

Witt's Wanderings

by John W. Witt

A presently acknowledged stain on the integrity of American democracy is the utilization of human slavery as an economic institution from the early days of British colonization. It continued, through the American Revolution and adoption of the U. S. Constitution, until 1863. At that point, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and human slavery no longer was a lawful means for providing labor in the United States.

Most casual observers of American history give Lincoln full credit for the abolition of slavery, despite his obvious military motive to bring the Confederacy to its knees by the move. He's probably entitled to that credit, despite the motivation, since abolition of slavery and cessation of hostilities in America's bloodiest war were both meritorious objectives.

Another elected politician may deserve more credit than President Lincoln, however. Even though his part in the abolition of slavery was depicted in the recent movie, *Amazing Grace*, few Americans know who William Wilberforce was. Perhaps that's not surprising, since lots of Americans don't seem to know who Abraham Lincoln was, or who George Washington was, for that matter.

As Anglicans, however, we have the right to put in perspective Mr. Wilberforce's role in the abolition of slavery in the western world. He was an Anglican, of the evangelical variety, but an Anglican nevertheless. Three of his sons were Anglican clergy, one of them, Samuel Wilberforce (1805-1873), rising to become, in turn, Dean of Westminster, Bishop of Oxford (1845-1870) and Bishop of Winchester (1870-1873). Samuel's son, Ernest Roland Wilberforce (1840-1907) continued the tradition. He was Bishop of Newcastle (1882-1896) and Bishop of Chichester (1896-1907).

William Wilberforce was born in 1759, son and grandson of wealthy businessmen. His father died when William was only eight and his mother sent him to live in London and Wimbledon with a prosperous uncle and aunt. The latter was an enthusiastic evangelical Christian. Her influence apparently led to William's leanings toward Methodism, which still was a part of the Church of England at the time.

At St. John's College, Cambridge, some of his evangelical enthusiasm wore off in his exposure to college social life. It's said he enjoyed playing cards, gambling and late-night drinking, all of which were anathema to the Methodists. His interest in politics emerged while at Cambridge and one of his closest friends at the time turned out to be a future Prime Minister, William Pitt, the Younger.

In 1780, while still a student at Cambridge, he ran for and was elected to a seat in the House of Commons. Though he attended Parliamentary sessions regularly, he continued to be faithful to his active social life—presumably toned down somewhat.

In Autumn, 1784, while on holiday in southern Europe, his trip was interrupted by a call to return to England to support parliamentary reform legislation proposed by Pitt, now Prime Minister. On his way back to Europe, Wilberforce read a book which had a profound impact, Philip Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*.

The renewed evangelical conversion he experienced caused him to reevaluate his political career. On counsel of Pitt and John Newton, a leading Church of England evangelical clergyman (and author of the popular favorite hymn, *Amazing Grace*), he decided to remain in Commons, but to work for the social improvement of his countrymen in new and different ways.

Wilberforce had been exposed to the evils of the slave trade as early as 1783, but it was at the urging of the P. M. and a future Prime Minister, William Grenville, that he took up the abolition cause

seriously. Actually, his first goal wasn't to attack slavery as an institution directly. Instead he focused on the slave *trade*, a more accessible target, since "Britannia ruled the waves." The Royal Navy controlled the seas and the British Merchant Marine included much of the world's merchant shipping.

In 1789, Wilberforce made his first speech condemning slavery and specifically criticizing the slave trade as morally unacceptable. The resolutions he first proposed in 1791 to curb the trade failed 12 times, but on each occasion by a smaller margin. His first bill to outlaw the slave trade completely failed in 1791, 163 to 88. In 1793, his second effort also failed, but only by eight votes. Indefatigable, he continued throughout the rest of the 1790s to introduce legislation abolishing the slave trade.

One of his bills passed Commons toward the end of the 1804 legislative session, but it was too late to bring it before the House of Lords. On reintroduction in Commons in 1805, however, it failed again. Subsequent proposals to ban participation in the slave trade by foreign ships manned by British crews finally resulted in successful passage of the Foreign Slave Trade Bill, which was aimed at ships with British crews, flying the American flag, but carrying slaves to French colonies.

Meanwhile, Wilberforce continued his campaign against slavery itself by publishing letters and books condemning it. In 1807, his friend, Lord Grenville, then the P. M., introduced the Slave Trade Act in the House of Lords, where it quickly passed. On its second reading in Commons, to Wilberforce's emotional delight, it passed, 283 to 16. It became law in March 1807.

The fight wasn't over, however. Wilberforce next turned his attention to the complete abolition of slavery in the British Empire. With his allies in the abolitionist cause, Wilberforce kept up the pressure through the 1820s. Gradually, public opinion began to turn in his favor, even though he resigned from Commons in 1825 because of ill health.

Finally, the Bill for the Abolition of Slavery passed Commons in July 1833, just three days before Wilberforce died. In August, the bill passed Lords and received Royal assent, emancipating enslaved people throughout the British Empire. It took 30 years more and a bloody Civil War to accomplish the dream in America.

Lest you believe that 1863 saw the end of slavery everywhere, consider two things: 1. Isolated cases of slavery, particularly of women and children, today continue beyond the long arm of the law; 2. Wilberforce's efforts stopped the organized slave trade originating in West Africa, but an Arab-run slave trade has continued in varying intensity along Africa's east coast. Nevertheless, William Wilberforce and his allies deserve to be heralded as Christian heroes by Anglicans everywhere.