Chapter Fifty-Three

THE NEW MAN: WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

If one person had to be singled out as embodying the change which overcame the established classes between 1790 and 1820, it would be William Wilberforce. By 1790 he had already taken on many of the characteristics we now think of as quintessentially Victorian: a deep Christian piety, a devotion to family life, someone for whom wealth and social status were enabling factors in a career dedicated to good causes. His private life was beyond reproach, and a sense of fair dealing motivated his every action. The Christian life for him was one of unremitting discipline and giving. But it was also one of perpetual joy, something which he radiated to everyone he met. Wilberforce's life pivots around the central act of his conversion, which took him in one sense out of the ethos of the eighteenth century into that of the nineteenth. It was the moment when 'enthusiasm', which had been marginalised in its early stages, seized hold of members of the highest levels of society with far-reaching consequences.

William Wilberforce was born on 24 August 1759, the son of a mercantile family, based in Kingston-upon-Hull, which had made its fortune in the Baltic trade. As a child he was abnormally small and was dogged from birth with indifferent health, including weak eyesight, but he was endowed with huge physical and mental energy, a remarkable charm of manner, and a spontaneous natural generosity. Wilberforce's education followed that which was the norm for members of the prosperous classes, first to the local grammar school and afterwards to a boarding-school, in his case one close to London at Putney. His father died when he was nine and he was sent to live with an aunt and uncle who owned a villa at Wimbledon. It was there that he was exposed for the first time to people who were 'enthusiasts', being friends of the great evangelical minister, George Whitefield. This must have affected the boy, for his mother took coach south and removed him to a boarding-school in Yorkshire. To be tinged with Methodism would have spelt social ruin.

At fifteen Wilberforce went up to Cambridge, having grown into an engaging

youth with a quick wit, fine singing voice and ease of manner. He was also very rich. The universities at this point acted more as a finishing school for young men of his class, the time being given over to enjoying the good things of life, including gambling, and in forming a network of friendships which would bind him into the country's ruling élite. One of these was the younger Pitt, who was to be a life-long friend. Both wished to enter politics and both were elected to the same Parliament in the same year, 1780. Wilberforce became a member of what was the Pitt set, a group which led a whirling social life dedicated to assemblies, dances, visits to the theatre and the opera, and the London pleasure gardens. Wilberforce was odd man out in one sense only for his background was trade, but his accomplished style compensated for that and opened every door, including those of the most exclusive clubs. In 1784 he was returned again as a member of Parliament, but this time with the added prestige of representing his county.

Wilberforce was by then twenty-five, and set off with his mother and sister to spend the winter on the French-Italian riviera, taking with them a clergyman of the conventional kind named Isaac Milner. Through Milner, the embers of Wilberforce's childhood encounters with the evangelicals were stirred, and he began to study the New Testament in Greek. Then, in October 1785, came what he called the 'great change', a conversion crisis in which he was engulfed by spiritual anguish. Every day he rose early to pray. 'I was,' he wrote, 'filled with sorrow.' Yet he knew that to adopt a reformed lifestyle would mean withdrawing from the fashionable and worldly circles in which he moved.

That this did not happen he owed to the advice of an old evangelical cleric, John Newton, whose counsel he sought. Newton wrote to Wilberforce: 'It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of His church and for the good of the nation.' In that he was prophetic, for the norm for anyone who became 'enthusiastic' was to move within a small like-minded circle. Newton's advice to Wilberforce was for him to retain his public life and build on it. That decision was to affect not only Wilberforce but through him the behaviour of a large section of the upper classes.

Besides living a life of Christian prayer and discipline, Wilberforce began to educate himself to make up for all the wasted years. Still a member of Parliament he was as yet a man without a mission, but that came quickly. His friends in the House were two other evangelical members, Sir Charles Middleton and Sir Richard Hill. At the former's house in the country he met James Ramsay, the local rector, who, in 1784, had published an attack on the transportation and use of African slaves on the colonial sugar plantations in the West Indies. This was a large and a lucrative trade,

the slaves being seized on the coast of East Africa and transported by sea in appalling conditions, so much so that a large percentage of them died on the way. They were then formed into gangs of slave labour on the plantations, subject to the most barbarous and inhuman cruelty. Ramsay wrote asking how men treated like this could ever listen to the Word of God from those who kept them in such miserable servitude, arguing for an end to the trade and the emancipation of the slaves. The book produced a storm of abuse from those whose fortunes depended on its continuance, but there were others who were sympathetic. A second book followed, and this was the one which converted not only Wilberforce but also his friend Pitt to the cause of the Abolition of the Slave Trade.

