

# Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the struggle to end the British slave trade

Joanne Laurier  
2 March 2007

*Amazing Grace*, directed by Michael Apted, screenplay by Steven Knight

Marking the 200th anniversary of the outlawing of the British slave trade, a new film commemorates the remarkable life of abolitionist William Wilberforce (1759-1833). *Amazing Grace* from British director Michael Apted (*The World Is Not Enough*, *Coal Miner's Daughter*) chronicles Wilberforce's struggle to end the trade in the late eighteenth century.

Wilberforce (Ioan Gruffudd), a sensitive and dynamic orator elected to the House of Commons at age 21, is urged by his closest friend William Pitt (Benedict Cumberbatch) to champion the cause of abolishing the slave trade, as a first step toward ending slavery in the British territories. The latter notion is so completely out of the question that no abolitionist dares propose it publicly. Pitt is making a bid to become prime minister and wants Wilberforce as a political ally, at one point instructing him to "Tear the enemy to pieces." At age 24, Pitt succeeds in becoming the youngest-ever British head of government.

In Apted's film, Wilberforce, a devout Christian, is torn between a career in politics and a life devoted to the spiritual. He seeks advice from his mentor, John Newton (Albert Finney), a former slave-ship captain so haunted by his "20,000 ghosts" that he dons a sackcloth and takes religious vows, composing hymns such as "Amazing Grace."

Newton is writing an account of all the iniquities he witnessed as a slaver. He tells Wilberforce to "publish it and blow a hole in their ships with it.... [W]e were apes, they [the slaves] were human.... I couldn't breathe until I wrote this." Wilberforce comes to believe that "God Almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of society."

As an eloquent and passionate voice against slavery, Wilberforce leads a group of 12 called the Abolition Committee who begin a campaign in Parliament in 1787. One of the founding members, the radical Thomas Clarkson (Rufus Sewell), later dubbed a "Jacobin" by his pro-slavery opponents, spends months on an extensive fact-finding mission visiting slave ports.

There are three legs to the British slave trade that Clarkson studies. Ships transport European goods to Africa, then load slaves for the journey to the West Indies (the infamous "Middle Passage"). There, the slaves are sold, and the ships return to England with West Indian exports.

The film's production notes include a section on the history of the African slave trade going back to 1444 in Portugal. It describes the appalling conditions aboard the slave vessels: "Men, women and children were chained together in a cramped hold, left to huddle in their own vomit and excrement. Sick or dead slaves were thrown overboard during the voyage, known as the Middle Passage, which lasted up to 100 days.

"On arrival in the West Indies, the slaves were kept on board the ships for a few days to be cleaned and fattened up in preparation for sale. The sickest and weakest, those who had no sale value, were left to die on the wharf. The others were oiled and paraded naked through the streets before

being auctioned. Once bought, the slaves went through a process of seasoning—learning new duties, adjusting to the harsh labour of the cane fields, during which many more of them died. And once seasoned, they endured forced labour, usually enforced by callous overseers."

Armed with a vast catalog of information about this ghastly enterprise, Clarkson organizes the collection of more than 300,000 signatures of people refusing to take slave plantation sugar in their tea—the blood of slaves said to be in each spoonful. Cries of "mob rule" in Parliament are quelled when Lord Fox (Michael Gambon), a supporter of the status quo, dramatically crosses the aisle to add his name to the petition.

It could be noted in this regard that *Amazing Grace* fails to explain the different social interests lined up against slavery, for many of whom, manufacturers and others, the question was hardly a moral one.

Another of the abolitionist group's leading lights is Oloudaqh Equiano (played by the famed Senegalese musician and singer, Youssou N'Dour). A Nigerian-born survivor of the slave trade, Equiano's chilling autobiography sells 50,000 copies in two months. His account of the Middle Passage journey (endured by an estimated 11 million human beings) is one of the few written by a slave.

The French Revolution unfolding across the English Channel prompts Clarkson to advocate an insurrection against "mad" King George III, a notion rejected by Wilberforce, no "Jacobin" himself. Pitt agrees: "One can't be seen opposing the king when the streets of Paris are running with blood." However, the impending war between France and England causes a rift between Pitt and Wilberforce as the former warns: "When war comes, opposition will soon be called sedition.... Issues of war must not be mixed with issues of slavery." To speak of human rights in 1793, the year France declares war on Britain, is to risk being labeled a friend of the French Republic. Wilberforce hazards the risk.

A powerful anti-abolition lobby in Parliament dominates. Its most vocal spokesmen are the demagogic Lord Tarleton (Ciarán Hinds) and the duplicitous Scot, Lord Dundas (Bill Paterson). King George's third and profligate son, the Duke of Clarence (Toby Jones), stands out as a degenerate among those financially tied to the West Indian plantations and who believe that "if we left the Indies, the French would come in and there would be no gold to fill the coffers of the King."

As the masses of Saint-Domingue (Haiti) rise up, Wilberforce again moves against the execrable slave trade, uttering: "Africa! Africa! Your sufferings have been the theme that has arrested and engages my heart—your sufferings no tongue can express; no language impart." His motion in Parliament is defeated.

Over the next several years, success in stopping the importation of slaves continues to elude Wilberforce. But in 1806, maritime lawyer and abolitionist James Stephen, newly back from the Indies, suggests a change in tactics. Disguised as an anti-French bill, the Foreign Slave Trade Act quickly passes with the effect of prohibiting two thirds of the British slave trade. The next year, a bill to abolish the slave trade altogether finally passes, at which point the Duke of Clarence remarks: "*Noblesse oblige*—I

am obliged to acknowledge an exceptional combat.” It is an affecting scene. Three days before his death in 1833, Wilberforce’s lifelong goal of the outlawing of slavery is achieved.

