William Wilberforce

(1759-1833)[1]

A biographical essay by Leslie Stephen, edited by Kevin Belmonte

William Wilberforce was born in the High Street, Hull, [England] on 24 August 1759, was the only son of Robert Wilberforce by his wife Elizabeth, daughter of Thomas Bird of Barton, Oxfordshire. Of three other children [Elizabeth, Sarah and Ann—Sarah] alone reached maturity. The family had long been settled in Yorkshire, and took their name from the township of Wilberfoss, eight miles east of York. A William Wilberforce (the first who adopted that spelling) was engaged in the Baltic trade and was twice mayor of Hull; he also inherited a landed estate from his mother (born Davyes). Robert, the younger of this William's two sons, was partner in the house at Hull.

Robert's son, William, a very delicate child, was sent at the age of seven to the Hull grammar school. Isaac Milner, who became usher at the school in 1768, reports that Wilberforce used to be put on a table to read aloud as an example to other boys. In 1768 his father died, and he was afterwards sent to his uncle William, who had a house at Wimbledon. Thence he attended a school at Putney which 'taught everything and nothing.' His mother brought him back to Hull upon hearing that his aunt [Hannah], a sister of [merchant and philanthropist] John Thornton, was [converting] him to Methodism, and placed him under the Rev. K[ingsman] Baskett, master of Pocklington grammar school. He forgot his Methodism, became generally popular, and was specially admired for his singing. Though idle, he did well in composition, and learnt much English poetry. In October 1776 he was sent to St. John's College, Cambridge.

[Wilberforce's] grandfather and uncle were now dead, and he was heir to a fortune under his mother's sole guardianship. He was already conspicuous for his hospitality. There was always 'a great Yorkshire pie' in his rooms, to which all friends were welcome. Though never 'what the world calls licentious,' he played cards and took his part in other social amusements. He was quick enough to do well in classical examinations; and the college fellows courted him and pointed out the uselessness of study to a man of fortune. He had a slight acquaintance with [William] Pitt, his contemporary at Cambridge. During his minority his business had been entrusted to his cousin, Abel Smith (grandson of his maternal grandfather). He gave it up upon reaching his majority, and determined to take to public life.

[Wilberforce] stood for Hull at the general election of 1780. Three hundred freemen of Hull were employed on the Thames, and Wilberforce went to London to address them and give them suppers at Wapping public-houses. He often met Pitt at this time in the gallery of the House of Commons, and they formed a lasting friendship. In September 1780 he was elected for Hull. He shared the general discontent of the period, and came in as an opponent of the North administration. He spent £8,000 or £9,000 upon the election.

On arriving in London he was generally welcomed, and became at once a member of five clubs, including 'Goostrees,' a small club in which the intimacy with Pitt became still

closer. Wilberforce joined for a time in the gambling at other clubs, where he was welcomed by George Selwyn, [Charles] Fox, [Richard] Sheridan, and their friends. He gave up [gambling] upon winning £600 one night from men to whom the loss was serious. His singing was praised by the Prince of Wales, and he was famous as a mimic - especially of Lord North - until Lord Camden advised him to give up the dangerous art. He had no house on his own property, and spent his holidays for some years at a house called Rayrigg upon Windermere.

In spite of his politics, his first vote was with the government against the re-election of Sir Fletcher Norton as speaker; and he voted with pain against a later attack by Pitt upon Lord North. In general, however, he acted with Pitt, whom he supported strongly in the following struggles. Pitt had rooms in the house at Wimbledon, which, after his uncle's death, belonged to Wilberforce. They were upon the most confidential terms during Pitt's chancellorship of the exchequer and through the coalition ministry.

In the autumn of 1783 Wilberforce went with Pitt and Edward James Eliot (afterwards Pitt's brother-in-law) to France. They stayed at Rheims to practise their French, and were afterwards presented to King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette at Fontainebleau. Pitt became prime minister in December. Wilberforce stood by him faithfully during the struggle in the early part of 1784, and on the dissolution of parliament went to Yorkshire to stand in the same interest.

On 25 March he spoke to a county meeting at York, denouncing the coalition with such success that he was at once requested to stand for the county. He was again elected for Hull on 31 March, and on 7 April was triumphantly chosen member for Yorkshire, for which he elected to sit. Wilberforce's success made the greater impression as it implied the revolt of the freeholders against the great county families. In the next parliament he supported Pitt with undiminished zeal. [Charles] Fox told him in one of the debates that he called everything ‘invective’ against his friend which was not ‘the grossest flattery’.

