

Amazing Grace (William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery) by Eric Metaxas, HarperOne, New York, New York (2007). (60 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols.)

1. Winning the Battle for the Abolition of Slavery in 1807.

Of course, finally winning the battle in 1807 is the single towering accomplishment for which we should remember Wilberforce today, whose bicentennial we celebrate, and whose celebration occasions a movie, documentaries, and the book you now hold. If anything can stand as a single marker of Wilberforce's accomplishments, it is that 1807 victory. It paved the way for all that followed, inspiring the other nations for the world to follow suit and opening the door to emancipation, which, amazingly, was achieved three days before Wilberforce died in 1833. He received the glorious news of his life-long goal on his deathbed. [page xiv]

2. The Clapham Circle.

At the center of most of these social ventures was the Clapham Circle, an informal but influential community of like-minded souls outside London who plotted good deeds together, and Wilberforce himself was at the center of Clapham. At one point he was officially linked with sixty-nine separate groups dedicated to social reform of one kind or another. [page xvii]

3. Greatest Social Reformer in the World.

Taken all together, it's difficult to escape the verdict that William Wilberforce was simply the greatest social reformer in the history of the world. The world he was born into in 1759 and the world he departed in 1833 were as different as lead and gold. Wilberforce presided over a social earthquake that rearranged the continents and whose magnitude we are only now beginning to fully appreciate. [page xvii]

4. Born in Hull.

On August 24, 1759, William Wilberforce was born into a prosperous merchant family in the city of Hull. The impressive, red-brick Jacobean mansion in which he was born was situated on the city's High Street, overlooking the Hull River. The Hull in turn flowed into the much larger Humber, which flowed eastward into the North Sea. [page 1]

5. The Port of Hull Did Not Participate in the Slave Trade.

But most important to our story are not those cargoes that came in and out of Hull's harbor, but the one that didn't. Though Hull was the fourth-largest port in England, it was the only one that did not participate in the slave trade. It was this happy detail that would enable Wilberforce to remain in political office in years hence. Any member of

Parliament from Bristol or Liverpool, whose economies depended on the slave trade, would not have been able to get away with leading the abolitionist movement for long. [page 2]

6. Meaning of “William”.

William, which means “valiant protector” ... [page 2]

7. Digestion Issues.

Wilberforce had digestive troubles his entire life, though precisely what he had is difficult to say. He seems to have suffered from some form of ulcerative colitis. [page 43]

8. Refusal to Assent to the Articles of the Church of England.

Wilberforce was throughout his life possessed of a rare and bracing intellectual honesty. At Cambridge, he had once been asked to sign his name assenting to the articles of the Church of England. This was viewed then as a formality, one of the college’s ancient requirements for receiving one’s degree; everyone simply signed the document and took their degree. But Wilberforce refused. He didn’t at that time agree with the official tenets of the Anglican Church, or at least wasn’t sure whether he did, and therefore couldn’t bring himself to sign it, which delayed his degree for several years. In an age when, just as today, most people struggled or winked their way through such hypocrisies, Wilberforce would not. [page 50]

9. Stirred by Nature’s Beauty.

At Interlaken, [Switzerland,] Wilberforce was awed and affected by the exquisite grandeur of the Jungfrau. His love of nature was constant throughout his life, and surely the transcendent power of its beauty must now also have stirred his heart toward thinking of first things. [page 51]

10. “The Great Change” Was Gradual.

Wilberforce’s “Great Change” did not happen overnight or in an instant. St. Paul might have been blinded by the light and changed in a single moment that could, in effect, be captured in a painting, but Wilberforce’s transformation was much more gradual. His conversion was much closer to St. Augustine’s, who came to intellectual clarity about the doctrines of Christian faith but was frustrated by his inability to conform his behavior to his beliefs. [page 52-53]

11. Poor Eyesight.

Wilberforce’s eyesight was so poor that he sometimes had readers who would read aloud to him. The idea of his sitting and hearing two full hours of Scripture and an hour

and a quarter of the dense, philosophical *Pensées* followed by an hour and a quarter of prayer is certainly impressive and tells us that he was almost crazy with what he now knew. [page 55]