A medallion designed for Josiah Wedgwood depicting a slave in chains. Issued in 1786 it came at the very outset of the long campaign for the abolition of slavery.

'My grand arraignment of this most detestable and guilty practice, the Slave Trade,' Wilberforce wrote, looking back in 1819, 'is because it is chargeable with holding in bondage, in darkness and in blood, one third of the habitable globe . . . ' In 1786 he moved to a house next to the Lords and gradually a group came together in support of the cause, but the real moment of decision came a year later on 2 May when he, Pitt and William Grenville sat under an oak on a warm May spring evening and Pitt said, 'Wilberforce, why don't you give notice of a motion on the subject of the Slave Trade? . . . Do not lose time, or the ground will be occupied by another.'

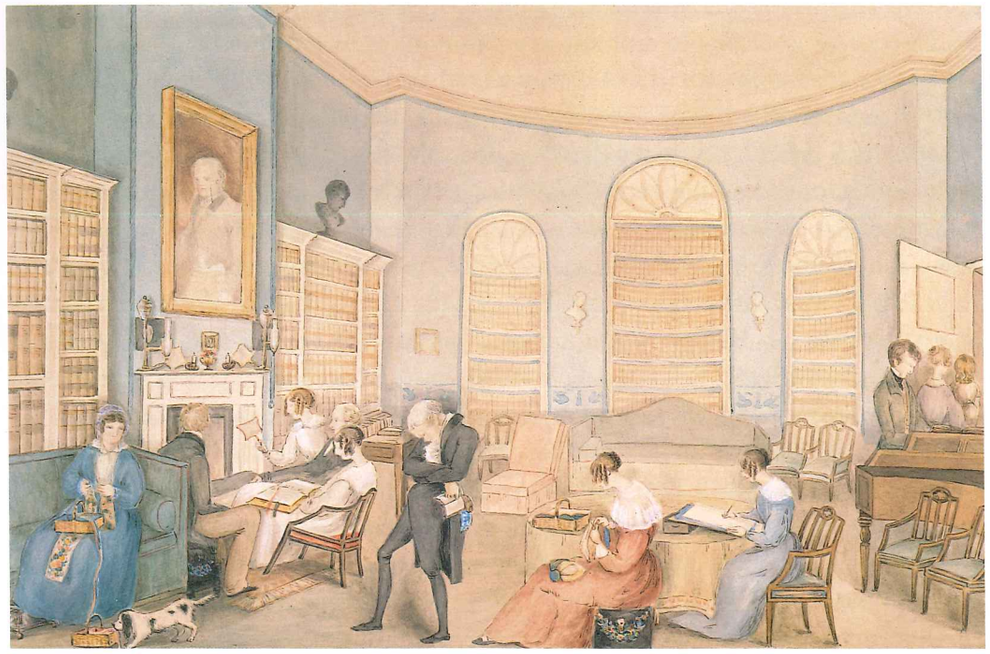
On 28 October 1787 Wilberforce wrote: 'God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners.' By the latter he meant morals, for he had launched an attack on the decadence of the upper classes. Wilberforce, in short, determined to make goodness fashionable. He resigned from his clubs and began to create an association of his peers who would govern their lives by decency of behaviour. One of these was the playwright, Hannah More, who produced *Thoughts on the Manners of the Great*, in which she argued that the poor could only be helped by reforming the rich. In 1789 she and Wilberforce began the foundation of schools to teach reading to the rural poor. She perceptively wrote of him: 'I declare you are serving God by making yourself agreeable . . . to worldly but well disposed people, who would never be attracted to religion by grave and severe divines, even if such fell their way.'

The Abolition of the Slave Trade was to prove a lifetime's labour. It began on 22

May 1787 when a committee was formed. Two years later Pitt moved that the trade should be investigated and Wilberforce spoke eloquently for three-and-a-half hours, but they were outflanked by the opposition, which demanded more evidence. By the time that that was forthcoming the French Revolution had broken out, engendering deep unease at the idea of any change so that when the House divided on the issue in April 1791, the Abolitionists lost the vote by 163 to 88. A year later, Pitt carried a resolution that 'the Trade . . . ought to be abolished'. That indication of intent was to take over fifteen years to reach fruition.