In 1802 [Wilberforce] remark[ed] that it was ‘merciful’ that he was not [appointed to a high political] office at this period. Had he been in office he could not have made a tour which had a profound effect upon his future life. He started in October 1784, with his mother and sister, for a tour on the continent. They settled at Nice, where there were many English residents.

Wilberforce returned to support Pitt's proposals for reform by February 1785; and after the session went abroad again and met his mother at Genoa, and brought her back through Switzerland to Spa, reaching Wimbledon on 10 November. In all these journeys he was accompanied by Isaac Milner. They read [Philip] Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion* together, and afterwards studied the Greek Testament. The result was Wilberforce's ‘conversion,’ [his self-described ‘great change,’] and a resolution to lead henceforward a strictly religious life.

[Wilberforce] communicated his new state of mind to Pitt, who received the announcement with delicate kindness, and, though not converted, was not in the least

alienated. Wilberforce, though he thought that his change would make him less of a party man, continued to support his friend throughout the pre-revolutionary period, especially in the French treaty, the impeachment of [Warren] Hastings, and the regency question [during the first onset of madness in King George III]. Meanwhile John Newton (1725-1807) became his spiritual adviser.

In the session of 1786 [Wilberforce] carried through the House of Commons a bill for amending the criminal law. It was rejected in the House of Lords after a sharp attack by [Lord] Loughborough [i.e. Alexander Wedderburn], though many compliments were paid to Wilberforce's benevolent intentions. The chief provision was that the bodies of all felons - not, as hitherto, those of murderers alone - should be given up for dissection. Hanging was to be substituted for burning in the case of women. Other changes of more importance were under consideration by his supporters; but his attention was soon directed to other subjects. He also carried through the House of Commons a bill for the registration of voters in county elections.

After the session [Wilberforce] spent some time in the country meditating and forming plans for his future life. He resolved to start a society for the reformation of manners [i.e. morals], on the model of those at the end of the seventeenth century. He secured the co-operation of several bishops, obtained a royal proclamation on 1 June 1787 against vice, and started a 'society for enforcing' it. He took an active part for many years in the proceedings of this society, of which Beilby Porteus, bishop of London, was afterwards president. It was generally known as the 'Proclamation Society,' and instituted proceedings against blasphemous and indecent publications. The 'Society for the Suppression of Vice' (ridiculed by Sydney Smith) was founded in 1802 to carry out the same object. It apparently superseded the older society. In 1787 [poet and playwright] Hannah More made Wilberforce's acquaintance at Bath, and pronounced him to be a most extraordinary young gentleman for talent and piety.

The attention of philanthropists was beginning to be drawn to the question of slavery. Granville Sharp had won the Somersett case in 1772. Thomas Clarkson had written his prize essay in 1785, and was beginning to agitate. He applied to Wilberforce, who received him sympathetically, and finally, at a dinner party given by [Samuel Johnson's close friend] Bennet Langton to some of the persons interested, [Wilberforce] announced his willingness to take up the cause in parliament. A committee, chiefly of Quakers, of which Sharp was president and Clarkson a member, was then formed on 22 May 1787.

Wilberforce's biographers have sufficiently shown that he was already interested in the matter independently. He had, it is said, written about slavery in the papers 'in his boyhood.' [In 1780, he asked his friend James Gordon to inquire about the condition of slaves in Antigua], and in 1783 had talked to James Ramsay (1733-1789), whose book on slavery in 1784 excited much interest. Christian Ignatius Latrobe testifies that Ramsay's friends, Sir Charles Middleton (afterwards Lord Barham) and his wife, had suggested to Wilberforce in 1786 to take up the question; and his friend John Newton had himself been a slave-trader. He was thus prepared to sympathise with the agitators, though modestly doubting his fitness for leadership.

Wilberforce states that Pitt recommended him to take parliamentary action, and that he made up his mind at the foot of a tree in Holwood Park (Pitt's country place), where there is now a stone seat, placed by Lord Stanhope, with an inscription. Pitt told him that he must not 'lose time, or the question would be taken up by another.' Both [Charles] Fox and [Edmund] Burke had had intentions of doing something. This was in 1787. It is plain that, as Wilberforce himself said, many circumstances had turned his attention to a question already exciting interest; and it seems to matter very little how far the application from Clarkson and his friends affected or hastened his decision. It is also undeniable that, in accepting the parliamentary leadership of the cause, he was really accepting an honourable position in a movement approved by enlightened men of all parties.

