

ANGLICANS AND THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

Robert Moore

THE GREAT ACHIEVEMENT of Wilberforce and the Clapham sect, in alliance with Quakers, was to turn the Slave Trade from an economic affair into a moral one with political implications. The Clapham Sect was a fellowship of some of the best intellects in England, Evangelical Anglicans all of them and mostly rich.

To the supporters of the Trade, Africans were commodities to be bought and shipped to the West Indies. “Were they not Human?” They considered that question irrelevant.

Not so for Wilberforce and company. It was against everything Christ stood for. Africans were God’s children, and both the economic principle of the trade and its inhumanity were an outrage against the Christian faith.

The movement to abolish the Slave Trade began in 1787 and took on the most powerful vested interest in the United Kingdom: the West India Lobby — British plantation owners and their bankers. Wilberforce did not realise how immensely powerful those people were when he introduced his Bill to abolish the Slave Trade. And It took him 20 years to get Parliament to declare the Trade illegal. He began with the audacity of hope and continued with the doggedness of faith until in 1807 when he achieved his purpose.

Wilberforce’s great ally outside Parliament was Thomas Clarkson, a mountain of a man, an Anglican by affiliation and a Quaker by temperament. “ His strength is as the strength of ten because his heart is pure.” And his tenacity of purpose was legendary.

He worked comfortably with the Quakers and they were masterful at creating groups to change public opinion. Being business people, they had printing presses producing pamphlets and small books showing the evil of the Slave Trade. They were wizards at networking and their superbly worded petitions to Parliament sent shivers down the spines of many of the members of the West India Lobby.

They invented the logo: one that became famous: a chained slave, with an arm out-stretched, appealing to someone with the words, “Am I not a man and a Brother?” And it was everywhere.

These Quakers were the originators of Civil Society which we Canadians hold in high esteem. The Quakers held debates about slavery all over Britain and women were allowed to speak at them, which appalled men of the upper and middle classes. Even more , Quakers doffed their hats to nobody, royalty not excepted.

The day after the great Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was passed, William Wilberforce said, to another member of the Clapham Sect, “What else shall we Abolish?” The answer that came back was “the lottery.” Not that he expected it to be “slavery” at that point. Wilberforce and his Clapham colleagues assumed that, with no new arrivals from Africa, planters would be compelled to treat their slaves more humanely, especially female slaves as the expected mothers of healthy broods. Humane treatment would lead to better field and factory work by the

slaves who would, over time, buy themselves out of slavery. And so Slavery would die a natural death. And, in its place there would be a contented labour force with no strong desire to leave the plantations.

In short, they believed in the **gradualness of inevitability**. Slavery was too horrible an institution to endure for very long. But it was better to have it expire peacefully than abolish it immediately and create chaos in West Indian society. This was thinking in Technicolor.

The plantation owners and operators were tough realists. Slavery had become a social system from which the white plantation hierarchy derived their sense of importance in the world. The plantation bosses saw themselves as aristocrats — **aristocrats of the skin**. Corrupted by absolute power over human beings, they could not envision life any other way. So it would take a revolution from above or one from below to change the system. Further, the West Indian planters of, say, the period 1810–1820, watched the institution of American slavery in the US growing ever more vigorous and gaining ever more ground. There was no breaking of the chains there. So why, they asked, should it happen in the West Indies?

Answer: The British West Indies were colonies of a Mother country where slavery was being severely questioned — difficult to hide that from the slaves!

Methodists and Moravians and Baptists got newspapers from England and those slaves who could read told the others. Besides, the planter class talked about what the opponents of slavery were doing in Britain at table as if the slaves were not there.

Barbados, then and now, has always had a reputation for “political sobriety.” So, no one expected a slave uprising on that island. But, in 1816, a major Slave uprising broke out — on Easter Sunday (with its message of new life!). It was crushed, with difficulty, by white troops, and alarm bells went off right across the West Indies. Emancipationists, with their abolition talk and writings in Britain, got the blame.

