



THE AGE OF

WILBERFORCE



BRITAIN'S GREAT CHANGE

KIM MORELAND

"I must awake to my dangerous state, and never be at rest till I have made my peace with God. My heart is so hard, my blindness so great, that I cannot get a due hatred of sin, though I see I am all corrupt, and blinded to the perception of spiritual things."

So writes William Wilberforce a few months before his conversion.

Greek scholar Gilbert Murray writes in *Religio Grammatici*, "[T]he moving force in human progress is not widespread...the uplifting of man has ever been the work of a chosen few." And we can certainly see how true his idea was during William Wilberforce's lifetime (1759-

1833). After living an extravagant lifestyle, Wilberforce converted to Christianity and God was able to use him to help change a nation.

Not only was the trade and institution of slavery firmly

entrenched in Britain, but the majority of the population lived in abject poverty in crime-laden areas, and were, as the Rev. Ernest Howse writes,

"coarse, insolent, and cruel." Furthermore, the church's beacon of light was buried

because there was a dearth of spiritual resources.

However, both the spiritual and moral darkness would soon become light in England because of William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect. The Clapham Sect was populated by people who used their gifts of wealth and influence to ensure a moral and societal transformation. This little group, with Wilberforce as its leader, promoted a humanitarian movement via an evangelical revival in Britain that spread into most of Europe and positively affected "the life of three other continents." The movement emphasized the worth of the "human soul and . . . the individual" and spawned a new responsibility to the underprivileged, including the reform of unjust sentencing practices and brutal prison conditions.

The members of the Clapham group would never have achieved as much, despite their talents and faithfulness, without the unifying influence of Wilberforce. Howse aptly describes this synergy: "[T]he other men would have been like little rivulets . . . but without Wilberforce the rivulets would never have been gathered into one mighty stream . . . harnessed for so many memorable enterprises."

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Wilberforce was short and sickly and had bad eyesight, but he was also a joyful, fun-loving and generous man. One of Wilberforce's natural gifts was his "melodious" voice, and his incredible ability as an orator earned him the sobriquet "the nightingale of the House of Commons." In the words of lawyer and essayist James Boswell, "I saw what seemed a mere shrimp mount upon the table; but, as I listened, he grew, until the shrimp became a whale."

At a young age of 27, that "whale" was already influencing England's political and civil life. At Wilberforce's urging, on June 1, 1787, King George III issued the Proclamation for the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue. The proclamation was intended to reverse the immorality of the age, and authorities were to start by punishing corrupt behavior such as drunkenness, vulgarity, and gambling, as well as those who printed immoral books. The proclamation directed the upper classes to set an example of behavior for the rest of society to follow.

It was an example that was sorely needed. Writing to a friend, Wilberforce said that it was not politicians' battles that made him despair for his country, but "the universal corruption and [immorality] of the times, which taking its rise amongst the rich and luxurious has now extended its baneful influence and spread its destructive poison through the whole body of people." There were two changes that needed to take place: They had to help "eliminate public corruption and promote religion in the hearts of the people."

A brief glance at one crime in particular, occurring in and around London, displays the enormity of the problem. The streets were rife with prostitution. One study said that a quarter (50,000) of the unmarried females in London were prostitutes. Sadly, the average age for many of those prostitutes was sixteen. Boys, too, were creating chaos by stealing and perpetrating other crimes. Many of these juveniles were homeless. London, as John Newton said, was "a nursery for wickedness."

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including The Philanthropic Society. While the society was supported by many evangelicals, it wasn't Evangelical in nature and dealt only with secondary "causes" of crime but did not, writes Brown, "attack the evil heart of man."

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Wilberforce, along with non-Christians, organized The Climbing Boy Society, which finally ended this practice fifty years later in 1875.

The Society for the Discharge and Relief of Persons Imprisoned for Small Debt started out with "marked Evangelical interest," but as time went by the religious part became only a token "interest." The number of people imprisoned for small debt was staggering—one advocate said that "more than

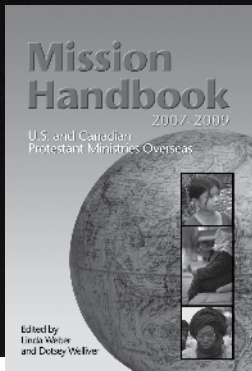
three quarters of the persons now imprisoned in Scotland are for small debts." Prison conditions were intolerable. There was anarchy behind the walls, no toilets, and frequently prisoners' families would have to supply food. These were some of the reasons that Wilberforce was involved with The Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and also one for the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders, which were started in 1818.