[Wilberforce's] true praise is not that he was the independent originator of the agitation, but that he was admirably fitted to represent and stimulate the national conscience. His independent position, his high principles, and the singular charm of character which made him popular even with his antagonists, marked him out as an ideal leader of the cause. The committee remained independent, and employed Clarkson to collect evidence. Wilberforce conducted the parliamentary campaign in harmony with the committee, but did not actually join it until 1794.

Pitt consented that evidence upon the African trade should be read before a committee of the privy council. At the end of 1787 Wilberforce endeavoured to procure the insertion of some provisions against the slave trade into the treaty which was then being negotiated at Paris by William Eden, first lord Auckland. Though Pitt approved, nothing came of this.

In January 1788 Wilberforce had a dangerous illness, which apparently implied 'a total decay of all the vital functions.' He retired to Bath in April, his physicians declaring that he could not last a fortnight. He recovered by 'a moderate use of opium,' which he afterwards found it necessary to take for twenty years, though without increasing the dose. Meanwhile Pitt undertook the cause. A resolution moved by him was passed on 9 May, pledging the house to deal with the slave trade in the following session; and an act imposing some restrictions upon the traffic was also passed, in spite of some opposition from [Lord] Thurlow, in the House of Lords.

As soon as he was better, Wilberforce prepared himself to carry on the struggle. On 12 May 1789 he moved twelve resolutions condemning the slave trade in an elaborate speech of three hours and a half. They were supported by Pitt, Burke, and Fox, and carried without a division. The planters, however, obtained leave to produce evidence at the bar, and the matter was postponed till the next session.

During the following months Wilberforce was in constant consultation with his friends, kept open house for his supporters, had the committee to dine with him weekly, and, with William Smith (1756-1835), conducted the examinations personally in the session of 1790. In the summer he stayed with his friend Thomas Gisborne (1758-1846) at Yoxall Lodge, and worked nine hours a day at getting up the evidence. In 1791 he received a dying message from John Wesley (died 2 March) encouraging him to persevere.

On 18 April 1791 he asked leave to bring in a bill for the abolition of the slave trade, but, after a debate lasting till 3.30 a.m.., the motion was rejected by 163 to 88. The abolitionists were much discouraged, and Wilberforce proposed an out-of-doors agitation by county meetings. He also joined in the Sierra Leone Company, suggested by Granville Sharp, of which Henry Thornton was chairman. Zachary Macaulay, afterwards Wilberforce's most energetic lieutenant, was the first governor. The alarm caused by the troubles at St. Domingo in the autumn of 1791 was unfavourable to the abolitionists.

Wilberforce spent the later months of the year at Yoxall Lodge and Rothley Temple, the seat of Thomas Babington. He came to town at the end of the year, and prepared for his motion. Pitt had been startled by the St. Domingo troubles; and [George III], who had been previously favourable, was now strongly opposed to a measure which would be approved by the Jacobins. His opposition made it impossible that the question should be taken up by the ministry.

Wilberforce, however, was strengthened by meetings and petitions, and proposed a motion for abolition on 2 April. The debate lasted till 6.30 a.m.., and Pitt spoke with such eloquence that for ‘the last twenty minutes he seemed to be really inspired.’ A motion for gradual abolition was carried by 238 to 85. Dundas accepted this proposal, and on 23 April it was decided by 151 to 132, after a sharp debate, that the date of abolition should be 1 January 1796. The tactics of the opponents were now confined to delay. The resolution was finally communicated to the House of Lords in May. There, however, it was decided to hear evidence at the bar of the house, which involved a postponement to the next session.

This session, according to Wilberforce, ended the first assault upon the slave trade. Although the supporters of the trade had been forced to take to a policy of delay, the zeal of its opponents rather slackened. The war [against France] had raised other questions of absorbing interest, and fears of the revolution strengthened the obstructionists.

In 1793 Wilberforce proposed a motion with a view to hastening the action of the House of Lords, but it was rejected by sixty-one to fifty-three (26 February). A measure for abolishing the supply of slaves to foreign powers was thrown out (12 June) on the third reading by thirty-one to twenty-nine. Wilberforce succeeded in 1794 in carrying this limited measure through the House of Commons; but it was thrown out in the lords (2 May), on the excuse of waiting for the result of the general inquiry, in which, however, no progress was made.

In 1795 leave to bring in a bill for abolition was refused in the commons by seventy-eight to sixty-one; and in 1796, though he succeeded in carrying the same measure to a third reading, it was then rejected (15 March) by 74 to 70. Enough of his supporters to have carried it were, as he complains, attending a new comic opera.