12. Walking Instead of Spending Funds on Transportation.

The wealthy best friend of the prime minister was now taking public transportation and walking out of guilt for all the money he wasted over the years, knowing that any money he saved could be better spent in caring for the poor. [page 55]

13. Encouraged by Friends to Stay in Politics.

Newton didn't tell him what he had expected – that to follow God he would have to leave politics. On the contrary, Newton encouraged Wilberforce to stay where he was, saying that God would use him there. [page 59]

14. New Attitudes with Money and Time.

Two changes manifested themselves right away: the first was a new attitude toward money, the second toward time. Before “the Great Change,” Wilberforce had reckoned his money and time his own, to do with as he pleased, and had lived accordingly. But suddenly he knew that this could no longer be the case. The Scriptures were plain and could not be gainsaid on this most basic point: all that was his – his wealth, his talents, his time – was not really his. It all belonged to God and had been given to him for use for God's purposes and according to God's will. God had blessed him so that he, in turn, might bless others, especially those less fortunate than himself. [page 63]

15. Live More to God's Glory.

In his diary on June 21 he writes: “To endeavor from this moment to amend my plan for time. I hope to live more than heretofore to God's glory and my fellow-creatures' good.” [page 64]

16. Made Up for Lost Time at Cambridge.

Regarding his own improvement, Wilberforce resolved to begin immediately by making up for lost time at Cambridge, where he'd frittered away the years and opportunities in idleness. “Books to be read,” he writes in his diary, “Locke's essay – Marshall's Logic – Indian Reports.” This resolve to read was no flippant New Year's resolution. For the next twelve summers, until his marriage, he would spend one or two months at some country home, assiduously studying nine or ten hours alone each day. He became renowned for reading everything – Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Blackstone, Pope – and for the rest of his life, his pockets were literally stuffed with literature on every subject. He would in later years carry corked inkwells in his pockets too – for he was forever making notes and writing letters – and his clothing ever after bore the ebon blots of his

obsession. Once while he was kneeling with others in prayer, one fatally overstuffed pocket interrupted the devotional atmosphere by exploding under the strain of literature and pouring its contents upon the carpet. [page 65]

17. Newton and Pitt Advised to Stay in Politics; the British Empire Needed Wilberforce.

The counsel of Pitt and Newton at this time were crucial. Newton wrote Wilberforce a letter sometime later that seemed to sum up his view of the situation. “It is hoped and believed,” he famously wrote, “that the Lord has raised you up for the good of His church and for the good of the nation.” Pitt, in his letter, had said something similar: “Surely the principles as well as the practice of Christianity are simple and lead not to meditation only, but to action.”

Thus December 1785 – when both Newton and Pitt advised Wilberforce to stay where he was, in politics, and to put his newfound perspective to use in that sphere – was an historic moment. Before this time, a serious Christian would have felt theological pressure to leave “the world” and enter a life of Christian service. Wilberforce’s decision to remain in politics made the transfer of Christian ideas into the previously “secular” realm of society possible for generations of Christians to follow. [page 68]

18. Life in 18th Century England Was Brutal.

Entirely surprising to most of us, life in eighteenth-century Britain was particularly brutal, decadent, violent, and vulgar. Slavery was only the worst of a host of societal evils that included epidemic alcoholism, child prostitution, child labor, frequent public executions for petty crimes, public dissections and burnings of executed criminals, and unspeakable public cruelty to animals. [page 69]

19. Societal Authorities Were to Set a Good Example.

The proclamation specifically said that those in high places of honor or authority were obliged to set a good example and were to be involved in reforming those who were leading “dissolute and debauched lives.” Those in high law enforcement positions, such as judges and sheriffs, were supposed to be “very vigilant and strict in the discovery and eventual prosecution of all persons who should be guilty of excessive drinking, blasphemy, profane swearing and cursing, lewdness, or other immoral and dissolute practices,” and they were also to suppress “loose and licentious” booklets and pamphlets and so on. [pages 83-84]

