

The Day Slavery Died

Tow hundred years ago, statesman William Wilberforce convinced England to end the slave trade. A new film, *Amazing Grace*, celebrates his legacy.

A 20-something idealist takes on the British establishment, questions its practices, challenges its support of a global evil—and eventually wins the day. It sounds like the storyline from a blockbuster novel, not a page from human history.

William Wilberforce (1759-1833), the son of a rich merchant, became a champion of the poor in 18th and 19th century England. Laboring while physically weak, yet spiritually strong, he secured his place in world history by spearheading the abolition of the British slave trade. Because of his efforts, Parliament enacted legislation 200 years ago that was the first step in bringing an end to the practice in Britain.

Now, today's theater-going audiences have the chance to witness the example this Christian politician set by his opposition to slavery. With sumptuous period settings, a rich atmosphere and some fine acting performances, *Amazing Grace* tells this story of political intrigue in which Wilberforce's convictions led him to challenge the most powerful figures in England.

Produced by Walden Media (*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; *Because of Winn-Dixie*), the film opens February 23 in time to precede the observance of Britain's bicentennial of the abolition on March 25. On that day, attention will be given to Wilberforce's achievements and his belief in the power of God to change the heart of an empire.

A Long Struggle Begins

The great reformer was born in 1759 at Hull, a major port in northern England. His birthplace, Wilberforce House, is now a museum. Today its walls display the horrific story of slavery and his struggle to abolish it. Wilberforce's father died when he was young, and for a time he was raised by an uncle and aunt. They were friends of the fiery preacher George Whitefield and supporters of the Methodist movement, which in those days wasn't as much a denomination as a radical faction of Christianity.

The reformer was inspired by Whitefield as well as by another great revivalist, John Wesley. Their powerful ministries during the Great Awakening effectively spawned an evangelical movement that stretched from Britain to the American colonies and blended a "signs and wonders" spirituality with a social conscience. Wilberforce would draw strength from their examples during his many years in the public square opposing slavery.

Most significantly, however, he was influenced by great hymn writer John Newton and the dramatic story of the slave trader turned preacher who had been flogged for desertion from the Royal Navy and suffered himself as a slave before his conversion. It was Newton who wrote the epic song "Amazing Grace" after reflecting on his own spiritual journey.

As a teenager, Wilberforce studied at Cambridge, one of the great universities of England. But he veered away from academia and was drawn to a career in politics. He watched parliamentary debates with his friend William Pitt.

The relationship between the two political figures is depicted well in the film. They treat each other like brothers. Wilberforce is played by popular Welsh actor Ioan Gruffudd (Black Hawk Down, Fantastic Four), and Pitt is portrayed by British TV star Benedict Cumberbatch.

They portray the political action in a north London church, which was transformed by the filmmakers into the House of Commons of the 18th century. Production designer Charles Wood used old drawings as his guide for recreating the debating chamber.

Wilberforce became a Member of Parliament after winning the election in his hometown of Hull. He rediscovered the faith of his childhood and decided that if he was to live for God, then he must withdraw from public office.

Seeking counsel for the path he should follow, he went to see his hero, Newton, who was by then age 60 and a pastor in London. Their meeting is an epic moment in the movie. Newton, played by Albert Finney, appears as an ancient prophet complete with sackcloth. He is a guiding figure to Wilberforce much as Moses was to Joshua.

Newton urged his young friend not to abandon the public arena but to remain in it as a force for good.

"It is hoped and believed," Newton wrote, "that the Lord has raised you up for the good of His church and for the good of the nation."

Wilberforce also took encouragement from words written to him by Wesley: "Unless God has raised you up for this very thing,

you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you?"

Meeting Newton was a turning point for Wilberforce, and he experienced God afresh. *Amazing Grace* shows this transition well but doesn't overplay the pivotal moment. Wilberforce's political action is given more prominence than his personal piety.

The scene is a favorite of one of the movie's producers, Ken Wales (Christy). A Hollywood veteran with an impressive résumé, and himself a Christian, Wales is determined to tell Newton's story in film one day.

Wales told *Charisma* about the challenge of presenting faith on the big screen. "Too often it's done with a heavy hand," he said. "But there has to be a certain honesty about it." Authenticity is the key, he stressed.

The slavery issue became important for Wilberforce. He was encouraged by his friend Pitt to trigger parliamentary talks on the subject. By that time Pitt, at age 24, had become the youngest prime minister ever to serve Great Britain.

Upheld by a group of supporters, Wilberforce became determined to put an end to slavery throughout the British Empire. But the practice was so rooted in his country's culture, he knew he had to take the marathon one step at a time.

It was quite a challenge for the filmmakers, too. "We were trying to condense all of that history and all of Wilberforce's great accomplishments into a two-hour film," says Micheal Flaherty, president of Walden Media.

They also wanted to convey the idea that a wider circle of reformers played their part in abolition. Thomas Clarkson, for example, was a relentless British researcher of evidence against slavery, and Olaudah Equiano was a former slave who shared his story in a written eyewitness account.

A great help to the production team was having access to original correspondence between Wilberforce and others in the so-called Clapham Sect—a group of evangelical Anglicans who opposed the slave trade and shared common political views on the liberation of slaves. Some of the dialogue written for the film was taken directly from those letters.

An Empire Is Changed

When Wilberforce brought the abolition issue before Parliament in 1789, he did so with a 3-1/2 hour speech that was not as much a protest as an eloquent, heartfelt plea to end a “trade founded in iniquity.”

“As soon as ever I had arrived thus far in my investigation of the slave trade,” he said, “so enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear, that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition.”

Despite a powerful speech, the decision on abolition was delayed, and further investigation of the issue was handed over to a committee. Wilberforce, however, kept his campaign going.

