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The Liberator

Stephen Neill.

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE. *Robin Furneaux*. London, Hamish Hamilton, 1974, xvi and 504 pp. £6.00.

WILBERFORCE. *John Pollock*. London, Constable, 1977, xvi and 368 pp. £8.00.

Another book on Wilberforce! Two more books on Wilberforce! Together 904 pages. Woe to the conscientious reviewer. And yet I have found the reading of these two books rewarding rather than wearisome.

But, in any case, do we really need any more books on a well-worn subject? The answer is to be found in the rather curious history of publications about Wilberforce. The immense five-volume biography produced by two of his sons appeared in 1838, five years after his death; very few and very weary, to adapt a phrase of Macaulay, are those who are in at the death of the subject. Then no biography appeared until 1923, when Sir Reginald Coupland published his admirable *Wilberforce: a Narrative*, a work to which our two writers are not, in my opinion, quite as kind as they might be. To speak of Coupland's 'benevolent imperialism' (Pollock p. 14) is not fair to the knowledge and impartiality of a really distinguished historian. Like a great many of my generation I delighted in that book when it first appeared. But I had also had the good fortune to discover for myself Sir James Stephen's *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography* (1849). The reader who penetrates beyond that formidable title may be surprised to find himself reading some of the most charming biographical studies ever written. I once discussed the essay on the Clapham Sect with George Macaulay Trevelyan, who was connected with them through his great-uncle Lord Macaulay and his great-grand-uncle Zachary Macaulay. He agreed with me that this is a superb piece of historical writing, which ought certainly to be reprinted and made more generally available. Stephen's enchanting sketch of Wilberforce among his friends is a delight to read. In this century, work on Wilberforce took a sinister turn with the writings of Dr Eric Williams, later Prime Minister of Trinidad, whose aim was to show that slavery was not abolished until it had become financially unprofitable, and that there was no element of generosity in the action of Parliament. Dr Williams is an economist; but his economics do not stand up to the economics of Professor R. Anstey who has studied the subject deeply and whose notable book *The Atlantic Slave Trade*

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and British Abolition 1760-1810 (1975) seems to me definitive for the period that it covers. Dr Williams is an historian; but his history does not stand up to the history of John Pollock, who has taken the trouble really to master the period under discussion. (For a particularly gross historical error, see Pollock, p. 205, footnote). Dr Williams is a Marxist; he has shown once again how almost impossible it is for a Marxist to write history. When he sees sheer goodness, he cannot recognise it for what it is. If a man appears generous, this must be explained away as concealed self-interest. If a man appears to be concerned for the poor and weak, he must be shown up as an ignorant and fanatical hypocrite. The Marxist has no resources from which to correct the distortions introduced by his principles into his narrative. Williams' book was more warmly received than it deserved, and has gone into a second edition; unfortunately, as Pollock remarks, the third world has accepted the Marxist view set forth in *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) as the true account of the story of the abolition movement. It was time that something was done to redress the balance.

The third Earl of Birkenhead (modestly disguised as Robin Furneaux, the name by which we shall call him in the rest of this review) has had the great advantage of access to a number of manuscript sources, in particular the great collection in the possession of Mr C. E. Wrangham, which earlier writers were unable to use. He has worked with great diligence and patience, and has produced what Pollock calls a 'long affectionately written book' (p. xv); the term 'affectionately' seems to me well chosen.

I would judge that Furneaux is not himself a Christian believer. But he has wrestled earnestly with the odd beliefs of those whom he oddly calls 'Evangelists' (so in the Index, but the more familiar 'evangelicals' does on occasion creep in). He quotes extensively from Wilberforce's private journal, revealing the minute and scrupulous care with which Wilberforce analysed his motives and actions, and strove to relate them all to the consuming passion of his life, the service of his Lord. But Furneaux nowhere makes the mistake of dismissing this careful introspection as morbid or neurotic. Like Henry Martyn, whose *Journal* to modern taste makes even more painful reading, he never paraded his hair-shirt before his friends. When the great proconsul Mountstuart Elphinstone heard that he would have Martyn as a companion on his voyage from Calcutta to Bombay, he wrote to a friend that he had been assured that the presence of the chaplain would greatly add to the *hilarity* of his company — and he was not disappointed. So Wilberforce perpetually diffused about himself an inescapable and indefinable charm. Charm is a quality always extremely difficult to define, and to communicate in the written word. Wilberforce, in spite of his abominably bad eyesight, was a great reader, of a very wide range of books. His conversation seems to

