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# Evangelicals, Slavery & the Slave Trade: From Whitefield to Wilberforce

**Evangelical Christians were prominent in the campaign to bring about the end of the British slave trade in 1807. However, John Coffey here shows how, in the mid-eighteenth century, evangelical Christians on both sides of the Atlantic acquiesced in the slave trade and slavery. By the 1770s to 1780s their ideas underwent a dramatic change and with the establishment of the committee to Effect the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 evangelicals joined Quakers at the heart of the new abolitionist movement. Coffey shows how, over the next 20 years, with various setbacks, they took a dominant role in the first mass extra-parliamentary campaign in British history that successfully restricted the British slave trade and then brought in the Act to abolish it.**

... the campaigns in England which secured first the abolition of the slave trade and then of slavery itself in the British Empire were led by Evangelical Christians and Quakers, not by the liberal intelligentsia. (Roy Porter)<sup>1</sup>

The abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 is forever associated with the name of William Wilberforce, a man routinely identified (even in the secular press) as an Evangelical Christian. This article locates Wilberforce within the larger story of Evangelicalism, slavery and the slave trade from the 1730s to 1807. The first section describes the ways in which leading Evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic acquiesced in the exploitation of black Africans. The second section shows how attitudes changed very dramatically in the 1770s and 1780s, and endeavours to explain why this was so. The third section analyses the Evangelical contribution to the spectacular early years of the mass abolitionist movement after the founding of the Abolition Society in 1787. Finally, we turn to the lean years after 1794, and the role of Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect in the abolition of the slave trade in 1806-07.

## **'A time of ignorance' (1730s-1760s)**

### **Edwards, Whitefield & The Countess of Huntingdon**

On 15 September 1791, the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Freedom held its annual meeting in the university town of New Haven. Its speaker was the Rev. Dr. Jonathan Edwards Jr., pastor of the local Congregational church, and son

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1 Porter 1990: 68.

of the famous revivalist and theologian. His sermon was on *The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade, and of the Slavery of the Africans*. The preacher realised that some in his audience might struggle to embrace abolitionism, 'because it seems to bear hardly on the characters of our pious fathers, who held slaves'. 'Thirty years ago', he noted, 'scarcely a man in this country thought either the slave-trade or the slavery of Negroes to be wrong'. The previous generation had been like Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon, who 'were ignorant that polygamy or concubinage was wrong'. 'As to domestic slavery', he continued, 'our fathers lived in a time of ignorance which God winked at; but now he commandeth all men everywhere to repent of this wickedness'.<sup>2</sup>

Edwards must have been thinking of his own dear father, Jonathan Edwards Sr. The great preacher had baptised black children, rejoiced in the conversion of blacks in times of revival, and admitted them to full membership of his congregation. He had envisaged a day when 'many of the Negroes and Indians will be divines'. But for all that, he still seated slaves in a segregated area of the church. As a young minister, he travelled to the slave port of Newport, Rhode Island, to purchase a fourteen-year-old African girl as a household slave. Her name was Venus, and she cost him eighty pounds. During his lifetime, Edwards Sr bought and sold several other slaves, including a 'Negro boy named Titus', who was valued at thirty pounds in the inventory of his estate. Indeed, when a local congregation criticised their minister for slave-owning, Edwards wrote in his defence, mounting biblical arguments to justify slavery. He believed that slavery, like just wars, was a necessary evil, and he never referred to slaveholding as a sin. Paradoxically, he did criticise the slave trade – the source of some of his own slaves – as a cruel traffic that impeded the evangelisation of Africa.<sup>3</sup>

A similar ambivalence can be found in the attitudes of Edwards' friend, George Whitefield, the most celebrated Evangelical preacher of the age. In a letter to the inhabitants of the southern colonies in 1739, Whitefield spoke out against the harsh treatment of slaves:

As I lately passed through your provinces in my way hither, I was sensibly touched with a fellow-feeling of the miseries of the poor Negroes. Whether it be lawful for Christians to buy slaves, and thereby encourage the nations from whom they are bought, to be at perpetual war with each other, I shall not take upon me to determine; sure I am, it is sinful, when bought, to use them as bad nay worse, than as though they were brutes.

Whitefield declared that 'my blood has frequently almost run cold within me', when witnessing the sufferings of the black slaves, whose 'cruel task-masters' ploughed their backs with 'unrelenting scourges'. He warned callous slaveowners of divine vengeance: 'Go to now ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you'.<sup>4</sup>

This prophetic denunciation of oppression was eagerly seized upon by early abolitionists like the Quaker Anthony Benezet, but Benezet believed that 'after residing in Georgia, & being habituated to the sights & use of Slaves, his judgement became so much influenced as to paliate, &, in some measure, defend the use of

2 Edwards 1791.

3 Chamberlain 2007: 340-41; Marsden 2003: 255-58; Stout and Minkema 2005.

4 Cited by Benezet 1766: 10-12.

Slaves'. Benezet challenged Whitefield on this 'repeatedly, with brotherly freedom', but to no avail.<sup>5</sup> Whitefield sanctioned the use of slave labour at his orphanage in Georgia, and defended slavery in a letter written in 1751:

As for the lawfulness of keeping Slaves I have no doubt, since I hear of some that were bought with Abraham's money & some that were born in his house – And I cannot help thinking that some of those servants mentioned by the Apostles in their Epistles, were or had been slaves. It is plain that the Gibeonites were doomed to perpetual Slavery, & though liberty is a sweet thing to such as are born free, yet to those who never knew the sweets of it, slavery, perhaps, may not be so irksome. However this be, it is plain to a demonstration, that hot countries cannot be cultivated without Negroes.<sup>6</sup>

The complacency of the 1751 letter stands in stark contrast to the moral outrage of a decade earlier. And when Whitefield died, he left behind over fifty slaves working the land of the Georgia orphanage.

Whitefield was chaplain to Selina, Countess of Huntingdon. In 1774, she received a letter from Anthony Benezet urging her to join him in a campaign for 'putting an end to this mighty Destroyer, "The Slave Trade"'. Benezet was optimistic that she could gain the support of Lord Dartmouth, the leading Evangelical in Parliament.<sup>7</sup> In reply, Selina apparently stressed the priority of spiritual liberation for slaves, and suggested that the issue of the slave trade should be left in God's hands. Benezet feared that this was a recipe for inaction. He agreed that 'God alone' could liberate 'his afflicted and oppressed creatures', but argued that God had often stirred up his people 'to labour both by word & deed, for the deliverance of their fellow-men, from outward as well as spiritual oppression & distress'. The trade was bound to continue if 'promulgators of the Gospel' were as mealy-mouthed as Whitefield had been, 'instead of bearing their Christian Testimony, against this outrageous violation of the rights of Mankind'.<sup>8</sup>

Although there were exceptions, most Evangelicals did not share Benezet's outrage against the slave trade. In fact, as Christopher Leslie Brown has recently commented, they displayed 'manifest indifference' to the enslavement of Africans. The Countess of Huntingdon acted as a patron to leading black Christian authors like Phillis Wheatley and John Marrant, but she more than doubled the number of slaves at the Georgia orphanage after Whitefield's death. The Anglican, Martin Madan, used profits from his Caribbean plantations to build a chapel for London Evangelicals at the Lock Hospital for Penitent Prostitutes. The Baptist, Anne Dutton, advised slaves to accept their condition and concentrate on the salvation of their souls. The early Evangelicals aimed to save souls, not to change laws. There were few Evangelicals in Parliament, and Lord Dartmouth, the Evangelical secretary of state, was a cautious man with little crusading fervour. Challenged to take up the slave trade issue in the 1770s, he privately expressed his dislike of the trade, whilst

5 See his letter of the Countess of Huntingdon in March 1775, in Bruns 1977: 380-81.

6 Bruns 1977: 381.

7 Unpublished letter from Anthony Benezet to the Countess of Huntingdon: Cheshunt Collection, Westminster College Cambridge, A3/1 no. 33.

