

10-2021

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### Recommended Citation

Scott, Patrick and Weisenburg, Michael C. (2021) "Thomas Campbell's Epigram on the American Flag and Abolitionist Oratory: Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and William Lloyd Garrison," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 47: Iss. 1, 160–168.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol47/iss1/13>

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**THOMAS CAMPBELL'S EPIGRAM ON THE AMERICAN  
FLAG AND ABOLITIONIST ORATORY: FREDERICK  
DOUGLASS, WILLIAM WELLS BROWN, AND WILLIAM  
LLOYD GARRISON**

*Patrick Scott & Michael C. Weisenburg*

The international influence of Scottish writing is not necessarily limited to major, well-known works. The Roy Collection's recent chance acquisition of an early-non-authorial transcript from a late, very short poem by Thomas Campbell (1777-1844) might seem of at best peripheral interest. It provides, however, a useful reminder that in the early 19th century Scottish writers included at least some who were vocal for the abolition of slavery, and that their support did not go unnoticed or unutilized by American abolitionists. The Campbell poem is his epigram "To the United States of America," and the activists who gave it currency in America were the abolitionist orators Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), William Wells Brown (1814-1884), and William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879).

While Campbell's father had been a merchant in Virginia, moving back to Scotland shortly before the Revolution, before Campbell was born, Campbell himself had always seen America as a champion of freedom. In his late teens, in the 1790s, following the Sedition trials, he had wanted to emigrate to the States. It was Campbell's reputation as a political liberal, and an American supporter, that underpinned his early success with American readers.<sup>1</sup>

Campbell's anti-slavery beliefs had been evident in his first book, *The Pleasures of Hope* (1799), where he asked of Eternal Nature:

When life sprung startling at thy plastic call  
(Endless her forms, and man the lord of all),  
Say, was that lordly form inspired by thee  
To wear eternal chains and bow the knee?  
Was man ordained the slave of man to toil,

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<sup>1</sup> On Campbell's American connections and reputation, see Andrew Hook, *Scotland and America, 1750-1835* (Glasgow: Blackie, 1975), 140-145.

Yoked with the brutes and fettered to the soil,  
 Weighed in a tyrant's balance with his gold?  
 No! Nature stamped us in a heav'nly mould!  
 She bade no wretch his thankless labour urge  
 Nor, trembling, take the pittance and the scourge!<sup>2</sup>

Those lines had been published midway through the twenty-year campaign, from the 1780s to 1807, to get parliament to abolish the slave trade in the British empire or on British ships, precipitating the near-simultaneous act of Congress banning the importation of slaves into the United States.

Campbell's epigram on the American flag, discussed here, was written thirty years later, in 1836, following parliamentary passage of the Act for Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Colonies (1833). From the British, or Scottish, viewpoint, it is tempting to think the Act of 1833 laid the issue to rest, but the act remained controversial, because it strung out emancipation in stages and because it paid compensation to slave-holders. Such "gradualism" ran counter to the original constitution of the Anti-Slavery Society which had stated that "slavery is a crime before God, and ... must, therefore, be immediately abolished." In 1836, Campbell had been in Glasgow, "a sad place for sentiments favourable to black slavery," when local "opponents of 'sudden negro emancipation'" had paid for a four-night debate between a Mr. Breckenridge, an American clergyman, and a leading British advocate of "immediatism," George Thompson, an ally of William Lloyd Garrison, who had recently returned from a rancorous lecture tour in the northern United States.<sup>3</sup> Reports of the debate had confirmed Campbell's continued belief that slavery, "a curse and a crime," "cannot be too soon abolished."<sup>4</sup>

Campbell's epigram, two years later, shows the continuing tension in his attitude towards America as land of liberty and his repudiation of slavery. On November 8, 1838, Campbell wrote excitedly to a correspondent: "Have you seen my epigram to the United States of North

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Campbell, *The Pleasures of Hope; with Other Poems*, 6th ed. (Edinburgh: Mundell, 1802), 58, Bk I, ll. 491-500.

<sup>3</sup> George Thompson (1804-1878) had argued the abolitionist case three years earlier in a three-night debate series in Glasgow, that time against Peter Borthwick: *Speeches of Messrs. Thompson and Borthwick on the Question of Colonial Slavery ... in Dr. Wardlaw's Chapel* (Glasgow: W.R. M'Phun, 1833). On Thompson's career, see S.J. Morgan, "Thompson, George Donisthorpe," in *ODNB* (2004, revd 2016). For a recent discussion of Glaswegian slavery involvement, see Craig Lamont, "That Barbarous Traffic," in his *The Cultural Memory of Georgian Glasgow* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 87-110.

