Genovese, Eugene D. (1967) *The Political Economy of Slavery*, New York: Random House.
- Gide, Charles and Rist, Charles (1949), *A History of Economic Doctrines*, second English edition, London: George Harrap.
- Grapp, William D. (1973) 'Classical economics and its moral critics', *History of Political Economy*, 5(2), Fall, pp. 359-74.
- Grierson, H.J.C. (1933) *Carlyle and Hitler*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hayek, F.A. (1952) *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, Their Friendship and Subsequent Marriage*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Hume, David (1752) 'Of the populousness of ancient nations', in *Writings on Economics*, edited by Eugene Rotwein, London: Nelson, 1955, pp. 108-83.
- Jones, Richard (1831) *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation*, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1964.
- Longfield, Mountiford (1834) *Lectures on Political Economy*, London: Milliken and Son.
- McCulloch, J.R., ed. (1850) *The Wealth of Nations of Adam Smith*, Edinburgh, A. & C. Black, fourth edition, 1850.
- Marrs, Edwin Jr. (1968) *The Letters of Thomas Carlyle to his Brother Alexander, With Related Family Letters*, Cambridge: Mass, Becknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Mill, J.S. (1848) *Principles of Political Economy*, edited by J.M. Robson, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2 volumes.

- Mill, J.S. (1850) 'The Negro question', *Fraser's Magazine*, 41, January, reprinted in August (1972, pp. 38-50).
- Mineka, Francis E., ed. (1963) *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812-1848*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Musgrave, Richard (1959) *The Theory of Public Finance*, New York: McGraw Hill.
- Neff, Emery (1924) *Carlyle and Mill, Mystic and Utilitarian*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Norton, C.E., ed. (1886) *Early Letters of Thomas Carlyle*, London: Macmillan.
- O'Brien, D.P. (1970) *J.R. McCulloch. A Study in Classical Economics*, London: Allen and Unwin.
- Postlethwayt, Malachy (1774) *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, fourth edition, reprinted New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1971.
- Ricardo, David (1952) *Works of David Ricardo*, edited by P. Sraffa, vol. V, *Speeches and Evidence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for the Royal Economic Society.
- Robbins, Lionel (1935) *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, London: Macmillan, second edition.
- Schumpeter, J.A. (1959) *History of Economic Analysis*, London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Slater, Joseph, ed. (1964) *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Smith, Adam (1776) *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, edited by E. Cannan, New York: Modern Library edition, 1937.
- Smith, Adam (1978), *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, edited by R.L. Meek, D.D. Raphael and P.G. Stein, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Stephen, Leslie (1900) *The English Utilitarians*, vol. 3, *John Stuart Mill*, London: Duckworth.
- Steuart, Sir James (1767) *Principles of Political Œconomy*, edited by Andrew Skinner, Scottish Economic Classics, London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966.
- Swift, Jonathan (1739), 'A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland From Being a Burden to their Parents or Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to the Public', in *The Works of the Rev. Jonathan Swift* (vol. XIII, pp. 43-53), London: J. Johnson, 1803.
- Wakefield, Edward Gibbon (1829) 'A Letter from Sydney', in *The Collected Works of Edward Gibbon Wakefield*, edited by Lloyd Pritchard, Glasgow: Collins, 1968.
- Ward, J.R. (1988) *British West Indian Slavery, 1750-1834. The Process of Amelioration*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wilson, David Alec (1923) *Carlyle Till Marriage (1798-1826)*, London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co.
- Wilson, David Alec (1927) *Carlyle at his Zenith (1848-53)*, London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co.