

# **THIS IMMORAL TRADE**

## Slavery in the 21st Century

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AND  
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MONARCH  
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# Introduction

## **William Wilberforce: A Man Of Courage, Commitment and Mission – But A Mission Not Yet Complete**

“William Wilberforce”: the name rightly reminds us of a courageous and dedicated man who fought with determination against fierce opposition, rooted in many vested interests, to end Britain’s involvement in the infamous slave trade.

During his early years in Yorkshire he showed few signs of the man he was to become. He was a sickly child and did not do well at school. Nevertheless, he went to St John’s College, Cambridge – where he did not take his studies seriously. Here are his first impressions:

*I was introduced on the very first night of my arrival to as licentious a set of men as can well be conceived. They drank hard, and their conversation was even worse than their lives.*

He adopted an extravagant lifestyle, and spent much of his time playing cards. However while at Cambridge he met the future prime minister, William Pitt the Younger, and formed a lasting friendship that was later to play an important role in his parliamentary career and political endeavours.

## *Milestones in the Life of a "Mighty Shrimp"*

- In 1780 he was elected as an MP to the House of Commons for Hull, beginning a parliamentary career that would last for 53 years.
- On March 25, 1784, Wilberforce spoke in the Castle Yard at York so eloquently that the famous biographer Boswell wrote:

*I saw what seemed a mere shrimp mount the table; but as I listened, he grew and grew, until the shrimp became a whale.<sup>1</sup>*

- In 1784 he became an evangelical Christian, a step that radically changed his life and behaviour.
- In 1787, a meeting with the dedicated slavery abolitionist Thomas Clarkson had a profound effect. On Sunday October 28, 1787, William Wilberforce wrote in his diary:

*God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the Reformation of society.<sup>2</sup>*

- From 1788, for the next 18 years, Wilberforce – eventually with Pitt's support – introduced anti-slavery motions every year in Parliament. These motions had very limited results because of fierce opposition from the planters in the colonies, who relied on slaves for cheap labour. He continued to fight resolutely for the abolition of the slave trade but it took 20 years for his endeavours to begin to achieve success.
- On February 22, 1807, the House of Commons voted by an overwhelming majority of 283 votes (with only 16 against) for the abolition of the slave trade. MPs gave him the greatest standing ovation ever recorded in Parliament while he sat, head in hands, overwhelmed with emotion and relief. This parliamentary



success was quickly followed by a series of active measures to end the slave trade.

- In 1809 the Royal Navy was mobilised to search ships suspected of carrying slaves – including ships flying under foreign flags.
- 1810 saw Parliament define slave trading as a felony, carrying a punishment of fourteen years' hard labour.
- In 1814, the British representative at the Congress of Vienna successfully required the abolition of the slave trade to be included in the International Treaty, which was signed by all the European powers on June 9, 1815.
- In 1825 Britain made slave trading a crime that could carry the death penalty.
- In August 1833 the British parliament took the final step of the abolition of slavery itself throughout the Empire, and the 700,000 people still held as slaves in British territories were freed.
- On the night that Wilberforce died, his supporters in the House of Commons were passing the clause in the Emancipation Act that declared all slaves free in one year and decreed that their masters would be given £20 million in compensation.

Wilberforce had devoted 53 years to this lengthy and arduous campaign, which finally resulted in success three days before he died. He celebrated the success of his endeavours with these joyful words:

*Thank God that I've lived to witness the day in which England is willing to give 20 million pounds sterling for the abolition of slavery.*<sup>1</sup>

David J. Vaughan in his biography of Wilberforce<sup>5</sup> concludes with a summary of his characteristics as a model to inspire all who hold positions of leadership today, which is set out below.

- **The importance of his Christian faith:**

*Everything he was as a person, and everything he accomplished as a leader, was an expression of his Christian faith. And any attempt to “secularize” the abolition movement in Britain is a revision of history... Those immortal words penned in his diary say it all: “God Almighty has set before me...” Wilberforce believed that God had called him to the task of abolition, and it was this Christian conviction that sustained him during the long and arduous struggle (p. 300).*

- **Integrity:** Wilberforce manifestly “integrated” his faith with his politics, infusing his political activities with values derived from his Christian beliefs.
- **Principled politics** – in the sense that his political activities were motivated by principles which transcended the personal and the purely political:

*A statesman who was tenacious in his pursuit of justice, indefatigable in his work for charity, and, most important, impervious to the corruption of power or fame (p. 307).*

- **Realism:** He was committed to the achievement of practical results; he was a reformer, not a revolutionary. He was deeply disturbed by the French Revolution and the ways in which revolutionary zeal could unleash the destructive forces that led so many to their death at the guillotine.
- **Political activism motivated by compassion:** History is replete with examples of reformers so passionate and motivated by “righteous indignation” that they become embittered and prone to hatred. Not only the French Revolution but also many others, such as revolutions in the name of Communism, have resulted in the sacrifice of millions of people on the altars of

ideology. Although Wilberforce was deeply angered by the horrors of the slave trade, and the politics of injustice which sustained it, he never allowed his indignation to turn into hatred of people.