20. Reformation of Manners.

By June 1787, Wilberforce had already taken many steps on the very long journey ahead toward the “reformation of manners.” In fact, it wasn’t until October 28 that he coined the phrase, when he famously penned in his diary: “God almighty has set before

me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.” [page 85]

21. Bring Civility and Self-respect to Society.

To our modern ears, the phrase “reformation of manners” sounds merely quaint, but what Wilberforce meant by the phrase was different from what we think when we hear it. By “manners” he did not mean anything to do with etiquette but rather what we would call “habits” or “attitudes”; there was also a distinctly moral aspect to his use of the phrase, though not in the puritanical sense. He wished to bring civility and self-respect into society that had long since spiraled down into vice and misery; he wanted, among other things, to stem the epidemic of teenage mothers prostituting themselves to pay for their gin habit. It was exceedingly progressive of him to see such actions not merely as crimes but as symptoms of a larger social condition that required the extraordinary intervention of those in power. [page 85]

22. Equiano, a Freed Slave.

Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave ... was one of the most colorful figures of the entire abolitionist movement. Equiano was eleven when he was sold into slavery, having grown up in what is today Nigeria. He was able to purchase his own freedom and traveled all over the world, including a trip on which he came within six hundred miles of the North Pole on a Royal Navy polar expedition that included a certain rather reckless fourteen-year-old boy who grew up to be Lord Nelson. Equiano eventually wrote a fascinating autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. His story, which was published in 1789, did much to educate the British people about the actual experiences and horrors of the slave trade and slavery itself, and it provided a powerful argument against the idea that Africans were different from any other people. The book showed its author to be a deeply sensitive, extremely intelligent human being, and an exceeding devout Christian. [page 96]

23. The Church Involved in the West Indian Slave Trade.

The Church of England at the time had a great deal of money invested in West Indian plantations and did not make any connection between the tenets of the Christian faith and abolition. [page 96]

24. Thomas Clackson Understand the Horrors of Slavery.

When news of the *Zong* [a slave ship of 107 tons where the “legal” drowning of 132 Africans occurred] incident reached a very prominent Anglican minister named Peter Peckard, he was profoundly affected. Peckard had been made vice chancellor of Cambridge in 1785, and his growing horror of the slave trade – abetted by his fresh

knowledge of the *Zong* incident – caused him to do something that would have very far-reaching results indeed. The vice chancellor set the topic for the university’s annual Latin essay prize, a contest so terribly prestigious that the winner usually beamed with pride all the way to his grave. Peckard now indulged his growing abolitionist passion and in 1785 set the question at: *Anne liceat invitos in servitute dare?* Is it lawful to enslave others against their will? The winning essay answering this provocative question would play a huge role in the cause of abolition.

That year the winner was a divinity student on scholarship named Thomas Clarkson of St. John’s College, which Wilberforce had attended a few years earlier. Clarkson was a devote, twenty-five-year-old Christian who had not previously been especially interested in the subject of slavery and its lawfulness. But in the process of throwing himself into the subject of extreme zeal that is born of academic ambition, the young scholar discovered things about the slave trade that he might rather not have known. The maimed parade of horrors that passed through Clarkson’s mind during this period changed him utterly. In the course of chasing an academic distinction, he came to know what few men in his day knew: the full scope of the monstrous traffic in human flesh that had continued for millennia and that was flourishing just then in the British Empire.