Wilberforce had been deeply grieved by the war, and was forced for a time to oppose his friends. He thought that Pitt, though not desirous of war, had not been sufficiently pacific in his conduct of negotiations. A personal appeal from Pitt prevented him from speaking in this sense in the debate upon the king's message at the beginning of 1793. After the fall of

Robespierre in 1794 he considered peace to be possible. In the debate on the address (30 December 1794) he proposed an amendment in favour of peace, and he spoke again on behalf of Grey's motion for peace on 26 January 1795.

Pitt was much affected by this desertion, and his sleep, it is said, was never broken except upon this occasion and by the mutiny at the Nore. Wilberforce's agreement with the opposition was temporary. Though he had been made a citizen of France in 1792, along with [Benjamin] Franklin, [Jeremy] Bentham, [Thomas] Paine, and other uncongenial persons, he was thoroughly anti-Jacobin. He heartily supported the coercive measures brought in at the end of 1795. A meeting in opposition to them had been summoned at York for 1 December.

On hearing of the plan Wilberforce resolved to attend, and travelled down at full speed in Pitt's carriage, his own not being ready. The opponents of the measures had met in the Guildhall, when Wilberforce appeared and carried by a large majority an adjournment to the Castle Hill, the regular place of meeting. His opponents declined to follow, but he was accompanied by a majority of the meeting, to whom he delivered ‘a most incomparable speech,’ and loyal addresses were unanimously voted. The performance was supposed to have greatly strengthened the government. In the following June he was again elected for Yorkshire.

Wilberforce was now thoroughly reconciled to Pitt, whom he believed to be sincerely anxious for peace, and had many intimate conversations with him during the critical period which followed. He was a constant attendant at a committee upon the Bank Restriction Act. Meanwhile he had finished a book, [*A Practical View of Christianity*], which was published on 12 April 1797. Cadell, his publisher, ventured on his putting his name to the work [believing this step might help sell] five hundred copies. In six months 7,500 had been sold. Fifteen editions were published in England by 1824, and twenty-five in America. It was translated into French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, and German, and may be taken as the manifesto of the evangelical party of the time. Burke was said to have studied it during the last two days of his life, [‘deriving much comfort from it,’] and sent a grateful message.

On 30 May following Wilberforce married Barbara Ann, eldest daughter of Isaac Spooner of Elmdon Hall, Warwickshire. From 1792 till his marriage Wilberforce had occupied apartments in Henry Thornton's house at Battersea Rise. He now took Broomfield, a house on the south-west side of Clapham Common, close to Thornton's, then regarded as a rustic retirement. His headquarters during the parliamentary session were at his house in Palace Yard [directly across from the House of Commons]. At Clapham he was the most distinguished member of the [Clapham circle], including Thornton, Charles Grant (1746-1823), and (till his death in 1797) E.J. Eliot, Pitt's brother-in-law. Among other supporters were Zachary Macaulay and James Stephen (1758-1832), who in 1800 married his sister [Sarah], the widow since 1797 of the Rev. T[homas] Clarke of Hull.

In the summer Wilberforce often stayed with Gisborne and Babington. His health took him occasionally to Bath or the neighbourhood. His first visit with his bride was to Hannah More. In 1795 he had visited her at Cowslip Green and discussed her plans for schools. In 1798, finding himself to be richer than he had supposed, he agreed with Henry

Thornton to allow her £400 a year as a subsidy towards her various good works.

[Wilberforce] was lavish in his charities even to the injury of his estate. Besides contributing to the cause of abolition and to many of the favourite causes of his party, he had a number of regular annuitants, and was constantly helping persons, not always much deserving help, in various difficulties. He took a part in the foundation of various societies promoted by his party, especially the Church Missionary Society, which was first discussed at his house in November 1798, and the [British and Foreign] Bible Society, established with his co-operation in 1803. He was also co-operating in the 'Society for bettering the Condition of the Poor,' started by him with Sir Thomas Bernard and E.J. Eliot in 1796. The *Christian Observer*, the [widely-distributed magazine founded by] the Clapham [circle], first appeared in January 1801, and [Wilberforce] contributed [some 13 pieces] to the early [issues].

