

**‘The Grand Object of my Parliamentary Existence’:  
William Wilberforce and the British Abolition Campaigns,  
1783-1833**

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## **Abstract**

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This thesis is a re-evaluation of William Wilberforce’s abolitionist activity in the House of Commons, 1788-1825. Under-used manuscript sources, as well as the parliamentary record and abolitionist literature, form the basis of the research. The historiography has relied on biographies of Wilberforce, which have in turn relied on a biography written by Wilberforce’s sons after his death. Revisiting Wilberforce’s correspondence and diaries offers new perspectives on his actions both in and out of the House of Commons. The thesis draws on the historiography on abolition to reassess Wilberforce’s contribution in conversation with the range of topics that have attracted interest, including the extra-parliamentary campaign and enslaved-led rebellions. In doing so, this thesis bridges the gap between biographies of Wilberforce and the historiography of the abolition campaigns.

The first half of the thesis focuses on the parliamentary campaign against the British Atlantic slave trade, 1787-1807, analysing Wilberforce’s actions and rhetoric. It demonstrates that Wilberforce took an increasingly decisive role in the anti-slave trade campaign over time, and that his rhetoric, both in his speeches and in his 1807 *Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, was targeted at his audience in the House of Commons. The second half investigates abolitionist activity after 1807 – enforcing British abolition, encouraging other countries to abolish the slave trade, and efforts to reform and gradually abolish slavery – and Wilberforce’s contributions after his retirement in 1825. It argues that the second half of Wilberforce’s career was in many ways a mirror of the first, because the abolitionists mimicked successful methods from pre-1807 when addressing a variety of concerns post-abolition. Similarly, his rhetoric as exemplified in his three publications between 1814 and 1823 followed the same lines as his 1807 *Letter*.

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## Abbreviations

<i>Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter, I-III</i>	<i>Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter, I-III</i> (London: Hatchard, 1827-31)
<i>The Anti-Slavery Reporter, IV-VI</i>	<i>The Anti-Slavery Reporter, IV-VI</i> (London: Hatchard, 1832-6)
BL	British Library
Bodl	Bodleian Library, Oxford University
BRO	Bristol Record Office
<i>Corresp., I-II</i>	Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce, <i>The Correspondence of William Wilberforce, I-II</i> , (London: John Murray, 1840)
HC/L Deb	Hansard, first-third series
KHLC	Kent History and Library Centre
<i>Life, I-V</i>	Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce, <i>The Life of William Wilberforce, I-V</i> , (London: John Murray, 1838)
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
NYRO	North Yorkshire Record Office
PP	Parliamentary Papers
<i>Private Papers</i>	A.M. Wilberforce (ed), <i>Private Papers of Wilberforce</i> , (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1897)
<i>PR, 1780-1796</i>	<i>Parliamentary Register, 1780-1796</i>
<i>PR, 1796-1802</i>	<i>Parliamentary Register, 1796-1802</i>
<i>PR, 1802-1805</i>	<i>Parliamentary Register, 1802-1805</i>
RL	David M. Rubenstein Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Duke University
TNA	The National Archives

## Introduction

William Wilberforce (1759-1833) is lauded as the Member of Parliament who led the campaign to abolish the transatlantic slave trade. The twenty-year period which culminated in 1807 is the focus of most of the historical interest in him and forms the largest section of the various biographies published since his death. This historiography has relied on *The Life of William Wilberforce* (1838), a five-volume biography written by two of his sons after his death.<sup>1</sup> This thesis re-examines Wilberforce's abolitionism – his ideas and actions – throughout his parliamentary career, from his initial involvement in 1787, through the passage of the Act to Abolish the Slave Trade in 1807, to the beginning of the anti-slavery efforts in 1823 and after his retirement in 1825. His contributions to the emancipation campaign have not received the attention given to his more prominent contributions to the first, but although he retired before it gained parliamentary momentum, he was central to its early history.

Wilberforce's death in July 1833, while the Emancipation Act was passing through the House of Commons, and his burial in Westminster Abbey, contributed to the mythology of his career and character. His epitaph praises his work as an abolitionist and as a devout Christian. His birthplace was converted into a museum commemorating his life and the campaign against the slave trade. There are blue plaques on the house in London where he died and the church in Clapham that he attended, as well as other associated sites. There are roads named after him in several towns and cities in the United Kingdom, and other places named after him across the globe, including towns and schools in Ohio and New Jersey, U.S.A. and Australia, a river in New Zealand, and a neighbourhood in Freetown, Sierra Leone. There are two statues of him in Hull, another at his grave, and one in the chapel at St John's College, Cambridge, where he was a student, all of which reference his role as an abolitionist. In addition to these public memorials, politicians across the party-political divide reference Wilberforce's career as an example of what they aspire to, because of the positive connotations relating to abolition. Most recently in January 2019, David Lammy, the Labour MP, referenced Wilberforce and the abolition campaigns in a speech about Brexit, and Jeremy Hunt, then

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, volumes I-V (London: John Murray, 1838).

Foreign Secretary, during his Conservative Party leadership bid in 2019, said Wilberforce was one of his political heroes.<sup>2</sup> This focus on one aspect of his career, with his religious views portrayed as the motivation for his abolitionism, has narrowed the public perception of Wilberforce.

The overall aim of this thesis is to reassess William Wilberforce's abolitionism, explored through the lens of his parliamentary career. It returns to underused manuscripts – his diaries and correspondence – to ask how a systematic examination of these and other sources can change our perception of Wilberforce as an abolitionist. It questions how he approached the slave trade, and slavery more broadly, both during the efforts to abolish the slave trade and afterwards. It seeks to revise the perception of Wilberforce's abolitionism, by considering it in light of the questions asked within the broader historiography. In doing so, it bridges the gap between biographies of Wilberforce, which have not engaged with these debates, and the broader history of abolition, which has relied on these biographies rather than the full range of archival sources available. This differentiates the research from biographies of Wilberforce; instead of narrating the story of his life, the thesis asks what Wilberforce's abolitionism can tell us about the campaign, and what scholarship about the broader campaign can tell us about Wilberforce's ideas and actions. Finally, it to some extent places abolitionism within the context of other issues that occupied him, at specific times and throughout his career.

Biographies of Wilberforce focus on his role in the campaign against the slave trade. However, this thesis shows that he was initially interested in the conditions of slavery. He saw amelioration efforts as part of a broader drive to increase missionary activity throughout the expanding empire, placing religious instruction at the centre of his plans for Britain's West Indian colonies. His actions were divided between his own initiatives and cooperation with abolitionist organisations. He based his initial arguments on the pre-existing abolitionist literature but developed them over time in response to current events and new ideas proposed by others. From the very beginning, Wilberforce saw the best plan of action on issues surrounding slavery as parliamentary- or government-driven change through legislation, which was reinforced by resistance the abolitionists encountered from colonial legislatures and slave-owners. After 1807 the

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<sup>2</sup> HC Deb, 10 January 2019, series 6, 652, cc.620-622; Tim Shipman, 'I'll make Brexit deal because business is my bread and butter, says Jeremy Hunt', *The Sunday Times*, 25 May 2019.



abolitionists' goals developed in several directions: towards encouraging other European countries to emulate British abolition; towards introducing their vision of civilisation to Africa, through Sierra Leone; and towards reforming, and later abolishing, slavery in the West Indian colonies. In contrast, Wilberforce's attention was typically focused on one thing at a time. Pauses in abolitionist activity were filled with other matters, and he did not put the same amount of effort into all aspects of the campaign, especially during the 1810s.

In 2007, the official celebrations of the bicentenary of the passage of the Act to Abolish the Slave Trade were criticised as a 'Wilberfarce.' Critics claimed that it focused on Wilberforce to the exclusion of other aspects of the campaign and the role of the enslaved, and for failing to take into account developments in historiography since the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Emancipation Act in 1983.<sup>3</sup> While museums and art galleries commissioned exhibitions that focused on a dialogue about the slave trade and included the voices of Africans and African-Caribbean people in the opposition to the slave trade and its legacy, government commemorations were more focused on celebrating Wilberforce and other white abolitionists.<sup>4</sup> Government acknowledged that Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho played 'a leading role throughout,' but in the official publication they were only mentioned in two short paragraphs.<sup>5</sup> The academic reaction distanced itself from the official commemorations, shifting the emphasis to newer questions about abolition, slave agency, and how abolition is commemorated in the Caribbean.<sup>6</sup> Despite the interest in Wilberforce, there has been surprisingly little academic study of him; for the most part he has been left to popular biographers and politicians. However, his fame and the controversy that now surrounds it calls for a scholarly reassessment, which this thesis aims to provide.

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<sup>3</sup> Madge Dresser, 'Remembering Slavery & Abolition in Bristol', *Slavery & Abolition*, 30 no.2 (2009), pp.223-246, p.234; J.R. Oldfield, *Chords of Freedom: Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Diana Paton, 'Interpreting the Bicentenary in Britain', *Slavery & Abolition*, 30, no.2 (2009), pp.227-289.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Prior, 'Commemorating Slavery 2007' *History Workshop Journal*, 64 (2007), pp.200-10; Emma Waterton et al, 'Forgetting to Heal: Remembering the Abolition Act of 2007', *European Journal of English Studies*, 14, no.1 (2010), pp.23-36.

<sup>5</sup> HM Government, *Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, 1807-2007* (London: Dept. for Communities and Local Government, 2007), p.10.