When his studies had been completed, Clarkson left Cambridge on horseback and headed for London, where he planned to pursue a career in the Church. But thoughts of what he had learned tortured him as he rode. He tried and tried to put the nauseous, sadistic images out of his mind, but failed. He rode on. While riding through Herefordshire, a spot near Wales Mill, he got off his horse and sat down by the side of the road, overwhelmed. It was a moment he would remember for the rest of his long life. For it was there and then, on the side of the road, that it first occurred to Thomas Clarkson that if the things he had uncovered and written about in his prize-winning essay were a reality in the world in which he now sat, it was time someone put an end to them. [pages 106-107]

25. All of the Slave Trade Was One Mass of Iniquity.

“On whatever branch of the system I turned my eyes, I found it equally barbarous,” he [Clarkson] wrote. “The trade was, in short, one mass iniquity from the beginning to the end.” [page 116]

26. The Slave Trade Ruined All Lives Involved.

One of the things that became quite clear to Clarkson and to Wilberforce was that the slave trade, like all evil systems, corrupted and ruined lives of all who touched it. It seemed that nearly everyone involved in it had somehow been duped into it; many were kidnapped and pressed into it against their will, while others were forced into it to pay

debts, which somehow never got paid. The whole slave trade was like some kind of seaborne gulag in which one level of prisoners (called sailors) were brutalized physically and mentally by psychotic and pathologically cruel captains, and another level of prisoners (called slaves) were brutalized physically and mentally by both of the above. [page 116]

27. The Slave Trade Ruined Africa's Economy.

One of the things that came out of Wilberforce's investigations was that the slave trade had ravaged and ruined the African economy, and he came to believe that a debt was therefore owed to the African continent. Wilberforce spent the rest of his life trying to help Africa. This is not to say that the behavior of Africans on the issue of slave trade was morally superior to that of the white Europeans. Everyone was grotesquely guilty, all down the line, including the African chiefs who kidnapped and brutalized anyone they could and who death-marched them to the coasts, where they were sold to others in the trade, who in turn sold them to slave-ship captains, who in turn sold them to West Indian planters, who in turn worked them to death. The captured Africans suffered and died in shocking percentages during every part of the journey from their homes. But Wilberforce rightly saw that it was the Europeans who had instigated this inhuman system and who had heaped endless fuel upon its satanic fires. He would do all he could to repay this debt to the continent of Africa. [pages 119-120]

28. One of Finest of Wilberforce's Speech, But the Abolition of Slavery Failed.

By every account it was one of the finest speeches of Wilberforce's life, and those who judged such things thought it elevated him into the marmoreal pantheon of immortals. Edmund Burke, perhaps the finest orator in that golden age of orators, thought the speech's "principles were so admirable, laid down with so much order and force," that the speech was "equal to anything he had ever heard of in modern oratory; and perhaps not excelled by anything to be met with in Demosthenes."

Bishop Porteus raved about the speech too. Everyone did. It was as glorious a presentation of the incontrovertible facts and unanswerable arguments as anyone might have imagined, and it was an answer to Wilberforce's many prayers and all the prayers of those who stood behind against the evil of the slave trade, from Equiano to Newton to Hannah More to the Middletons to Ramsay to Clarkson to Sharp and the Quakers to Charles Eliot to Isaac Milner to John Wesley. As Wesley prophesied, however, the stony hearts of the members of Parliament, wedded to the "great Goddess Interest," were unmoved. And in the end, abolition failed.

And how exactly did it fail? The debate ended with that quintessentially nondecisive "decision"—a decision to "hear more evidence," as if more evidence was needed to be

heard. In the meantime, the West Indian slave trade, with its Boschian horrors, would continue just as ever; tens of thousands of slaves more would be kidnapped from African shores, suffocated in reeking holds for two or three months, driven to madness and despair, and then unloaded and sold and pressed into a life of such particular headship that it would kill them—and all with the considered blessing of both houses of His Majesty’s Parliament, which now adjourned for the summer. [pages 136-137]

29. Repercussions of the Wesleys’ Assistance to the Poor.

John Wesley’s caution to Sharp must have returned with fresh meaning now. Wesley and his brother Charles had traveled hundreds of miles on horseback all across England, preaching the Christian Gospel and helping the poor, who in those days had neither a government nor a private sector friendly to their plight. For their pains, the Wesleys were denounced by almost all of the Church of England ministers and persecuted awfully and in every kind of way. This continued from 1740 until around 1780. Some of the Wesleys’ “lay preachers” were even killed by mobs or kidnapped by naval press gangs. [page 140-141]