During the parliament elected in 1796 the abolition question had made slow progress. On 6 April 1797 a dilatory motion proposed by Charles Ellis, in the interest of the [West Indian] planters, was carried by 93 to 63. It recommended that the colonies themselves should be instructed to introduce measures preparing gradually for abolition of the trade. Pitt, in opposing the motion, declared that every one was now agreed that the trade should be abolished. On 15 May, however, Wilberforce's motion for leave to introduce a bill was rejected by 82 to 74. A majority of 87 to 83 rejected a similar proposal on 1 April 1798, when Wilberforce gained an ally in [George] Canning and lost one in [William] Windham. Finally, on 1 March 1799 the bill was again defeated by 84 to 54. A bill for limiting the area of the slave trade was thrown out by a small majority in the House of Lords on 5 July.

In spite of these failures, Wilberforce was convinced that the cause was gaining ground, and that the abolition was only a question of time. For the remainder of this parliament, however, the question was not brought forward in the house. The indifference of [Henry] Addington and of the majority of the house, and an illness of Wilberforce himself, prevented him from proposing any motion. He was still exerting himself in various ways, and especially to prevent an extension of the slave trade, anticipated in consequence of the cession to England of Trinidad at the Peace of Amiens. He hoped for a time that the peace might lead to a general convention of the powers for the abolition of the slave trade, and thought that if Pitt had been in office this scheme would have been proposed.

Many other matters interested [Wilberforce] at this time. The general [economic] distress [and poor harvests] caused him to spend £3,000 more than his income in 1801. He was anxious on all occasions for peace, and in May 1803 found himself again voting with Fox and [Charles] Grey against the renewal of the war. He did his best to keep Pitt and Addington upon friendly terms, and enthusiastically admired the magnanimity of Pitt in supporting the new ministry in 1803. Addington, however, was not trustworthy in regard to the slave trade, and when the breach took place Wilberforce, who still had confidential talks with Pitt, was gratified by his old friend's accession to power, and only anxious that no coalition should be made with Fox.

Wilberforce was re-elected for Yorkshire without opposition in July 1802, and in 1804 again brought forward the abolition of the slave trade. Conditions had become more

favourable. The anti-Jacobin sentiment which had animated the last parliament was no longer a dominant factor in the situation. The Irish members [of Parliament] introduced by the union [with Ireland] were almost unanimously against the slave trade, and public opinion had been greatly altered.

The abolition committee again became active, and was joined by [Henry] Brougham, Zachary Macaulay, and James Stephen; and in the next year Clarkson was again able to take part in the agitation, after a long illness. Even the West Indian interest was said to be ready for a five years' suspension. A meeting, however, of planters decided to oppose every measure against the trade (17 May 1804). Wilberforce then brought in the bill, and the first reading was carried by 124 to 49. It was carried through the House of Commons, and the third reading passed by 69 to 33 on 27 June. It was, however, again thrown out by the House of Lords.

Pitt had supported the abolition warmly, but disappointed Wilberforce by the ‘one blot’ on his behaviour in the cause. He promised to prohibit by royal proclamation the supply of slaves to the conquered colonies. The proclamation was delayed for a year, and then only issued on Wilberforce's threat of parliamentary action. In the session of 1805 Wilberforce again introduced the bill, but by some misadventure the second reading was lost (28 February) by 77 to 70.

A painful difficulty with Pitt was raised by the impeachment of Lord Melville. On 8 April 1805 [Samuel] Whitbread moved the resolutions for his censure. Pitt moved the previous question. Wilberforce, who had been deeply moved by the scandal, spoke against Melville, and after a division of 216 on each side, a casting vote against government was given by the speaker of the house.

Wilberforce's high character for impartiality gave great weight to his views, and he was said to have influenced forty votes. Wilberforce had been on friendly terms with Melville, although the delay in abolishing the slave trade had been greatly due to Melville's action. He declined to join in the deputation who carried up the final resolution to St. James's, and upon his last meeting with Melville, about 1810, they shook hands heartily.

The impeachment, however, wounded Pitt deeply, and was thought to have hastened his death. During the following months Wilberforce often saw Pitt, and they had affectionate conversations. On Pitt's death (23 January 1806) Wilberforce tried to raise a private subscription for paying his debts. He had previously taken part (in 1801) in raising £12,000 to relieve Pitt's embarrassments, and had to oppose a suggestion that this sum should be part of the debt ultimately repaid by the nation. He was one of the bearers of the banner which preceded the coffin at Pitt's funeral.

The new government of Fox and [Lord] Grenville was generally in favour of abolition, though the opposition of two members prevented it from being adopted by the cabinet. Resolutions in favour of abolition were carried by 115 to 14 on 10 June 1806. On the dissolution of parliament Wilberforce was again returned without opposition for Yorkshire in November, and afterwards finished a book upon the slave trade. It was published on 31

December, and had a marked effect.

