

ARTICLE

Granville Sharp's Ancient Constitution: Legal Argument and Antislavery Thought

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This article examines the role of legal argument in late eighteenth-century antislavery thought by subjecting Granville Sharp's legal writing to detailed scrutiny. Much scholarship on law and antislavery in the British context justifiably focuses on the meaning of Lord Mansfield's 1772 ruling in *Somerset's Case*. Adopting a different approach, this article reads Sharp's antislavery jurisprudence expansively, as an effort to fashion legal and political ideals. In so doing, it shows that Sharp's legal writing was part of a broader project aimed at associating antislavery with a particular conception of national identity. Examining Sharp's wide-ranging analysis of statute and common law, the article further argues that Sharp developed a form of natural-rights constitutionalism, melding the radical cause of abolition with the notion of tradition. Finally, the article explains how Sharp's jurisprudence promoted an ideologically important vision of abolitionism as a distinctively modern form of progress. In short, the article argues that Sharp's legal writing should be read not only in relation to *Somerset* but also as a means of understanding the character of antislavery thought and its relation to wider currents in eighteenth-century radicalism.

Legal argument played a central role in the eighteenth-century rise of antislavery in Britain. Before the formation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, prominent antislavery critics cast doubt on the legality of slavery, making law and justice a crucial site of early debate. John Wesley's seminal tract, *Thoughts upon Slavery*, suggested that legal justifications for enslavement were false, and argued, more broadly, that slavery contravened "natural Justice."¹ Maurice Morgann, author of the first abolition plan published in Britain, introduced his work by arguing that slavery was incompatible with "the laws of England, and the genius of our constitution."² Perhaps no figure, however, exemplified the conjuncture between law and antislavery more than Granville Sharp, the prolific writer and advocate who would later become the society's first chairman.

¹ John Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery* (London, 1774), 31.

² Maurice Morgann, *A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies* (London, 1772), iii.

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Table of Contents Antislavery Argument

1. Understanding the eBook Antislavery Argument
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Antislavery Argument
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Antislavery Argument
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Antislavery Argument
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Antislavery Argument
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Antislavery Argument User Reviews and Ratings

- Antislavery Argument and Bestseller Lists
- 5. Accessing Antislavery Argument Free and Paid eBooks
 - Antislavery Argument Public Domain eBooks
 - Antislavery Argument eBook Subscription Services
 - Antislavery Argument Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Antislavery Argument eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Antislavery Argument Compatibility with Devices
 - Antislavery Argument Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Antislavery Argument
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Antislavery Argument
 - Interactive Elements Antislavery Argument
- 8. Staying Engaged with Antislavery Argument
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Antislavery Argument
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Antislavery Argument
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Antislavery Argument
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Antislavery Argument
 - Setting Reading Goals Antislavery Argument
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Antislavery Argument
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Antislavery Argument
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources

13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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