have been a continual delight. He had a mind like quicksilver, which would dart from point to point in unpredictable and occasionally absurd gyrations. Any number of friends, and enemies, bear witness to the exquisite modulations of his voice, which could charm (there it is again!) the House of Commons for three hours at a stretch. And Wilberforce, unlike Zachary Macaulay, had a considerable, but never malicious, sense of humour.

Furneau's book is particularly good on all the parliamentary side of Wilberforce's activities — doubtless this runs in the family tradition. At times the reader is likely to find this rather tedious — the political manoeuvrings of the later years of George III are tedious and nothing can ever make them otherwise. But all this has somewhere to be recorded at length; otherwise we should fail to realise the astonishing patience of Wilberforce and his friends, their dexterity in handling parliamentary situations, and the sheer dogged goodness by which they changed the climate of opinion in the entire nation. Furneau's conclusion is that 'there is no reason to adjust Lecky's verdict: "The unwearied, unostentatious, and inglorious crusade of England against slavery may probably be regarded as among the three of four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations"' (p. 259). This is a notable tribute, based upon years of toil, from one who, I suspect, did not start his work strongly prejudiced in Wilberforce's favour.

The two books before us naturally have much in common, but are so different that they are in many ways complementary to one another. The difference in tone can perhaps be made clear by quoting one scene which both have recorded:

Furneau:

In a coherent interval on Sunday night he said to Henry, 'I am in a very distressed state'. 'Yes, but you have your feet on the Rock'. 'I do not venture', Wilberforce replied, 'to speak so positively; but I hope I have'. These are his last recorded words. He lapsed into a coma and died at three o'clock on the morning of Monday, July 29, 1833. He was within one month of his seventy-fourth birthday (pp. 454-5).

Pollock:

Late that night he stirred, and Barbara and Henry heard him murmur, with apparent reference to his body, 'I am in a very distressed state'. 'Yes', said Henry, 'but you have your feet on the Rock'. The old humility asserted itself. 'I do not venture to speak so positively. But I hope I have'.

At 3 a.m. on Monday morning, 29 July 1833, he knew (p. 308).

When Pollock told me a number of years ago that he was planning to write a book on Wilberforce, I discouraged the idea, not thinking that there was anything very new or important to be said about Wilberforce. I was never more wrong in my life. I have followed the progress of the book all

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through the period of its writing with affectionate concern, and I must be careful now not to let partiality affect my estimate of it.

I can only say that this book is a triumph of genuine historical research. Lord Furneaux was fortunate in being able to use certain invaluable treasure – houses of material. But who would have imagined how much Wilberforce material was lying about, simply waiting to be indentified and pillaged? Pollock lists no less than nineteen major sources, as well as twenty-nine subsidiary ones. It is unlikely, but not certain, that no major source has been overlooked. In view of this vast mass of new material Pollock criticises Furneaux's remark that a biographer of Wilberforce must lean heavily on the printed sources (p. xv), and, wisely I think, has built up his book largely from the manuscript evidence. An astonishing proportion of his references are to manuscript sources, the great majority of which had remained unknown up to the present time.

'To keep this book to a reasonable size, I have restricted the historical background to a minimum' (p. xv). This means that for a full account of Wilberforce's public activities we have to go to Furneaux and Anstey and other reputable writers; it means also that a great deal of space is available here for private and not rarely trivial detail, much of it entirely fascinating and affording a ready entry into the way in which Wilberforce and his friends really lived and enjoyed life. The last thing that these Evangelicals ever were was gloomy; right at the end of his life, when his health was already extremely bad, Wilberforce affirmed that he had greatly enjoyed life, and would like to go on living for a long time yet.