30. Trusting God in This Battle.

After Yoxall, Wilberforce returned to London. The debate on abolition during this parliamentary session was at last opened on April 1791. Wilberforce rose at 5:00 p.m. and spoke on the subject for four hours. His attitude was humble. He wrote that he looked to God on his battle now “for wisdom and strength and the power of persuasion, and may I surrender myself to him as to the event with perfect submission and ascribe to him all the praise if I succeed, and if I fail say from the heart thy will be done.” [pages 143-144]

31. Pitt, the Younger, Ascended to the Oratorical Greatness of His Father.

They had debated all through the night. It was still black outside, but it was already after five o’clock in the morning when Pitt rose and began. He spoke for an hour and in that hour gave one of the greatest speeches of his life. Anyone who had ever doubted his commitment to abolition could not doubt it again. “How shall we hope to obtain,” he asked, “if it be possible, forgiveness from Heaven for the enormous evils we have committed if we refuse to make use of those means which the mercy of Providence has still reserved for us for wiping away the shame and guilt with which we are now covered? Shall we not count the days and hours that are suffered to intervene and to delay the accomplishment of such a work?” His rhetoric rose and rose magnificently.

And then something extraordinary happened. As Pitt ascended now to the very summit of his speech, the golden anthem of dawn burst from the horizon through the chamber’s windows, and the great room swelled like a sail filled with morning. It was a transcendent moment, one remembered for decades by those who were there, and by

accounts Pitt stepped into the moment brilliantly, as though he had himself ordered the sunlight for his own purposes. From the vast storehouses of classical verse, he put his hand in an instant to an apt couplet from Vigil that spoke of light dispelling the gloom of darkness over Africa. It was a glorious ending, and those who would know said that it lifted him truly for the first time into the rarefied oratorical company of his famous father. [pages 152-153]

32. Defeats Took Their Toll.

To be sure, all of these defeats, year after year, took their toll. Thomas Clarkson, having had more than enough discouragement and defeat for the time being, now stepped away from the cause; he would stay away for twelve years. [page 160]

33. Wilberforce Shared His Faith through “Launchers”.

William Wilberforce’s conversion to Christianity in 1785 – what he called his “Great Change” – was without question for him the central and most important event of his life. Indeed, as far as Wilberforce was concerned, faith in Jesus Christ was the central and most important thing in life itself, so it can hardly surprise us that sharing this faith with others was central and important to Wilberforce too. And so, everywhere he went, and with everyone he met, he tried, as best he could, to bring the conversation around to the question of eternity. Wilberforce would prepare lists of his friends’ names and next to the entries make notes on how he might best encourage them in their faith, if they faith, and toward a faith if they still had none. He would list subjects he could bring up with each friend that might launch them into a conversation about spiritual issues. He even called these subjects and questions “launchers” and was always looking for opportunities to introduce them. [page 167]

34. Met the Woman to be Wilberforce’s Wife.

For those who believe in random coincidences, it was an extraordinary coincidence by any account that on the day after registering what for him was a very rare sense of peace with God that he should meet the woman for whom he had been waiting and praying so many years. For it was that next day, Holy Saturday, that Wilberforce met his future wife for the very first time. They dined in a party, and before all of the courses had been served Wilberforce had fallen headlong for her, and eight days later they were engaged, and a month after that married – and within ten years had six children, four boys and two girls. But we may be getting ahead of ourselves. [page 175]

35. Wilberforce, the Leader of the Clapham Circle.

This group of people who lived at Clapham at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, most of whom we have already met, have been called the Clapham Community, the Clapham Group, and the Clapham Circle; the last term

should suffice for our purposes. Whatever they are called, it's no exaggeration to say that over the course of a few decades, with William Wilberforce as their unofficial leader, they quite literally and only somewhat inadvertently changed the world forever. [page 182]

36. Wilberforce's Conversational Influence Was Great.

"On the whole," [Henry] Thorton wrote in 1793, "I am in hopes that some good may come of our Clapham system. Mr. Wilberforce is a candle that should not be hid under a bushel. The influence of his conversation is great and striking I am not surprised to find how much religion everybody seems to have when they get into our house." [page 183]