In 1793 Wilberforce made his home in a squat Queen Anne House at Battersea Rise on a small estate at Clapham, then wholly rural. His life now pivoted between work in the House, his circle at Clapham dedicated to the reform of society, and visits to Bath for his health. Wilberforce's conversion led him to rise above party, and to take into the political mainstream a whole series of causes: public hangings, the humanising of prison life, medical aid for the poor, and their education through the Charity and Sunday School movements. In 1796 the Bettering Society was formed to investigate problems engendered by poverty. It gained an

A sketch of the library at Battersea Rise about 1824 with William Wilberforce and his family. No one is idle, the women either sewing, reading or drawing. The virtuous pattern of home life established by Wilberforce was to become a Victorian ideal.



influential ally in the father of the future Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, who, in 1802, pushed through with Wilberforce's help an Act to control the conditions of work, and to limit the excessive hours which children laboured in the new factories. Out of this Society arose the British Institution for 'diffusing the knowledge and facilitating the general introduction of useful mechanical inventions and improvements; and for teaching . . . the application of science to the common purposes of life.' It was to the Bettering Society that Humphry Davy was to demonstrate his miner's lamp, and Michael Faraday his discovery of electro-magnetism.

All of this activity contributed to the change of atmosphere pervading the governing classes, one hastened by the publication in 1797 of Wilberforce's A *Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in the Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*. It sold 7,500 copies and went through five impressions in six months, a best-seller by the standards of the age. The book took the reader on a journey, showing how Christianity should and could guide the politics, habits and attitudes of the nation. It was a book which contributed to creating the ethos of the Victorian age and for decades a copy found its place in every home. In it, Wilberforce outlined the life of the regenerate Christian as it was lived out through personal character and public acts. Penitence and spiritual anguish were counterpoints to joy and spiritual sunshine. Of Wilberforce himself a friend wrote: 'His presence was as fatal to dullness as to immorality, his mirth as irresistible as the first laughter of childhood.'

The year before the book appeared he married Barbara Spooner, the daughter of a Birmingham banker. Gradually Battersea Rise became home to a burgeoning young family and a routine of life evolved which was increasingly to become upper class society's norm, with family prayers, hard work and Sunday observance as its lynchpins. All through these years the efforts to secure Abolition went on but it was not until 1807 that the bill was at last passed with the majority of 267. The Solicitor-General spoke at length, contrasting the almost saintly figure of Wilberforce with that monster across the Channel, Napoleon. At the close of his speech the House cheered and Wilberforce sat with his head bowed, the tears streaming down his face.

Old Bishop Porteus of London wrote of that day: 'Here then after a glorious struggle of eighteen years a final period is at length put in this country to the most execrable and inhuman traffic that ever disgraced the Christian world.' On 25 March 1807 the Abolition of the Slave Trade became law. But it was one thing to pass such an act and quite another to enforce it, added to which the optimistic belief that the planters would soon emancipate their slaves proved unfounded.

Sir Thomas Lawrence's unfinished portrait of Wilberforce at the age of sixty-nine conceals the curvature of the spine he suffered from. It captures, however, his beguiling charm.

Shortly after Wilberforce and his family moved to a house in Kensington Gore. By then he had become a legend, the nation's conscience, and the house was thronged with visitors consulting the man who had come to epitomise reform. The causes he espoused read like a roll call for the values of a new age: parliamentary reform, support for Elizabeth Fry in her prison reformation, the humanisation of the criminal code, the establishment of Trustee Savings Banks, the creation of a National Gallery, involvement in the British and Foreign Bible Society, speaking in favour of Catholic Emancipation and against the evils of transportation, and taking part in founding what was to become the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Dogged by poor sight, weak lungs and colitis, as he got older he developed curvature of the spine, so that year by year his head fell forward a little more until it finally rested on his chest. To check this he wore 'a steel girdle cased in leather' but no one knew. They would register on encounter only a smiling and joyous presence. Wilberforce died on 29 July 1833 at the age of seventy-four, a nationally revered figure who was buried with full public honours in Westminster Abbey. With him a new age had dawned, that of reform.