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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

William Wilberforce (the sociable voice of abolition)

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Abstract

William Wilberforce (1759-1833) was a key figure in the successive campaigns for the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery in Britain. His long parliamentary speeches were crucial in the success of his fight, but it is primarily his personality and the moral virtues he came to embody that were decisive. 'The voice of abolition', as he was nicknamed, was first and foremost a sociable voice: having converted to evangelical activism, he used his gifts in society as a 'talisman' to re-moralize his country and delineated a new model of sociability that was philanthropic and religious.

William Wilberforce has gone down in history as the powerful voice of abolition in the British Parliament. He came to embody the fight for the abolition of the slave trade and then of slavery itself and his long and famous speeches at Westminster have turned him into the moral conscience of the nation. His determination, his religious conversion and his evolution away from a life of dissipation towards a life of virtue and selflessness have been amply studied: less so the role of his sociability in securing abolition. He also embraced other causes – the alleviation of poverty and the reformation of manners – that can be traced to the same origin, namely the devotion to Christ. Wilberforce, from his 'conversion' until his death, engaged in a sort of systemic activism that entailed a complex relation with sociability and the delineation of a philanthropic model of interaction with the other.

Wilberforce was born into an affluent middle-class family of Hull merchants[1] and his own story is intertwined with a family saga. Anne Stott, in her biography of his life, has underlined the interplay between moral sentiments – sympathy in particular – and kinship during his formative years.[2] A friendship ethos informed his relationship with some of the members of his family, as shown by a letter to his daughter Elizabeth, where he urged her to consider him as 'a friend (…) warmly attached to (her) and (highly) interested in (her) welldoing and happiness.'[3]

From his early days, Wilberforce was surrounded by friends, among whom William Pitt, who played a decisive part in his philanthropic activism. As recognized by Anna Maria Wilberforce, 'Friendship is often the means by which influence is gained, and Wilberforce's friendship with Pitt (…) was no doubt the source of a strong personal influence.' (*Private Papers* vi)[4] In spite of a few political disagreements, he remained convinced of Pitt's unflinching devotion to the cause of abolition and vindicated his action regardless of the doubts expressed by such fellow abolitionists as Thomas Clarkson.[5]

Never lacking company, he enjoyed the pleasures of fashionable sociability to the full. At Cambridge, he was an extremely popular student thanks to 'An infinite fund of anecdote, an unvarying fertility of wit, a constant readiness to be pleased and give pleasure' (*The Life*, vol. I, 18). He quickly mastered the art of conversation and this made him both a most welcome guest and a wonderful host[6] : Madame de Stael declared that 'he was the best converser (she) had ever met in this country' and found he was 'the wittiest man in England' (*The Life*, vol. IV, 205). His home in this respect can be seen as a strategic location, particularly his Wimbledon one where he implemented 'the system of frank and simple hospitality which marked his London life' (*The Life*, vol. I, 35), while in Hull he relished 'sumptuous suppers' (*The Life*, vol. I, Journal, April 14, 1797, 31).

A tension very soon appeared between his sociable dispositions and the realisation of the necessity to abide by a 'strict new moral code'.[7] This was the consequence of his second Grand Tour (1785), accompanied by Isaac Milner who was instrumental in transforming him into a devout young man. Wilberforce thus became aware of the negative impact of '(being) intent upon shining in company' (*The Life*, vol. I, 157), of the dangers of table talk: '(…)

when in society I am too apt to lose the sense of God's presence, or possess it feebly and faintly, and I do not try to turn the conversation, and practise the company regulations which I have made' (*The Life*, vol. III, 435).

In a self-castigating and ironical move – from a former clubman and faro player at White's and Brooks's (Tomkins 29) – he urged Pitt to implement a tax on public diversions. But this should be set against a subtler apprehension of public entertainments, since he made a distinction between 'innocent relaxation' and an unbridled passion for gaming in an essay published in 1797, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*: 'The Christian relaxes in the temperate use of all the gifts of Providence (…). He relaxes in the feast of reason, in the intercourses of society, in the sweets of friendship, in the endearments of love, in the exercise (…) of all the benevolent and generous affections (…)'.8

The recklessness of his prime youth was permanently curbed when, in 1797, he married Barbara Ann Spooner he had met in Bath. Marriage and friendship immediately found themselves at loggerheads, and Wilberforce was forced to reinvent his sociability, as he founded a nuclear family, which distanced him from the community of his friends and family relations. With his wife, Wilberforce shared his religious faith and together they embodied a 'middle-class model of marriage' (Stott 135), a 'companionate marriage'.9 Hannah More, his lifelong friend, was aware of the threat to his Christian activism but congratulated him: 'The piety of your fair companion (…) gives me a comfortable hope that marriage in your case, so far from dangerously entangling you more and more in the cares of this fashionable world, may, on the contrary, help to speed you in the race of glory and honour and immortality (…)'. 10