37. John Thorton Established Clapham.

John Thorton [Henry's father] established the beachhead at Clapham both geographically and spiritually. [page 184]

38. Pitt's Design of the Oval Library at Battersea Rise.

The oval library at Battersea Rise had the distinction of having been designed by William Pitt, who, though not a member of the Clapham Circle, was obviously well connected to many who were, most notably Thorton, Eliot, and Wilberforce. Pitt had told Thorton that he'd always wanted to design a library. From our modern point of view, this may seem like a surprising ambition for Pitt, but at the end of the Enlightenment it was not so out of the ordinary for bright, wealthy young men to want to do such things. The love of reason and rationality that typified the Enlightenment lent itself rather well to design, and eighteenth-century men were able to look back to the Romans and the Greeks for their inspiration. Thomas Jefferson designed Monticello and the University of Virginia, of course, and George Washington oversaw all the designs for the vast city that would posthumously bear his name. Before that, while in the field leading the Continental forces, he closely supervised the smallest details of Mount Vernon's renovation, down to moldings and paint colors, via letters. So Pitt was in good company. And naturally, as with practically everything else he put his mind to, he did a singular job. [page 184-185]

39. Charles Simeon of Cambridge.

And then there was Charles Simeon of Cambridge. According to Ernest Marshal Howse, the "intellectual center of Clapham" was at Cambridge. Simeon, whom some called "St. Charles of Cambridge," was an especially important figure in the evangelical movement of this time and had close ties with the Clapham Group. [page 186]

40. The Six Wilberforce Children.

All six of the Wilberforce children would be born at Broomfield in the next nine years. Little William was born in 1798, Barbara in 1799, Elizabeth in 1801, Robert in 1802, Samuel in 1805, and Henry in 1807. After the sixth child, Mrs. Wilberforce pronounced them all good, and rested. [page 190]

41. Friend, Charles Middleton, Commander of His Majesty's Navy.

... the eighty-year-old Charles Middleton to take the post of first lord of the Admiralty. Few doubted that Middleton's entire life had been a preparation for this hour. As good as Melville was, the fast-unfolding events on the high seas now required the surer hand that Middleton could bring, and the rapport that he had with Nelson was nothing small; indeed, it was likely decisive in the incalculably crucial Trafalgar campaign.

Middleton's taking this post was simple an extraordinary turn of events. That this man whom Wilberforce revered and loved and knew as a friend and a brother in the faith—and who had been at the forefront of the abolitionist movement—should now at his advanced age command His Majesty's Navy, at this gravest of hours, when the future of the empire and the next century so depended on him, was something monumental. [page 203]

42. God to Turn Hearts of the House of Lords.

... during his usual Sabbath devotions, he writes, "The decision of the great question approaches. May it please God, who has the hearts of all in His hands, to turn them as in the House of Lords; and enables me to have a single eye, and a simple heart, desiring to please God, to do good to my fellow-creatures, and to testify my gratitude to my adorable Redeemer." [page 208]

43. Wilberforce's Efforts Cheered with Romilly's Speech.

But when Romilly [the solicitor-general] spoke of Wilberforce's reception at home it was too much for Wilberforce. Until then he has sat composed, quite composed, but now he was overcome, and taking his head in his hands, he wept.

Romilly's moving oration, now halted and combined with the tears of its subject, proved too much for the room. It was as if somewhere, in the heart of creation, a dam had burst.