<sup>6</sup> *Slavery & Abolition*, 29, no.2 Public Art, Artefacts and Atlantic Slavery (2008), pp.135-303; *Slavery & Abolition*, 30, no.2 Remembering Slave Trade Abolitions: Reflections on 2007 in International Perspective (2009), pp.161-338.

## Historiographical Review

The five-volume *Life*, published by Wilberforce's sons, forms the basis of the biographies on Wilberforce. This includes copious extracts from his diaries, journals, and correspondence, as well as their own and acquaintances' recollections. However, the sons misrepresented some aspects of Wilberforce's life, such as his religious views and his conflict with Thomas Clarkson, another prominent abolitionist.<sup>7</sup> Reginald Coupland's 1923 *Wilberforce* relied heavily on the sons' work, as well as other published collections like *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, another publication by his sons, and *Private Papers of William Wilberforce*, edited by a descendent of Wilberforce.<sup>8</sup> Subsequent biographies used additional sources, both published and archival. In the 1970s, two biographies, by Robin Furneaux and John Pollock, utilised different sets of sources, his diaries in the case of the former and his correspondence, and diary for 1814-1822, in the latter.<sup>9</sup> William Hague's 2007 biography also incorporated manuscripts but, similar to the earlier two, without interrogating them.<sup>10</sup> There was a flurry of biographies published around the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007; in general these are more hagiographic than the three mentioned here, with the exception of Stephen Tomkins, who brought public attention to the Sierra Leone apprenticeship scandal in a book on the Clapham Sect in 2010.<sup>11</sup>

Since the 1970s there has been little scholarly attention on Wilberforce, when historiographical trends rightly shifted away from 'great white men' to be more inclusive. However, Wilberforce is mentioned, at least in passing, in any major work on abolition, because of his prominent role in the House of Commons. It is impossible to talk about the abolition of the slave trade without acknowledging Wilberforce, but his contribution

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<sup>7</sup> Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp.498, 513; 'Literary Memorials: Clarkson's *History* and *The Life of William Wilberforce*' in Oldfield, *Chords of Freedom*, pp.33-55.

<sup>8</sup> Reginald Coupland, *Wilberforce: A Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923); Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, I-II (London: John Murray, 1840); A. M. Wilberforce, *Private Papers of William Wilberforce* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1897).

<sup>9</sup> Robin Furneaux, *William Wilberforce* (London: Hamilton, 1974); John Pollock, *Wilberforce* bicentenary edition (Eastbourne: Kingsway Communications, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the great Anti-slave Trade Campaigner* (London: HarperPress, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *William Wilberforce: A Biography* (Oxford: Lion Hudson plc, 2007); Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2007); Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain* (Oxford: Lion Hudson plc, 2010); Stephen Tomkins, 'William Wilberforce was complicit in slavery', *The Guardian*, 3 August 2010.

is not often subjected to critical analysis. The primary topic of debate is how effective Wilberforce was as a parliamentarian, and his decisions have been criticised by Fiona Spiers, among others.<sup>12</sup> These criticisms are addressed in Chapter Two, to consider how much the issues Spiers raised contributed to the failure of the abolition bills. The other aspect of Wilberforce's involvement that has received interest is the rhetoric of his early speeches. Brycchan Carey has analysed his 1789 speech on the slave trade as an example of the rhetoric of sensibility.<sup>13</sup> The parliamentary campaign in general has, particularly more recently, been overlooked in historical writing about abolition. Roger Anstey's *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition*, published in 1975, is still the most comprehensive overview of the whole of the parliamentary campaign to 1807.<sup>14</sup> Since then, little has been written that includes the full period. However, this thesis follows Wilberforce's actions throughout the twenty-years of anti-slave trade activity and beyond, to consider the campaign as a whole, rather than only the first and/or final stages.

Debates in the nineteenth century centred on the question of who deserved the credit for the abolition of the slave trade. In 1808, Thomas Clarkson, one of the founding members of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, published *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament*. The two-volume *History* was criticised at the time for implying that Clarkson had been more influential in effecting abolition than Wilberforce, and praised by Wilberforce's critics for the same reason.<sup>15</sup> When Robert and Samuel Wilberforce wrote *The Life of William Wilberforce*, they in part set out to discredit Clarkson's account, and to redress the balance in favour of their father. This in turn attracted criticism, and Clarkson published a response, highlighting specific errors, which was replied to in the Preface to an edited volume of correspondence published by Robert and Samuel in 1840.<sup>16</sup> A final book by Clarkson's friend Henry Crabb Robinson, which the author described as 'a personal vindication,' was published before the quarrel

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<sup>12</sup> Fiona Spiers, 'William Wilberforce: 150 years on', in Jack Hayward (ed), *Out of Slavery: Abolition and After* (London: Frank Cass, 1985), pp.47-68; see also James Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776-1838* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), pp.114, 119; Dale H. Porter, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade in England, 1784-1807* (USA: Archon Books, 1970), p.142.

<sup>13</sup> Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp.145-73.

<sup>14</sup> Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (New Jersey, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975).

<sup>15</sup> Oldfield, *Chords of Freedom*, pp.35-6.

<sup>16</sup> Oldfield, *Chords of Freedom*, pp.39-42; Thomas Clarkson, *Strictures on a Life of William Wilberforce...* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longman's, 1838); Preface, *Corresp.*, I, pp.v-xxvii.

was put to rest.<sup>17</sup> The sons later apologised to Clarkson, saying that the exclusion of Clarkson's efforts from the *Life* was because 'too jealous a regard for our Father's fame led us to entertain an ungrounded prejudice against you.'<sup>18</sup> However, the sons' version of events won out, and Clarkson was relegated to the side-lines of the history of abolition until Earl Leslie Grigg's work in the 1970s, and Ellen Gibson Wilson's twenty years after that.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond this argument about who deserved the credit for the abolition of the slave trade, the moral, humanitarian motives of the abolitionists were not questioned. As is oft-quoted, W. E. H. Lecky described British abolition as 'among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in this history of nations.'<sup>20</sup> This stood unchallenged for almost a century, until Eric Williams argued that the slave trade was abolished because of the economic decline of the British West Indian colonies and reduced profitability of the trade.<sup>21</sup> Another thirty years passed before this 'decline thesis' was challenged by Seymour Drescher, who argued that the slave trade continued to be profitable, and that abolition was the triumph of moral values over self-interest.<sup>22</sup> This debate – economics vs. morals – has continued on into the twenty-first century. On one side, S. H. Carrington revisited the sources to offer support for Williams' thesis; on the other, many historians shared James Walvin assessment that Drescher's work had 'established a new orthodoxy.'<sup>23</sup>

The rejection of the economic decline thesis raised new questions about the relationship between abolitionism and the economy. Thomas Haskell, drawing on David Brion Davis' remarks on 'ideological hegemony,' argued that capitalism expanded the

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<sup>17</sup> Henry Crabb Robinson, *Exposure of Misrepresentations Contained in the Preface to the Correspondence...* (London: Edward Moxon, 1840), note to the printer.

<sup>18</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.7, ff.233-4, Robert and Samuel Wilberforce to Thomas Clarkson, 15 November 1844.

<sup>19</sup> Earl Leslie Griggs, *Thomas Clarkson: The Friend of Slaves*, (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1970); Earl Leslie Griggs, *Henry Christophe and Thomas Clarkson* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1952); Ellen Gibson Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson: A Biography* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> W.E.H. Lecky, quoted in Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, p.xx.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

<sup>22</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1977) (Anstey published *Atlantic Slave Trade* first but read *Econocide* in advance of its publication, and cited Drescher's proof of the continuing profitability of the slave trade).

<sup>23</sup> S.H. Carrington, *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775-1810* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002); James Walvin, 'Why did the British Abolish the Slave Trade? *Econocide* Revisited', *Slavery and Abolition*, 32, no.4 (2011), pp.583-8, p.585.

limits of moral responsibility, resulting in the abolition campaigns.<sup>24</sup> Davis responded to point out that his statements about hegemony were aimed at the acceptance of abolitionism by the British ruling classes, rather than the emergence of antislavery sentiment.<sup>25</sup> This developed into a wider conversation, with further responses from John Ashworth and Haskell.<sup>26</sup> Four years after these exchanges, they were published, along with sections of Davis' book and additional contributions, as *The Antislavery Debate*.<sup>27</sup> The root of this controversy, according to Ashworth, lies in the 'obvious temporal correspondence' of the rise of both capitalism and humanitarianism (in the guise of abolitionism) and efforts to connect the two.<sup>28</sup> In this debate, Wilberforce is conspicuous mainly by his absence, though Davis did make some reference to James Stephen.<sup>29</sup>

Other theories have been posited for the emergence and success of abolitionism. Roger Anstey argued in the 1970s that it was a feature of the evangelical revival.<sup>30</sup> In addition to his arguments against the economic decline thesis, Drescher has pointed to the changing political landscape of the late eighteenth century, with the emergence of a politically engaged middle class, as a key influence in the rise of abolitionism.<sup>31</sup> In *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, Davis discussed opposition to slavery before the American Revolution, emphasising its religious basis in the New World, and the changing perception of slavery in philosophy. He noted that these ideas travelled back across the Atlantic through the Quakers.<sup>32</sup> Scholarship on the ideology of antislavery sentiment and abolitionism in Britain has since been continued by Christopher Brown,

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Haskell, 'Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Parts 1 & 2', *The American History Review*, 90 no.2&3, (1985) pp.339-61 & pp.547-66; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, second edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.379.

<sup>25</sup> David Brion Davis, 'Reflections on Abolitionism and Ideological Hegemony' *The American Historical Review*, 92, no.4 (1987), pp.797-812.

