PART SEVEN

THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE, IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS, PICTURES THE SLAVE TRADE IN ALL ITS HORROR

[May 12, 1789]

THE CRUSADE against Negro slavery calls up in American minds such names as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Harriet Beecher Stowe, John Brown, and Abraham Lincoln, but decades before the founding of Garrison's Liberator, in 1831, a group of dedicated and tireless Englishmen had started the great agitation. As early as 1772, Granville Sharp won a case before the famous judge, Lord Mansfield, establishing the principle that any slave who landed on British soil was free. Thomas Clarkson's special contribution was the amassing of evidence of the iniquities of the slave trade, for which purpose he examined hundreds of ships and traced the fate of thousands of Negroes. He joined vigorously in the work of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, took a lively interest in fugitive slaves in Canada, and did what he could to prevent the annexation of Texas by the United States.

Associated with Sharp and Clarkson in the British abolition movement was the statesman and humanitarian leader, William Wilberforce (1759–1833). The son of a prosperous commercial family, he went to Cambridge, where he became one of the few intimate friends of the cold and aloof Mr. Pitt. Entering Parliament in 1786, his wit and eloquence soon made him popular and prominent. Five years later he experienced what has been called an evangelical "conversion," which left a strong imprint of piety and moral courage on his character. In the year 1788 he suffered a grave illness and was not expected to live more than a fortnight. As he lay on what he thought was his deathbed, he exacted from his friend Pitt, now Prime Minister, the promise to do what he could for the abolition of the slave trade. A few months later, Pitt, with the enthusiastic support of Fox and Burke, persuaded Commons to take up the question of the slave trade at the next session, and a bill was accordingly drawn up.

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE PICTURES THE SLAVE TRADE

Having recovered his health by May, 1789, Wilberforce addressed the Commons on the distant, almost unimaginable horrors of the slave trade.

"The number of deaths speaks for itself."

I N OPENING, concerning the nature of the slave trade, I need only observe that it is found by experience to be just such as every man who uses his reason would infallibly conclude it to be. For my own part, so clearly am I convinced of the mischiefs inseparable from it that I should hardly want any further evidence than my own mind would furnish by the most simple deductions. Facts, however, are now laid before the House. A report has been made by his Majesty's privy council, which, I trust, every gentleman has read, and which ascertains the slave trade to be just such in practice as we know, from theory, it must be. What should we suppose must naturally be the consequence of our carrying on a slave trade with Africa? With a country vast in its extent, not utterly barbarous, but civilized in a very small degree? Does anyone suppose a slave trade would help their civilization? Is it not plain that she must suffer from it? That civilization must be checked, that her barbarous manners must be made more barbarous; and that the happiness of her millions of inhabitants must be prejudiced with her intercourse with Britain? Does not everyone see that a slave trade carried on around her coasts must carry violence and desolation to her very center? That in a continent just emerging from barbarism, if a trade in men is established, if her men are all converted into goods, and become commodities that can be bartered, it follows they must be subject to ravage just as goods are; and this, too, at a period of civilization when there is no protecting legislature to defend this their only sort of property in the same manner as the rights of property are maintained by the legislature of every civilized country. We see then, in the nature of things, how easily the practices of Africa are to be accounted for. Her kings are never compelled to war, that we can hear of, by public principles, by national glory, still less by the love of their people. In Europe it is the extension of commerce, the maintenance of national honor, or some great public object that is ever the motive to war with every monarch; but, in Africa, it is the personal avarice and sensuality of their kings; these two vices of avarice and sensuality, the most powerful and predominant in natures thus corrupt, we tempt, we stimulate in all these African princes, and we depend upon these vices for the very maintenance of the slave trade. Does the king of Barbessin want
brandy? he has only to send his troops, in the nighttime, to burn and desolate a village; the captives will serve as commodities that may be bartered with the British trader. What a striking view of the wretched state of Africa does the tragedy of Calabar furnish! Two towns, formerly hostile, had settled their differences, and by an intermarriage among their chiefs had each pledged themselves to peace; but the trade in slaves was prejudiced by such pacifications, and it became, therefore, the policy of our traders to renew the hostilities. This, their policy, was soon put in practice, and the scene of carnage which followed was such that it is better, perhaps, to refer gentlemen to the privy council's report than to agitate their minds by dwelling on it.