We have commended Furneaux for his valiant wrestling with the 'Evangelists'. With a great sum obtained he this freedom. Pollock, by contrast, was born free, or nearly so, having moved in the best Evangelical society for upwards of thirty years; he can understand things from within, as those outside the charmed circle can hardly be expected to do. But Pollock quotes less from the diary than Furneaux, and, though he gives us all the essentials about Wilberforce's religious beliefs and practices, does not labour them unduly. On occasion he dons the preacher's gown and points a moral for us, and this of course is bad, but these are only occasional lapses from the staid demeanour of the historian.

It would be possible to quote almost endlessly, and from page after page, some little touch revealing the charm, gaiety, seriousness, adoration of children, his own and others, and not infrequent absurdity by which the life of this good and great man was attended. How is this for a combination of the two:

Wilberforce knelt at a table in the centre 'and after a little pause . . . began to read a prayer, which he did very slowly in a low, solemnly awful voice. This was

followed by two other prayers and *the grace*. It occupied about ten minutes, and had the best effect as to the manner of it'. But not when, as one occasion at least, his over-loaded pockets burst in the middle of prayers and he vainly tried to retrieve their contents from his kneeling position (p. 184).

Or how is this as a letter: from a near septuagenarian father to a son:

My dear Mr Tutor, for in that character you present yourself to me in the epistolary view, though in the negative relation: i.e. a Tutor of Oriel is too busy to write letters. Perhaps also to read them. Yet nature claims her rights and your affectionate old father begs you will some day, when your tutorial gown is on the peg and yourself in an unacademical simplicity (before you put your clothes on, say, when you get up or after unrobing and going to bed) direct your mind's eye towards this place and resolve to gladden the hearts of its inmates by visiting them on paper when you cannot do it in person (p. 297).

Above all this book is valuable as putting for good and all to the foolish legend that Wilberforce and his kind were so blind and self-centred as to lavish concern on the distant Negro and never to notice the sufferings of their own fellow-countrymen near at hand. It just was not so. Wilberforce had many enemies in his day. Among them the egregious Cobbett, an unscrupulous defender of slavery, poured forth his venom on Wilberforce, and unfortunately as so often venom has proved greater survival capacity than virtue. And even Charles Raven once so far forgot himself in an incautious moment as to say that Wilberforce and his friends had no care for the English working man who was enduring a slavery infinitely worse than that suffered by the slaves in the West Indies. Pollock's many quotations show that Wilberforce had a heart for every care and suffering, wherever he might find it, and that he was deeply concerned about poverty and suffering among the working-class in Britain, though probably he was unaware of the direction in which deliverance for them should be sought. He gave enormously of his resources, up to the limit of the possible and beyond it, to every kind of good cause. He might, indeed, have achieved more if he had concentrated a little more instead of squandering his strength in so many directions. But, throughout, his first love was the cause of the slaves; it was a happy thing that he lived just long enough to hear the great news that slavery had finally been abolished in every part of the British Empire.

So our two authors have said their say, and now perhaps Wilberforce can be allowed to sleep in peace for a number of years. Research will continue in various directions. But unless some quite unexpected and hidden sources of information are disclosed, I do not think that the favourable verdict given by both of them will be substantially changed. Sir Samuel Romilly was right in his famous comparison of Wilberforce with Napoleon, which caused the House of Commons as one man to stand and cheer:

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When he should retire into the bosom of his happy and delighted family, when he should lay himself down on his bed, reflecting on the innumerable voices that would be raised in every quarter of the world to bless him; how much more pure and perfect felicity must he enjoy in the consciousness of having preserved so many millions of his fellow-creatures than the man with whom he had compared him, on the throne to which he had waded through slaughter and oppression (Furneaux p. 252).