

## **Dogmatic Eurocentric Historiography in the Movie *Amazing Grace of Freedom***

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### **Introduction**

The movie *Amazing Grace of Freedom*, directed by Michael Apted, was released in 2007 to coincide with the commemoration of the bicentennial anniversary of the British abolition of the trade in captured Africans. There is absolutely no denying the fact that it is singularly aimed at perpetuating the dominant and traditional historiography on British abolitionism. The movie reinforces the old interpretation that the primary movers and shakers of the British anti-slavery movement consisted of a small circle of white, predominantly male abolitionists in Britain who were motivated by nothing less than humanitarian and Christian principles. This was the view taken by Frank Klingberg when he published *The British Anti-Slavery Movement: A Study in British Humanitarianism* as far back as 1926 and by Reginald Coupland in his work *The British Anti Slavery Movement* published in 1933.<sup>i</sup> The movie shows no respect or regard for, and interest in the years of revisionist scholarship on Caribbean slavery in general produced by such historians as Eric Williams, Kamau Brathwaite, Richard Hart, Hilary Beckles and Gelien Matthews,<sup>ii</sup> to name a few. By the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with its new and improved technology and with the power, reach and influence of the film historian, it is regrettable that the old and narrow but dominant perspective on British abolition has remained totally unchanged.

### **The Movie**

#### *William Wilberforce*

In the movie, William Wilberforce is presented as the most significant, the most dedicated and most powerful agent of British abolition. Viewers are left to conclude that had it not been for his commitment to God and to the cause, the wheels of abolition would not have been set in motion by 1787. Such a presentation ignores the fact that in the early eighteenth century, the Quakers under George Fox first instructed members of his denomination, also called Friends, to ameliorate the condition of their enslaved charges and later expelled those who kept enslaved persons. The production opens with the statement that for approximately three hundred years after the establishment of the trade in humans from Africa across the Atlantic, many Europeans profited from the trade and few voices of opposition were raised against it. The statement sets up Wilberforce as a moral giant *par excellence* among not just his countrymen and women, but among the greedy and unscrupulous slave trading nations of all of Europe.

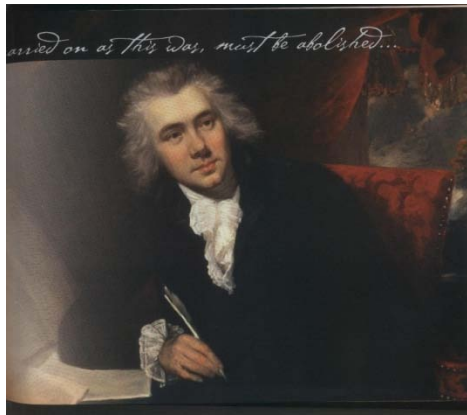


Figure 1: William Wilberforce

Wilberforce's centrality in initiating action against the African human trade and slavery is emphasised by pointing to his famous declaration that "God has set me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners." Abolition is presented first and foremost as Wilberforce's personal mandate from God. On the cover page of the book *Amazing Grace of Freedom*, a spinoff of the movie, the burden and glory of abolition is fixed on William Wilberforce who is referred to as 'the slaves' champion.' Charles Colson is quoted as proclaiming that "Wilberforce had changed the course of western civilization, this great man had brought the slave trade to an end." Section 11 of the book makes the bold declaration that "One person plus God can make a difference."<sup>iii</sup>

Careful attention is given to building up Wilberforce as a well rounded humanitarian. He is not a man with just one or two good causes. The first scene of the movie captures Wilberforce stopping the driver of his carriage on a regularly rainy day in England to intervene in an act of cruelty to animals. Wilberforce, who is already feeling unwell, steps out into the rain and implores a man whom he does not know to cease from flogging his horse. The man heeds Wilberforce's advice and the audience is left to conclude that because this man dared to stand up for what is good, the horse will live another day. What makes this scene even more poignant in winning the love and admiration of the audience for the central character is that this was a selfless action which endangered his own fragile health. The movie incorporates details from Wilberforce's personal life which revealed that he continually suffered from the effects of indigestion and stomach cramps which made him dependent on port and opium like drugs. In later life, his poor health was complicated by curvature of the spine and poor eyesight. Emphasis on Wilberforce's physical discomforts makes him grow taller, not smaller, in the esteem of the audience. Wilberforce is presented as a true public servant who refused to allow physical infirmity to hinder his service to humanity. In another scene of the movie, we see the goodly and godly Wilberforce stunning the many poor, lowly and dirty beggars of the streets of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England by bestowing them with generous alms. Yet another example of the good natured disposition of the hero of the movie is his magnanimity in