<sup>4</sup> William Beattie, *Life and Letters of Thomas Campbell*, 3 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1849), III: 205-206.

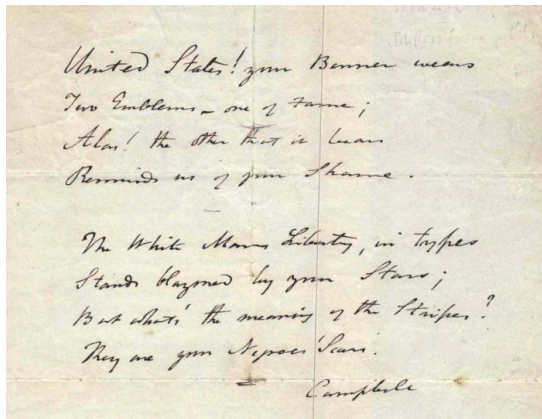
America—the ‘Slave States’—on their starred and striped banner?’<sup>5</sup> It seems to have appeared first in the *Morning Chronicle*, on November 6, 1838, in this form:

TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,  
ON THEIR STRIPED AND STARRED BANNER

United States! your banner wears  
Two emblems, one of fame;  
Alas! The other that it bears  
Reminds us of your shame!

The white man’s liberty in types  
Stands blazon’d by your stars—  
But what’s the meaning of the stripes?  
They mean your negroes’ scars.<sup>6</sup>

The Roy Collection transcript, illustrating how the epigram circulated informally as well as in print, matches the newspaper text.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>5</sup> William Beattie, *Life and Letters of Thomas Campbell*, 3 vols (London: Moxon, 1849), III: 264.

<sup>6</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, May 6, 1838, 3;

<sup>7</sup> The early date and British origin of the transcript are confirmed by a watermark in the paper reading “Ruse & Turners 1839”; Ruse & Turners were paper manufacturers in Maidstone, Kent. Before its acquisition by the library, the transcript had been mounted in an extra-illustrated copy of John Cam Hobhouse, Lord Broughton, *Recollections From a Long Life, with Additional Extracts from His Private Diaries*, 6 vols (1909-1911); Hobhouse attended an anti-slavery Meeting at Exeter Hall in June 1840 (V: 267-268, dated June 1), and his later assessment of Campbell is at VI: 121-123. We are grateful to Amy Wilcockson, of the University of Nottingham, for confirming that the transcript is not, as had previously been suggested, in Campbell’s own hand.

Campbell's epigram appeared the same day as in the *Morning Chronicle* in a second London newspaper, the *Globe*, and it would soon be reprinted in a host of other newspapers in cities and towns across England, Scotland and Ireland.<sup>8</sup> Before he included it in his next volume, published in 1842, Campbell revised his second stanza, changing lines 5-6:

The white man's liberty in types  
Stands blazon'd by your stars—

to read

Your standard's constellation types  
White freedom by its stars—<sup>9</sup>

By the time the book appeared, however, the newspaper version was already well known, and Campbell's revision never displaced it.

It was in its original form that Campbell's epigram began to be quoted on British abolitionist lecture platforms, as, for instance, at the British Anti-Slavery Convention on June 20, 1840, where Campbell was present.<sup>10</sup> In the later 1840s, Frederick Douglass used Campbell's epigram repeatedly, as for instance, in Exeter in September, 1846, again at a valedictory soiree of several hundred anti-slavery sympathizers at the London Tavern, in March 1847, when he was about to return to the States, and then also the following month at a meeting at New Hall, Northampton, presided over by the mayor, where the admiring local newspaper reported that he "took occasion, with admirable effect, to introduce Campbell's lines 'To the United States of America.'"<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Globe*, May 6, 1838, 3; *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, November 9, 4; *Liverpool Mercury*, November 9, 6; *Durham Chronicle*, November 9, 2; *Carlisle Journal*, November 10, 3; *Leeds Mercury*, November 10, 6; *The Warder and Dublin Weekly Mail*, November 10, 3; *Sheffield Independent*, November 10, 5; *The Sun* (London), November 14, 2; *Wiltshire Independent*, November 15, 4; *Kendal Mercury*, November 17, 4; *Leicestershire Mercury*, November 17, 2; *Northern Whig* (Belfast), November 17, 4; *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, November 19, 4; *Caledonian Mercury*, November 22, 3; *Brighton Gazette*, November 22, 4; *Inverness Courier*, November 28, 4. Reprintings consulted in British Newspaper Archive, March 15, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Campbell, *The Pilgrims of Glencoe and Other Poems* (London: Edward Moxon, 1842), 85.