- **Undaunted perseverance** was a major factor in his eventual success. There are those who argue that slavery would have been abolished in time, or would have “died out” because of social and economic factors such as industrialization. But, as Vaughan rightly argues, the historical fact is this: abolition and emancipation throughout the British Empire took place when it did because of the perseverance of William Wilberforce and his supporters.

*He fought an upward battle against powerful and hostile opposition; he was not riding along on a pleasant wave of historical necessity... A sentence from Swift's epitaph speaks poignantly of Wilberforce: "Imitate him if you can; he served the cause of human liberty (pp. 309–10).*

There is now a great need for others to imitate him. For in 2007, when we celebrate his achievements, we cannot celebrate the end of slavery. Instead, we must be challenged by the continuing existence of this dehumanising practice and we need to mark this year of commemoration with a determination to eradicate slavery from the face of the earth.

It was as long ago as 1927 that the International Slavery Convention outlawed slavery worldwide. Article 2 requires member states to take the necessary steps to bring about, progressively and as soon as possible, the complete abolition of slavery in all its forms. But, today, 80 years later, more people are enslaved than at any time in history: 27 million is one conservative estimate. So Wilberforce's mission to abolish slavery is far from accomplished, and it is our shame that millions of people are still suffering some form of slavery today.

International protest and systematic actions ranging

from economic sanctions and boycotts to political and religious rallies succeeded in bringing an end to one form of injustice – apartheid. So why are we, as individuals, as political parties, as churches, or as the “international community”, so half-hearted in our endeavours to end the practice of slavery, which is at least as brutal in its violations of fundamental human rights as was apartheid?

Because pictures and personal accounts often speak louder than statistics, in this book we will focus on three notorious examples of countries where we can witness the horrors of modern slavery in poignant detail, with first-hand accounts from those who have been enslaved. Our case studies come from Sudan, northern Uganda and Burma (Myanmar). Many are based on personal encounters with those who have been enslaved as victims of the brutal policies of oppressive regimes. Then we will review the history of slavery and survey the current disturbing situation, identifying different forms of contemporary slavery in various countries.

Slavery is a blight on the face of the earth and we in our generation should strive to achieve, belatedly, the successful completion of the 1927 Slavery Convention’s commitment to eradicate it in all its forms. Therefore, it is our hope that this book, which documents the continuation of this barbaric practice, will stimulate more effective action to ensure that William Wilberforce’s valiant endeavours do not remain unfulfilled and that the year of the commemoration of his achievements is not a year of condemnation of our failures.

PART ONE

# Modern Slavery: The Voices of Today's Slaves



# Introduction

The statistics of modern-day slavery are shocking – and a challenge to us all. But behind each statistic is a human being – a man, woman or child; and behind each human being is a family and a community, which have been devastated or destroyed by the horror of slavery in our world today.

As real-life experiences often speak louder than objective, academic descriptions, we shall introduce some of the hundreds of people whom one of the authors has met personally. Great care has been taken to ensure the validity and authenticity of the evidence obtained.

We have selected three areas where Caroline Cox has had the opportunity to interview people who have endured the horror and the humiliation of enslavement in some form: chattel slavery in Sudan; forced labour and sexual slavery in Burma; and abduction of children as child soldiers both in Burma and in Uganda.

The people whose stories we record here are the “lucky” ones, in that they have escaped and made their way back to their homelands or to freedom elsewhere. However, even after their escape, the nightmares remain and the aftermath of slavery blights their lives. For example, they often find that their families have perished; their homes may have been destroyed. Girls or young women who have been abducted may find it very hard to attract a “good” husband, as they will have been forced into sexual relationships. Women returning with babies conceived through sexual relations with their masters may find that their children are not welcomed by the local community. And, for all, there is the memory of their ordeal and the stigma of having been a slave.

# SUDAN



Source: Central Intelligence Agency