<sup>26</sup> John Ashworth, 'The Relationship between Capitalism and Humanitarianism', *The American Historical Review*, 92, no.4 (1987) pp.813-28; Thomas Haskell, 'Convention and Hegemonic Interest in the Debate over Antislavery: a reply to Davis and Ashworth', *The American Historical Review*, 92, no.4 (1987), pp.829-78.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Bender (ed), *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> Ashworth, 'The Relationship between Capitalism and Humanitarianism', p.813.

<sup>29</sup> Davis, *Age of Revolution*, pp.418-19, 444-5, 451, 464-6.

<sup>30</sup> Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, p.xxiii; see also: Edith F Hurwitz, *Politics and Public Conscience: Slave Emancipation and the Abolitionist Movement in Britain* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973), pp.15-16.

<sup>31</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilisation in Comparative Perspective* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987); Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, second edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988).

analysing the influence of the American Revolution on British abolitionism.<sup>33</sup> These themes are considered when looking at Wilberforce's entry into the campaign, to draw conclusions about Wilberforce's own motivations and influences.

In addition to these debates, after the 1970s there was new historical interest in the role that popular politics played in the abolition campaign. Walvin's *Slavery and British Society, 1776-1846* (1982) brought together essays on various aspects 'to suggest possible future directions' for study.<sup>34</sup> The extra-parliamentary aspects of abolitionism have since been studied by historians as a crucial feature in the development of popular political culture in Britain and have now been more extensively analysed than the parliamentary aspects. John Oldfield argued that the organisation of the London Committee enabled the outpouring of popular support, but that actions in parliament were still key to success.<sup>35</sup> Clare Midgely highlighted the importance of the role of women in the campaigns, as the first instance of organised involvement of women in politics, and Moira Ferguson examined women's contributions to antislavery literature.<sup>36</sup> The popular and novel politics of abolitionism also feature across the general historiography on abolition. Within this, Wilberforce's unease about popular agitation and women's involvement in the movement, in comparison to Clarkson's support for the same, mean that he is a diminished figure in histories of the popular movement, despite his contemporary importance. However, my research demonstrates that Wilberforce supported petitioning, if not other forms of expression, within limits of class and gender, and that he supported it increasingly over time.

On the theme of the extra-parliamentary campaign, the records of two of the major abolitionist organisations have been studied in detail. Judith Jennings' *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade* was based primarily on the minutes of the London Committee. It followed the Committee from its Quaker origins in the mid-1780s to its final role as a means to organise the lobbying of government figures in 1804-7. Wayne Ackerson's *The African Institution (1807-1827) and the Antislavery Movement*

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<sup>33</sup> C.L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> James Walvin, 'Introduction', in James Walvin (ed), *Slavery and British Society, 1776-1846* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp.1-21, p.21.

<sup>35</sup> J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992); Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1832* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992).

in *Great Britain*, drew on the information in the African Institution's annual reports to illustrate abolitionist activity after 1807.<sup>37</sup> There is not a similar volume of work on the Antislavery Society, founded in 1823, or on its periodical, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* published by Zachary Macaulay, one of Wilberforce's closest colleagues in the abolition campaigns, although it features in biographies of Macaulay.<sup>38</sup> Wilberforce's interaction with these societies has not been explored, although he was a member of all three. This thesis investigates Wilberforce's role in and engagement with the societies, asking when his actions were part of an organisation's agenda, when he influenced that agenda, and when his actions were separate to these main vehicles of abolitionist activity.

Thus far, this review, and the historiography, has focused on events in Britain. The West Indian colonies, and the actions of enslaved persons, have also received attention, in two broad areas of interest. The first is slave rebellions. Claudius Fergus analysed the impact of these throughout the era of abolition, and Gelien Matthews highlighted the interplay between abolitionists in Britain and the rebellious enslaved, using parliamentary speeches around major uprisings and the reaction of the enslaved to abolitionist activity in Britain.<sup>39</sup> As well as these overviews, there is a range of literature focusing on particular revolts, for example, Emilia Viotti da Costa's work on the Demerara Rebellion of 1823, which included analysis of the response by abolitionists and in parliament.<sup>40</sup> The Haitian Revolution, 1791-1804, which many historians view as a contributing factor in the failure of abolition bills in the 1790s, has received the most attention, especially (in English) from David Geggus.<sup>41</sup> While Matthews included Wilberforce's speeches in her analysis, slave uprisings do not feature prominently in scholarship on Wilberforce. This thesis makes a key intervention here. It incorporates his responses to both specific revolts and the threat of slave revolts in general into its re-

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<sup>37</sup> Wayne Ackerson, *The African Institution (1807-1827) and the Antislavery Movement in Great Britain* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Iain Whyte, *Zachary Macaulay 1768-1838: The Steadfast Scot in the British Anti-Slavery Movement* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), pp.185-91, 227-8.

<sup>39</sup> Claudius K. Fergus, *Revolutionary Emancipation: Slavery & Abolitionism in the British West Indies* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2013); Gelien Matthews, *Antislavery, Abolition and the Atlantic World: Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>41</sup> Fergus, *Revolutionary Emancipation*, pp.64-71; David Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); David Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

evaluation of his abolitionism, demonstrating how he and other abolitionists used the threat or outbreak of revolt and rebellion to their advantage.

Alongside the Caribbean historiography, there has been a recovery of the global or imperial dimension to enslavement and abolition. Robin Blackburn's *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* considered abolition across European empires, to argue that abolitionism succeeded 'where [slavery] became politically untenable' – in Britain in 1807 and 1833, in the French Antilles in 1848.<sup>42</sup> Oldfield and Peterson have studied abolition from a transatlantic perspective, the first intending to 'de-centre Britain' and the second to 'expand the ... geographic frame' of the historiography.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, a special edition of *The William and Mary Quarterly* in 2009 was aimed at looking beyond the 'essentially national frameworks' of the historiography.<sup>44</sup> Turning away from the Caribbean, Andrea Major and Richard B. Allen highlighted the inconsistencies of abolitionism beyond the West Indian colonies in their work on enslavement in India and the Indian Ocean World respectively.<sup>45</sup> The chronology of abolition and emancipation differed in the Indian Ocean World because East India Company territory was exempt from the 1833 Emancipation Act.<sup>46</sup> The second part of thesis brings the global, rather than transatlantic, history of abolition into consideration, highlighting the geographical specificity of Wilberforce's abolitionism in contrast to his more global interest in missionary activity.

Recent scholarship has also turned its attention to the proslavery side of the debate. Paula Dumas, Srividhya Swaminathan, and Michael Taylor have researched the way in which the West Indian interest (those economically involved in the slave trade and slavery in Britain and in the colonies, including slaveowners and parliamentary

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<sup>42</sup> Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 2011 reprint), pp.520-2.

<sup>43</sup> J.R. Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-slavery, c.1787-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.3; Derek Peterson, 'Abolitionism and Political Thought in Britain and East Africa' in Derek Peterson (ed), *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012), pp.1-37, p.27.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph C. Miller, 'Introduction: Atlantic Ambiguities of British and American Abolition', *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 66, no.4 (2009), pp.667-704 p.667.

<sup>45</sup> Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772-1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014); Richard B. Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Labourers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Bill for Abolition of Slavery throughout British Colonies, for promoting Industry of Manumitted Slaves, and for compensating Owners (as amended by Committee), 31 July 1833, *PP*, 1833 IV [593], p.183.



agents) responded to the abolitionists.<sup>47</sup> The focus of this research is the parliamentary debates that followed Wilberforce and other abolitionists' speeches, and the 'anti-abolitionist' campaign. This scholarship followed Larry E. Tise's argument that 'ideologized proslavery' in America developed in reaction to sustained opposition to slavery and the slave trade. It also discussed the ambivalence towards the institutions of slavery in Britain before the emergence of organised abolitionist activity in the 1780s.<sup>48</sup> In analysing the parliamentary campaign, this thesis draws on pro-slavery criticisms of Wilberforce, and also considers the abolitionists' response both to pro-slavery arguments and to how the West India interest mobilised to defeat Wilberforce's bills.

Throughout these recent histories, as noted above, Wilberforce is inescapably present. As the leader of the parliamentary campaigns, it is all but impossible to write about abolition without mentioning him. The wealth of questions and knowledge that the scholarship has generated means that there are new questions to ask of currently under-used sources. For example, biographies include Wilberforce's relationship with Henri Christophe, King of Haiti, 1811-20, and his involvement in Sierra Leone, but the enslaved are largely absent from the narrative. This is perhaps a consequence of his speeches and publications, in which enslaved and 'free blacks' are a homogenous mass, to be generalised about, and later liberated through the abolitionists' plans. Unlike some of the other leading abolitionists, like James Stephen and Zachary Macaulay, Wilberforce never visited the colonies and had relatively few personal interactions with black activists in Britain. As we will see, even his involvement in the Berbice Commission (1811-16), an experimental form of plantation management through which Wilberforce and others were responsible for the Crown estates, and Crown-owned enslaved persons, in the colony, made little difference to how he spoke about the enslaved.

Charlotte Sussman, in a review of Brown's *Moral Capital*, suggested that Wilberforce and his Evangelical circle have been overlooked in newer histories of abolition because, 'proud of the secularity of British culture, scholars of the era have

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<sup>47</sup> Paula E. Dumas, *Proslavery Britain: Fighting for Slavery in an Era of Abolition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009); Michael Taylor, 'British Proslavery Arguments and the Bible, 1823-1833', *Slavery and Abolition*, 37, no.1 (2016), pp.139-58; Michael Taylor, 'The British West India Interest and its Allies, 1823-1833', *The English Historical Review*, 133 (2018), pp.1478-511.