opening his dining table to all and sundry of all classes. On one occasion he had more than 25 persons all at once to dinner. Thus, when it came to the central subject of the movie, the British abolition of the trade in captured Africans, Wilberforce is the star. For his persistence and the eloquence and conviction with which he moved eleven motions in twenty years demanding the abolition of the human trade from Africa, he gained the nickname the 'bloody terrier' of the British House of Commons. In the movie, he empathises with captured Africans by lying in a box structured to the restricting dimensions of the space allotted during the miserable and horrific Atlantic crossing. Wilberforce's indefatigable exertions in the campaign to end the British trade in enslaved Africans are also reinforced by his untiring hunt for factual evidence to substantiate his parliamentary demands for abolition.

Designed to keep the spotlight on Wilberforce, the great man of the British abolitionist movement, the slate of supporting actors of the movie is very thin and none act outside of the consciousness of the star. All of them are foils for the great work that God has set before William Wilberforce.

#### *William Pitt*

One of the primary supporting actors is William Pitt, the British Prime Minister, who having first held this prominent position at age 24, was the youngest person to have ever done so. Pitt and Wilberforce are not just parliamentary colleagues but also friends who met at Cambridge University. Pitt is the first person in the British Parliament who expresses a wish to abolish the trade in enslaved Africans and it is automatically assumed that he does so out of humanitarian conviction, although the historian William Darity has shown that Pitt's flirtation with abolition seems to have stemmed from economic concerns.<sup>iv</sup> The British trade was supplying enslaved persons to its competitors, the French, who by the latter half of the eighteenth century were out producing the British.

During the years of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars from 1793 to the time of Pitt's death in 1806, the movie fails to explain why Pitt, who begged Wilberforce in the first place to champion the cause of abolition, is now cautioning him against his yearly abolition motions. All of the contradictions in Pitt's involvement in abolition are left unresolved and the central impression that remains of this character is that he is one of two earthly vessels that God uses to confirm Wilberforce's leading role in British abolition. While Pitt is the leader of government and is thus wrapped in the partisan politics of the day, Wilberforce is without political prejudice and is well placed to lead the noble cause.



Figure 2: William Pitt the Younger

*John Newton*

The second earthly vessel used to persuade Wilberforce that he is the man chosen by God for this project is the former trader in enslaved Africans who repents of his sins, converts to Christianity, becomes a minister of the gospel and writes the hymn that gives the movie its title, *Amazing Grace*. John Newton, however, is tormented by the ghosts of 20,000 Africans whose lives he traumatised as he profited from the pestilential holds of the ships of the Middle Passage.

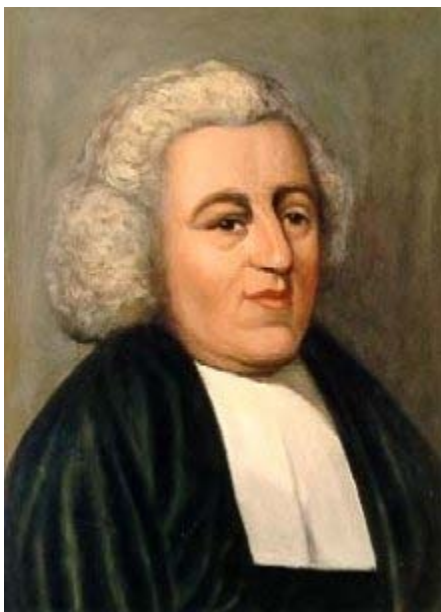


Figure 3: John Newton

It is not until in his old age, and now physically blind, that John Newton, who has set to paper his confession of the evils of the African human trade, realizes that the words of his hymn are now true indeed. He once was lost but now is found, was blind but now can see. In the meantime, Wilberforce visits Newton twice in the movie and on both occasions seeks advice concerning whether as a convert to Christianity, he should dirty his hands in the grey world of politics. Newton's admonition on both occasions is the same. Contrary to the thinking of the day, a man of God need not retreat in quiet meditation, especially a man like Wilberforce who has much influence in shaping and changing public policy. He cautions Wilberforce, however, to be in the world but not of the world. He gives Wilberforce the mandate to "Throw their dirty ships out of the waters of London, Bristol and Liverpool ... all those streets running with blood. ... You will get filthy with it ... but do it for God's sake."