As a matter of fact, the threat of unsociability – at the time of his 'conversion' or later of his marriage – was averted by the necessities of religious activism and the centrality of sociability in promoting it. Many of Wilberforce's biographers have highlighted the role of fashionable sociability in preparing him for his evangelical mission. When he experienced a moral crisis in 1785 and decided to 'cultivate spirituality of mind' (*Private Papers*, letter to his son Samuel, October 14, 1823, 213) both Pitt and John Newton, a former slave trader, urged him not to isolate himself from the world, but rather to try and transform it from within. The undertaking became collective thanks to the development of the 'Clapham Sect', – a group of friends and relatives dedicated to the abolition of slavery and more broadly to the moral reformation of society – which knew its heyday in the 1790s-1800s and evolved from a network to a community, defined as a 'state of mind' (Stott 119).11

Its members initially lived in three houses that made up a single unit, Thornton's Battersea Rise, Wilberforce's Broomfield and Charles Grant's Glenelg (Stott 119). What developed as an Evangelical, but officially Anglican, male-dominated community soon fed on female friendship: 'My dearest Lizzy,— We heard from Marianne (Thornton) of her having paid you a visit. Her friendly attachment to Barbara and you, I account as one of the special blessings of Providence (…),' (*Private Papers* 171). The sentimental rhetoric of the abolitionists and the streak of sentimentalism in many of Wilberforce's parliamentary speeches12 raise the

issue of a growing effeminacy of the religious man: was the Clapham man a forerunner of the 'new man', who gradually sketched out an original model of religious sociability?

The abolitionist sociability of Wilberforce and his companions was primarily based on benevolence, a quality praised by eighteenth-century moral sense philosophers: 'his kind construction of doubtful actions, his charitable language (…), his thorough forgetfulness of little affronts, were fruits of that general benevolence which continually appeared' (*The Life*, vol. V, 296). Yet it was innovative in its conviction that sociability was a tool towards reaching an essential goal that went beyond abolition, i.e. the moral reformation of society. The trio of friends at the origin of Clapham, Henry Thornton – John Thornton's son – , William Wilberforce and Edward Eliot was determined to use sociability in order to address Britain's issues perceived as 'material, moral and spiritual' (Tomkins 49). Wilberforce, when he famously told More 'If you will be at the trouble, I will be at the expense' (*The Life*, vol. I, p. 351), at a stroke revealed the strengths of the Clapham Sect's philanthropic system and its weaknesses, most remarkably here, a gendered division of labour13 and a class-oriented venture.

Wilberforce shared an endogamous conception of sociability with his friends: his type of abolitionist sociability in particular, most paradoxically, failed to understand the 'other' for whom it fought so forcefully. Wilberforce used several tools to reach his goal of curing Britain's ills: his sociable endowments – that served him as a 'talisman' (*The Life*, vol. II, p. 61) – and his wealth were decisive, as he himself admitted (*The Life*, vol. II, p. 370).

He had a modern approach to relief and he systemized it by resorting to investigation and surveys14 in order to raise subsidies for his causes. He also made the most of the interconnectedness of networks, asking Hannah More in 1813 to 'exert (herself) in (her) circle' in the fight against 'the moral darkness' of the East Indies (*The Life*, vol. IV, p. 103). He had very soon understood that abolition was to be obtained through a shaping of public opinion by both the spoken word and the written word. Hence his publication of Practical Christianity in which he outlined a 'vision for a stable Christian social order' (*ODNB* 8) and, in 1823, of *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies.*

On his deathbed, he received the news of the passing of the abolition bill, the triumph of his lifelong fight against slavery. This was the result of his abolitionist sociability but also of the sociability displayed by other networks – non-conformist, women's networks – , the moral pressure put on foreign powers (*ODNB* 11), the outburst of slave rebellions and the decline of the plantation system. The humanitarian narrative told by such historians as Roger Anstey in *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760-1810* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1975) has been challenged by a revisionist version that prioritizes economic factors or empowers the slaves themselves making them actors of their liberation. 15 Yet, if Wilberforce's anti-slavery action has been justly celebrated, his social conservatism has been lambasted by such detractors as William Cobbett, who accused him of neglecting domestic misery. With the benefit of hindsight, one might consider that he helped fashion the colonized subaltern of Victorian times and gave substance to the myth of the un-English character of slavery.16 To his credit, he recognized the humanity of the African slaves, who 'have manifested the greatest willingness to receive instruction, and made a

practical proficiency in Christianity (…)'.17 The Sierra Leone project launched with Henry Thornton in 1791 shows the abolitionists' ambiguous undertaking of transforming the former slaves into Westernized peasants, without acknowledging the existence of their distinct culture, neither entirely African nor entirely European.18

Wilberforce's major achievement lies in changing the self-image of his nation: his awakening to what he perceived as the unchristian nature of slavery led him to live up to new ideals.19 He fought for a transformation of Britain's identity, its re-moralization, and confidently stated: 'ere long we shall rejoice in the consciousness of having delivered our country from the greatest of her crimes and rescued her character from the deepest stain of dishonour' (*An Appeal* 108-109). His enactment of the Christian hero's virtues did not estrange him from true politeness20 but, on the contrary, made him embody a new type of sociable man, one whose sociability was philanthropic. Remaining in the world, he outlined a distinct model of sociability rooted in the Christian values of charity and benevolence, a sociability of the heart that did not forbid relaxation and the pleasures of friendly intercourse.