Everyone caught up in the increasingly charged atmosphere had been waiting, as it were, for some unconscious cue, something to ground the electricity – and Wilberforce's tears were it. Almost simultaneously, every man in the chamber lost his composure and was carried off by the flood of emotion. Everyone rose, and three

deafening cheers rang out for Mr. Wilberforce; they echoed off those historic walls and hallowed them, and all was lost to the tumult. [page 210]

44. Abolition Finally Passed.

And here we leave him, weeping there in his accustomed seat as the overswollen thunderclouds of praise and celebration and joy burst over him and heaven rains a deluge of approbation upon his bowed head. In a little while the House would decide 283-16 in favor of abolition, and the battle would be officially won. But let's not run ahead just yet. Let's behold him here for a little while longer, here in this Moment of moments, a man allowed that highest and rarest privilege, to be awake inside his own dream. Seated there, head in his hands, humbled and exalted in his humility, we have the apotheosis of William Wilberforce. [page 211]

45. England's Anti-slavery Crusade in the History of Nations.

The Irish historian William Lecky gives us his own oft-quoted verdict: "The unwearied, unostentatious, and inglorious crusade of England against slavery may probably be regarded as among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of the nations." [page 213]

46. The Royal Navy Becomes the Police of the High Seas.

The Royal Navy would become the policemen of the high seas for many decades into the future, and incredible as it may seem, British patrols were still functioning in this noble capacity into the 1920s. By then the large-scale trade had disappeared, but enterprising criminals will find niche markets. Each year into the 1920s ten or twelve boats, each carrying fifteen to twenty children, mostly for sale into the sex trade, would cross the Red Sea from Eritrea up into Saudi Arabia. [page 217]

47. Wilberforce Could Walk Home from Parliament.

Moving to Kensington Gore seemed the perfect compromise: the area was still somewhat rural—for this was two centuries ago—but still near Parliament that Wilberforce could walk home from work. If he was alone, he would sometimes recite the exceedingly long 119th Psalm to himself as he walked. [page 218]

48. Wilberforce Memorized Scripture and Poetry.

Wilberforce loved memorizing poetry, Cowper and Milton especially, and he often recited it as he walked. But he especially enjoyed reciting Scripture and took seriously the injunction—from Palm 119 itself—to "hide God's word in one's heart." [page 218]

49. Men Need to Be Born Again.

Wilberforce certainly believed that one had to have a “personal” relationship with God and that one had to be “born again.” He believed that moral efforts were worth nothing without an experience of transforming grace, which he had experienced during his “Great Change.” [All] men must be regenerated by the grace of God before they are fit to be inhabitants of heaven,” he wrote, “before they are possessed of that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord.” [page 221]

50. What Is a Human Being?

On June 22, 1813, the great effort culminated in the House. Several of the “Saints” spoke, and then it was Wilberforce’s turn. He held the chamber spell-bound for three hours, and by all accounts it was one of the great speeches of his life. He spoke of female infanticide, and he spoke of suttee. He spoke of the practice of geronticide—murdering the “useless” old—and he spoke of murdering those who were sick; and he spoke of human sacrifices for “religious” reasons. Surely the British had a responsibility to do anything they could to help the powerless victims of these horrors. Taking a more explicitly religious tone than he had ever taken before or would after, he made the case that Christianity alone could open a way to help the people of India and that it could provide the philosophical underpinnings for doing so. In every way this debate, as with the debate over abolition, was a debate about worldviews that were antithetical in their understanding of everything—most centrally in their definitions of what constituted a human being. [page 231]

51. Wilberforce’s Speech Needed to be in Every Man’s Library.

A writer in the press gallery said that Wilberforce “spoke three hours but nobody seemed fatigued; all indeed were pleased, some with the ingenious artifices of his manner, but most with the glowing language of his heart. Much as I differed from him in opinion, it was impossible not to be delighted with his eloquence He never speaks without exciting a wish he would say more.” Lord Erskine said the speech “deserves a place in the library of every man of letters, even if he were an atheist.” [page 232]

52. England’s Loving One’s Neighbor and Servant Leadership – Notions Needed for India.

The Christian notions of loving one’s neighbor and servant leadership would soon find themselves newly expressed in the concepts of noblesse oblige and, later on, social conscience. These notions were increasingly evident in every sphere and on every scale. In this vote on India, the change had been formally and publicly acknowledged, much as it had been in abolition’s passage a few years earlier. The selfish prerogatives of power had been publicly and legally condemned and disavowed, and a new and bright precedent had been set in international relations. [page 233]