The slave trade, in its very nature, is the source of such kind of tragedies; nor has there been a single person, almost, before the privy council who does not add something by his testimony to the mass of evidence upon this point. Some, indeed, of these gentlemen, and particularly the delegates from Liverpool, have endeavored to reason down this plain principle: some have palliated it; but there is not one, I believe, who does not more or less admit it. Some, nay most, I believe, have admitted the slave trade to be the chief cause of wars in Africa.

Having now disposed of the first part of this subject, I must speak of the transit of the slaves in the West Indies. This, I confess, in my own opinion, is the most wretched part of the whole subject. So much misery condensed in so little room is more than the human imagination had ever before conceived. I will not accuse the Liverpool merchants; I will allow them, nay, I, will believe them, to be men of humanity; and I will therefore believe, if it were not for the multitude of these wretched objects, if it were not for the enormous magnitude and extent of the evil which distracts their attention from individual cases and makes them think generally, and therefore less feelingly, on the subject, they never would have persisted in the trade. I verily believe, therefore, if the wretchedness of any one of the many hundred Negroes stowed in each ship could be brought before their view, and remain within the sight of the African merchant, that there is no one among them whose heart would bear it.

Let anyone imagine to himself six or seven hundred of these wretches chained two and two, surrounded with every object that is nauseous and disgusting, diseased, and struggling under every kind of wretchedness! How can we bear to think of such a scene as this? One would think it had been determined to heap on them all the varieties of bodily pain, for the purpose of blunting the feelings of the mind; and yet, in this very point (to show the power of human prejudice), the situation of the slaves has been described by Mr. Norris, one of the Liverpool delegates, in a manner which I am sure will convince the House how interest can draw a film over the eyes so thick that total blindness could do no more; and how it is our duty therefore to trust not to the reasonings of interested men or to their way of coloring a transaction. "Their apartments," says Mr. Norris, "are fitted up as much for their advantage as circumstances will admit. The right ankle of one, indeed, is connected with the left ankle of another by a small iron fetter, and if they are turbulent, by another on their wrists. They have several meals a day; some of their own country provisions, with the best sauces of African cookery; and by the way of variety, another meal of pulse, etc., according to European taste. After breakfast they have water to wash themselves, while their apartments are perfumed with frankincense and lime juice. Before dinner they are amused after the manner of their country. The song and the dance are promoted," and, as if the whole were really a scene of pleasure and dissipation, it is added that games of chance are furnished. "The men play and sing, while the women and girls make fanciful ornaments with beads, which they are plentifully supplied with." Such is the sort of strain in which the Liverpool delegates, and particularly Mr. Norris, gave evidence before the privy council. What will the House think when, by the concurring testimony of other witnesses, the true history is laid open.

The slaves, who are sometimes described as rejoicing at their captivity, are so wrung with misery at leaving their country that it is the constant practice to set sail in the night, lest they should be sensible of their departure. The pulse which Mr. Norris talks of is horse beans, and the scantiness of both water and provision was suggested by the very legislature of Jamaica, in the report of their committee, to be a subject that called for the interference of Parliament.