Along with Wilberforce’s closest cohorts—Pitt, Newton, Clarkson and Equiano—the film represents his wife Barbara (Romola Garai), an outstanding personality and ardent abolitionist in her own right. As well, Lord Fox, a semi-jaded aristocrat (skillfully performed by Gambon) who initially supports slavery, proves himself a cunning collaborator once won over to the cause. Sir Charles and Lady Margaret Middleton are two more crucial players in the abolition movement. According to the film, Wilberforce ran an enlightened household, with his manservant familiar with the writings of Francis Bacon.

The creators of *Amazing Grace* have performed a service in calling attention to a significant historical period and one of its most worthy representatives. With clean, tight images and deep commitment, the film brings to life a figure who was a friend of US President James Madison and hailed as an inspiration by Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. He was admired by Thoreau and Whittier, while Byron proclaimed him to be “the moral Washington of Africa.”

Wilberforce, together with George Washington, Joseph Priestly, Thomas Paine and Jeremy Bentham, was elected a citizen of France by the country’s revolutionary National Convention.

Wilberforce’s lifelong devotion to Africa sprang from a belief that the slave trade had ravaged the African economy and a debt was owed to the continent by the Europeans who had instigated the heinous system. Wilberforce’s colleague, James Stephen, once said: “I would rather be on friendly terms with a man who had strangled my infant son than support an administration guilty of slackness in suppressing the Slave Trade.”

Besides giving himself body and soul to the battle against slavery, Wilberforce challenged injustice on many fronts. He fought to reduce the crimes punishable by hanging and bring about penal reform for women prisoners. As a champion of myriad causes for the poor, he sponsored legislation for improving child labor laws and founded the Society for the Relief of the Manufacturing Poor, among many others.

Perhaps inevitably, the film paints a relatively uncritical picture of Wilberforce, who was an individual, like any other, inevitably limited by his times and his class position. He was not a social revolutionary. His fervent Christianity makes him an icon even today for certain right-wing forces (like former Watergate conspirator Charles Colson) who set up his moral example against the struggle for political and social change. Many of Wilberforce’s own colleagues, including Clarkson, repudiated his religiosity.

It is to Apted’s credit, as he explained in an interview, that he rejected making a film dedicated to Wilberforce’s “finding, losing, and finding Christianity again” in favor of “a focus on the anti-slave trade act itself.”

The filmmakers themselves are no doubt responding to different impulses. Apted, a sincere and honest artist, decries the present situation in which “there’s more slavery in the world now than there was when this act was passed in 1807.... But if the film or the publicity around the film, can draw attention to the world we live in, I think that would be great.”

Apted refers to the continuing existence of slavery in various parts of the globe. Of the estimated 27 million slaves, the majority are bonded laborers in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal—workers whose bodies are collateral for debts that never decrease for years and sometimes generations.

As horrifying as these figures are, however, to a certain extent they miss the point. The real moral equivalent of slavery today is archaic and crisis-ridden capitalism itself, which condemns *billions* to poverty and misery.

Apted speaks about Wilberforce’s role in history: “Wilberforce’s anti-slave trade act, by mobilizing the voice of the people in this small way, set the table ready for all the great revolutions in the 19th century—all the emancipation acts, the voting acts and all the great social changes.” This

is overstating the case, the British abolitionist’s undoubted courage notwithstanding.

On the other hand, the approach of certain leftists who deride Wilberforce as nothing but a bourgeois gradualist who actually obstructed the end of slavery is simply ahistorical and misguided. The nineteenth century certainly recognized this.

Karl Marx, writing from London in 1862 about opposition to British intervention in the American Civil War, noted that such feeling existed even in Liverpool, whose commercial greatness “derives its origin from the slave trade.... Fifty years ago Wilberforce could set foot on Liverpool soil only at the risk of his life.” Wilberforce is clearly here the incarnation of the abolitionist movement in Britain.

In a speech given in Paisley, Scotland, in 1846, Frederick Douglass, the great black abolitionist, paid lavish tribute to Wilberforce, “to mention whom [along with Clarkson] ought to produce three rounds of applause.”

He went on: “When Wilberforce came forward, public attention became directed to the matter. Ten times did he introduce a bill for the abolition of the slave-trade, and ten times was it doomed to defeat—Parliament sometimes laying the matter on the table, and at other times giving it an indefinite postponement. Convinced that justice, that humanity, that all nature was on his side, believing that by perseverance he would succeed, he went on with his good work. And what do we see take place within half a century? We see the slave-trade, which was sanctioned by all Christians, is now nearly regarded as not only improper, but as piracy, and the men caught at it are hung up at the yard-arm.”

In 1858, Lincoln noted that he had never allowed himself to forget that Wilberforce had led the fight against the slave trade in the British Empire. It’s a fact, he said, that “schoolboys know.”

Schoolboys and girls no longer know it, and Apted’s film deserves credit for reviving interest in this vital historical experience.

In 1778 or so (sources cite different dates), William Cowper (1731-1800), poet and friend of Wilberforce, penned “The Negro’s Complaint” with its moving final stanzas:

*By our blood in Afric wasted  
Ere our necks received the chain;  
By the miseries that we tasted,  
Crossing in your barks the main;  
By our sufferings, since ye brought us  
To the man-degrading mart,  
All sustained by patience, taught us  
Only by a broken heart;  
Deem our nation brutes no longer,  
Till some reason ye shall find  
Worthier of regard and stronger  
Than the colour of our kind.  
Slaves of gold, whose sordid dealings  
Tarnish all your boasted powers,  
Prove that you have human feelings,  
Ere you proudly question ours!*



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**