

Wilberforce

Information taken from: The Abolition Project http://abolition.e2bn.org/people_24.html

Biographical information

William Wilberforce (1759 -1833): The Politician

William Wilberforce was an English politician who became the voice of the abolition movement in Parliament. He was born in Hull, into a rich merchant family. As a child, whilst living with his uncle in London, he was taken to hear John Newton preach. It made a great impression on him but he returned home and soon became part of fashionable society, attending the theatre and races, where he watched his own horse run.

He enrolled at Cambridge University and became friends with William Pitt. At the age of 21, Wilberforce was elected to Parliament. He was well suited to politics as he was an extremely eloquent speaker and very witty. In 1783, he met James Ramsay and, for the first time, discussed slavery. Around 1784-6, he underwent a gradual but 'intense religious conversion' whilst travelling with a friend. He considered leaving Parliament but his friend and mentor, John Newton, advised him against this, so, instead, he decided to serve God in public life.

His new beliefs affected his public life. Before, he had usually voted with Pitt but now he was guided by his conscience. He and his evangelical friends were nicknamed "the Saints" by upper class circles but he won widespread respect. He championed many causes but it was the fight against the Slave Trade and slavery that he worked most tirelessly for. His interest was rekindled by a letter from Sir Charles Middleton, suggesting he should represent the cause in Parliament. William Pitt also encouraged him to take up the cause.

From 1789, Wilberforce regularly introduced bills in Parliament to ban the Slave Trade. He was fiercely opposed by those making fortunes from the trade, who used all kinds of delaying tactics. The first time a bill was introduced, Wilberforce lost the debate by 163 votes to 88 but he never gave up. Finally on 25th March 1807, the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act abolished the Slave Trade in the British colonies. It was carried by 267 votes. The house rose to its feet and cheered wildly. (see Letter from Clarkson)

Document

William Wilberforce's 1789 Abolition Speech

This document excerpts one of two accounts of William Wilberforce's famous Abolition speech, delivered in the House of Commons on Tuesday 12 May 1789.

As soon as ever I had arrived thus far in my investigation of the slave trade, I confess to you sir, so enormous so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition. A trade founded in iniquity, and carried on as this was, must be abolished, let the policy be what it might, let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest till I had effected its abolition. Such enormities as these having once come within my knowledge I should not have been faithful to the sight of my eyes, the use of my senses and my reason, if I had shrunk from attempting the abolition: it is true, indeed, my mind was harassed beyond measure; for when West-India planters and merchants retorted it upon me that it was the British parliament had authorized this trade; when they said to me, "It is your acts of parliament, it is your encouragement, it is faith in your laws, in your protection, that had tempted us into this trade, and has now made it necessary to us." It has become difficult, indeed, what to answer; if the ruin of the West-Indies threatened us on the one hand, while this load of wickedness pressed upon us the other, the alternative, indeed, was awful. It naturally suggested itself to me, how strange it was that providence, however mysterious in its ways, should so have constituted the world, as to make one part of it depend for its existence on the depopulation and devastation of another. I could not therefore, help, distrusting the arguments of those, who insisted that the plundering of Africa was necessary for the cultivation of the West-Indies. I could not believe that the same Being who forbids rapine and bloodshed, had made rapine and bloodshed necessary to the well-being of any part of his universe. I felt a confidence in this principle, and took the resolution to act upon it: soon, indeed, the light broke in upon me.....

.....Having heard all of this you may choose to look the other way but you can never again say that you did not know.