



Noble Reformer

Lessons for Today from Yesterday's Crusader

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Book Review:

William Wilburforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner

by William Hague

Harcourt, 608 pp., \$35

At a moment when a supposedly conservative Department of Justice is trying to weaken modern antislavery legislation, William Hague, former leader of Britain's conservative party, has published a biography of William Wilberforce (1759-1833), the conservative philanthropist who led the struggle 200 years ago to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire. Hague's detailed and well-written account gives us the chance to assess slavery, then and now, while also examining the role of conservatives, then and now, in addressing the most serious deprivation of liberty short of murder.

In an age of blurred political parties and blurrier party discipline, Wilberforce prided himself on belonging to no formal group. But of his conservative and religious inclinations, his colleagues had no doubt. And how could they? The author of *A Practical View of Christianity*, he worked to open India to Christian missionaries and urged stricter public morals. He favored tough antisedition laws when he believed England was threatened by the French Revolution, and later by Napoleon. Wilberforce even took positions that many conservatives would look askance at today: opposing the drilling of troops and publishing of newspapers on Sunday, supporting the closing of theaters because of their association with vice, opposing the creation of labor unions.

Yet Hague's painstaking work shows us that, while Wilberforce did take these stands, he was a leader in many reform causes. At the urging of his friend (and later prime minister) William Pitt—the subject of an earlier Hague biography—he fomented an abolitionist movement, led efforts to reform prisons and limit capital punishment to serious crimes, and fought for laws to help the indigent and improve working conditions. He helped create the first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and strove to limit wasteful spending by a monarch he supported.

To some conservatives in his day, Wilberforce was what we would now call a maverick; but closer observation reveals him to be what some would disparage as a "values" politician, seeking within a conservative framework to reform society. And Hague shows how much there is to admire about Wilberforce: the way he avoided entanglement with sweeping, violent movements to remake society and, along with the Quakers and their leaders, pioneered the use of peaceful means of petition and persuasion to further the abolitionist cause. For inspiration, look no further than the way Wilberforce handled the argument that abolishing the slave trade was an imposition of British "values" on the world. He and his allies invoked the message of Genesis—that all humans are made in God's image—as well as the doctrine of Christian love and, for good measure, Adam Smith's economic theories about the value of free labor.

Echoing arguments we would recognize and appreciate today, Wilberforce and Pitt dismissed the efforts of opponents to delay abolition by invoking multilateralism: "This miserable argument, if persevered in, would be an eternal bar to the annihilation of evil," Pitt declared in one of the landmark parliamentary debates on the slave trade. "How was [the slave trade] ever to be eradicated if every nation was thus prudentially to wait until the concurrence of all the world should be obtained?"

Pitt added that if, after recognizing the evil of slavery, Britain did nothing, other nations would conclude that Britain found nothing

wrong with slavery, and would similarly fail to act. Pitt's government, at Wilberforce's urging, tried to form a multilateral coalition against slavery, but because of French opposition, Britain had to go it alone.

Equally admirable is the way Wilberforce, after Pitt's death and Wilberforce's own parliamentary victory over the slave trade, persuaded the British government to use the Royal Navy to enforce the law. More than 600 British sailors lost their lives in the freeing of several hundred thousand men, women, and children from slave ships flying flags of many nations.

Today, of course, we know that legal abolition by Parliament in Britain and, later, a civil war in the United States did not end slavery. In absolute numbers there may be as many slaves now as there were in Wilberforce's day. Race and plantation economics may not be dominant factors today, but millions are enslaved in brothels, homes, factories, and on farms. Slavery may be illegal, but it extends into every country in the world, including our own.

How, then, might Wilberforce and Pitt look at today's fight against slavery-and the role of conservatives and faith-based groups?

While Hague addresses such questions only tangentially, good historical biographies-and this is a good one-often give clues in judging how their subjects might have regarded present events, and the actions of contemporary groups and leaders. I suspect that Wilberforce would be dismayed to see that many faith-based groups are not broadening their agendas to embrace the slavery issue. He would be pleased about the advocacy for abolition by Southern Baptists and such organizations as Concerned Women for America, and he would certainly appreciate the help slavery survivors enjoy today from evangelical groups such as the International Justice Mission, World Vision, and the Salvation Army, and Roman Catholic and Jewish organizations such as Caritas and Project Keshet. But I suspect that both Wilberforce and Pitt would be puzzled by the endless international conferences and multilateral resolutions that substitute for aggressive law enforcement against slavery.

Wilberforce would undoubtedly be gratified by George W. Bush's leadership in fighting slavery and mustering bipartisan support in Congress for abolitionist efforts. But he would be mystified by the lobbying efforts of Bush's own Justice Department to stop tougher federal prosecution of pimps and sex slave "masters." (Wilberforce certainly understood that prostitution could and did lead to sex slavery.) Equally mystifying would be the arguments of some conservative politicians that federalist doctrine prevents tougher federal prosecution efforts against slave masters.

William Hague has done a genuine service by illuminating, through the life of William Wilberforce, the spiritual dimensions of conservatism, and by showing that conservatism, faith, and reform are not mutually exclusive. During times of peace and turmoil, Wilberforce never wavered in his devotion to abolition. Naïve to some, impractical and apolitical to many, he led one of the most successful struggles for liberty in human history. That Hague's portrait is especially judicious and nuanced, compared with some recent studies of Wilberforce, makes him all the more impressive.

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