<sup>48</sup> Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defence of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), p.14.

downplayed the way it was structured by religious controversy.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, histories of Evangelicalism, which sometimes refer to the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century as the ‘Age of Wilberforce,’ all include the abolition of the slave trade, because of the centrality of the ‘saints’ to the movement.<sup>50</sup> The ‘saints,’ posthumously dubbed the ‘Clapham Sect,’ were a group of Evangelical Anglicans who lived around Battersea Rise in the late eighteenth century and sympathisers beyond London, such as Hannah More in Somerset. Wilberforce is often seen as the leader of the group, and so discussions of the network, its members, and its activities are often centred on him, but scholarship has also challenged the centrality of Wilberforce and his interests to the ‘Saints’. The group worked alongside him for abolition of the slave trade and slavery, for the opening of India and other colonies to missionaries, and the various moral reform movements that emerged. These included the Proclamation Society, which promoted the Royal Proclamation for the Discouragement of Vice, and the Bible Society, which provided translations of the Bible. E. M. Howse’s assessment of the group emphasised their role in the abolition campaign and missionary societies and movements, but possibly overstated Wilberforce’s importance.<sup>51</sup> More recently, Anne Stott has discussed the personal lives of the group, and Gareth Atkins has explored the connections between group’s religious and more secular activities and networks.<sup>52</sup> Biographies of individuals involved discuss their connection to the Saints, but also their wider interests, for example Zachary Macaulay and Charles Grant’s imperial connections to Sierra Leone and India, and Henry Thornton’s influence on monetary policy.<sup>53</sup>

Ford K. Brown analysed the networks, movements and ideas that the group was a part of, which demonstrated the importance of Evangelicalism to Wilberforce’s connections and interests, and the links between the ‘saints’ in Parliament and other

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<sup>49</sup> Charlotte Sussman, ‘Review’, *Social History*, 33, no.1 (2008), p.81.

<sup>50</sup> Ford K. Brown and John Wolffe both refer to the ‘Age of Wilberforce’ in the subtitles of their books: Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961); John Wolffe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

<sup>51</sup> Ernest Marshall Howse, *Saints in Politics: The Clapham Sect and the Growth of Freedom*, second edition (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1971).

<sup>52</sup> Anne Stott, *Wilberforce: Family and Friends* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Gareth Atkins, *Converting Britannia: Evangelicals and British Public Life, 1770-1840* (Melton: Boydell Press, 2019).

<sup>53</sup> Catherine Hall, *Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); Whyte, *Zachary Macaulay*; Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Meacham Standish, *Henry Thornton of Clapham* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964); Ainslie Embree, *Charles Grant and British Rule in India* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962).

Evangelicals or supporters.<sup>54</sup> John Wolffe, in *The Expansion of Evangelicalism*, emphasised the centrality of the ‘Saints’ to Anglican Evangelicalism in Britain between the 1790s and 1840s.<sup>55</sup> Boyd Hilton’s *Age of Atonement* also highlighted the influence that Evangelicalism, over the same period and led by Wilberforce and the ‘saints,’ had on society.<sup>56</sup> While all of these works discuss the slave trade and abolitionism, they look beyond the campaigns to focus on the wider impact of Evangelical influence. For instance, in *Moral Capital*, Brown argues that the abolition of the slave trade gave the Evangelicals influence that they leveraged to benefit their goals for wider reform.<sup>57</sup> Zoë Laidlaw has also noted this, in relation to the Commission of Eastern Inquiry.<sup>58</sup> In focusing on the abolition of the slave trade and early efforts to abolish slavery, this thesis is not primarily concerned with the wider influence of Wilberforce and his religious peers. However, it does highlight moments where they demonstrated an awareness of it.

If the abolition of the slave trade was Wilberforce’s main focus in Parliament, the Evangelicals’ missionary efforts were his main focus outside of Parliament. The titular quote of this thesis, in which Wilberforce declared in 1804 that the abolition of the slave trade was ‘the grand object of [his] parliamentary existence,’ is in direct contrast to a statement made to his sons during his retirement that ‘there is no part of my political life I look back on with more pleasure than the part I took in behalf of the missions in India in the House of Commons.’<sup>59</sup> Wilberforce was a founding member of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1799 and of the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804, and missionary and abolitionist interests were not separate in his mind.<sup>60</sup> In 1814, he proposed a motion at a CMS meeting to present a petition from that society as a part of the popular response to the non-abolition of the French slave trade in the First Peace of Paris, and supported missionary efforts in the West Indian colonies in Parliament when they were threatened by the West India interest. When he considered retiring in 1810, he listed work relating to religious questions, including the conversion of the enslaved,

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<sup>54</sup> Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*.

<sup>55</sup> Wolffe, *Expansion of Evangelicalism*.

<sup>56</sup> Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>57</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, p.457.

<sup>58</sup> Zoë Laidlaw, ‘Investigating Empire: Humanitarians, Reform and the Commission of Eastern Inquiry’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40, no.5 (2012), pp.749-68.

<sup>59</sup> Wilberforce to Melville, 13 June 1804, quoted in Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p.188; Bodl. MS. Wilberforce, d.56, f.182, recollections.

<sup>60</sup> C. Duncan Rice, ‘The Missionary Context of the British Anti-Slavery Movement’ in Walvin, *Slavery and British Society*, pp.150-163; Stiv Jakobsson, *Am I not a Man and a Brother? British Missions and the Abolition of the Slave Trade in West Africa and the West Indies* (Lund: Gleerup, 1972).

among his reasons to remain in Parliament. From the Berbice Commission in 1811 onwards, religious instruction was included in amelioration proposals. As this thesis shows, during the anti-slave trade campaigns, and in the House of Commons more generally, Wilberforce downplayed his religious feelings to suit the more secular audience of his fellow MPs. Wilberforce's proselytising activities is outside of the scope of this work, but it considers his desire to extend the reach of Christianity when relevant.

Evangelicals as abolitionists have, as this brief overview shows, been widely studied, both as a feature of the evangelical programme of reforms, and as an explanation of the emergence of abolitionism in Britain in the 1780s. As mentioned earlier in this review, Anstey pointed to the evangelical revival as the key reason for abolitionism's popularity, and Wilberforce's evangelical conversion in 1785-6 is commonly held as the primary motive behind his abolitionism.<sup>61</sup> Chapter One challenges this latter view, but the widespread acceptance of it illustrates an aspect of the historiography that this thesis seeks to counterbalance: Wilberforce's evangelical abolitionism is widely studied; Wilberforce's political abolitionism is not. In doing so, this thesis bridges the gap between histories of abolition and biographies of Wilberforce, investigating Wilberforce's interactions with key aspects of abolition such as popular petitioning as well as re-visiting the parliamentary campaigns.

### **Source Overview**

My main research aim was to use the manuscripts to re-evaluate Wilberforce's abolitionist career in parliament. In doing so, I made a series of decisions about the scope and limits of this thesis, which informed the way in which I approached researching and writing what is to follow. Firstly, I narrowed the field of Wilberforce's career to focus on his actions in parliament, and to analyse his extra-parliamentary activities through that lens. His parliamentary activity was recorded in the most detail, because it was reported in newspapers and later collated, as well as in the journals that detail the daily activity of parliament. I had already, in approaching Wilberforce as an abolitionist, restricted what could be explored in his parliamentary career; other activities and causes are mentioned, but not explored in detail, due to space constraints. The parliamentary records became the jumping off point for the writing of each chapter; I investigated what he did within

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<sup>61</sup> Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, p.xxiii.

the parliamentary system before stepping back to ask what the manuscripts added to the narrative, and so to the analysis. At times, this was activity that took place entirely out of the House of Commons. At others, it was extra detail that gave evidence of his strategy or his personal opinion of the measures pursued.

Secondly, I decided to include the full period of Wilberforce's career, instead of limiting the thesis to his career either pre- or post-1807. Either of these shorter timeframes would have enabled me to go into greater detail about some aspects of the abolition campaign, and possibly to include more of his parliamentary activity. However, my aim was to understand the whole sweep of Wilberforce's abolitionist career, which has not been done before. Ackerson, writing about the demise of the African Institution, said that 'the line between the two groups may have blurred to the point that it could not be delineated.'<sup>62</sup> The same could be said of Wilberforce's abolitionism (and abolitionism in general). Although the passage of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in March 1807 is a logical break, and this thesis is split into two parts along this fault line, there is continuity across the two halves. Stopping in 1807 would reinforce the imbalance in the existing historiography. Starting in 1807 would erase the way in which the first campaign informed those that came after it, especially when considering Wilberforce's contributions and parliamentary activity. There are several trends in the second half of his abolitionist career that began in the first; excluding either would have had a direct impact on the conclusions drawn.

The manuscripts left by Wilberforce form the largest part of the primary research for this thesis. The majority of these are held at the Bodleian Library (some of which his sons collected after Wilberforce's death) in both the Wilberforce Papers and in Thomas Fowell Buxton and Thomas Clarkson's papers. The rest of the correspondence is held in various other archives. Some of Wilberforce's letters to and from other major political figures, such as Lord Auckland and Lord Grenville, can be found in collections of their papers at the British Library. The David M. Rubenstein Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, at Duke University in North Carolina, also holds a large number of letters, the majority of which have been made available online. Another collection of letters is held at the Wilberforce House Museum in Hull. His correspondence with William Pitt the Younger is divided between The National Archives, and the Stanhope Papers at the Kent

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<sup>62</sup> Ackerson, *African Institution*, p.218.