8 Benezet to the Countess of Huntingdon in March 1775, in Bruns 1977: 379-84.

acting publicly to uphold it. As Brown explains, 'he cordoned off his political work from (to him) the no less important work of promoting the Evangelical revival'.<sup>9</sup> The slave trade was simply not on the Evangelical agenda.

### John Newton

The most dramatic evidence for this is found in the life of John Newton, who worked as a slave trader between 1748 and 1754. As a slave ship captain, Newton resorted to draconian measures to control his human cargo. On 11 December 1752, he discovered a plot among the slaves below deck, and recorded his action in a logbook: 'Put the boys in irons and slightly in the thumbscrew to urge them to a full confession ...'. Yet, at this very time, Newton was becoming deeply serious about religion. Acutely sensitive to divine providence, he immersed himself in the Bible and formal prayer. He cracked down hard on cursing and sexual immorality among his crew, whipping one sailor for having sex with a female slave in full view of the other Africans. At the Caribbean island of St Kitts in 1753, he enjoyed a month of conversations with another slave trader, Alexander Clunie, who explained the concept of grace and drew him towards an Evangelical understanding of the Christian faith. At no time in the 1750s (or indeed in the 1760s or 1770s) did Newton express remorse for trading in slaves. He retired from the business not because of moral qualms, but because of a minor stroke he suffered as he was preparing to embark on another slaving voyage in 1754. When he published his autobiographical *Authentic Narrative* (1764), he lamented the sins of his youth, blasphemy, drunkenness and immorality. But this classic Evangelical text did not seriously question the ethics of the slave trade; indeed, Newton wrote that 'I never knew sweeter or more frequent hours of divine communion, than in my last two voyages to Guinea'. In his mind (and in the eyes of nearly all his contemporaries), slave trading was just a job.<sup>10</sup>

The case of Newton confirms that one could experience a full-blown Evangelical conversion without feeling any real compunction about the slave trade. But how could devout and conscientious Christians be so oblivious to the moral evil of this traffic in human beings? Many years later, Newton tried to explain why he (as a Christian) had participated in what he now called 'a commerce, so iniquitous, so cruel, so oppressive, so destructive':

Disagreeable I had long found it; but I think I should have quitted it sooner, had I considered it, as I now do, to be unlawful and wrong. But I never had a scruple upon this head, at the time; nor was such a thought once suggested to me, by any friend. What I did, I did ignorantly; considering it as the line of life which Divine Providence had allotted to me, and having no concern, in point of conscience, but to treat the Slaves, while under my care, with as much humanity, as a regard to my own safety would admit...The Slave Trade was always unjustifiable; but inattention and interest prevented, for a time, the evil from being perceived.<sup>11</sup>

This testimony is worth unpacking. Firstly, Christians supported the slave trade because they did not believe it to be 'unlawful or wrong'; after all, it was sanctioned

9 Brown 2006: 337-41, 380, 176-77.

10 See Walvin 2007b: 1-102, quotations on p 51; Newton 1765(3rd edn), quotation at p 141. For a sympathetic popular account see Turner 2005.

11 Newton 1788: 3-4, 7. For a provocative reading of the journal and Newton's other writings on slavery see Wood 2002, ch 1 ('Slavery, testimony, propaganda: John Newton, William Cowper, and compulsive testimony').

and promoted by the British state, and slavery was apparently legitimised by both the Old and the New Testament. Secondly, contemporary society regarded the slave trade as morally unexceptionable, and slave traders encountered little or no criticism from friends. In Evangelical circles, being an actor or a card player was unacceptable, but being a slave trader was apparently legitimate. Thirdly, an earnest Christian slaver or planter could satisfy his conscience by resolving to treat his cargo with some 'humanity'. Fourthly, Christians were simply inattentive. To most, the horrors of the slave trade were out of sight, out of mind. Newton did not have this excuse, but he too was guilty of 'inattention' – preoccupied by the getting the job done, by nourishing his soul, and by writing home to his beloved Mary, he simply failed to think seriously about whether his vocation was morally justifiable. Finally, slave trading was a profitable business, and 'interest' prevented many from questioning the source of their wealth. Newton himself made a good living from his activities, and in his extraordinary journal from these years, slave trading is reduced to an exercise in bookkeeping, with the anonymous slaves known only by their numbers.<sup>12</sup>

### **Evangelical failure and black Evangelicalism**

The first generation of Evangelicals, then, signally failed to question the morality of the African slave trade. There was no Evangelical equivalent to the prophetic Quaker voices of Benjamin Lay, John Woolman and Anthony Benezet. The early Evangelicals preached about turning from 'the world', but when it came to the slave trade, they were social conformists.

Yet, remarkably, it was this very period that was to witness the birth of a vibrant black Evangelicalism. Evangelical religion with its fiery preaching and warm fellowship had a powerful appeal to black slaves. When Olaudah Equiano heard Whitefield preach in Georgia in 1765, he was 'very much struck and impressed' at the passion of the evangelist's exhortations, noting that Whitefield was 'sweating as much as ever I did while in slavery on Montserrat beach'. When he first attended a Methodist 'love feast', Equiano was overwhelmed by the heartfelt testimonies and the sense of community.<sup>13</sup> On Whitefield's death in 1770, the African-American poet, Phillis Wheatley, wrote 'An Elegiac Poem' in praise of the great revivalist.<sup>14</sup> All across the British Atlantic world, African slaves were converting to Christianity in large numbers through the new Evangelical movements.<sup>15</sup> In the Danish sugar colonies in the Caribbean, the Moravians saw hundreds of slaves come to faith, and organised them into the earliest African Protestant congregations in the Americas. In some ways, the Moravians were remarkably egalitarian and interracial, as is illustrated by the career of Rebecca Protten, a convert who eventually gained her freedom from slavery, became an itinerant evangelist, and married a white Moravian missionary. Yet they were careful not to condemn the institution of slavery itself.<sup>16</sup> In Virginia, the leading Presbyterian revivalist, Samuel Davies, went out of his way to convert slaves, but he also eschewed any attack on slavery. As David Brion Davis has put it, 'the main thrust of eighteenth-century revivalism ended with the missionary, not the abolitionist'.<sup>17</sup>

12 Newton 1952.

13 Equiano 2003: 132, 183-84, 277. After describing Whitefield, Equiano adds dryly: 'I thought it strange I had never seen divines exert themselves in this manner before, and

was no longer at a loss to account for the thin congregations they preached to'.