<sup>10</sup> Mr. Staunton's speech, reported in *Sun*, June 22, 1840, 2.

<sup>11</sup> "Slavery in America," *Western Times*, Saturday September 3, 1846, 6; "Farewell to the British People," March 30, 1847, in John W. Blassingame, et al., eds, *The Frederick Douglass Papers, series one: speeches, debates and interviews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979-85), 2: 19-52 (45); "Mr. Frederick Douglass, the Escaped Slave, at Northampton," *Northampton Mercury*, Saturday, April 3, 1847, 3. For Douglass using the epigram after he returned to the U.S., at Corinthian Hall, Rochester, NY, in 1850, see Frederick May Holland, *Frederick*

British criticism of the United States frequently drew American pushback, not only in the south, but even from New Englanders who were wary of inflaming southern intransigence. One notable answer to Campbell's epigram was from the Massachusetts lawyer-poet Edward Lunt (1803-1885), in verses linking the Union Jack to British oppression in India and Ireland:

England! Whence came each glowing hue,  
 That streaks your flag of meteor light—  
 The streaming red—the deeper blue,  
 Cross'd with the moonbeams pearly white?  
 The blood and bruise—the blue and red—  
 Let Asia's groaning millions speak!  
 The white—it tells the colour fled,  
 From starving Erin's pallid cheek!<sup>12</sup>

Lunt's answer was soon reprinted in Irish newspapers, and its inclusion in his next volume of poems sparked further newspaper reprintings in America, with another round of reprintings following his appointment in 1849 as U.S. Attorney for Massachusetts.<sup>13</sup>

Despite Lunt's riposte, Campbell's epigram, summarizing the idea that slavery was in conflict with America's founding ideals, would become a canonical reference in abolition rhetoric. It gained this importance, not only from Douglass, but from one of the most influential texts of the mid-19th century abolition movement, William Wells Brown's lecture in 1847 to the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, Massachusetts.

William Wells Brown, born into slavery in Kentucky, escaped in 1834, aged 19, settling in Boston, publishing the bestselling autobiography *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1847), and becoming a prominent abolitionist lecturer. Between 1849 and 1854, he was in Europe, first as a delegate to the Paris Peace Congress and

*Douglass, the Colored Orator* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1891), 229. Douglass's editors, having checked Campbell's epigram in book form rather than in newspapers, wrongly credit Douglass with improving Campbell's wording.

<sup>12</sup> "Epigram. Suggested by One of T. Campbell," *Dublin Morning Register*, February 6, 1839, reprinted from *New York Morning Herald; Burlington Free Press*, March 22, 1839, 1, from the *Boston Courier; Tipperary Free Press*, February 13, 1839.

<sup>13</sup> George Lunt, "To the English Flag," in *The Age of Gold and Other Poems* (Boston: William D. Ticknor, 1843 [1842]), 129; *Richmond Daily Whig*, November 26, 1842, 3; *Barre Gazette* (Barre, MA), December 30, 1842, 2; *Ottawa Free Trader*, January 5, 1844, 4 (calling both epigrams "the concentrated essence of a nation's venom"); *Columbia Fountain* (Washington, DC), April 21, 1846, 3; *Semi-Weekly Eagle* (Brattleboro, VT), November 5, 1849, 4; *Daily Crescent* (New Orleans, LA), June 1, 1849, 1; *Tipperary Vindicator*, August 8, 1849, 3.

then settling in London, out of range of the Fugitive Slave Act, till the risk of reenslavement was preempted by well-wishers purchasing his freedom (as they also did for Frederick Douglass). Brown was author of the first published novel by an African-American, *Clotel, or the President's Daughter, A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853), as well as several other histories, plays, and memoirs.<sup>14</sup>