53. Wilberforce, a Humble Man.

Throughout his life Wilberforce resisted the cheap temptation to point the finger to others while posturing as their moral superior. He succeeded in defusing the anger of some and drew them in to hear what he was saying. [page 265]

54. Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

In 1824—along with his successor in the abolition struggle, Thomas Fowell Buxton—he was one of the founding members of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. [page 266]

55. Last Decade of Life, Wilberforce Was Destitute.

In 1830 the last decade of Wilberforce's life dawned. The few years he had left held a serious trial or two and some joys as well. He did not appear in public often. In fact, it was on May 15, 1830, that he appeared for the last time in public in London, having been persuaded to take the chair at a meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society. But a terrible financial blow fell that year, eclipsing much else. The dairy business in which he had helped his eldest son, William, now required more capital, and Wilberforce, always eager to help William, now went to great lengths to obtain it. He sold a great deal of stock and, most dramatically, even sold his boyhood home in Hull. But after all this, the business was a failure: they lost everything. Now in his seventies, Wilberforce—formerly a very wealthy man—found himself nearly destitute. It was a serious blow, but those around him were deeply impressed at this equanimity and even joy in the midst of the drama. He had given away vast sums of money throughout his life, and the innumerable people and projects had benefited from his personal generosity could never be tallied in this world. But now he was even forced to sell Highwood, and would end his life without a home of his own. Foxes had holes and birds had nests, but Wilberforce and Barbara were forced in old age to cast themselves upon the mercies of their second and third sons, living for alternating periods with each of them. [pages 268-269]

56. Wilberforce's Perpetual Gratitude.

Toward the end of his days, Wilberforce's marked habit of perpetual gratitude in all circumstances actually seemed to increase. He judged that living with his two sons, both ministers, was a blessing he would not have experienced if his finances had not been devastated. [page 270]

57. What Wilberforce and Friends Achieved Was a Moral Revolution.

Wilberforce, who might have crowed with pride over his accomplishments, was very obviously humble about anything he might have done, and genuinely and keenly aware of how much he failed.

But others aren't obliged to be so modest about him. In the estimation of Sir Reginald Coupland, who was Beit Professor of Colonial History at Oxford, "more than any man, he had founded in the conscience of the British people a tradition of humanity and of responsibility towards the weak and backward Whose fate lay in their hands. And that tradition has never died." As well versed as we are today in the manifold failings of colonial rule, the comparison to things before Wilberforce gives us another picture. Before Wilberforce, a world power like Great Britain could do what it liked with the people of Asia and Africa, and for two centuries and more did. Treating human beings as they treated dumb beasts or insensate resources like timber, hemp, and ore; but after Wilberforce, all that changed. What "Wilberforce and his friends achieved ..." Coupland tells us, "was nothing less, indeed, than a moral revolution." [pages 273-274]

58. Others Treated Wilberforce Kindly.

"What cause it is for thankfulness," he [Wilberforce] said, "that God has always disposed people to treat me so kindly." [page 274]

59. Three Days Before Death, the Abolition of Slavery Passed.

"I am like a clock that is almost run down," Wilberforce said to one friend. But he would have one more glimpse on this side of the veil. On Friday evening, July 26, Wilberforce received word of the very thing for which he had dreamed his entire adult life: the House had just passed the bill abolishing slavery in the British Empire. The West Indian planters would be compensated for approximately half the market value of their slaves. "Thank God," Wilberforce rejoiced, "that I should have lived to witness a day in which England is willing to give twenty millions sterling for the Abolition of Slavery." [page 274]

60. July 29, 1833, Wilberforce Died.

Barbara and his youngest, Henry, were with him when he stirred one last time. "I am in a very distressed state," he said. "Yes," Henry said, "but you have your feet on the Rock." The man whose voice and words had changed the world now spoke his last. "I do not venture to speak so positively," he said. "But I hope I have." He was humble and hopeful to the end, and at 3:00 a.m. on Monday morning, July 29, 1833, William Wilberforce departed this world. [page 275]