14 Basker 2002: 174-76.

15 See Frey and Wood 1998, ch 4.

16 See Sensbach 2005.

17 Davis 1966: 388.

### **The Birth of Evangelical Abolitionism (1770s-1780s)**

And yet, in the final decades of the eighteenth century, Evangelicals were to play a central role in the great campaign against the slave trade. The 1770s and 1780s saw a sudden surge of abolitionist activism, prompted by a variety of factors including the growing influence of Quaker and Enlightenment critiques of slavery, and the upheaval of the American Revolution.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Quakers and the Enlightenment**

The key group promoting abolition in this period was the Quakers, led by the indefatigable Benezet. Evangelicals were somewhat doubtful about the doctrinal orthodoxy of the Quakers, but they admired the Quaker commitment to serious, counter-cultural Christianity. Indeed, the leading historian of early British abolitionism has argued that 'The British antislavery movement emerged from a religious reaction against what its Evangelical and Quaker founders derided as nominal Christianity'.<sup>19</sup>

Benezet clearly recognised Evangelicals as potential allies in his crusade against slavery, for they shared the Quaker dissatisfaction with lukewarm piety and lax morality. Although he failed to sway Whitefield or the Countess of Huntingdon, he had more success with others. In Pennsylvania, he struck up a friendship with the young Presbyterian physician, Benjamin Rush, who managed to cling on to his Evangelicalism while immersing himself in the Philadelphia Enlightenment. Rush reminds us that Evangelicals were awakening to the issue of slavery partly because of their growing engagement with moderate Enlightenment thought with its ideals of liberty, benevolence, progress and humanity. Various eighteenth-century intellectuals (including Montesquieu and the Scottish historian and divine William Robertson) had condemned the slave trade, and Rush drew on their arguments in *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements on the Slavery of the Negroes* (1773). But he also used Scripture to bolster his case, and finished his tract with a stirring appeal to the clergy to take up the cause.<sup>20</sup>

### **American Evangelicals**

Rush's pamphlet reflected a wider ferment among significant numbers of American Evangelicals. Their conversion to antislavery was the result of growing exposure to several intellectual influences: Quaker writings, Enlightenment moral philosophy, and the radical Whig ideas of the Patriots. In New England and the Middle Colonies, Evangelical preachers were often fervent promoters of American protests against British 'tyranny'. But, as they preached, some became painfully aware of the glaring gap between the noble rhetoric of American liberty, and the terrible reality of American slavery. On the eve of the revolutionary war, the heirs of Jonathan Edwards began to denounce slavery. Among them were the Congregational divines, Jonathan Edwards Jr, Nathaniel Niles, Levi Hart, and Samuel Hopkins. Hopkins was the boldest, for he was based in Newport, Rhode Island, New England's major slave port. He witnessed the inhumanity of the traffic at close quarters, but his frequent attacks on the slave trade and on slavery put him on a collision course with members of his congregation. In the South, where the economy was heavily dependent on slave plantations, Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian itinerants won

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18 See Brown 2006.

20 See Rush 1948, 1951.

19 Brown 2006: 28.

a significant following among blacks, forming interracial fellowships that posed a direct challenge to the predominant culture of the slaveholding Anglican gentry. Leaders like the Baptist David Barrow, the Methodist James O'Kelly, and the Presbyterian David Rice, spoke out against slavery.<sup>21</sup> In 1784, under the influence of Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, the Methodist Conference condemned 'the Practice of holding our Fellow-Creatures in Slavery' and resolved 'to extirpate this Abomination from among us'.<sup>22</sup>

Once convinced, Evangelicals proved zealous abolitionists. They developed what can only be described as a liberation theology directed against black slavery – the mission of God, they insisted, was to loose the bands of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke, to preach deliverance to the captives, to set at liberty them that are bruised (Isa. 58:6; Luke 4:18). Like the Quakers, they launched a counter-cultural assault on worldliness, and declaimed in the uncompromising language of the Hebrew prophets. Slavery was not merely wrong, it was an abomination, an accursed thing, a crying sin, a national crime. Individuals and nations who traded in slaves were stained by blood guilt, and exposed to the threat of divine vengeance. The only way to avert God's wrath and atone for this sin was to repent, to renounce slavery without equivocation and with immediate effect.<sup>23</sup> This highly charged theological vocabulary made the Enlightenment critique of slavery look rather colourless, though Evangelical reformers tended to sugar their Biblical imperatives with Enlightenment values.<sup>24</sup> The Enlightenment provided them with a language that appealed to their more secular contemporaries, but it was their moral and religious absolutism which would drive much of American abolitionism from the 1770s to the 1860s.

Yet as we have already suggested, there was no necessary connection between Evangelical theology and abolitionism. It remained perfectly possible in America to embrace Evangelicalism whilst owning slaves or defending slavery. The wave of antislavery sentiment in revolutionary America eventually swept away slavery in the northern and middle colonies, and led to the abolition of the American slave trade in 1808. But in the South, plantation slavery was firmly entrenched. By 1800, southern Evangelicals – Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians – were starting to make their peace with slavery. The Baptist evangelist John Leland, who had once condemned slavery as 'the violent deprivation of the rights of nature', later described it as a 'humane, just and benevolent' institution. In the North too, many Evangelical leaders became less strident.<sup>25</sup>

### British abolitionism

In Britain, abolitionism took longer to get off the ground, though once it did it would face less opposition. West Indian planters were to prove a much weaker lobby than the slaveholding Southern states. In the 1770s, however, British abolitionism was almost a one-man crusade. That man was Granville Sharp, the founding father of

21 See Bruns 1977; Essig 1982; Isaac 1982, ch 8; Stout and Minkema 2005.

22 Bruns 1977: 502-504.

23 For numerous examples of this language used by both Quakers and Evangelicals, see Bruns 1977. The importance of this evangelical rhetoric of sin and repentance

for instilling a sense of urgency is stressed in Davis 1962.

24 For a suggestive analysis focussed on the early nineteenth century see Forbes 1999.

25 See Essig 1982; Mathews 1965; Gourley 2005.

British abolitionism. Raised in a High Church family, his doctrinal orthodoxy and intense biblicism gave him an affinity with the rising Evangelical movement.<sup>26</sup> He was drawn to the cause after a chance encounter in 1765 with a black slave, Jonathan Strong, who had been savagely beaten by his master. Sharp brought a number of legal cases against slaveowners in subsequent years, culminating in the famous Somerset case (1772), when Lord Mansfield ruled that black slaves could not be returned to the colonies against their will. He formed strong connections with black Britons, and was greatly admired by Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano.<sup>27</sup> He also developed close links with American abolitionists, corresponding with both Benezet and Rush.<sup>28</sup>

During the 1770s, Sharp published a number of attacks on slavery and the slave trade, culminating in *The Law of Retribution* (1776), a major work of 350 pages that marshalled biblical evidence to warn of 'God's Temporal Vengeance against Tyrants, Slave-holders, and Oppressors'. It was published in the same year as the American Declaration of Independence, but whilst Sharp sympathised with the American Patriots, and embraced Enlightenment notions of benevolence and rights, his book displayed an unfashionable preoccupation with divine wrath. Believing that national crimes bring national punishments, Sharp insisted that slavery must be rejected if God's judgement was to be averted. He reminds us that the militant abolitionism of late eighteenth-century Evangelicals (and Quakers) arose from their distinctive combination of moderate Enlightenment values and Counter-Enlightenment convictions. Whilst their opposition to the slave trade had roots in contemporary moral philosophy, the urgency of their activism arose from a belief that the trade was an abomination in the eyes of a just God – only swift and unconditional repentance would restore Britain and America to divine favour.<sup>29</sup>

Sharp's was a relatively lonely voice, but he was able to garner support from John Wesley, who (following Whitefield's death in 1770), was England's most renowned Evangelical preacher. By 1772 at the latest, Wesley was corresponding with Benezet and Sharp, and praising the 'honest Quaker' for exposing 'that execrable sum of villainies, commonly called the Slave-trade'. According to one historian, 'the correspondence between Benezet, Sharp and Wesley was almost certainly the most significant grouping in the early campaign against slavery'.<sup>30</sup> In 1774, he published his own *Thoughts upon Slavery*, a tract that went through four editions in two years, becoming one of the most widely read books on the subject in the 1770s. Other Methodists like John Fletcher and Thomas Vivian condemned slavery in the same decade.