The bill for abolishing the slave trade was introduced in the House of Lords in January 1807, and, though still opposed by a few bigots, the second reading was carried by 100 to 36, and it was sent to the House of Commons on 10 February. Counsel was heard against it during the following week.

On 23 February the chief debate took place, when [Sir Samuel] Romilly, as solicitor-general, made an eloquent comparison between Napoleon and the 'honoured man who would that day lay his head upon his pillow and remember that the slave trade was no more.' Wilberforce was too much affected to be conscious of the cheers with which the house greeted him, and the motion was carried by 283 to 16. The bill finally received the royal assent on 25 March 1807 just before the resignation of the ministry. The 'African Institution' was founded upon the passing of the act, in order to promote the effective application of the measure and the suppression of the slave trade in foreign countries.

Wilberforce was henceforth the object of unique respect. He was regarded as the authorised interpreter of the national conscience. In the general election of 1807, however, he had to stand a severe [election] contest for Yorkshire against Lord Milton and [Henry] Lascelles, who had been his colleague from 1796 to 1806. A subscription of £64,455 was raised to pay his expenses. The poll lasted for fifteen days, and at the end he had received 11,806 votes to 11,177 for Lord Milton and 10,989 for Lascelles. Many of his supporters insisted upon paying their own expenses, and the sum finally spent on his behalf was £28,600, while his opponents' charges were reckoned at £200,000.

After an autumn at Clapham, [Wilberforce] had a dangerous illness. He decided in the course of the next year to give up the Clapham house and settled at Kensington Gore, where he could discharge his parliamentary duties with less separation from his family. He also gave up his house in Palace Yard, taking lodgings in the neighbourhood.

Kensington Gore became a famous place of resort for his numerous friends and clients. He spent the early hours in private and family prayers; but a 'throng of visitors' began at breakfast-time and continued through the day. His friends admitted that his peculiar talents were displayed to most advantage in keeping up an 'extensive though simple hospitality.'

Kensington was still in the country, and his garden was full of 'lilacs, laburnums, nightingales, and swallows.' His brother-in-law James Stephen was a close neighbour, and he was courted not only by his friends but by the leaders of society. In 1814 Mme. de Stael was invited by the Duke of Gloucester to meet him at dinner. She knew him to be the 'most religious' and now pronounced him to be also the 'wittiest man in England.'

[Wilberforce] felt it right to withdraw from the 'gay and irreligious though brilliant' society, which was too exciting. At Brighton, however, in 1815, he felt bound to attend the Prince Regent [later King George IV] at the pavilion. The prince's courtesy charmed him, and no occasion of offence was given. The deaths of Henry Thornton and John Bowdler the

younger, a favourite disciple, in 1815, and of his sister in 1816, were serious losses.

Meanwhile the universal admiration and respect did not distract [Wilberforce] from his main occupations, which, after the abolition of the slave trade, became more [numerous and diverse] than before. He spoke with authority upon some of the exciting questions of the day. He offended many of his religious friends and exposed himself to much abuse by supporting Catholic emancipation. He was doubtful in 1808, but in 1813 defended the Catholic claims in a weighty speech (9 March), arguing that to exclude them from parliament was now to maintain a useless irritation. In the [military] scandals [involving Mary Ann] Clarke [and the Duke of York] (1808-9) [Wilberforce] tried to take a middle course with the help of [Henry] Thornton and others, and to secure the resignation of the Duke of York with the least possible exposure. He offended the royal family, but, though the motion supported by him was rejected, the duke's resignation fulfilled his purpose.

In 1810, again, he voted against government on the inquiries in regard to the Walcheren expedition, and wished to reprimand [Sir Francis] Burdett instead of sending him to the Tower [of London]. Generally he held the position of the independent umpire, and his amiable counsels were received with much respect and little adhesion. His health, never strong, was tried by the trouble of representing a large constituency. As early as 1802 his cousin, Lord Carrington, had thought the work too much for him, and had suggested the advantage of a close borough. In 1812 he finally decided to retire, when a vote of thanks for his services during twenty-eight years was passed at a county meeting (28 October). For the rest of his parliamentary career he sat for [the constituency of] Bramber.

Meanwhile the slavery question was still occupying much time. [Wilberforce] had been convinced that a bill for the registration of slaves in the West Indies was a necessary complement to the abolition of the slave trade. In 1812 he pressed the necessity of this measure upon [Prime Minister Spencer] Perceval, who received the proposal favourably, but was assassinated directly afterwards (11 May).