Mr. Norris talks of frankincense and lime juice; when the surgeons tell you the slaves are stowed so close that there is no room to tread among them; and when you have it in evidence from Sir George Younge that even in a ship which wanted two hundred of her complement, the stench was intolerable. The song and the dance are promoted, says Mr. Norris. It had been more fair, perhaps, if he had explained that word "promoted." The truth is that for the sake of exercise these miserable wretches, loaded with chains, oppressed with disease and wretchedness, are forced to dance by the terror of the lash, and sometimes by the actual use of it. "I," says one of the other evidences, "was employed to dance the men, while another person danced the women." Such, then, is the meaning of the word "promoted," and it may be observed too, with respect to food, that an instrument is sometimes carried out, in order to force them to eat, which is the same sort of proof how much they enjoy
themselves in that instance also. As to their singing, what shall we say when we are told that their songs are songs of lamentation upon their departure which, while they sing, are always in tears, inasmuch that one captain (more humane as I should conceive him, therefore, than the rest) threatened one of the women with a flogging, because the mournfulness of her song was too painful for his feelings. In order, however, not to trust too much to any sort of description, I will call the attention of the House to one species of evidence which is absolutely infallible. Death, at least, is a sure ground of evidence, and the proportion of deaths will not only confirm, but, if possible, will even aggravate our suspicion of their misery in transit. It will be found, upon an average of all ships of which evidence has been given at the privy council, that, exclusive of those who perish before they sail, not less than twelve and one half per cent perish in the passage. Besides these, the Jamaica report tells you that not less than four and one half per cent die on shore before the day of sale, which is only a week or two from the time of landing. One third more die in the seasoning, and this in a country exactly like their own, where they are healthy and happy, as some of the evidences would pretend. The diseases, however, which they contract on shipboard, the astringent washes which are to hide their wounds, and the mischievous tricks used to make them up for sale, are, as the Jamaica report says—a most precious and valuable report, which I shall often have to advert to—one principal cause of this mortality. Upon the whole, however, here is a mortality of about fifty per cent, and this among Negroses who are not bought unless quite healthy at first, and unless (as the phrase is with cattle) they are sound in wind and limb. How then can the House refuse its belief to the multiplied testimonies, before the privy council, of the savage treatment of the Negros in the middle passage? Nay, indeed, what need is there of any evidence? The number of deaths speaks for itself and makes all such inquiry superfluous. 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. . . .

When we consider the vastness of the continent of Africa, when we reflect how all other countries have for some centuries past been advancing in happiness and civilization; when we think how in this same period all improvement in Africa has been defeated by her intercourse with Britain; when we reflect that it is we ourselves that have degraded them to that wretched brutishness and barbarity which we now plead as the justification of our guilt, how the slave trade has enslaved their minds, blackened their character, and sunk them so low in the scale of animal beings that some think the apes are of a higher class, and fancy the orangutan has given them the go-by. What a mortification must we feel at having so long neglected to think of our guilt, or attempt any reparation! It seems, indeed, as if we had determined to forbear from all interference until the measure of our folly and wickedness was so full and complete; until the impolicy which eventually belongs to vice was become so plain and glaring that not an individual in the country should refuse to join in the abolition; it seems as if we had waited until the persons most interested should be tired out with the folly and nefariousness of the trade, and should unite in petitioning against it.