History and Library Centre in Maidstone, and I accessed similar smaller caches of letters at the Bristol Record Office, the North Yorkshire Record Office, and the UCL Special Collections.<sup>63</sup>

The mixed nature of the correspondence – sometime organised chronologically, sometimes alphabetically by correspondent – means that I spent time in the archives systematically going through the letters, establishing the correspondent and subjects covered before focusing on ones relating to the abolition campaigns. When looking at collections of other people’s papers, I used catalogues where possible to establish where the correspondence with Wilberforce and other prominent abolitionists was within the collection. Wilberforce received, and sent, an immense volume of letters. He frequently complained about the amount of time that he spent on his correspondence, travelling with what he referred to as his ‘arrears’ in the summer.<sup>64</sup> Matters relating to abolition made up the majority of his surviving correspondence in most collections of politicians’ letters (his personal relationship with Pitt, Perceval and Buxton alters the balance in their papers), but in the collections of Wilberforce’s papers, the majority are related to personal and religious matters. Little of the correspondence is complete on both sides, but the surviving letters, either to or from Wilberforce, give signs as to Wilberforce’s opinions, in the instances that it does not make it explicit.

Other than the geographical spread of the manuscripts, the main obstacle to a comprehensive study of Wilberforce is his handwriting.<sup>65</sup> This is likely a contributing factor to the fact that a reassessment of his career has not been attempted before. My ability to read this has improved with familiarity. The issue is particularly troublesome in the diaries, which he did not write intending for others to read. In comparison, his correspondence was either written in what is for the most part a more legible hand, or, later on, dictated to an amanuensis. Within this latter portion of the correspondence, Wilberforce occasionally added postscripts himself, citing the private nature of his comments. These additions could be both personal and political matters. I started reading and transcribing his correspondence before doing extensive work with the diaries,

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<sup>63</sup> Leonard W. Cowie, *William Wilberforce, 1759-1833: A Bibliography* (London: Greenwood Press, 1992).

<sup>64</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, p.35, diary entries, 06 July 1809, 12-14 July 1809.

<sup>65</sup> Pollock commented that his handwriting ‘was clearer than most of his contemporaries’ but that ‘the diaries, written very small ... are difficult to decipher’, *Wilberforce*, pp.24-5; Furneaux noted that his handwriting deteriorated to an ‘illegible scrawl’ over time, *William Wilberforce*, p.291.

meaning that I was familiar with the general patterns of his handwriting before approaching the more challenging examples of it.

Not all of Wilberforce's diaries have survived, most frustratingly for 1786-7, when he joined the emergent abolition campaign, and 1804-7, the final years of it. His sons include extracts from these periods of the diary in their biography, and it is unclear when the original version was lost. Although it can be assumed that they edited the entries they included, based on comparisons with the other diaries, for these periods the sons' versions of the diaries are used, as the only available option. Wilberforce's sons frequently omitted phrases from their extracts, but they did not fabricate new material; the edited quotations in the *Life* can, therefore, be considered reliable, but incomplete. There are also periods for which he did not keep a diary, mostly during his most serious illnesses. The lack of information for these periods is less of an obstacle, because he was less active.

His diaries are, for the most part, an account of how he spent his time, with little additional detail or reflection beyond his movements and appointments. He does, however, offer occasional insight into his thoughts, and the way he spent his time is indicative of his interest and involvement in different aspects of the campaigns. They are also illustrative of the range of his interests and concerns: his family life and health feature heavily (I particularly enjoy his references to potatoes as a health food), and he reprimands himself for wasting time, for being too concerned with worldly matters, and not finding enough time for private devotions. Wilberforce's religious life features, overall, more than his political life, even without considering his religious journals, which he wrote separately from his main diary.

Robert and Samuel Wilberforce were not the only people who published books about Wilberforce after he died. John Harford, a Bristol-based Evangelical who became closely acquainted with Wilberforce after 1812, and who had chaired the Bristol Abolition Society, wrote his *Recollections of William Wilberforce* in 1864, which included memories of conversations with Wilberforce about earlier periods of his life.<sup>66</sup> Memoirs of other public men, such as Thomas Fowell Buxton's, published posthumously by his son, and published collections of their letters and diaries, such as Canning's *Letter Journal*, all feature Wilberforce, because they were involved in the parliamentary

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<sup>66</sup> John S. Harford, *Recollections of William Wilberforce, Esq., MP for the County of York during nearly thirty years* second edition (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1865).

abolition campaigns, and therefore worked with Wilberforce.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, George Stephen, James Stephen's youngest son, wrote and published a series of letters to Harriet Beecher Stowe, the American abolitionist, recounting the British emancipation movement, and discussed Wilberforce's contribution prior to his retirement in 1825.<sup>68</sup> James Stephen wrote his own *Memoirs* in 1819, but the work was only completed as far as 1783, prior to both his introduction to Wilberforce and the emergence of abolitionism.<sup>69</sup> While these sources are secondary to the manuscripts, I have used them to offer additional perspectives on the campaigns and Wilberforce's role in them.

The other major part of the research is based on the parliamentary records. The debates about the slave trade and enslavement were published, first in newspapers at the time, and then collated in *Parliamentary Register* and *Hansard*. There is some overlap between these two series in 1803-5, when the *Register* recorded some debates more extensively than *Hansard*. At times the newspaper reports are more detailed than the *Register* and *Hansard*; the public interest in the matter meant that debates were often reported as a priority but were then not included as fully in the collated records of parliamentary business. The speeches were not reported verbatim, because of conditions in the House of Commons (housed at the time in St. Stephen's Chapel) and space limitations in newspapers. The digitisation of these resources has enabled me to follow the abolition debates through the parliamentary record in detail, by both searching for Wilberforce and other's contributions, and cross-referencing dates and motions mentioned in the manuscripts and other sources. An additional result of this research is Appendix One which gives, for the first time, a full timeline of the various motions and bills pursued by Wilberforce and his parliamentary allies between 1788 and 1807.

The extra-parliamentary campaign was not limited to the famous petitions. The abolitionists, most prolifically Thomas Clarkson and James Stephen, published pro-abolition pamphlets from 1784 onwards. William Wilberforce contributed four publications to this body of literature: *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Addressed to the Freeholders of Yorkshire* (1807), *A Letter to His Excellency the Prince*

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<sup>67</sup> T.F. Buxton and Charles Buxton (ed), *Memoirs of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, Baronet. With Selections from his Correspondence* (London: John Murray, 1848); George Canning and Peter C. Jupp (ed), *The Letter-Journal of George Canning, 1793-1795* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1991).

<sup>68</sup> George Stephen, *Antislavery Recollections: in a Series of Letters Addressed to Harriet Beecher Stowe* (London: Thomas Hatchard, 1854).

<sup>69</sup> Merle M. Bevington (ed), *The Memoirs of James Stephen, written by himself for the use of his children* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1954).



of Talleyrand Perigord &c &c &c on the subject of the Slave Trade (1814, also published in French), *Lettre à l'Empereur Alexandre sur la Traite des Noirs* (1822) and *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire in behalf of the Negro slaves in the West Indies* (1823).<sup>70</sup> The third of these, the letter to Tsar Alexander I, which is the least studied, was only published in French for circulation overseas, but is considered in Chapter Four. Wilberforce's pamphlets are analysed as public expressions of his abolitionism, as features of abolitionist strategy, and as contributions to abolitionist literature, where they are relevant within the narrative of his abolitionist career. Other pamphlets, such as those by Thomas Clarkson, James Ramsay, and James Stephen, are used as points of comparison, as sources of information or argument for Wilberforce, and to illustrate additional aspects of the campaigns.

Another important feature of the extra-parliamentary movement was the role of abolitionist organisations. The minutes of the London Committee, the annual *Reports of the Directors of the African Institution*, and the *Antislavery Monthly Reporter* (1825-30) and *The Antislavery Reporter* (1830-36) offer insights into their work. The minutes, held at the British Library, are limited to the decisions made, and the members present.<sup>71</sup> The *Reports*, published annually in March, relay the actions of the African Institution, the British government, and foreign governments over the previous twelve months, with commentary as to the success of various efforts and how the Institution viewed them.<sup>72</sup> It also forms the basis of Appendix Three, giving an overview of slave trade-related treaties and legislation in Britain, Europe, and the United States, 1807-25. The *Reporter* included records of Antislavery Society meetings, with resolutions and speeches published, as well as information about slavery.<sup>73</sup> However, the first two years of the Society are not covered, because the publication did not exist until 1825. While the minutes of the London Committee were a private record (there is a short letter attached to them debating the best place to keep them prior to the books being placed in the British

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<sup>70</sup> William Wilberforce, *Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade: Addressed to the Freeholders and Other Inhabitants of Yorkshire* (London: Luke Hansard & Sons, 1807); William Wilberforce, *A Letter to his Excellency the Prince of Talleyrand Perigord on the Subject of the Slave Trade* (London: J. Hatchard, 1814); William Wilberforce, *Lettre à l'Empereur Alexandre sur la Traite des Noirs* (London: G. Schulze, 1822); William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire in behalf of the Negro slave in the West Indies* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1823).

<sup>71</sup> BL., Add MS 21252-21256, Fair Minute Books of the Committee for the abolition of the Slave-trade, 1-3.

<sup>72</sup> *Reports of the Directors of the African Institution* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1807-1826).