Urged on by Wesley and others, he pressed for another debate. It came in 1791. This time his speech lasted four hours,

supported again by a weight of evidence as well as his belief that the country stood behind him.

Parliament, however, voted against the Abolition Bill. Wilberforce kept up the fight, redirecting some of his energy into the promotion of other causes and helping set up organizations such as Church Missionary Society and Bible Society.

The battle against slavery spilled over into the next century. In 1807, the Abolition Bill was passed with an overwhelming majority, making the slave trade illegal on British ships. Wilberforce cried with joy and relief.

But he was not content with this legislation and pursued the end of slavery itself in the British Empire. Finally, Parliament passed the Abolition of Slavery Act in 1833. Three days later, the father of the movement died. His health had deteriorated in the fight, but his fire never went out.

Thousands of Londoners mourned Wilberforce's passing. Lords and dukes carried his casket to Westminster Abbey, where he is buried. One politician who attended the service proclaimed it "the noblest and most fitting testimony to the estimation of the man."

Wilberforce influenced abolitionists in the United States, though it took nearly 60 years more to end slavery in America. The nation's first historically black college, Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio, was named in his honor, and its choir is to be featured on the Amazing Grace soundtrack.

Filmmakers hope the movie will also leave a mark and inspire a

new generation of history-makers.

Clive Price, a writer and reporter based in southern England, is the U.K. correspondent for Charisma.

New Faces in the Fight

The struggle to thwart slavery is international today. A worldwide coalition includes a British charity and a U.S. film group.

William Wilberforce's story continues to inspire modern-day campaigners for human rights. Among them is the Westminster, England-based Christian charity CARE, which has been influenced by the reformer's potent mix of personal faith and political activism.

Like Walden Media—producer of *Amazing Grace*—and others, they are part of Stop the Traffik, an international coalition of more than 300 member-groups working together to raise awareness about human trafficking and to call for change and freedom.

According to the International Labor Organization, a global alliance, at least 12.3 million people are victims of forced labor worldwide. Of these, 2.4 million are a result of human trafficking—the 21st century equivalent of the old slave trade. The United Nations claims it is the fastest growing form of international crime, generating \$7 billion per year.

“The film will be a dramatic backcloth for these issues,” says CARE Executive Chairman Rev. Lyndon Bowring. “More women and children are enslaved in the world today than there were 200 years ago. This is evil—and it must be stopped.”

“We want to make as much noise as possible about this issue,” says the Rev. Steve Chalke, chairman of Stop the Traffik.

Chalke believes the battle against slavery began with Wilberforce and still goes on today. “The holding of slaves in the British Empire became illegal [with Wilberforce],” he explains, “but slaves were still traded afterwards.

“Wilberforce and friends battled for 20 years to get the legislation through the British Parliament to outlaw the slave trade. And they battled for another 20 years to get the slaves free.”

Slavery worldwide did not die with Wilberforce, and the reformer’s concerns are as relevant as ever.

One of the latest and most chilling developments in the modern slave trade only recently emerged from the Thames, the same river that used to be an entry point for slave ships in Wilberforce’s day.

In the fall of 2001, a passer-by found the mutilated body of a young African child floating past the Tower of London. The mysterious murder of this youngster, nicknamed “Adam,” was thought to be linked to a ritual killing.

Campaigners and police now fear that children are being

trafficked not just for sex or domestic service but also for use in sacrifice, to appease pagan gods. “It’s a much bigger factor than is recognized,” Chalke says.

He points out that amid the “massive globalization” of the 21st century, modern economics converge at times with ancient practices. Some of the bridges and buildings of the world’s expanding cities are being constructed by people who hold animistic beliefs.

Chalke explains the connection: “One feature of most religions around the world is that you have to appease gods in order to be OK. You sacrifice to the god of the river so that you don’t drown while you’re building the bridge.”

Chalke is leader of , a contemporary-style congregation that meets in an old building that has its own unique tie to the anti-slavery movement.

Formerly known as Christ Church, the structure used to be the central London base for Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect. Bombed during World War II, the church was all but destroyed.

Amazingly, only its tower remained standing—the very part that had been a gift from Abraham Lincoln’s family and friends to thank the congregation for the inspiration they had been in the struggle to emancipate slaves in America.

An Old Song Gets New Life

John Newton’s “Amazing Grace,” long a staple of altar calls, has a new role as

part of a movie soundtrack.

As the film *Amazing Grace* ends, a moving rendition of the world-famous hymn for which the new movie is named is played on bagpipes.

John Newton, a slave-ship captain turned preacher of the gospel, composed “Amazing Grace” in the late 1700s after having a spiritual experience during a fierce storm on the high seas. Later, his resulting statement of faith traveled across the Atlantic on waves of revival and became rooted in American culture.

More recently, it became the song of hope in the U.S. after September 11. It was played by a Salvation Army band at Ground Zero and by pipers from the New York Police Department at Yankee Stadium.

Newton’s classic hymn, now with its prominent role in a Hollywood soundtrack, could also become an anthem for the modern day anti-slavery movement, particularly if the film has a big impact.

Walden Media, creators of the movie, enlisted worship leader Chris Tomlin to write a new part for the epic song. While researching the hymn, he discovered Newton first wrote the words as a poem and that the final verse—which starts, “When we’ve been there 10,000 years / Bright shining as the sun”—was written 100 years later.

So Tomlin restored the original ending Newton himself had intended to have: “The earth shall soon dissolve like snow / The sun forbear to shine / But God, who called me here below /

Will be forever mine.”

The finished song “Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)” is the closing track on Tomlin’s latest CD, *See The Morning*, and he sings it on the soundtrack backed by the choir of Wilberforce (Ohio) University, named in honor of William Wilberforce.