In 1813 [Wilberforce] was greatly occupied by another matter. The renewal of the charter of the East India Company would give an opportunity for ‘introducing Christian light into India.’ Upon the previous renewal in 1793 he had proposed clauses enabling the company to employ religious teachers; and he had been interested in the plan of Robert Haldane (1764-1842) for the founding a mission in India. Wilberforce had consulted various friends in 1812 and in 1813, ‘stirred up petitions,’ and examined witnesses in the House of Commons. [Lord] Castlereagh, after some difficulty, was induced to approve, and on 22 June Wilberforce spoke for two hours with his old eloquence in support of Castlereagh's resolution. The result was the foundation of the bishopric of Calcutta, first held by Thomas Fanshaw Middleton.

The slavery question was revived by the events of 1814. The African Institution resolved to postpone the registration bill in order to press for a general convention. Wilberforce applied to Lord Liverpool and to Castlereagh on the subject, and was greatly disappointed at the absence of any satisfactory stipulation by the French government in 1814. He afterwards had interviews with the Emperor Alexander [of Russia] on the subject.

On 17 June a meeting was held in Freemasons' Hall, when Wilberforce, as ‘the great father of our cause,’ was entrusted with a petition to the House of Commons. He spoke effectively in the house and carried an address to the prince regent, and afterwards an amendment to the address upon the peace. He called for petitions, of which more than eight hundred with nearly one million signatures were presented.

[Wilberforce] also printed a letter to [Prince] Talleyrand [of France] which was widely circulated. Talleyrand replied dexterously and evasively. On 15 November Wilberforce heard that the French government had prohibited the slave trade north of Cape Formosa. Soon afterwards Napoleon, on his return from Elba, proclaimed a total abolition, which was afterwards accepted by the government of the restoration.

The registration bill had meanwhile come up again in the beginning of 1815. The government declined to support it, although Wilberforce offered in return for such support to speak on the Corn Bill. Stephen hereupon resigned his seat in parliament. Wilberforce declared that the refusal implied an unwillingness of government to support any measures for improving the condition of the slaves, and considered himself at liberty to take up the question of emancipation.

In 1792 he had emphatically denied that he contemplated immediate emancipation, for which he considered the negroes to be still unfit. He spoke to the same effect even at the time of the abolition of the trade (17 March 1807). It soon became evident that regulations which were the necessary result of suppressing the slave trade could only lead to emancipation. He was not as yet prepared, however, for a direct agitation.

During the next years [Wilberforce] had much correspondence with Christophe, emperor of Haiti. Wilberforce tried to obtain his recognition at the congress of Aix-la-Chapelle, gave him good advice, procured schoolmasters, professors, and governesses for him and his people, and formed plans which came to nothing on Christophe's death at the end of 1821.

Wilberforce supported the government during the critical period which followed the peace. A speech in favour of the Corn Bill of 1815, which he had made after much hesitation, caused threats of personal violence, and his house at Kensington Gore had to be garrisoned for a time by soldiers. In 1817 he was on the secret committee which considered the popular discontent, and gave the weight of his authority to the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act which followed. He was attacked by Burdett (27 June 1817) as ‘the honourable and religious member.’ The house resented the rudeness.

One of his last conspicuous appearances was caused by the Queen Caroline troubles in 1820. When, upon the queen's return to England, Castlereagh moved for a committee of inquiry, Wilberforce obtained an adjournment of the debate (7 June) in order to give time for an arrangement. He carried on a negotiation with [Henry] Brougham, which was only broken off upon the question of the restoration of the queen's name to the liturgy, a demand of which he personally approved. On 22 June he carried a resolution in the House of Commons recommending the queen not to insist upon her claims, and was one of four members who on

29 June conveyed this resolution to her. Brougham appears to have given him assurances of her consent, which encouraged him to make this fruitless proposal.

Wilberforce's health was becoming weak. At the end of 1821 he was much grieved by the death of his eldest daughter [Barbara] on 30 December. Though advised to avoid [overly stressful or physically taxing] work, he still took part in the growing agitation against slavery. He wrote in 1822 an *Address to the Emperor of Russia*, which was sent to all the members of the legislatures in France, Belgium, Spain, and Portugal.