1. See John Wolfe, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, p. 1 (https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29386 [accessed 17 April 2020]).

2. See her reference to Adam Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759) in Wilberforce, Family and Friends (Oxford: OUP, 2012), p. 2.

3. Letter dated November 30, 1816: Private Papers of William Wilberforce, by William Wilberforce, edited by Anna Maria Wilberforce, The Project Gutenberg eBook, p. 167 (www.gutenberg.org, February 14, 2014 [eBook #44912] [accessed 17 April 2020]).

4. On a tour of the continent with him he observed that 'men and women crowded round (him) in shoals,' The Life of William Wilberforce, by his sons Robert Isaac Wilberforce, MA, and Samuel Wilberforce, MA, (London: John Murray, 1838), vol. I, p. 81.

5. The Life (2nd edition; London: John Murray, 1839), vol. II, p. 76, letter to Clarkson. In this entry, the second edition is used for vols. II, III, IV, V. See also William Wilberforce Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Rubenstein Correspondence, 1814, 25, letter to George Harrison.

6. His son describes 'his rule of always leading people to talk upon the subjects with which they are best acquainted' (The Life, vol. II, p. 250).

7. Stephen Tomkins, The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2010), p. 46.

8. A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity (Dublin: Robert Dapper, 1797), p. 329.

9. Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), p. 363.

10. Letter dated 29 May 1797, MS: Weston Library, University of Oxford, MS Wilberforce c. 3, ff. 31-2. Published: Undetermined. The Letters of Hannah More: A Digital Edition (https://www.18thcenturycommon.org/ letters-hannah-digital-edition/).

11. See Stott p. 40: 'it was his intense sociability that laid the foundation for what was to be the Clapham Sect'. Wilberforce was brought into Evangelicalism through John Thornton, his aunt Hannah's half-brother, who lived on Clapham Common. For the full list of the 'Saints,' see Tomkins, p. 11. Also see Christopher Leslie Brown, Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 342: 'Teston, not Clapham, became the first headquarters for Evangelical abolitionism'.

12. See Brycchan Carey, 'William Wilberforce's Sentimental Rhetoric: Parliamentary Reportage and the Abolition Speech of 1789', The Age of Johnson, A Scholarly Annual, vol.14 (2003), p. 281-305. Also see the interesting

discussion of masculinity and religion by Jeremy Gregory, 'Homo religiosus: Masculinity and Religion in the Long Eighteenth Century', Tim Hitchcock and Michele Cohen, English Masculinities 1660-1800 (1999; New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 85-110.

13. Hannah More used her pen more than the power of talk, but women were expected to make the most of conversation 'rather than formal debating or the more direct speech of political activism' (Miles Ogborn, The Freedom of Speech: Talk and Slavery in the Anglo-Caribbean World (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 209.

14. The surveys can be compared to modern opinion polls: 'The following queries were sent by Mr. Wilberforce in January, 1796, to a large circle of private friends (…) (The Life, vol. II, p. 616-620).

15. See the works of C.L.R. James and Eric Williams, or David Brion Davis.

16. Catherine Hall has examined the articulation of a 'redeemed country' with the 'notion of a 'British lion' ever ready to take up the cause of freedom' in Civilising Subjects. Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867 (2002. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 185.

17. An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies (London: Hatchard and Son, 1823), p. 95-96. In this respect, the portrait of Olaudah Equiano, posing as a black gentleman (Royal Albert Museum and Art Gallery, Exeter: it might also be that of Ignatius Sancho) and his autobiography, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1789) are part of the same undertaking, summarized in the catchphrase: 'Am I not a Man and a Brother?'

18. Markman Ellis discusses empowerment in his study of the 'sentimentalist rhetoric' as 'a one-way street: the colonial viewer is distressed by the condition of the slave (…) but the slave is not empowered by it, nor given any greater insight to the condition of slavery', The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p. 123.

19. In Moral Capital, Christopher Brown examines the central issue of motivation (p. 335) and relates anti-slavery to moral prestige, refusing to see Christianity as the prime mover of abolition: 'William Wilberforce and Hannah More (…) understood that their leadership in the abolition movement would bring credit to other projects that lacked the same moral prestige' (p. 457).

20. See William Van Reyk, 'Christian Ideals of Manliness in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', The Historical Journal, vol. 52, n°4 (December 2009), p. 1057: 'Much evidence can be found to support (Philip Carter's) claims (in Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain 1660-1800 (2001; New York: Routledge, 2014)) that there were connections between sociability and religion and that the relationship between sociability and Christianity was enhanced by the emergence of sentimentalism.'

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