### **Birth of the national movement**

It was not, however, until the 1780s that abolitionism became a national movement. In 1783, Britons were shocked by the story of the slave ship *Zong*, whose captain had ordered over 130 sick slaves thrown overboard for whose loss the ship owners

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26 He is included in Lewis 1995 (Vol II: 1000). Brown 2006, ch. 3 emphasises his High Church background and his distance from the Clapham Sect, but other historians stress his Evangelical convictions: Anstey 1975: 158; Ditchfield; Wallace 1998.

27 Equiano 2003: 328-30.

28 Woods 1967.

29 See Brown 2006: 174-76; Coffey 2007.

30 Carey 2003: 276.



claimed compensation from the insurers. The case was publicised by Equiano and Sharp. At Cambridge University, the Vice-Chancellor Peter Peckard preached a university sermon against the slave trade in 1784, and set a Latin essay competition on the lawfulness of enslaving others by force in the following year. The winning entry came from a student named Thomas Clarkson who was preparing for a clerical career. But what began as a scholastic exercise soon became a consuming passion, and Clarkson quickly emerged as a central figure in the abolitionist movement.<sup>31</sup> Quakers were once again at the heart of the action. In 1783, the London Yearly Meeting petitioned Parliament on the issue and set up its own Committee on the Slave Trade. In 1787, Quakers would reach beyond their own ranks to establish a non-sectarian Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, including Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson on the organizing committee.

The Quaker initiative coincided with important developments among Evangelical Anglicans. As the Evangelical movement burgeoned within the Church and the nation, it grew in confidence and ambition. It is surely no coincidence that, as Seymour Drescher observes, 'the take-off of British abolitionism coincided almost exactly with the revival of the British missionary movement'.<sup>32</sup> Evangelicalism was now attracting elite lay converts who began to expand its vision. In part, this may have been a generational shift: the generation of Walpole, for whom politics had been a dirty business, was giving way to the generation of Pitt the Younger, which was more likely to see politics as a moral vocation.<sup>33</sup> But it was also a result of a political crisis – the revolt of the American colonies – and of a profound cultural shift during 'the age of sensibility'.

### **Cowper, Margaret Middleton and Hannah More**

The new attitudes were reflected in the work of England's most popular poet, William Cowper, who also happened to be a close friend and collaborator of John Newton. Cowper introduced stinging attacks on slavery and the slave trade into his long meditative poems, 'Charity' (1782) and 'The Task' (1785). In 'Charity', he held out little hope for 'merchants rich in cargoes of despair/Who drive a loathsome traffic ... And buy the muscles and the bones of man'.<sup>34</sup> Among other things, Cowper's poems were subtle pieces of Evangelical propaganda, and they would certainly have been read by cultured Evangelicals like Margaret Middleton.

Middleton was an accomplished painter and musician, who lived at Barham Court in Teston, Kent, with her husband, Sir Charles (a leading naval official) and the philanthropic Elizabeth Bouverie. Barham Court was to be the unlikely epicentre of the new Evangelicalism, and these well-connected Evangelical women did much to

31 Clarkson's religious identity is a matter of some debate, for whilst he collaborated with Evangelicals and Quakers, and was sympathetic to both, he was not strictly aligned with either. He is included in Lewis 1995 ('While he worked closely with evangelicals, it is difficult to identify him with certainty as an evangelical although his deathbed confession clearly fits the evangelical stereotype: "All my works and

righteousness are as filthy rags. I trust only in the Atonement, the sacrifice, the blood shed on the cross for washing away my sins and entrance into Heaven"', Vol I: 228-29).

32 Drescher 1980: 47.

33 I owe this point to Mark Smith.

34 Basker 2002: 294-302. Cowper's early antislavery poetry is oddly overlooked in Brown's detailed analysis of the origins of Evangelical abolitionism in Brown 2006, ch. 6.

promote the idea of abolition among influential Anglicans. In 1791, Hannah More told Margaret that 'you have the first title to every prize on the whole slave subject', while another visitor to Barham Court later insisted that the 'abolition of the slave trade...was the work of a *woman*' [his italics]. Middleton encouraged the campaigning of the vicar of Teston, James Ramsay, who had witnessed the cruelties of slavery at first hand in the Caribbean, and who published a series of informed critiques of the slave trade between 1784 and his death in 1789. These were the first works to attract the ire of the West Indian lobby in Britain, and to give the issue a national profile. The two women also hosted a series of seminal meetings between 1786 and 1789, which led to a strategy to put the campaign for abolition on the agenda of their fellow Christians and of Parliament itself. It was here in 1786, that both Clarkson and Wilberforce pledged themselves to work for abolition. Also present at these gatherings were Hannah More and Beilby Porteus (the High Church bishop of Chester and then London), both of whom would make important contributions to the campaign. In 1789, Wilberforce and his allies were 'locked up' at Barham Court planning their parliamentary campaign. Hannah More, who loved her visits to the house, declared that Teston would prove 'the Runnymede of the negroes'.<sup>35</sup>

As Christopher Brown has recently emphasised, the elite Evangelical Anglicans at Barham Court were not simply interested in the physical welfare of black Africans. They had other agendas too. Initially, their concern was with the promotion of Christianity among the slaves. They believed that if the slave trade was abolished, planters could no longer tolerate high mortality rates among their existing slaves – they would be forced to treat them more humanely, and might also allow missionaries to work among them. But the Evangelicals soon developed wider concerns, partly in response to the nation's crushing defeat in the American War of Independence (1775-83). This had been Britain's Vietnam, and with the prestige and morale of the empire so badly battered, there was a desperate need to recover national dignity and moral purpose. Starting from the premise that the slave trade was a stain on the national character, an 'iniquity' that had provoked divine wrath, they believed that abolition could rehabilitate the international reputation of Britain, and re-establish the nation's fractured relationship with God. Abolition could serve as a wedge issue, one that would lend credibility to their other campaigns for moral and spiritual uplift, and inject ethical and religious seriousness into public life. As Brown observes, this marked a significant departure from the strategy of earlier Evangelicals, who had concentrated their energies in evangelism, and held out little hope for political activism. Yet the Teston set were just as committed to the spread of 'vital religion' as their predecessors – they just happened to believe that a Christian crusade against the slave trade would enhance the profile and credibility of the Gospel.<sup>36</sup>

## **Evangelicals and the Abolitionist Crusade (1787-1794)**

### **Wilberforce, Evangelical Anglicanism and Quakers**

The emergence of Anglican abolitionism in the mid-1780s was vital to the success of the Abolition Society. Abolitionism could no longer be dismissed as the cranky concern of a marginalised sect; it was now a mainstream cultural and political

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35 The definitive study of the Teston set is Brown 2006, ch. 6.