On November 14, 1847, Brown gave a lecture to the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society that relied on Campbell's epigram for dramatic effect in its second half. Founded by free women of color in 1832, the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society was the first of its kind in the United States. In addition to helping newly freed and runaway slaves, the group worked toward education reform and supported abolitionist programs and publications, such as William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*. In 1834, they expanded their membership to include white women, and the society regularly hosted lecture series that included prominent abolitionists such as Garrison, Edmund Quincy, and others. Brown was the fifth in a series of six and the only African American to give a lecture that year. He spoke on the subject of "Slavery as it is, and its influence upon the morals and character of the American people."<sup>15</sup> Brown's approach is to present the aesthetic incomprehensibility of slavery and its affects on the individual. Arguing that "Slavery has never been represented; slavery never can be represented," the first part of his lecture illustrates that slavery so thoroughly corrupts morality that it undermines "the foundation of society" (*ibid.*, 108). In the second part of his speech, Brown calls attention to American hypocrisy by asking, "what will the people of the Old World think?" (*ibid.*, 121):

Shall the American people be behind the people of the Old World?  
Shall they be behind those who are represented as almost living in  
the dark ages? (*ibid.* 123).

Quoting from John Greenleaf Whittier's lines on the British flag, whose "every flap" proclaims "that all around are free,"<sup>16</sup> Brown introduces an anecdote about international response to the Stars and Stripes:

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., R.J.M. Blaket, in *American National Biography* (1999, 2000); William Edward Farrison, *William Wells Brown, Author and Reformer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); Ezra Greenspan, *William Wells Brown, An African American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> William Wells Brown, *Lecture delivered before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1847), in Ezra Greenspan, ed., *William Wells Brown: A Reader* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 107-129.

<sup>16</sup> Whittier had asked "Shall we scoff at Europe's kings / When Freedom's fire is dim with us": John Green Whittier, "Our Countrymen in Chains!", in Lydia Maria Child, *The Evils of Slavery and the Cure of Slavery*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Newburyport:

Only a short time since an American man-of-war was anchored in the bay opposite Liverpool. The English came down by hundreds and thousands. The stars and stripes were flying; and there stood those poor persons that had never seen an American man-of-war, but had heard a great deal of American democracy. Some were eulogising the American people; some were calling it the “land of the free and the home of the brave.” And while they stood there, one of their number rose up, and pointing his fingers to the American flag, said:

“United States, your banner wears  
 Two emblems,—one of fame;  
 Alas, the other that it bears,  
 Reminds us of your shame.  
 The white man’s liberty entyped,  
 Stands blazoned by your stars;  
 But what’s the meaning of your stripes?  
 They mean your Negro-scars.”

What put that in the mouth of that individual? It was the system of American slavery; it was the action of the American people; the inconsistency of the American people; their profession of liberty, and their practice in opposition to their profession (*ibid.*, 124-125).

Brown uses the Whittier and Campbell poems, and the anecdote, to enliven his oratory with elements of drama and song. In the imagined Liverpool dockside scene of his anecdote, he portrays Campbell, the unnamed “one of their number,” as intervening spontaneously, pointing his finger at the flag, and decrying slavery. By dramatizing the moment of inspiration, Brown quotes Campbell’s epigram as if it were being composed right there before the crowd in Salem. Later, when he asks, “what put that in the mouth of that individual?,” he prompts his audience to think of Campbell as an anti-slavery poet-prophet speaking out against injustice, just as Brown himself was doing in that moment.

Brown’s oratorical appropriation of Campbell has a different rhetorical force than the epigram’s many appearances in print and reminds us that the epigram may well have been sung, not merely quoted, by Brown and others at antislavery meetings. Brown reprints Campbell’s epigram in his songster, the *Anti-Slavery Harp* (1848), along a woodcut showing a slave tied to a flagpole flying the American flag. Lockard and Sandell argue that the *Anti-Slavery Harp* reveals Brown’s extranational emphasis on the abolition of slavery as a continued global concern, and McClendon comments that Campbell’s epigram “features the crucial themes of the collection: hypocrisy, the political expediency of feeling, and African

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Whipple, 1839), 21-22; Whittier, *Voices of Freedom*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Cavender, 1846), 9; and elsewhere.