<sup>73</sup> *Anti-slavery Monthly Reporter*, volumes I-III (London: Hatchard, 1827-1831); *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, volumes IV-VI (London: Hatchard, 1832-1836).

Museum in 1834), the *Reports* and *Reporter* were published and circulated to subscribers.<sup>74</sup>

## Thesis Outline

The thesis is arranged on broadly chronological lines. It is divided into two parts: Part One, covering 1785-1807, examines the campaign against the slave trade; Part Two, covering 1807-33, analyses Wilberforce's abolitionism after the 1807 Slave Trade Abolition Act. Part One, then, focuses on the portion of Wilberforce's abolitionist activities that have received more scholarly attention, to consider how his actions and views fit into the wider debates about the British abolition campaign. Part Two analyses Wilberforce's continuing abolitionist activity after 1807, which has received significantly less scholarly attention, especially as regards Wilberforce's continuing involvement after his retirement.

Chapter One, 'The Beginning of the Campaign, 1785-1788', focuses on Wilberforce's entry into the abolition movement in 1787. It includes an extended analysis of various accounts of the early campaign and how Wilberforce became involved, investigating his motives and challenging the predominant narrative that it was the result of his Evangelical conversion in 1785-6 or of Thomas Clarkson's influence, highlighting the importance of his networks from the outset. The chapter then turns to the early years of the organised efforts against the slave trade, focusing on Wilberforce and Pitt's attempt to convince other European governments to consider abolition, and the false start to the parliamentary campaign in 1788.

Chapters Two and Three are parallel chapters which examine the parliamentary efforts to abolish the slave trade. Chapter Two, 'The Parliamentary Campaign, 1789-1807 I: Strategy', details the narrative of the campaign, and addresses the approach that Wilberforce took in his attempts to pass a bill for the abolition of the slave trade. It assesses his actions against contemporary criticisms of his strategy, to consider whether or not they account for the delays and failures of the abolition bills. It argues for a narrative of Wilberforce taking more control of the parliamentary strategy over time,

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<sup>74</sup> BL., Add MS 21254, f.i-ii, Richard Phillips to Thomas Clarkson, 18 August 1834 (copy).

before he approached sympathetic government figures to take the lead publicly in the final, successful attempts.

Chapter Three, 'The Parliamentary Campaign, 1789-1807 II: Rhetoric', analyses the rhetoric that Wilberforce used in his speeches, and in his 1807 abolitionist publication, *Letter to the Inhabitants of Yorkshire*. It does so on several levels, detailing the changing arguments that he included in his speeches; the way that he spoke about some of the core themes in the campaign; and how the speeches fitted into the rhetorical culture of the late-eighteenth-century House of Commons. The chapter gives valuable insight into Wilberforce's arguments, the strategic element of the rhetoric, and how the case for abolition developed over time, in response to defeats and relevant events.

Chapters Four and Five cover the same period but are split geographically to reflect the two main areas of interest that the abolitionists pursued after 1807. Chapter Four, 'After Abolition I: The Suppression of the Slave Trade, 1807-1825', follows the efforts made to enforce the 1807 Act and to encourage other European powers to follow suit and abolish their transatlantic slave trades. It considers Wilberforce's work with the recently founded African Institution, and the different ways that he was involved in lobbying European governments to abolish the slave trade. It asks which of his actions can be seen as separate to the wider efforts of the African Institution, and which actions were directly the result of his membership of that group.

Chapter Five, 'After Abolition II: Slavery, 1807-1833', examines Wilberforce's involvement in colonial affairs, the beginnings of the campaign for emancipation, and his continuing engagement with abolitionism after his retirement from the House of Commons in 1825. The chapter compares the Berbice Commission with his involvement in Sierra Leone and his relationship with Henri Christophe and the Kingdom of Haiti. It then looks at the founding of the campaign to abolish slavery, 1818-23, and its early years, before Wilberforce retired due to ill health, 1823-5. The change in Wilberforce's rhetoric and engagement during his retirement, 1825-33, when he stopped speaking as frequently about the issue, reinforces the idea that Wilberforce adjusted his words and actions as the lead abolitionist in the House of Commons.

Overall, several key themes emerge throughout this thesis: the importance of networks throughout Wilberforce's career as an abolitionist; the continuing similarity of his rhetoric to that of the early abolitionist literature of the 1780s; his awareness of

how his words and actions were viewed by both his supporters and opponents in the House of Commons. Although some of the historiography portrays Wilberforce as unwilling to compromise during the anti-slave trade campaign, 1787-1807, this thesis demonstrates that before and after 1807 he adapted both his approach to bills and his rhetoric to suit the parliamentary context in which he was working.

**PART ONE:**

**1783 - 1807**

## Chapter 1

### The Beginning of the Campaign

Wilberforce agreed to lead the parliamentary campaign against the slave trade in Spring 1787, immediately before the formation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (also known as the London Committee). His reasons for doing so have been taken for granted: for the most part, historians and biographers have relied on the narrative given by his sons in *The Life of William Wilberforce* (1838). This points to his Evangelical conversion and the influence of Sir Charles and Lady Middleton and others living around Barham Court and Teston as the central influences on his decision.<sup>1</sup> This chapter challenges the assumptions that have been made about Wilberforce's motivation, because re-visiting the manuscript sources suggests that the role of his conversion has been over-emphasised in the literature. The analysis of the sources is preceded by brief discussions of the immediate history of abolitionism and of Wilberforce's own history up to his Evangelical conversion in 1785-6. The chapter finishes with analysis of the first two years of the abolition campaign, 1787-8; they have not received much scholarly attention beyond interest in petitioning but are an important insight into Wilberforce's ideas and aims at the beginning of the campaign. Wilberforce's actions are looked at in the context of the actions of other abolitionists and the false start to the parliamentary campaign in 1788.

Antislavery sentiment, including objection to the transatlantic trade, had been increasing since the mid-eighteenth century. The catalyst for this was the *Somerset vs Stewart* case in 1772, which ruled in favour of the freedom of an enslaved man called James Somerset and set a legal precedent for what happened when an enslaved person was brought to Britain.<sup>2</sup> However, it was not until the mid-1780s that abolitionists were able to rally significant amounts of popular support. As discussed in the Introduction, there is a wealth of literature on the emergence of abolitionism in the 1780s, which points to a range of explanations for this increase in support. These explanations include the evangelical revival, the emergence of humanitarianism, the changing political landscape,

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<sup>1</sup> *Life, I*, pp.140-51.

<sup>2</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.99-102; Steven Wise, *Though the Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trial that led to the End of Human Slavery* (London: Pimlico, 2006).

insecurities in the aftermath of the American Revolution, and a decline in the profitability of the slave trade.

Alongside societal changes that allowed the abolition campaigns to gain popularity, there was an increase in the volume of public opposition to slavery in general and the slave trade in particular. In June 1783, the Society of Friends in London sent a petition to the House of Commons calling for the abolition of the slave trade, in response to both the *Zong* case and new legislation banning the members of the African Committee, which managed the African Company of Merchants, from involvement in the trade.<sup>3</sup> The owners of the slave ship *Zong* had claimed insurance money after the crew threw its human cargo overboard when supplies of water ran low during the transatlantic crossing in 1781. The case was brought back into the public consciousness by Granville Sharp in March 1783, and is argued by James Walvin to have been a trigger for the rise of popular abolitionism.<sup>4</sup> Bishop Porteus' sermon to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in February 1783 had made the conditions of the slave trade and slavery a topic of conversation, in which he mentioned Rev. James Ramsay's forthcoming pamphlets, albeit not by name.<sup>5</sup> Ramsay's two publications in 1784, *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of Slaves* and *An Inquiry into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade*, were based on his experience in St. Kitts.<sup>6</sup> Thomas Clarkson's *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, published in English in 1786, further galvanised popular antislavery sentiment.<sup>7</sup> While Ramsay's *Essay* focused on the treatment of enslaved persons and argued for their conversion, his *Inquiry* and Clarkson's *Essay* put forward arguments against the slave trade. Both men viewed it as immoral, and made appeals in religious terms, condemning the trade as iniquitous. However, they were also concerned with the abuses of the system. In 1785, a

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<sup>3</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 10, 17 June 1783, pp.176-7.

<sup>4</sup> James Walvin, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p.10; Michelle Faubert, *Granville Sharp's Uncovered Letter and the Zong Massacre* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> 'The Civilisation, Improvement, and Conversion of the Negroe-Slaves in the British islands recommended', in Bishop Porteus, *Sermons on Several Subjects* (London: T. Payne and Sons, 1783), pp.381-410, p.393.

<sup>6</sup> Rev. James Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (London: James Phillips, 1784); Rev. James Ramsay, *An Inquiry into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade...* (London: James Phillips, 1784).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, particularly the African* (London: James Phillips, 1786).

petition on the slave trade was also signed in Bridgewater, Somerset, although the intent and number of signatures is unknown.<sup>8</sup>

Later in the decade, abolitionists assumed that people recognised the moral and religious wrongs of slavery, and they shifted their rhetoric to highlight the potential benefits of the abolition of the slave trade, rather than to attack the morality of those involved. In 1783, the Quakers appealed on ‘the Principles of humanity and justice’; five years later, the words ‘and sound policy’ had been added to that statement, apparently by Pitt, and were to endure into the successful Act in 1807, as discussed by Stephen Farrell.<sup>9</sup> The key arguments were designed to appeal on practical as well as emotional grounds, and included the use of eyewitness accounts to highlight the suffering involved in the slave trade. The arguments were also designed to counter the objections to abolition made by supporters of the trade.<sup>10</sup> This link between morality and policy is visible in Clarkson’s *Essay*, and became a common feature of British abolitionist writing.<sup>11</sup> In this it mimicked the work of Anthony Benezet, the American Quaker and antislavery campaigner, who is credited with changing the way in which antislavery arguments were presented, combining Enlightenment thinking, facts and travel accounts with Christian teachings, and answering proslavery counterarguments.<sup>12</sup>

When nine Quakers, along with the Anglicans Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp and Phillip Sansom founded the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in May 1787, they decided to focus on the slave trade rather than the institution of slavery itself.<sup>13</sup> This followed the pattern established by Quakers in North America, who banned

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<sup>8</sup> John Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), p.41; Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the Slave Trade...*, I (London: R. Taylor & Co, 1808), pp.320-1.