In 1823, Another major slave revolt occurred in Guyana, led by a deacon of a London Missionary Society chapel. It was brutally put down. But the blame was not put on the slave leaders but on the Minister of the London Missionary Society, John Smith — who was sentenced to death. Reprieved by Order of Parliament, he died before this decision could be effected. An Anglican priest, Rev. Stanton Austin, thought it was scandalous that John Smith could be considered the “leader” of the rebellion. And he had said so in public. His defence of Smith caused him to be drummed out of the colony.

Both these rebellions undermined the conviction that, with no Slave Trade, the slave system would become kinder and gentler. By 1818, Wilberforce and Clarkson had reluctantly come to the view that Slavery would not slowly fade away. Emancipation would have to come from above, from Westminster.

But it still bothered many of the abolitionists that a sudden end to slavery could leave in its wake mayhem. In other words, a race would be freed — but what had become “acceptable” social norms would be destabilized. They were in a state of in-betweenity: they wanted slavery abolished from Westminster, but they also wanted the ex-slaves to remain on the plantations as paid labourers to sustain the sugar industry — and by the regularity of unforced labour — begin to be civilised.

After all, their conviction could be summed up as follows: “Those who work for their betters are the industrious peasants; those who work for themselves are the idle peasants.”

Noticing that the rebel leaders were likely to be literate Christians, the policy makers at Westminster concluded that more revolts were highly possible.

So Parliament decided, in 1824, to start taking the savagery out of the slave system. The process was called “Amelioration” and much of the thinking that went into it was Anglican.

Instructions were sent to the West Indian Legislatures to pass laws that would:

1. Ensure religious instruction “of the right type” to the slaves
2. Permit and legalise the marriage of slaves
3. Stop Sunday labour
4. Forbid flogging and curtail the planter’s power to punish slaves.

Inevitably, these instructions were largely ignored, except in Guyana and Trinidad where there were no planter legislatures. In the islands with legislatures, the watchword was, “comply but do not enforce.”

Of course, for most of the Parliamentarians, the “right type” of Christianity was the Church of England. The religion of the Baptist, Moravian and Methodist bodies took the Bible too literally. So the Church of England presence was to be “beefed up.” The Anglican Church did not have Elders and all the clergy would be white. So the Blacks could not rise to positions of authority, thus giving them the confidence to buck the system. Besides, at Sunday worship Blacks and whites would be made to sit separately, thereby discouraging any ideas of equality.

Accordingly, Parliament created two dioceses in the West Indies: one for Jamaica including the Bahamas and Belize; the other for Barbados, including the Windward and Leeward Islands and Guyana, with one Bishop for each diocese.

Their task? Make deferential Anglicans of the slaves and uncruel masters of the planters. Therefore, the Anglican Church was required to go straight down the middle, pulling both sides closer together.

It was an enormously difficult undertaking. The Anglican clergy were expected by most of the planter class to de-emphasise the more inflammatory parts of the Bible (like the Book of Exodus), and tone down the language of the Old Testament prophets.

Desmond Tutu has said that the Bible in the hands of oppressed people is a ticking time bomb.

Clearly, this form of Anglicanism could not nurture a capacity for Black leadership in its worship or organisation. That is why no leaders against slavery emerged from it.

Back in Britain, in 1824, an extraordinary thing happened. A woman named Elizabeth Heyrick, a Quaker, published a pamphlet called *Immediate, Not gradual Abolition*. It was full of mockery for those in Parliament, like Wilberforce who spoke the language of gradualness. One demand proved quite shocking, even to those in favour of Emancipation: Parliament should compensate the slaves, not the slave owners. Its effect? Some 70 anti-slavery women’s organisations sprang into being across the country. Another woman activist, Lucy Townsend, an Anglican, founded another crop of anti-slavery societies. The members of these societies used the boycott of sugar and any by-product of sugar, like cake or biscuits, to drive home their point. They campaigned door to door, like modern political candidates before an election.