American suffering.”<sup>17</sup> As Ezra Greenspan points out, the songs and melodies that Brown selected are largely Scotch-Irish in tradition because those would have been familiar to his intended audience.<sup>18</sup> His audience at Salem would have been uncharacteristically heterogeneous for the United States at the time, with a considerable number of free black and female attendees, but Brown’s choice of verse for the *Anti-Slavery Harp*, combined with the imagery of the pamphlet’s cover and illustrations, is designed to appeal to a largely white audience whose main moral concerns were the degradation of national and filial institutions.

A decade after Brown’s Salem address, in 1858, Campbell’s epigram was used even more fiercely by the veteran abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator*. Speaking at a mass meeting in Farmingham, Massachusetts, on Monday, July 5, 1858, a year after the Dred Scott decision, Garrison denounced patriotic flagwaving and the American flag itself, before quoting Campbell’s lines:

To the great mass of our unreflecting follow-countrymeu this is a day for proud exaltation, for ostentatious parade, for extravagant vain-glorying, for revelry and dissipation, for the ringing of bells and the firing of cannon; but to the friends of the slave it is a day for heartfelt sadness, for the deepest humiliation, in view of the hypocrisy and blood-guiltiness of the uatiou. Wherever else the American (lag is unfurled to the breeze, I thank God it is not waving over our heads, and that it would not be tolerated on an occasion like this, for, in the language of the British poet, Campbell

United States! your banner wears

Two emblems ...

After quoting the full epigram, Garrison continued:

therefore, away with that flag forever. So long as beneath it four millions of men are driven with impunity to their unrequited toil, like brute beasts, and every slave shin is to be protected from search or visitation under it, let the true friends of freedom discard it with indignation and horror.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Joe Lockard and Jillian Sandell, “National Narratives and the Politics of Inclusion: Historicizing American Literature Anthologies,” *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, 8.2 (Spring 2008), 227-254 (233); Aaron D. McClendon, “Sounds of Sympathy: William Wells Brown’s *Anti-Slavery Harp*, Abolition, and the Culture of Early and Antebellum American Song,” *African American Review*, 47.1 (2014): 83-100 (91).

<sup>18</sup> Ezra Greenspan, *William Wells Brown: An African American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2014) 173.

<sup>19</sup> “Anti-Slavery Celebrator of the Fourth of July,” *Boston Liberator*, July 9, 1858, reprinted as “Abolitionism Rampant. Lloyd Garrison and his Massachusetts Radical Fanatics Celebrating the Fourth of July,” in *The Spirit of Democracy* (Woodfield, OH), July 28, 1858. Garrison’s speech had been followed by the

Garrison's reprinting of the epigram prompted yet another series of reprints and responses in newspapers throughout the United States, most of which paraphrase *The Liberator*, yet quote Campbell in full.<sup>20</sup> While these later appearances are largely a function of the American culture of reprinting during the period, they nonetheless emphasize how forceful and popular Campbell's verse was among American readers.

Campbell's verses signified slightly different things to Campbell himself, in the 1830s, and to the well-known American abolitionist orators who deployed them in the 1840s and 1850s. For Campbell, his lines were a rather detached quip, paying tribute to the longstanding European idealization of the United States flag as a beacon of freedom, paradoxically tainted by slavery.<sup>21</sup> For Douglass, Brown, and especially Garrison, the epigram came to be a denunciation of the flag, and the failure of America's founding ideals. A few years after Garrison's speech, the flag regained its position as a unifying symbol of republican idealism, when American soldiers rallied round the flag, shouting out the battle-cry of freedom. Campbell's epigram could easily have vanished, an ephemeral anti-American witticism temporarily useful to fill a few column inches in British provincial newspapers. It gained its initial foothold with American commentators partly because Campbell was already well-known as a long-time supporter of American democratic ideals, but it gained its force and influence because of how it was taken up by the major American abolitionist orators.

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congregation singing an abolitionist hymn to the tune of 'Auld Lang Syne,' with words by the abolitionist orator known to Campbell in Glasgow in the 1830s, George Thompson.

<sup>20</sup> "Abolition Rampant," *The New York Herald*, Friday, July 16, 1858, 3; "Abolition Rampant," *The Spirit of Democracy* (Woodsfield, OH), July 28, 1858, 2.

<sup>21</sup> It is this sense that the lines were juxtaposed with the "immortal" Declaration of Independence" in a British newspaper as war loomed in "the great Western republic": "The Crisis in America," *Reynold's Newspaper*, January 27, 1861, 7.