An exchange on Amazing Grace and the British slave trade

Joanne Laurier
8 March 2007

Below are two letters on "Amazing Grace*: William Wilberforce and the struggle to end the British slave trade" and a reply by the review's author, Joanne Laurier.*

To the editor,

I read a review by Peter Linebaugh, a fellow radical (at least judging by his lingo) on *Counterpunch*. Linebaugh's article is titled "An Amazing Disgrace." The gist of it is that the slave trade ended due to the efforts of the slaves themselves and by their allies among the masses, workers in particular, not because of the parliamentary games between ultra-comfortable representatives of the oppressor classes. Secondly that the British bourgeoisie only relented when a sufficient labor force had been created to replace the Africans, namely the modern proletariat at home.

Here's some of what Linebaugh wrote:

"This movie omits drama because it avoids the historical conflicts: the primary conflict was between the slave in the plantations and the master, the secondary conflict was between the worker in the factory and the boss. You wouldn't know that from this whitewash.

"The two historical faults with the movie are first it does not show us that the English abolitionist movement owed its beginning, its thrust, and its ending to the activity of the slaves themselves. The second fault is that it does not consider the historical proposition that the abolition of the slave trade could only succeed at the moment in economic development when other sources of exploitation became available to English capital, namely, the working class in England. Now, those are themes of tragedy.

"The steel workers of Sheffield opposed the slave trade in the 1790s; the United Irishmen did likewise. These were the allies of the Jamaicans, the vast number of Afro-Americans, and above all the Haitian slaves. These men and women waged near constant struggle in rebellion (1760s), in the War of Independence (1776), and in the Haitian revolution against slavery (1791-1803). The drama of the time arose from the possibility of revolutionary combinations of proletarians—Irish, African, English even against the lords of humankind. But not a word, not a whisper, about them in *Amazing Grace*."

For now I agree with Linebaugh.

Sincerely,

AA

Des Moines, Iowa

2 March 2007

In your review you mention the support for Wilberforce from some on the right of politics today. I was active [in] left politics in Hull in the '60s and recall that Moral Rearmament toured the country with a play on his life ("Mr. Wilberforce MP," I think was the title).

John Savile, labour historian at Hull University, produced a leaflet for the Hull performance critical of Wilberforce. It pointed out that while a passionate opponent of slavery abroad he was a supporter of wage slavery at home in the shape of the Combination Acts. These virtually outlawed trade unions and led to the famous case of the prosecution of the Dorset farm labourers, known as the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

Even today this episode in history resonates and we have the right presenting morality detached from social forces as the way of progress. Such an approach fits neatly with the notion of "ethical imperialism" touted by New Labour. Behind the moralising rhetoric lie real material interests and rivalries, and we know by now what "real imperialism" looks like.

MM

Sheffield, England

2 March 2007

The materials on William Wilberforce cited in the letters from AA and MM express an essentially ahistorical and subjective approach to the problem, in my view.

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I noted in my review that Wilberforce was not a social revolutionary. He was, however, a bourgeois representative of progressive thought. The claims of various radicals regarding Wilberforce are well summarized by AA, based on a review of the film by Peter Linebaugh from *Counterpunch*. They fundamentally constitute a repudiation of the Enlightenment.

The "parliamentary games between ultra-comfortable representatives of the oppressor classes" ascribed to Wilberforce were in fact a relentless struggle against some of the most powerful vested interests of big capital in Britain, and therefore the world—the owners of West Indian sugar plantations. The quote from Karl Marx I cited acknowledges that the slave trade was one of the underpinnings of Britain's commercial greatness and that Wilberforce played a crucial part in its demise. This is clearly not separate from the rebellions in the colonies, both in America and the West Indies. The film does allude to the uprising in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) as an impetus for his efforts.

In fact, Henri Christophe, a former slave in Haiti who had risen in the ranks of the revolutionary army, was head of the country and in 1815 he appealed to Wilberforce for help in education. He hoped Haiti would be recognized by the British against the French whom he feared would overrun the country. Wilberforce and his Clapham colleagues recognized the importance of Haiti as a counterargument to the skeptics who did not believe that blacks could be free citizens able to govern themselves.

Also it is worth noting again the lavish tribute black anti-slavery crusader Frederick Douglass paid to Wilberforce. (His speech, "British Influence on the Abolition Movement in America: An Address Delivered in Paisley, Scotland, on April 17, 1846," is available online.) Douglass's account of Wilberforce's determined endeavors in Parliament is moving and I quote part of it in my review. Year after year for nearly two decades, Wilberforce put anti-slave trade bills before the House of Commons—even during the French Revolution, when to do so was to run the risk of being labeled seditious. As the film shows, he broke with William Pitt over this issue.

Further, Wilberforce was prepared to brave the consequences of being identified with forces such as the Jacobins, with whom he did not agree, when Britain was at war and threatened with invasion. The record of this bourgeois politician stands in stark contrast to anything offered today by any section of the global ruling elite, white, black or Pan-African.

While it is true that Wilberforce was conservative in his attitude towards the working class, it is not true to say that in the late eighteenth century the working class, which as a whole did oppose the slave trade, had sufficient social weight to singularly abolish the enterprise. Moreover, it did not at that time have a political identity independent of the most radical sections of the bourgeoisie, as it was still emerging from the period of handicraft industry and would continue to do so until after the Napoleonic Wars. This applies to the Sheffield steelworkers in the 1790s, referred to by AA. They were not employees of big factories, but handicraft workers—"little masters" as they are often called.

At the time of the French Revolution the British working class was still largely undifferentiated both politically and socially. This would change, particularly under the impact of the revolution and the development of industry. With the experience of organizing unions and building its own party with Chartism, the working class became a force able to exercise political influence on the British government. By the time of the American Civil War, British workers' support for emancipation was a significant factor in preventing the British government from backing the South.

Wilberforce did side with the government on the Corn Laws, eliciting charges of being a wealthy enemy of the laboring classes. Nonetheless, he saw himself, as quoted in the film, championing both the causes of "suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of society." Again, while his principles were not identical to those of even a radical bourgeois like Thomas Clarkson, he was a staunchly principled man in his work as an abolitionist.

That Wilberforce's evangelical religiosity continues to make him an attractive target for even quite right-wing forces today, seeking to use his example to advance their own political and social agenda, does not detract from his historical contributions.

Sincerely,

Joanne Laurier for the WSWS

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