The whole point to Wilberforce's strategy was to work with all sorts of people through common grace to promote human justice and the reformation of manners. Wilberforce was the leader of what was known as "Wilberforce's neutral party" or the "Evangelical Party," which averaged between twenty-five and thirty members who worked together politically on the moral issues of the day.

One way that Wilberforce achieved so much through politics was to spend a good deal of his time talking with people about their schemes to promote a reformation of manners. Sir James Stephen (1824-1894), a biographer of Wilberforce, commented that Wilberforce would meet with one person or group advancing a cause while people with other causes waited to see him.

Tongue-in-cheek, Stephen writes, "In the ante-chamber, the advocates for an improved prison discipline were themselves undergoing a sort of temporary imprisonment."

Furthermore, Wilberforce's study was cluttered with "piles of subscription lists, plans, and reports from countless kindred associations." In fact, for half a century, Wilberforce was involved with almost every plan of consequence that would advance "the religious, and intellectual, and social improvement, either of the rich or of the poor." Besides being a member of the House of Commons, and pursuing the abolition of the slave trade, by one account Wilberforce was active in sixty-nine societies, of which he was the vice-president of twenty-nine, treasurer of one, governor of five, and on the committee of five others. Wilberforce was not stingy with his wealth either, giving away between a fourth and a third of his income.



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William Wilberforce, powerfully used of God to end the Atlantic Slave Trade and better the lives of millions in 19th Century Britain.

The question becomes, how could one man have overseen all these “schemes”? He couldn’t. Stephens says that Wilberforce’s position was like a “minister of public charities,” and others did the “toilsome details.” By the middle of the Age of Wilberforce, the network of societies with which Wilberforce was involved grew so large that there were thousands of branches throughout the country. Perhaps the most inspirational part of Wilberforce’s work is that eventually so many societies existed throughout the country that they became the norm instead of the exception.

It is prudent to remember, however, that the Clapham group was comprised of redeemed sinners—and like all redeemed people they still made mistakes and sometimes egregious ones. One well documented instance was the case of printer Thomas Williams. He printed *Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine, which was certainly objectionable material at that time, and was imprisoned despite admitting wrongdoing and begging the group for mercy. He left his family destitute.

Yet the societies continued to do groundbreaking work. In a letter to friends on December 17, 1796, Wilberforce and two others briefly outlined the formation of a new charity called the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor. This charity would help raise the conditions of the poor in general,

“correct the abuses of the workhouses,” and “assist the poor in placing out their children in the world.” However, its scope was even greater than just helping the poor; the Society was to strengthen the economy overall by, among other things, “its improvements and experiments [that would] be . . . applicable to farms, manufactories, private families, and to every situation of life.”

Intending not to change society’s class structure but to combat poverty and brutality by moral reformation, Wilberforce and the Clapham group encouraged Sunday schools to teach children how to read the Bible and other religious material so they could understand the Christian faith and virtue. Wilberforce said, “If people were destined to be free, they must be made fit to enjoy their freedom.” Reading wasn’t the only thing accomplished during this time; teachers would also impart practical skills such as how to run an orderly household.

By far, Sunday schools and literacy were better crime prevention than the prisons and gallows. Yet, to illustrate the contentiousness of the idea of common people reading, one writer says there was talk that Prime Minister Pitt’s Cabinet almost used their power to suppress it. It was thought, and rightly so, that teaching lower classes to read would promote democracy in England.

Wilberforce’s concern wasn’t only for humans. During this time cruelty to animals was rife.

Animal torture for sport was common, and cattle, horses, and sheep were treated inhumanely.

Wilberforce along with Richard Martin (MP) and Reverend Arthur Broome led a group of reformers who worked to pass the 1822 Richard Martin’s Act to prevent cruelty to animals. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in 1824.

It was a firm Christian conviction that led Wilberforce to become a powerful liberator of the oppressed. He, along with the other members of the Clapham group, changed every sphere of life in England and helped bring about more humane treatment of people around the world. 🌐

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