Wilberforce and his associates were mystified. There was not a world in which women did such things.

But all this effort did not budge Parliament. For the majority of parliamentarians, the death of slavery was simply not on the cards.

Although these women failed to achieve their objective, they set the pattern for the next round of anti-slavery campaigns, led by male activists.

By 1830, it was clear that Britain was in a ferment: all over the country, groups were agitating for a parliament that would reflect the changes in the country. The anti-slavery movement, with strategic wisdom, seized the opportunity to link the reform of Parliament with the abolition of the slavery.

Between 1830 and 1832, the reform of Parliament was a hot topic everywhere in Britain. But another topic arose from an event that had occurred not in Britain but in Jamaica.

An immense slave rebellion.

It started on the day after Boxing Day in 1831 and spread throughout the northern part of the island and it is estimated that some 20,000 slaves were involved in burning and looting. More than 200 plantations in north-west Jamaica suffered 1.1 million pounds damage.

The rebel leader, Samuel Sharpe by name, was literate, widely respected, a spellbinding speaker, and chief deacon of the Baptist chapel in Montego Bay. He told his followers that the King of England had decreed their freedom, which was being withheld from them. Beginning with something like a “sit-down strike,” it escalated into a full-scale revolt which took the army over a month to subdue. Sharpe was caught, imprisoned and hanged. His words on the scaffold were memorable: “I would rather die on the scaffold than live in slavery.”

The news of this rebellion sent a shock-wave through Members of Parliament and His Majesty’s government. The reaction was clear: if slavery was not abolished by the government in Britain, it would be abolished by violence in the West Indies as many people expected more, and increasingly violent revolts.

One Member of Parliament put the matter wittily:

“If, as some say, the slave is unfit for freedom, he is even more unfit for slavery.”

This was grist for the abolitionists’ mills, and, when Parliament was finally reformed and the franchise slightly expanded, a bill was passed bringing an end to slavery in the West Indies.

Wilberforce died shortly afterwards with the knowledge that emancipation had come at last.

But, there was a “catch” to the Emancipation Act. Legally free though the ex-slaves were, they were required by law to give 7 ½ hours, 6 days a week, to their former plantation owners without wages. This was called, euphemistically, “Apprenticeship” and lasted for six years. The compensation that was so vehemently called-for by the radical women of the early 1820’s was given not to the slaves.... but to the former slave owners: 20 million pounds (2.2 billion dollars in today’s money).

The widespread fear among the plantocracy that the complete liberty of the ex-slaves would be accompanied by violence was completely misplaced. They went to all the churches to celebrate their total emancipation and behaved with great dignity.

The Anglican contribution to the end of slavery was largely concentrated in Parliament, which, even after it was reformed, had a large majority of Anglicans. But, as I mentioned, there were anti-slavery movements in the society where Anglicans shared their opposition to slavery with Quakers, in particular, but also with Methodist, Moravians and Congregationalists. These were the fore-runners of what we now call civil society action.

The two Anglican Bishops sent to the Caribbean in 1824, and their clergy, spent much of their energy in trying to make the slaves not so much docile as respectful of the plantocracy and industrious in their work. But the Bishops reported confidentially to the Archbishop of Canterbury that slavery was on its last legs. Their opinions were pivotal in strengthening the resolve of the British Government to abolish the institution.

For me, Thomas Clarkson best symbolizes the movement to abolish slavery. He was both an Anglican and a Quaker, thus uniting in himself two of the most important aspects of the campaign to abolish slavery. He died in 1848 at the age of 85, having outlived all of his colleagues in the struggle.

At his funeral, which was held at an Anglican church, an unprecedented thing happened — as they lowered his body into the grave, the many Quakers who attended the funeral, most of them of a new generation, did what they would not even do for the King of England — they took their hats off!