### *Other Supporting Actors*

Among the slim cast of characters who hold the hands of Wilberforce in the parliamentary fight to abolish the trade is the Clapham Sect, limited to Thomas Clarkson, Wilberforce's wife, Barbara, the Thortons, Hannah More, James Stephen and Olaudah Equiano. The most memorable meeting of the sect presented in the movie is the scene of the Clapham dinner. It is here that Thomas Clarkson, who is given a far more minor role than the historical evidence supports, is presented. At this juncture Wilberforce, who is always at the centre of the action, is horrified by the hard evidence that Clarkson pulls out of the carpet bag that he places on the dinner table. Wilberforce's eyes widen as Clarkson demonstrates the use of the dreadful chains and shackles, thumbscrews, force feeders and other instruments of torture used during the Middle Passage. The evidence is presented, not so much to identify the source of the evidence of Wilberforce's parliamentary speeches on abolition, but to demonstrate why an individual so sensitive about the whipping of a horse would be even more committed to ridding his country of a trade in which so many atrocities were committed against humanity. The opportunity to credit Clarkson as the abolitionist who organised the British masses into more than 200 branch societies of the anti-slavery movement is wasted. Eric Williams' presentation of Thomas Clarkson in the final chapter of *Capitalism and Slavery* as the field officer of the movement is largely ignored.

The role given to Hannah More, and later Barbara Spooner Wilberforce, is a small but significant admission that white women in Britain did lend their support to the British anti-slavery movement. The extent of their contribution, as delineated by Claire Midgley,<sup>v</sup> however, is inadequately covered. Instead, the movie accurately portrays the fact that white male abolitionists, especially Wilberforce, tended to sideline female abolitionists who were sometimes more radical in their abolitionist demands than their male counterparts.<sup>vi</sup>

James Stephen, who had gone to Jamaica to make his fortune in the slavery business but suffered a crisis of conscience and returned to England as an abolitionist writer, provided

Wilberforce with further evidence of the callously brutal treatment of the enslaved men, women and children. He described how the servile labour force was so overworked that it was common for them to fall asleep at their tasks and lose their limbs to the mills or be scalded or burnt to death by the hot sugar syrup in the scorching boiling house.<sup>vii</sup> The director of the movie could have used the introduction of the character of James Stephen to make the connection between black and white anti-slavery. He allows Stephen to reveal that the enslaved in the colonies were riding on the wave of the anti-slave trade parliamentary debates in England. When Stephen declares, however, that the enslaved were depending on “their good friend over the water,” that is, Mr Wilberforce, to set them free, he relegates them to the suppliant posture of the Wedgwood medallion begging the white man to recognise that they too are men and brothers. The opportunity to portray the enslaved as active and conscious freedom fighters in league with white abolitionists, a position well substantiated in the historiography of Caribbean revisionist historians, dies with this vapid presentation.

As in the case of the other secondary characters, the entrance of Olaudah Equiano on the stage is downplayed. This is significant for it underscores that the European perspective of British abolitionism which takes little notice of the self-liberating efforts of the enslaved. While other liberated blacks living in England such as Ignatius Sancho, Ottobah Cugoana and Mary Prince wrote anti-slavery letters and books that were used by white abolitionists, only Equiano’s biography, which sold about 50,000 copies in 1789, is given recognition.<sup>viii</sup> Absolutely no acknowledgement is made of the thousands of enslaved persons both in Africa and the New World who fought against enslavement and sometimes gave their life to break the chains of the servile regime. Equiano is useful only insofar as he is pitiable, a victim whose suffering renders him as worthwhile grist in Wilberforce’s abolitionist mill.

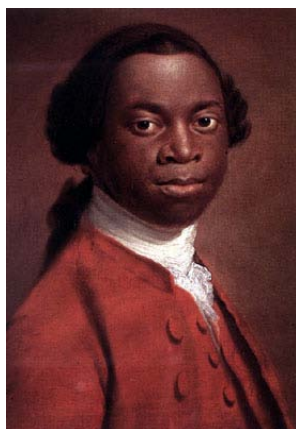


Figure 4: A disputed portrait of Olaudah Equiano in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter.