[Wilberforce] made an able speech against the introduction of slaves into the Cape on 25 July, and in March 1823 [published *An Appeal on Behalf of Negro Slaves*] which was followed by the formation of the Anti-slavery Society. A motion against slavery by Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, on 15 May, was met by resolutions proposed by Canning in favour of amelioration of the system, which Wilberforce persuaded his followers to accept. On 16 March 1824 he again spoke vigorously upon slavery, but on the 19th was taken seriously ill. He made one more speech upon the same topic, and then had another attack, which made his retirement necessary in March 1825.

[Wilberforce] had already given the lead of the [slavery abolition] cause to [Thomas Fowell] Buxton, whom he now requested to move for a new writ for Bramber [a procedure through which Wilberforce would resign from Parliament]. [Wilberforce] resolved to leave London, and bought a little property of 140 acres at Highwood Hill, near Mill Hill. There he lived quietly, enjoying his garden and visited by his friends. Mackintosh went to see him, and described him as the 'most amusable of men.' No one 'touched life at so many points,' and he had still all the charm of youth.

On 15 May 1830 he made his last public appearance at a meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society, when Clarkson was also present and moved that Wilberforce should take the chair. In 1831 he had to leave Highwood in consequence of a great diminution of fortune [brought on through poor investments by his eldest son]. Six persons, one of them a West Indian and another his old political opponent, Lord Fitzwilliam, made offers which 'would have at once restored his fortune.'

Wilberforce, however, resolved to find a 'delightful asylum' with his wife under the roofs of his two sons - Robert, [then] vicar of East Farleigh in Kent; and Samuel, [then] vicar of Brightstone or Brixton in the Isle of Wight. Wilberforce divided his time between the two. His second daughter [Elizabeth] died soon afterwards.

In May 1833 [Wilberforce] went to Bath, after an attack of influenza. His strength, however, declined, and in July he was moved to London. He there heard of the second reading of the bill for the abolition of slavery. He gradually became weaker, and died on 29 July 1833.

[Wilberforce] had chosen Stoke Newington, where his sister and eldest daughter were buried, as the place for his own grave. In compliance with a requisition signed by all members of parliament whose names could be obtained [at] the time, he was buried at

Westminster Abbey on 5 August. The lord chancellor and the speaker of the House of Commons were among the pall-bearers. A statue was placed in Westminster Abbey by public subscription, a column was erected in memory of him at Hull, and a county asylum for the blind was founded in his honour at York. Wilberforce was survived by his four sons: William, Robert Isaac, Samuel and Henry William. His two daughters died before him.

One most obvious characteristic of Wilberforce was the singular personal attractiveness of which his biographers confessed their inability to give any adequate description. The *Recollections [of William Wilberforce]* by John Scandrett Harford and the article in Sir James Stephen's *Ecclesiastical Biography*, founded on personal [friendship] in [Wilberforce's] later years, give some impression of the singular vivacity and playfulness which qualified him to be a favourite of society in his early days.

[Wilberforce's] transparent kindliness and simplicity made him, like [Charles] Fox, lovable even to his antagonists. His freedom from the coarser indulgences which stained Fox's private life implied also a certain unfitness for the rough game of politics. He [stood] aside from the world of corruption and devot[ed] himself to purely philanthropic measures.

The charm of [Wilberforce's] character enabled him to take the part of moral censor without being morose; and the religious views which in other [evengelicals] were generally regarded as gloomy, if not pharisaical, were shown by his example to be compatible with indomitable gaiety and sociability. Though profoundly convinced of the corruption of human nature in general, he loved almost every particular human being.

[Wilberforce's] extraordinary breadth and quickness of sympathy led to his taking part in a vast variety of undertakings, which taxed the strength of a delicate constitution and prompted an almost reckless generosity. The slavery agitation happily concentrated his powers upon one main question of the day. His more one-sided supporters, who sometimes lamented the versatility which prevented him from confining his powers to one object, perhaps failed to observe how much his influence even in that direction was strengthened by his sensibility to other claims. He could not be regarded as a fanatic of one idea.

[Wilberforce] held a unique position in his time as one who was equally respected by his Tory allies, by such orthodox Whigs as [Henry] Brougham and Sydney Smith, and by such radicals as [Sir Samuel] Romilly and [Jeremy] Bentham. His relations to his own family seem to have been perfect, and no one had warmer or more lasting friendships. Though some injudicious admirers tried to raise his merits by depreciating the claims of his allies and predecessors in the anti-slavery movement, it may safely be said that there are few heroes of philanthropy whose careers will better stand an impartial investigation.

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[1] This public domain biographical essay has been edited and expanded by Kevin Belmonte. The original essay appears in Gordon College's set of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, Ed. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, 63 vols., (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1885-1901).