36 See Brown 2006, *passim* and Coffey 2007.

phenomenon. Wilberforce was clearly the key player. A personal friend of the Prime Minister William Pitt, he was well connected and well liked by the nation's leading politicians. He was also highly intelligent and very eloquent. His first major speech against the slave trade in May 1789 was a three-and-a-half hour *tour de force* which left veteran parliamentarians reaching for superlatives to describe the performance. Edmund Burke, the finest orator in the House, declared that it was 'equal to anything he had heard of in modern oratory'.<sup>37</sup> But besides his natural gifts, Wilberforce was also fired by religious passion. Had he been converted to Evangelicalism in his teens, he may not have cultivated friendship with Pitt or embarked on a political career; but had he not experienced evangelical conversion in his twenties, he would have lacked a burning sense of mission. As he wrote in his diary on 28 October 1787: 'God Almighty has placed before me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade & the reformation of manners'.<sup>38</sup>

Recent scholarship has rightly emphasised that abolition was not a one-man show (though who has seriously argued that it was?). Wilberforce relied on other elite Evangelical Anglicans, and his own contribution was matched by Clarkson's Stakhanovite labours. Clarkson travelled 35,000 miles between 1787 and 1794 in order to raise support for the campaign. He set up local branches, orchestrated petitions, gathered evidence about the trade, organised eyewitness testimony to Parliament, and still managed to find time to publish a series of influential books.<sup>39</sup> But these Anglican abolitionists could hardly have achieved what they did without the Quakers, who published most of the key abolitionist propaganda, and used their networks to promote the cause across England.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, the Evangelical Anglicans and Quakers at the heart of the campaign were quickly inundated with support from all quarters of society. Politicians like William Pitt, Edmund Burke and Charles James Fox raised their voices against the trade in Parliament; the master potter, Josiah Wedgwood, joined the Abolition Committee and designed their famous seal ('Am I not a Man and a Brother?'); literary figures like Coleridge and Southey wrote eloquent diatribes against the trade; theatre managers put on performances of plays like *Oroonoko* to evoke sympathy for slaves; black Londoners lobbied on behalf of their enslaved brethren; urban radicals in Manchester and other towns promoted petitions; women spearheaded the boycott of sugar produced on slave plantations. In 1789, over one hundred petitions were sent to Parliament; in 1792, over five hundred. By that stage, at least 300,000 Britons had stopped consuming sugar and rum. The nation was swept by a tide of moral fervour. Abolition had become the first great popular human rights campaign of the modern era.<sup>41</sup>

### A popular movement

There was nothing like this anywhere else in Europe. France had its own abolitionist organisation, but one with little popular support. Only in Britain (and in the northern

37 The speech is anthologised in MacArthur 1995 and discussed in Bragg 2006.

38 There are many biographies of Wilberforce, but see especially Wilberforce and Wilberforce 1838; Pollock 1977; Hague 2007. For perceptive observations on the secrets of his success see Wolffe 2004: 28-32.

39 His role is vividly described in Hochschild 2005, chs 6 & 8.

40 The Quakers' role is examined in Jennings 1997.

41 See Oldfield 1995.

United States) did abolitionists manage to inspire a groundswell of public agitation. There are various reasons for this, but Britain's distinctive religious culture was surely one of the most important.<sup>42</sup> As James Walvin observes, 'it was, from the first, a form of grass roots Christian outrage: churches, chapels, and ministers rallied their flocks to direct their voice to Parliament'.<sup>43</sup> Quakers played a crucial role, but the campaign received unstinting support from other denominations. Many Christians who threw their weight behind abolition were not Evangelical. Unitarians like the scientist Joseph Priestley and the Manchester radical Thomas Cooper were active abolitionists. Latitudinarian and High Church Anglicans often supported the campaign too – in 1807, the bishops in the House of Lords (none of whom was firmly aligned with the Evangelical party) would vote 'virtually en bloc' for abolition.<sup>44</sup> Cambridge University's leading abolitionist, Peter Peckard, was decidedly Latitudinarian in his churchmanship, though as Master of Magdalene College he fostered a significant number of Evangelical fellows and students.<sup>45</sup> In the Church of Scotland, many clergy in the Moderate Party promoted petitions to Parliament and letters to the press.

### **The Christian case**

Moreover, when one compares the sermons and tracts of Evangelicals with those of other Christian abolitionists, the arguments and texts they employ are strikingly similar. Both emphasised the unity of humanity – Africans and Europeans were 'of one blood', brethren fashioned in the image of their Father God. Both invoked the principle of liberty – 'deliverance for the captives' was on the agenda of Jesus, as well as being mandated by modern notions of natural rights. Both insisted on the necessity of benevolence, a cardinal virtue of British moral philosophy in the eighteenth century, but also a biblical requirement – 'love your neighbour' and the Golden Rule were favourite abolitionist texts. Finally, Evangelical and other Christians warned that persistence in the slave trade would provoke 'national punishment' from above. Christian abolitionists – whether they identified with Evangelicalism or not – displayed a high regard for the authority of Scripture and a discriminating attitude towards Enlightenment thought. They repudiated the radical Enlightenment's denial of monogenesis and providential intervention in history, while fusing the fashionable language of the moderate Christian Enlightenment with the ancient teachings of the Bible.<sup>46</sup>

Yet Evangelicals held these common biblical convictions with a peculiar intensity, and they assumed a correspondingly high profile within the campaign. It is striking that parliamentary critics of abolitionists labelled them 'enthusiasts', 'fanatics', and 'methodists'. Historians have long acknowledged the central role of Evangelicals, focussing on the elite Anglicans around Wilberforce, but abolitionism attracted the support of many other Evangelicals across Britain.

### **Scotland**

Scotland has often been silently omitted from the history of abolition, but Scottish Enlightenment thinkers like William Robertson and James Beattie were a source of inspiration to Wilberforce and his allies, and Scottish Evangelicals were also

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42 See Drescher 1980, 1986, 1994a.

43 Walvin 2007a.

44 Anstey 1975: 393.

45 Walsh and Hyam 1998.

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46 Coffey 2006, available online at [www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge\\_papers/index.php](http://www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers/index.php).

deeply committed to the cause from the late 1780s. The Popular Party in the Kirk eagerly promoted petitions and backed the General Assembly's deliverance in 1792 that the slave trade was 'incompatible with the great principles of religion and morality'. Clarkson's counterpart in Scotland, William Dickson, noted that the leading minister of the Popular Party, John Erskine, was 'zealous, well informed and inquisitive' about the subject. Evangelicals from the various Seceder denominations also spoke up against the slave trade. Moreover, London Scots like James Ramsay, Zachary Macaulay and James Stephen would play a central role in the abolitionist activities of the Evangelical networks at Teston or Clapham.<sup>47</sup>

### Evangelical Dissent

The influence of Evangelical Dissenters would reach its peak many years later in the early 1830s, when their agitation helped to precipitate the overthrow of slavery itself in the British empire. But Baptists and Methodists were heavily involved in the earlier assault on the slave trade. The General Baptists were the first religious group (other than the Quakers) to announce their support – in June 1787, their annual meeting sent a deputation to the Abolition Committee led by the renowned evangelist Dan Taylor.<sup>48</sup> Particular (or Calvinistic) Baptists were just as enthusiastic. In Bristol, second only to Liverpool as a slave trading port, the preachers Caleb Evans and Robert Hall wrote to the press and raised funds for the Abolition Committee.<sup>49</sup> Other leading Baptist ministers, like James Dore in Southwark, Robert Robinson in Cambridge, and Abraham Booth in London, published influential sermons against the trade.<sup>50</sup>