Let us then make such amends as we can for the mischiefs we have done to the unhappy continent; let us recollect what Europe itself was no longer ago than three or four centuries. What if I should be able to show this House that in a civilized part of Europe, in the time of our Henry VII, there were people who actually sold their own children? What if I should tell them that England itself was that country? What if I should point out to them that the very place where this inhuman traffic was carried on was the city of Bristol? Ireland at that time used to drive a considerable trade in slaves with these neighboring barbarians; but a great plague having infected the country, the Irish were struck with a panic, suspected (I am sure very properly) that the plague was a punishment sent from heaven for the sin of the slave trade, and therefore abolished it. All I ask, therefore, of the people of Bristol is that they would become as civilized now as Irishmen were four hundred years ago. Let us put an end at once to this inhuman traffic—let us stop this effusion of human blood. The true way to virtue is by withdrawing from temptation; let us then withdraw from these wretched Africans those temptations to fraud, violence, cruelty, and injustice which the slave trade furnishes. Wherever the sun shines, let us go round the world with him, diffusing our beneficence; but let us not traffic only that we may set kings against their subjects, subjects against their kings, sowing discord in every village, fear and terror in every family, setting millions of our fellow creatures a-hunting each other for slaves, creating fairs and markets for human flesh through one whole continent of the world, and, under the name of policy, concealing from ourselves all the baseness and iniquity of such a traffic. Why may we not hope, ere long, to see Hanse towns established on the coast of Africa as they were on the Baltic? It is said the Africans are idle, but they are not too idle, at least, to catch one another; seven
hundred to one thousand tons of rice are annually bought of them; by the
same rule why should we not buy more? At Gambia one thousand
of them are seen continually at work, why should not some more thousands
be set to work in the same manner? It is the slave trade that causes their
illness and every other mischief. We are told by one witness: "They
sell one another as they can"; and while they can get brandy by catching
one another, no wonder they are too idle for any regular work. If
I have one word more to add upon a most material point; but it is a
point so self-evident that I shall be extremely short. It will appear from
everything which I have said that it is not regulation, it is not mere pallia-
tives, that can cure this enormous evil. Total abolition is the only possible
cure for it. The Jamaica report, indeed, admits much of the evil, but re-
commends it to us so to regulate the trade that no persons should be kid-
napped or made slaves contrary to the custom of Africa. But may they
not be made slaves unjustly, and yet by no means contrary to the custom
of Africa? I have shown they may; for all the customs of Africa are ren-
dered savage and unjust through the influence of this trade; besides, how
can we discriminate between the slaves justly and unjustly made? or, if
we could, does any man believe that the British captains can, by any
regulation in this country, be prevailed upon to refuse all such slaves as
have not been fairly, honestly, and uprightly enslaved? But granting that
they should do this, yet how would the rejected slaves be recompen-
sed? They are brought, as we are told, from three or four thousand
miles off, and exchanged like cattle from one hand to another until they
reach the coast. We see then that it is the existence of the slave trade that
is the spring of all this internal traffic, and that the remedy cannot be
applied without abolition. Again, as to the middle passage, the evil is
radical there also; the merchant's profit depends upon the number that
can be crowded together, and upon the shortness of their allowance.
Astringents, escharotics, and all the other arts of making them up for sale
are of the very essence of the trade; these arts will be concealed both
from the purchaser and the legislature; they are necessary to the owner's
profit, and they will be practiced. Again, chains and arbitrary treatment
must be used in transporting them; our seamen must be taught to play
the tyrant, and that deprivation of manners among them (which some
very judicious persons have treated of as the very worst part of the busi-
ness) cannot be hindered, while the trade itself continues. As to the slave
merchants, they have already told you that if two slaves to a ton are not
permitted, the trade cannot continue; so that the objections are done
away by themselves on this quarter; and in the West Indies, I have shown
that the abolition is the only possible stimulus whereby a regard to popu-
lation, and consequently to the happiness of the Negroes, can be effectu-
ally excited in those islands.

I trust, therefore, I have shown that upon every ground the total abo-
lication ought to take place. I have urged many things which are not my
own leading motives for proposing it, since I have wished to show every
description of gentlemen, and particularly the West India planters, who
deserve every attention, that the abolition is politic upon their own prin-
ciples also. Policy, however, sir, is not my principle, and I am not ashamed
to say it. There is a principle above everything that is political; and when
I reflect on the command which says: "Thou shalt do no murder," believ-
ing the authority to be Divine, how can I dare to set up any reason-
ings of my own against it? And, sir, when we think of eternity, and of the
future consequences of all human conduct, what is there in this life that
should make any man contradict the dictums of his conscience, the prin-
ciples of justice, the laws of religion, and of God. Sir, the nature and all
the circumstances of this trade are now laid open to us; we can no longer
plead ignorance, we cannot evade it, it is now an object placed before
us, we cannot pass it; we may spurn it, we may kick it out of our way,
but we cannot turn aside so as to avoid seeing it; for it is brought now so
directly before our eyes that this House must decide, and must justify to
all the world, and to their own consciences, the repudiation of the grounds
and principles of their decision. A society has been established for
the abolition of this trade, in which Dissenters, Quakers, Churchmen—in
which the most conscientious of all persuasions—have all united and
made a common cause in this great question. Let not Parliament be the
only body that is insensible to the principles of national justice. Let us
make reparations to Africa, so far as we can, by establishing a trade upon
true commercial principles, and we shall soon find the rectitude of our
conduct rewarded by the benefits of a regular and a growing commerce.

It was not alone the best-reading subject, nor the manner of speaking, moving
though it was, that counted. It was the man himself. In his lifetime struggle
against slavery, Wilberforce was to become the conscience of England. In his
person piety and eloquence combined to make even reform respectable.