<sup>9</sup> *Journals of the House of Commons, 1688-1834*, 39, 17 June 1783, pp.487-8; *PR 1780-1796*, 23, 09 May 1788, p.598; Stephen Farrell, ‘Contrary to the Principles of Justice, Humanity, and Sound Policy’: The Slave Trade, Parliamentary Politics and the Abolition Act, 1807’, *Parliamentary History*, 26, S1 (2007), pp.141-202, p.141.

<sup>10</sup> Rev. James Ramsay, *An Address on the Proposed Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade humbly submitted to the Consideration of the Legislature*, (London: James Phillips, 1788; Rev. James Ramsay, *Objections to the Abolition of the Slave Trade, with answers* (London: James Phillips, 1788).

<sup>11</sup> Clarkson, *Essay*, pp.55-115.

<sup>12</sup> Benezet and Sharp corresponded from 1768, and Ramsay’s *Essay* was influenced by Benezet’s work. For more on Benezet, see Maurice Jackson, *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); David L. Crosby, ‘Anthony Benezet’s Transformation of Anti-Slavery Rhetoric’, *Slavery and Abolition*, 23, no.3 (2002), pp.39-58.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade, 1783-1807* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), p.36.



the trade in slaves before prohibiting members of the Society of Friends from owning slaves.<sup>14</sup> The decision to appeal to the House of Commons was in line with Quaker faith in the governance of elites to correct societal wrongs. These similarities to the actions of the Quakers are unsurprising, given that they made up three-quarters of the founding members of the Committee. The slave trade was also seen as an easier institution to target than the whole system of enslavement because abolishing it would not infringe on existing property rights, and thus stood a better chance of being passed by Parliament.<sup>15</sup> It was at this stage in the development of the campaign that Wilberforce became involved.

### **Wilberforce before Abolition**

William Wilberforce was born in Hull on 24 August 1759, and with the exception of two years spent living with his aunt and uncle in Wimbleton, grew up there, attending Hull Grammar and Pocklington School, near York. During his time in Wimbleton, he was introduced to the evangelical movement by his aunt, meeting Rev. John Newton, who was to be important during his re-acquaintance with evangelicalism fifteen years later. It was alarm about Methodism on his mother's part that led to his return to Yorkshire soon after.<sup>16</sup> He then went to St. John's College, Cambridge, where he was known for his sociability. At the end of his time at Cambridge, Wilberforce turned his thoughts to what he might do next. Having inherited both his grandfather's and his uncle's fortunes, he did not need to find a paying career.<sup>17</sup> There were rumours of an upcoming general election, and several of his peers were planning to stand. Disinclined to be more involved in the family trading business, and having spent time in the House of Commons Gallery in the winter of 1779, Wilberforce decided to do the same, and successfully set his sights on the seat for his birthplace in September 1780, immediately after his twenty-first birthday.<sup>18</sup> He was not the only one of his peers making this plan. As well as Wilberforce,

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<sup>14</sup> Yearly Meetings began to advise against the slave trade from 1721 onwards, but it was not enforced until 1758-1761, when slave-owning began to be publicly disapproved of: Brycchan Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657-1761* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2012), p.1, p.207, pp.213-14; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, second edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.330-2.

<sup>15</sup> Jennings, *Business*, p.38 – Clarkson does not reflect on this decision in *History*.

<sup>16</sup> John Pollock, *Wilberforce*, bicentenary edition (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 2007), pp.22-4; *Life, I*, pp.5-6

<sup>17</sup> *Life, I*, p.10.

<sup>18</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, e.11, f.127, S. Wilberforce notebook; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.43, f.5, autobiography.

also standing as MPs that year were William Pitt the Younger, William Grenville, ‘and about 20 of us,’ who had all been at Cambridge, and who also went on to be members of Goostree’s together.<sup>19</sup> Several of the group went on to be key players in the abolition campaign – Pitt and Grenville as supportive prime ministers, and others as supporters of Wilberforce’s bills in the House of Commons.

Wilberforce’s early years in the House of Commons were unremarkable. His personal fortune meant that he was able to establish himself as an independent MP, not needing to curry favour with the government in order to pursue salaried official posts. He focused on constituency business, and when the Quaker petition against the slave trade was presented in 1783, was more concerned about a bill relating to the building of a new prison in Hull that was passing through the House of Lords.<sup>20</sup> Later that year, during the recess from parliament, Wilberforce, together with Pitt and Edward Eliot, went on a tour of Europe. When they returned, Wilberforce began to contribute more to parliamentary debates, mostly those relating to the national debt and other fiscal matters, the East India Company, and matters relating to the working of parliament. He also contributed to debates about Ireland, smuggling, and the fisheries.<sup>21</sup> In 1784, he was elected as MP for the County of Yorkshire, then the largest constituency.<sup>22</sup>

The roots of Wilberforce’s Evangelical conversion were in conversations he had with Isaac Milner during a second tour of Europe he took with his mother and sister in the summer of 1785. Milner had been involved in his early education in Hull and was then a fellow at Queen’s College, Cambridge.<sup>23</sup> Over the course of the tour, Wilberforce studied the Greek New Testament, and engaged in long theological conversations with Milner. It was not an immediate conversion; Wilberforce later recalled that ‘tho’ my understanding assented to Dr Milner’s religious opinion which were of the kind commonly termed evangelical, the hearts of neither of us were suitably affected.’<sup>24</sup> After his return to England, he continued to grapple with these ideas, and over the winter he

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<sup>19</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, e.11, f.128, S. Wilberforce notebook; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.43, f.5, autobiography.

<sup>20</sup> Bodl., MS. Don. e. 164, f.10, diary, 17 June 1783; *Journal of the House of Lords, 1688-1834*, 36, 17 June 1783, p.695.

<sup>21</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 12-27.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Yorkshire, 1754-1790’, *History of Parliament Online* <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/constituencies/yorkshire>> [accessed 20 March 2020].

<sup>23</sup> *Life, I*, p.66 - according to his sons, Wilberforce first asked William Burgh to accompany him, and invited Milner when he saw him shortly after Burgh declined.

<sup>24</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.43, f.13-14, autobiography.

spent his time in conversations with Rev. John Newton, the slave-trader turned minister, Sir Charles Middleton, the naval officer, and other prominent Anglican Evangelicals. Extracts from his religious journal for this period, a more reflective record of his time than his diaries, were included in the *Life* by his sons, and reflect his internal conflict as well as the changes he was making in his daily life.<sup>25</sup> Wilberforce also discussed his new religious views with Pitt, who attempted to talk him out of them. Wilberforce, it seems, was contemplating retiring from public life, whether permanently or temporarily, as a result of his conversion to Evangelicalism. When he expressed this to Pitt, his friend urged him to stay in the House of Commons, arguing that ‘the principles as well as the practice of Christianity are simple, and lead not to meditation only but to action.’<sup>26</sup>

The defining features of evangelical forms of Christianity, as described by David Bebbington, are conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism, and activism – the need for a conversion experience, the belief in the centrality of the Bible and the importance of the crucifixion of Christ, and the turning of faith into action.<sup>27</sup> Also of particular importance to Evangelicals in the period were the observance of the Sabbath, and public morality more generally.<sup>28</sup> In the late eighteenth century, the matter of turning faith into action, which Bebbington describes as ‘the expression of the gospel in effort,’ often took the form of proselytizing and a sense of duty.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Wilberforce’s decision to stay in the House of Commons at the end of his conversion experience, and his more conscientious approach to his role as an MP, can be seen as part of the development of his Evangelicalism, despite him contemplating quitting politics.

Earlier in 1785, he had spoken about penal reform for the first time, and the following year, in May 1786, Wilberforce introduced his first Bill to Parliament, aimed at extending the dissection of executed bodies to a wider range of crimes, and reducing the sentence given to women convicted of treason.<sup>30</sup> Although the matter of the use of

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<sup>25</sup> *Life*, I, pp.89-99.

<sup>26</sup> Pitt to Wilberforce, December 2, 1785, in *Private Papers*, pp.12-15; Ian Bradley, ‘Wilberforce the Saint’ in Jack Hayward (ed), *Out of Slavery: Abolition and After* (London: Frank Cass, 1985), pp.69-85, p.75.

<sup>27</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1880s* (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1989), p.16.

<sup>28</sup> John Wolfe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p.169.