Methodists too were keen participants in the abolitionist movement. John Wesley wrote to pledge his support in August 1787, and in the following year he provoked a disturbance by preaching an abolitionist sermon in Bristol. He died in March 1791, at the height of the agitation, with the cause still prominent in his thoughts. Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* was one of the last books he read, and his final letter was addressed to Wilberforce: 'Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it'.<sup>51</sup> A year later, Samuel Bradburn, known as 'the Demosthenes of Methodism' for his oratorical powers, published a powerful address on the evil of the slave trade. He claimed that 'he had never conversed on the subject with but one Methodist in the nation, who did not avowedly oppose the slave trade'. In Manchester, hundreds of Methodists had signed the city's great abolitionist petition 'in the Chapel at the Communion Table, on the Lord's Day'. Bradburn exhorted his readers to petition Parliament, pray for abolition, and boycott West Indian sugar.<sup>52</sup>

### African writers: Cugoano and Equiano

Vincent Carretta has noted that 'Almost all the Afro-British writers whose religious beliefs we know were Methodist members of the Church of England, embracing the predestinarian Calvinism preached by George Whitefield and the clergymen

47 See Whyte 2006.

48 Clarkson 1808, vol I: 442-43.

49 See Hayden 2001 and Whelan 2000.

50 Dore 1788; Robinson 1788; Booth 1792.

51 Carey 2003: 277-78.

52 Bradburn 1792: 13-24.

associated with his aristocratic patron, the Countess of Huntingdon'.<sup>53</sup> The irony here, of course, is that Whitefield and Huntingdon had signally failed to speak out against the slave trade, despite being prompted by Benezet. But by the 1780s, some of their African followers were becoming politicised, and finding that Scripture spoke of physical as well as spiritual liberation. In 1787, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano published a powerful abolitionist work, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*. Cugoano was a close friend of Olaudah Equiano, and both men enjoyed a public profile as eloquent correspondents to the press, signing themselves in joint letters as 'Sons of Africa'. Equiano even addressed a personal petition to Queen Charlotte.<sup>54</sup> But it was his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative* (1789) which was to prove most influential. The book went through nine editions in English over the next five years, and attracted an array of elite subscribers, from the Prince of Wales to Josiah Wedgwood. A bootleg American edition was published in New York in 1791, and there were translations into Dutch (1790), German (1792) and Russian (1794). Equiano's book not only assisted the campaign for abolition, it also made him a prosperous man.<sup>55</sup>

Among the subscribers to the first edition were some of the leading lights of Anglican abolitionism: Elizabeth Bouverie, Thomas Clarkson and his brother John, Sir Richard Hill, Sir Charles and Lady Middleton, Hannah More, Beilby Porteus, Granville Sharp, Henry Thornton and John Wesley.<sup>56</sup> Most of these figures were closely identified with Evangelicalism, and it is easy to see why Equiano's narrative appealed to them. Besides being an eloquent first-hand testimony to the evils of the slave trade, it was also a compelling evangelical conversion narrative. The title page depicted Equiano holding a Bible open at Acts 4:12: 'Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved'. His autobiography traced the hand of Providence in his life, protecting him from death during his many voyages, and drawing him towards Christ. His was a story of redemption – it told of how he had saved money to purchase his freedom from physical slavery, and how Christ had redeemed him from spiritual bondage. Chapter 10, which described his encounter with Calvinistic Methodists and his subsequent conversion, culminated with a long poem (or hymn) recounting the tale of his spiritual transformation.

Of all the texts published by abolitionists before 1807, Equiano's is now by far the most famous. He himself has become an icon for black Britons, Africans and African-Americans, and *The Interesting Narrative* is widely taught in schools and universities across the world. Its hero appears as the representative African in the film *Amazing Grace*, and his portrait (together with that of Wilberforce) adorns the front cover of the government's bicentenary booklet. Yet his contribution to the cause was often not acknowledged by white abolitionists. In *Amazing Grace* the movie, Clarkson (played by Rufus Sewell) visits Equiano's grave in 1807 to celebrate abolition in the presence of his deceased friend; in Clarkson's *History of the Abolition* (1808), Equiano was conspicuous by his absence. Only in recent decades have

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53 Carretta's 'Introduction' in Equiano 2003: xviii.

54 Equiano's correspondence is published in Equiano 2003: 327-71.

55 See Carretta 2005.

56 Equiano 2003: 317-22.

historians begun to do justice to the contribution of abolitionists who were not educated, white, middle-class men.

### Women abolitionists

We have, for example, learned more about women's place within the movement. As we noted above, Elizabeth Bouverie and Margaret Middleton were unsung heroes, whose behind-the-scenes lobbying helped to launch the abolition campaign among Anglican Evangelicals. But their friend Hannah More played a more public role. More was already an acclaimed writer by the 1780s, when she identified openly with Evangelicalism. She had known the Middletons since 1776, and later became a close friend of Newton and Wilberforce. Her poem, *Slavery* (1788), was written to coincide with the centenary of the Glorious Revolution, and designed to raise support for Wilberforce's first abolition bill. It exposed the gulf between Britain's self-image as a land of freedom, and the nation's systematic enslavement of Africans. More canvassed MPs by letter and in person, and raised the subject of the slave trade at fashionable dinner parties.<sup>57</sup>

### Evangelical Anglicans: Gisborne, Cowper and Newton

Other Evangelical Anglicans assisted the cause in significant ways. Thomas Gisborne, a clergyman and close friend of Wilberforce, hosted strategy meetings at Yoxall Lodge in Staffordshire, and published his own abolitionist tract in 1792.<sup>58</sup> William Cowper composed several new poems against the slave trade, including 'The Negro's Complaint', a sonnet to Wilberforce, and the biting satire, 'Pity for the Poor Africans':

I pity them greatly, but I must be mum;  
For how could we do without Sugar and Rum?  
Especially Sugar so needful we see;  
What, give up our Desserts, our Coffee, and Tea?<sup>59</sup>

Cowper's mentor, John Newton, also backed the campaign by finally speaking out against the slave trade. His personal journey personified the moral pilgrimage of the nation and of the Christian community – blinded to the sinfulness of the trade in the 1750s, he saw the light three decades later. To his credit, he tried to make amends. His most important contribution was to persuade the newly converted Wilberforce to remain in Parliament, and use his position to fight for good causes. But he also published his *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (1788). Although this pamphlet bore a biblical text on its title page, Newton realised that his value to the campaign lay in his past as a slave trader, rather than in his present role as a preacher. Even here, he held back from telling the full truth about his old life, observing that some captains used thumbscrews on their slaves, but omitting to say that he had done so himself. Nevertheless, the tract was a powerful indictment of slave trafficking, and Newton was able to give the substance of his evidence to a special parliamentary committee established to investigate the trade.<sup>60</sup>

57 See More 1788; Stott 2003: 87-95; Skedd in *ODNB*.

58 Gisborne 1792.

59 Basker 2002: 297.

60 See Walvin 2007b: 83-102.

## Political failure

The committee produced a major report that provided the abolitionists with potent ammunition for their case.<sup>61</sup> Wilberforce brought his Abolition Bill to the Commons in April 1791, but was defeated by 163 votes to 88. When he tried again in 1792, at the height of popular agitation, he was outmanoeuvred by the Home Secretary, Henry Dundas, who won parliamentary approval for a gradual abolition bill that promised much but delivered nothing. By this stage, events abroad were derailing the campaign. The French Revolution created fear of popular politics and suspicion of abolitionists and their talk of liberty, equality and brotherhood. The slave rebellion in the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue (later Haiti) in 1791 only reinforced the conservative backlash. By 1794, the public outcry against the slave trade had died down. The Abolition Committee met less often, and practically disbanded after 1795. It was all too much for Thomas Clarkson, who had worn himself out with obsessive research and campaigning. He retired from public life in 1794, his 'nervous system ... almost shattered to pieces'.<sup>62</sup>