One exception to the exaggerated role of Wilberforce in British abolition is the scene in which he rolls out before his fellow parliamentarians a weighty petition calling for abolition that carries as many as 390,000 signatures. This is irrefutable evidence that *the great man theory of historical explanation and causation* is inappropriately applied to this movement. In the movie, Wilberforce even bellows that the voice of the people will not be drowned out on this issue. Yet the movie director made no attempt to capture even one anti-slavery public meeting or even one boycott against the use of sugar produced by the enslaved.

An interesting scene of the movie, which promises but eventually fails to depart from the essentially religious and humanitarian interpretation of British abolitionism, is the economic argument that is raised by Lord Tarleton, a pro-slavery champion and one of Wilberforce's parliamentary opponents. Tarleton explains, "If we didn't have slaves how would we fill the coffers of the king?" Instead, however, of taking the cue provided by Eric Williams in *Capitalism and Slavery* that when the trade was no longer filling the king's coffers it was abolished, the director of the movie leaves the audience to conclude, as Seymour Drescher argues in *Econocide*<sup>ix</sup> that, swept away by the humanitarianism of Wilberforce and his colleagues, the British Parliament cut down the trade just at the time when it was most profitable to their economy.

## Conclusion

Thus in terms of characterization, setting, theme and plot as well as the script, the movie *Amazing Grace of Freedom*, adheres blindly and religiously to the old narrow Eurocentric interpretation of the British campaign against the trade in captured Africans. This is contrary to historical evidence and done in spite of substantial revisionist historiography. The movie fails to consider adequately how the British masses, white women in England, the enlightened former enslaved in England, the anti-slavery conduct of blacks in the various English Caribbean colonies and economic factors all contributed to the parliamentary decision that ended the British involvement in the trade in captured Africans by 1807.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Klingberg, Frank. 1926. *The British Anti-Slavery Movement: A Study in British Humanitarianism*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Coupland, Reginald. 1933. *The British Anti Slavery Movement*. London: Thorton Butterworth.

<sup>ii</sup> See Williams, Eric. 1944. *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press; Brathwaite, E. Kamau. 1971. *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770 – 1820*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Hart, Richard. 1985. *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery – Blacks in Rebellion*. Vol. 2. Mona: Institute of Social and Economic Research; Beckles, Hilary. 1987. *Black Rebellion in Barbados: the Struggle Against Slavery, 1627 – 1838*. Bridgetown: Carib Research and Publications, and Matthews, Gelien. 2006. *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, as examples of revisionist historiography on abolition presented by Caribbean historians.

<sup>iii</sup> Baer, Ted; Wales, Susan and Wales, Ken. 2007. Op. Cit., p. 30.

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<sup>iv</sup> Darity, William, Jr. "The Williams' Abolition Thesis before Williams" in *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 9:1(May 1988) pp. 32 – 34.

<sup>v</sup> Midgley, Claire. 1992. *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780 – 1870*. London: Routledge.

<sup>vi</sup> Wilberforce, for example, was intolerant of the publication of Elizabeth Heyrick's 1823 publication in London entitled *Immediate Not Gradual Abolition of Slavery*.

<sup>vii</sup> See Stephen, James. 1824. *The Slavery of the British West Indies Delineated , As It Exists Both in Law and Practice, and Compared with the Slavery of Other Colonies, Ancient and Modern*. Vol. 1 Aberdeen: A. Constable and Co.; Stephen, James. 1830. *The Slavery of the British West Indies Delineated, As It Exists Both in Law and Practice, and Compared with the Slavery of Other Colonies, Ancient and Modern*. Vol. 2 Aberdeen: A. Constable and Co.

<sup>viii</sup> See Ignatius Sancho. 1782. *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho An African in Two Volumes to Which are Prefixed memoirs of His Life*. London: J. Nicholas; Equiano, Olaudah. 1789. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the Afrian*. London; Cuguano, Ottobah. 1825. "Narrative of the Enslavement of Ottobah Cuguano, A Native of Africa: Published by Himself in the year 1787". In *The Negro's Memorial or the Abolitionist Catechism by an Abolitionist" by Fisher Thomas* (pp. 120 – 127) London: Hatchard and Co.; Prince, Mary. 1831. *The History of Mary Prince A West Indian Slave Narrated by Herself With a Supplement by the Editor to which is Added the Narrative of Asa-Asa A Captured African*. London: F. Westley and A. H. Davis.

<sup>ix</sup> Drescher, Seymour. 1977. *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.