## Wilberforce, the Clapham Circle and Abolition (1794-1807)

### 'The Clapham Sect'

Wilberforce was in a stronger position to ride out this storm. In 1792, his friend Henry Thornton had invited him to move to Clapham, where he had recently purchased a small estate, Battersea Rise. Wilberforce agreed, and before long the two men attracted a galaxy of highly-placed friends to join them. They thought of themselves as the Clapham 'circle', but contemporaries called them 'the Saints', and they would later be dubbed 'the Clapham Sect'. Most of the group worshipped at Holy Trinity Clapham, where John Venn was the Rector from 1792.<sup>63</sup>

Among those gathered at Clapham, a number made particularly valuable contributions to the campaign for abolition. Henry Thornton was a banker, a distinguished political economist and MP for Southwark, and one of Wilberforce's most valued confidants. William Smith, the only non-Evangelical in the group (and a Unitarian to boot), was another MP who worked closely with Wilberforce throughout these years, providing a useful link to Whigs and radicals.<sup>64</sup> James Stephen moved to Clapham in 1797, after a dissolute early life, a spell in the Caribbean, and an evangelical conversion. A brilliant legal mind, he would help to mastermind abolition.<sup>65</sup> Zachary Macaulay, who had also seen slavery at first hand in the Caribbean, was chosen by Wilberforce and Thornton to take over from John Clarkson as governor of Sierra Leone in the 1790s; he returned to England and moved to Clapham in 1799, becoming editor of the *Christian Observer*, the house journal of these Evangelicals. His encyclopaedic knowledge of slavery and the slave trade was legendary among his friends, for when information was needed, Wilberforce quipped, 'Let's look it out in Macaulay'. Together these men formed a

61 Some of Newton's evidence is cited in *Abstract of the Evidence, contained in the Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council, relative to the Slave-Trade, London, 1790; Extracts from the Evidence delivered before a Committee of the House of Commons ... on the part of the Petitioners for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, London, 1791.*

62 Clarkson 1808, vol. II: 469.

63 The fullest study remains Howse 1953.

64 See Davis 1971.

65 The turmoil and scandal of his early life are described in graphic detail in Stephen 1954.



formidable team. As John Wolffe has written, their campaign against the slave trade 'exploited their respective talents: Wilberforce's parliamentary eloquence, Stephen's legal acumen, Thornton's business skill, and Macaulay's capacity for gathering and ordering evidence'.<sup>66</sup>

### Rejection and revival

Yet they had to be patient and tenacious. Wilberforce brought abolition bills to Parliament year after year between 1794 and 1799, only to see them rejected. The House of Lords seemed resolutely opposed, as were George III, his son the Duke of Clarence, and Admiral Lord Nelson, who condemned 'the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies'. Pitt, whose cabinet had always been split on the issue, was now less supportive. The French and Haitian Revolutions had made the House of Commons increasingly reactionary, and even Wilberforce (who backed the current crackdown on political radicalism) had been labelled a 'Jacobin'. Between 1800 and 1803, he introduced no further abolition bills to Parliament, waiting for a more opportune moment. He was himself rather weary and disillusioned with both the public and the politicians. In February 1804, he wrote to Hannah More: 'Alas! the tales of horror, which once caused so many tears to flow, are all forgotten! I am grown to think that sensibility is one of the most cruel of all qualities'.<sup>67</sup> The British were suffering from compassion fatigue.

But 'the Saints' remained watchful. They saw signs that events were beginning to turn their way. Following the Union with Ireland in 1801, the new Irish MPs constituted a bloc sympathetic to abolition. The French had abolished their slave trade following the catastrophic slave rebellion in Haiti, but Napoleon reinstated it in 1802. British abolition could now be presented as a patriotic measure – a means of shaming the French, and boosting Britain's reputation. In May 1804, the Abolition Committee met for the first time since 1797, with Wilberforce and Sharp meeting with eight other Quakers and Evangelicals. James Stephen and Zachary Macaulay were soon added to the committee, and Thomas Clarkson emerged from retirement to take an active part. The committee was increasingly dominated by the Anglican Evangelicals, who were better placed than the Quakers to drive abolition through Parliament. Once again, appeals were made to the public. Clarkson set off on the road again, and Macaulay published a pamphlet entitled *The Horrors of Slavery* (1805).<sup>68</sup>

Yet this strategy had been tried before, without success. Clarkson worried that Macaulay's moralistic assault on slavery risked alienating supporters, and pointed out that in 1787 the Society had deliberately decided to limit its focus to abolition of the slave trade. This had never satisfied Granville Sharp, who like many other abolitionists thought slavery itself intolerable. But it reflects the caution and pragmatism of Wilberforce and Clarkson, who recognised the advantages of setting achievable objectives. Both men also knew that it was not enough to denounce the trade as immoral and irreligious. MPs were a hard-headed bunch, and the abolitionists had sought to persuade them with hard evidence and facts. They had set out to demonstrate the 'impolicy' of the trade, not simply its 'injustice' and 'impiety'. Atrocity stories about the treatment of black slaves had their place, but so did mortality statistics recording the appalling death rates among slave ship crews. Clarkson's books and Wilberforce's speeches relied less on religious appeals

66 Wolffe in *ODNB*, online edition.

67 Wilberforce and Wilberforce 1840, vol. I: 299.

68 Jennings 1997: 99-104.

than on secular arguments. David Brion Davis is right to assert that ‘religion was the central concern of all the British abolitionist leaders’;<sup>69</sup> yet they were well aware that religious considerations weighed less heavily with others. Not content with salving their own consciences by denouncing the trade, Wilberforce was determined to do whatever was necessary to abolish it.

It was James Stephen who struck on the ingenious tactic of introducing abolition by stealth. In 1805, he had published an anonymous work, entitled *The War in Disguise*, which highlighted the fact that enemy colonies were being supplied by ships flying neutral colours. Stephen argued that Britain should cut off this line of supply in order to defend its national interest. The book barely mentioned the slave trade, but Stephen knew that much of the British slave trade was carried out by ships in neutral flags, and that much of it took slaves to foreign colonies or to recently captured possessions. In 1806, he persuaded Wilberforce that a bill against the foreign slave trade, introduced by the government not by the abolitionists, would end much of the traffic. Following Pitt’s recent death, a new ministry had been established headed by Lord Grenville and Charles James Fox. Firmly opposed to the trade, they approved the plan, and Stephen duly drafted the legislation. In April, the Foreign Slave Bill was debated in both Houses, though few MPs or Lords bothered to turn up. Wilberforce adopted a low profile, aware that his ‘suspicious face’ would give the game away. He warned Grenville to argue on the basis of national interest alone, to avoid the ‘mistaken idea that it rests on general Abolition principles or is grounded on justice and inhumanity, an imputation which I am aware would prove fatal to it’. The proslavery Liverpool MP Colonel Tarleton warned that the abolitionists were ‘now coming in by a side wind’, but most of the West Indians believed that the bill would simply undermine their French and Dutch rivals. In May, the Bill was passed into law. According to Roger Anstey, it would wipe out between two-thirds and three-quarters of the British slave trade.<sup>70</sup>

Having achieved so much by working undercover, the abolitionists resurfaced and moved in for the kill. They announced their intention of introducing a bill for the abolition of the slave trade to the British West Indian colonies, and published a new raft of pamphlets against the slave trade. Perhaps the most striking feature of these works is their emphasis on averting divine judgement on Britain. Evangelical abolitionists construed the national interest in theological as much as in secular terms – abolition alone would wash away Britain’s blood guilt and restore the nation’s relationship with God. Granville Sharp, who had argued like this since the 1770s, returned to the theme in two tracts published in 1806 and 1807. He interpreted hurricanes on Caribbean plantations as judgements from God ‘to blast the enemies of law and righteousness’, and warned that the persistent toleration of slavery ‘must finally draw down the Divine vengeance upon our state and nation’.<sup>71</sup> In *The Dangers of the Country*, published in January 1807, James Stephen highlighted the threat from Napoleonic France and outlined a plan of action. At one level, this was the work of a practical politician, packed with facts and figures, and offering a seven-point plan for strengthening Britain’s military. But the book culminated with a passionate, sixty-page call for national ‘reformation’. Stephen argued that the crisis confronting Britain was a sign of God’s anger against the

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69 Davis 1984: 139.

71 Cited in Davis 1962: 219.

70 See Anstey 1975: 365-78.

nation for its part in the slave trade. Despite being shown the horrors of the trade in 1792, Parliament had allowed it to continue for fourteen long years. God had already punished the French for their part in the trade by sending them a bloody revolution and a dictator, and the British too were in imminent danger of divine vengeance. The slave trade was ‘a national iniquity’, ‘a most heinous offence, not only against man, but against God’. Scripture and History showed that in ‘the course of Providence towards nations’, ‘perseverance in guilt’ precedes ‘the scourge’. By persisting in this ‘system of gigantic guilt’, Britain was toying with disaster, and offering a ‘grand provocation’ to the Almighty.<sup>72</sup>

Wilberforce concurred. His *Letter on the Slave Trade* (1807) marshalled a variety of secular arguments (economic, political and humanitarian), but his case was topped and tailed by an appeal to the fear of God. Indeed, he frankly declared that ‘of all the motives’ that impelled him, concern for the prospects of his country was ‘the greatest force’. God governed the world, and ‘the sufferings of nations are to be regarded as the punishment of national crimes; their decline and fall, as the execution of His sentence’. Since Britain had persisted in ‘fraud, oppression and cruelty’, despite being clearly convicted of the evil of the trade, ‘have we not abundant cause for serious apprehension?’ To continue any longer in such crimes, after ‘the fullest knowledge and the loudest warnings, must infallibly bring down upon us the heaviest judgements of the Almighty’. ‘We have been eminently blessed’, Wilberforce concluded in his final sentence, ‘we have been long spared; let us not presume too far on the forbearance of the Almighty’.<sup>73</sup>

Abolition became a key issue at the general election in the winter of 1806-07, and public opinion was mobilised once again to good effect.<sup>74</sup> A significant number of MPs pledged themselves to support abolition. The Prime Minister Grenville made meticulous preparations among peers, who had previously been the main roadblock to abolition. He introduced the bill to the Lords with a stirring moralistic speech, and the House agreed to its second reading. But Wilberforce was still cautious. Although the slave trade had already been eroded by numerous minor pieces of legislation, Wilberforce had suffered numerous defeats, and the opinion of many MPs was unknown. In the event, the crucial debate in the Commons on 23 February 1807 was to be a triumph. The bill was introduced into the House, not by Wilberforce, but by Lord Howick, who denounced the slave trade as ‘contrary to the fundamental principles of Christianity, irreconcilable with that summary of Christian duty, “to do unto others, as you would they should do unto you”’. Many other speakers invoked Christian ideals, and Wilberforce was praised repeatedly for making ‘this signal act of mercy and justice the leading feature of his public life’. He himself spoke at the close of the debate, delighted that MPs had been so determined ‘to assert the rights of the weak against the strong; to vindicate the cause of the oppressed’.<sup>75</sup> The Solicitor-General, Samuel Romilly, contrasted Napoleon, who was responsible for massive bloodshed, with Wilberforce, who could enjoy the sleep of the just ‘having preserved so many millions of his fellow creatures’. The House rose in spontaneous applause, and then burst into three hurrahs. It was an unprecedented scene. Wilberforce ‘sat bent in his chair, his head

72 Stephen 1807: 164-227.

73 Wilberforce 1807: 4-5, 348-50.

74 Drescher 1994b.

75 *Parliamentary Debates*, ed. W. Cobbett and T. Hansard, 41 vols, 1803-20, vol VIII, cols 945-995, quotations at cols 947, 967, 994.

in his hands, and the tears streaming down his face'.<sup>76</sup> When the House divided, the slave trade lobby was routed. 283 voted for abolition, a mere 16 against. The bill received the royal assent on 25 March 1807 and passed into law.

## Conclusion

The 1807 Act was a stunning achievement for the abolitionists, but it was far from being the end of the story. Illegal slave trading continued after 1807, and African slaves were still being grievously exploited on Britain's Caribbean plantations. It was not until 1833-34 that Parliament legislated to emancipate Britain's 800,000 slaves, and even then they had to serve an apprenticeship until 1838. Evangelicals had a major part to play in emancipation too. In Jamaica, missionaries highlighted the injustices of slavery, and the Baptist preacher Sam Sharpe led a slave revolt that threw the viability of the institution into question. Wilberforce's anointed successor, Thomas Fowell Buxton, led the cause in Parliament, and Evangelical Dissenters orchestrated massive antislavery petitions.<sup>77</sup> By the 1880s, slavery had been extinguished in the southern United States and across most of the earth. 'From any historical perspective', writes the pre-eminent historian of slavery, David Brion Davis, 'this was a stupendous transformation'.<sup>78</sup> Various factors had combined to make this possible, but it could not have happened without the abolitionists.

Evangelicalism was one of the driving forces behind British and American abolitionism, and the Christian crusade against the oppression of black Africans would have important religious consequences. The Teston set had hoped that a righteous assault on the slave trade would infuse godly values into public life. There is good reason to think they were right. According to the eminent historian of slavery and abolition, David Brion Davis, the abolitionist campaign helped to rehabilitate Christianity's reputation as a force for human progress after the critique of the secular Enlightenment. When Thomas Clarkson wrote his two-volume *History* of the movement in 1808, he credited the overthrow of the slave trade to the influence of Christian faith.<sup>79</sup> The rise of godly abolitionism reflected the growing ambition and dynamism of evangelical religion, and probably enhanced its credibility. The success of Wilberforce and his allies was a powerful testimony to the transformative power of the Gospel, and heralded the emergence of Evangelicalism as a major cultural force.<sup>80</sup> In the United States, however, slavery was to prove a deeply divisive issue among Christians, one that separated black from white, North from South. The resurgence of militant abolitionism in the 1830s would help to put Northern and Southern Christians on a collision course, leading to the great denominational schisms of the 1840s, and finally contributing to the American Civil War.<sup>81</sup>

This whole complex story is one worth pondering. For the century and a half between the 1730s and the 1860s, the history of Anglo-American Evangelicalism was intertwined with the history of black slavery. White Evangelicals were often indifferent to the sufferings of African slaves, and even produced trenchant defences of enslavement, especially in the antebellum American South. At the very same time, black peoples across the Atlantic world turned to Evangelical religion for succour and salvation. And Evangelicals (both black and white) were at the very

76 Pollock 1977: 211; Howse 1953: 63.

77 See Wolfe 2006: 193-97.

78 Davis 1984: 108.

79 See Davis 1984, Part II: 'Redeeming Christianity's Reputation'.

80 See Bradley 1976.

81 See Wolfe 2006: 197-201; Carwardine 1993.

heart of the campaigns for abolition and emancipation. It is a story that should disturb and challenge, chasten and inspire.

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