<sup>29</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp.16-17.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Devereaux, ‘Inexperienced Humanitarians? William Wilberforce, William Pitt, and the Execution Crisis of the 1780s’, *Law and History Review* 33, no.4 (2015), pp.879-885 – the bill only features in the Pollock biography, pp.40-2.

executed bodies appears at odds with humanitarian sentiment, Simon Devereaux argued that the intention of the bill was to reduce the number of people sentenced to hanging, in response to a perceived rise in crime and subsequent use of capital punishment, and to act as a deterrent to criminals.<sup>31</sup> Wilberforce also seconded a Bill for parliamentary reform in 1786.<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, he continued to contribute to debates on both issues, an indication of the beginnings of his interest in various types of reform. John Wolffe argued that ‘Evangelical involvement in politics stemmed from a zeal to develop and sustain the Christian character of the state itself.’<sup>33</sup> Although Wilberforce was not involved in parliamentary debates about religion and public morality in the House of Commons until the 1790s, they can be connected to this earlier interest in penal and parliamentary reform.

### **The Origins of Wilberforce’s Involvement**

The narrative of Wilberforce’s initial involvement in the abolition campaign given by his sons in *The Life of William Wilberforce* is echoed in more recent biographies of Wilberforce, most notably Pollock, Furneaux, and Hague. All three used the *Life* and Clarkson’s *A History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade* as the basis for their accounts of this period, and highlight the influence of the Teston Set (which included the Middletons and Ramsay), as well as emphasising other influences. Pollock and Hague portray the Middletons at Teston as central figures, but also acknowledge his prior curiosity about slavery, and the influence of a conversation with Pitt.<sup>34</sup> Furneaux, on the other hand, gives Wilberforce’s evangelicalism the deciding role because ‘to justify his continuance as a member of Parliament he had to find some good cause that he could promote there.’<sup>35</sup> Similarly, histories of abolition, such as those by Drescher and Brown, tend to emphasise the importance of Wilberforce’s conversion to evangelical Anglicanism, or Pitt’s influence.<sup>36</sup> However, there are several different versions which emerge from a re-

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<sup>31</sup> Devereaux, ‘Inexperienced Humanitarians’, pp.842, 855-6, 868.

<sup>32</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 19, 13 February 1786, p.99.

<sup>33</sup> Wolffe, *Expansion of Evangelicalism*, p.184.

<sup>34</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, pp.80-1; William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the great Anti-slave Trade Campaigner* (London: HarperCollins, 2007), pp.140-1.

<sup>35</sup> Robin Furneaux, *William Wilberforce* (London: Hamilton, 1974), pp.69-72.

<sup>36</sup> C.L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp.333-52, 376-7; Drescher, *Abolition*, p.211; Adam Hochschild, *Bury the*

evaluation of the manuscripts, including an autobiographical memo, and other people's accounts of the period.

Wilberforce's personal diary for this period tends not to be reflective, and is more a record of when events happen, or where he was on certain days. This, coupled with the fact that the final months of 1786 and all of 1787 are not among the surviving manuscripts, means that there is not an immediate contemporary version of the events from his point of view. Although his sons quote from his religious journals from this period, the earliest date now available is 20 November 1787. The much-repeated quote that 'God Almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners' is cited by them as being written in late October 1787, and mimics a similar, undated quote in a chapter covering the period April 1786 – September 1787 in which he said that 'God has set before me as my object the reformation of [my country's] manners.'<sup>37</sup> The abolition of the slave trade was, from a chronological perspective, the second of Wilberforce's 'great objects.'

In the *Life*, Robert and Samuel emphasise that Wilberforce's involvement 'was the fruit of his religious change,' and 'the immediate consequence of his altered character,' outright rejecting claims about the influence of either Lady Middleton or Thomas Clarkson.<sup>38</sup> Wilberforce's previous interest is mentioned, focusing on 'the condition of the West Indian slaves,' and resulting in conversations with slave traders in 1786.<sup>39</sup> He had, according the *Life*, previously sent two letters, one to a local newspaper condemning the slave trade when he was fourteen, and another to a friend heading to Antigua, asking him to 'collect information' about slavery.<sup>40</sup> However, there are no extant sources to support these claims, and the letter written to a York newspaper may not have been published. A conversation with Ramsay in 1783 will be discussed in more detail below. The change in focus from the West Indian colonies to the slave trade happened, in this narrative, as a natural part of his inquiries into slavery.<sup>41</sup> In the sons' narrative, after this change in focus, he discussed the slave trade with Sir Charles

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*Chains: The British struggle to Abolish Slavery* (London: Pan Books, 2005), pp.122-4 – Hochschild also emphasises the role of Clarkson.

<sup>37</sup> *Life*, I, pp.149, 130 – from the surrounding quotes and references, this quote was from between February and June 1787.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p.140.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p.149.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, pp.9, 149.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p.149.

Middleton and Mr. Bennet Langton, and then with Pitt. It was Pitt who finally convinced him to bring the matter into the House of Commons ‘as a subject suited to my character and talents,’ and he then announced it publicly at a dinner party at Bennet Langton’s in the Spring of 1787.<sup>42</sup>

The one pre-1786 moment mentioned by his sons and corroborated in the manuscript sources is a reference to Ramsay in November 1783. Wilberforce noted in his diary ‘House – walk’d – Reports – call’d but not supp’d at Goostree’s – Edwards – Ramsay negroes’,<sup>43</sup> which suggests that he was familiar with the contents of Ramsay’s *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* prior to its publication in 1784. The Edwards noted by Wilberforce was most likely Gerard Edwards, Sir Charles and Lady Middleton’s son-in-law, who was also a member of Goostree’s and had been at St. John’s College, Cambridge during Wilberforce’s time there, and who Wilberforce referred to as ‘Edwards’ in 1792.<sup>44</sup> Edwards’ connection to the Middletons, who had encouraged Ramsay to publish his work, suggests that Wilberforce’s reference to Ramsay in his diary was either as a subject of conversation between Wilberforce and Edwards, or Edwards introducing the two men. His sons claim the latter.<sup>45</sup> Regardless of the details of the event, they give a clear indication of some intellectual engagement with slavery, but not necessarily with the slave trade.

Wilberforce’s sons also quote a portion of a letter from Charles Ignatius La Trobe to his daughter on the matter.<sup>46</sup> La Trobe published the full version of this in *Letters to my Children* in 1851, in which he goes into more detail about the relationship between Ramsay and the Middletons, and his own contributions to the cause.<sup>47</sup> He claimed that ‘this great and momentous event [the abolition of the slave trade] was brought about by the instrumentality of a woman,’ meaning Lady Middleton, who pushed for a parliamentary campaign.<sup>48</sup> La Trobe’s narrative centres on a discussion between the Middletons, Ramsay and La Trobe in the summer of 1786 about who would be best suited

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<sup>42</sup> *Life*, I, p.151.

<sup>43</sup> Bodl., MS. Don. e.164, f.17, diary, 13 November 1783.

<sup>44</sup> *Life*, I, pp.17, fn.1, 370; ‘Edwards, Gerard Noel (1759-1838), *History of Parliament Online*, <<http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/member/edwards-gerard-noel-1759-1838>> [accessed 18 August 2020]. Thank you to Ian Harris for suggesting this identification during the viva voce.

<sup>45</sup> *Life*, I, p.148.

<sup>46</sup> *Life*, I, pp.142-6.

<sup>47</sup> 05 December 1815, C.I. La Trobe, *Letters to my Children; written at sea during a voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, in 1815* (London: Seeleys, 1851), pp.13-25.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p.14.

to ‘brave the storm’ and lead the abolition campaign in the House of Commons.<sup>49</sup> They saw Wilberforce as a suitable candidate for several reasons: his religious beliefs, his personal talents and charisma, his commitment to the truth, and his friendship with ‘the Minister’ (Pitt).<sup>50</sup> Middleton then wrote to Wilberforce to ‘propose the subject.’ Wilberforce replied that he did not believe he was the best person to do so, ‘yet could not possibly decline it,’ and committed to visiting Barham Court shortly afterwards to discuss the matter.<sup>51</sup> Although Wilberforce’s diary for 1786 has survived, it ends in early October, before the visit was made.<sup>52</sup> La Trobe did not mention any specific pre-existing interest on Wilberforce’s part, or any other prevailing influences, but implied that Wilberforce was already aware of the subject.

After the *Life*, and the letter reproduced within it, the second most-used account of Wilberforce’s entry into the campaign is Clarkson’s *History*. He wrote that having decided to devote himself to the cause, he presented copies of his *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* to various MPs, including Wilberforce.<sup>53</sup> The *Essay* was published in June 1786, and Clarkson does not mention when he began approaching MPs, but he is not mentioned in Wilberforce’s diary, which ended in October, and so it can be assumed that they did not meet until late-1786 at the earliest. During their first meeting, Wilberforce ‘stated frankly, that the subject had often employed his thoughts, and that it was near his heart,’ and asked for more information, which led to further conversations on the topic.<sup>54</sup> Wilberforce’s response gave Clarkson hope of parliamentary action, and, with other abolitionists in London, he resolved to ask Wilberforce to ‘take up the question in Parliament’ presumably on the basis of these conversations.<sup>55</sup> He agreed to do so, Clarkson reports, at a dinner party in London at which Middleton and Bennett Langton were also present.<sup>56</sup> Any conversation with Pitt and Grenville is absent from Clarkson’s account, which is understandable given that it is his account of proceedings.

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<sup>49</sup> La Trobe, *Letters*, p.22.

<sup>50</sup> La Trobe, *Letters*, p.22.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p.22.

<sup>52</sup> Bodl., MS. Don. e.164, f.53, diary, October 1786 – La Trobe said that the dinner happened in autumn, after Wilberforce was in Yorkshire, and at the end of the existing diary Wilberforce travels between Hull and Leeds.

<sup>53</sup> Clarkson, *History*, I, pp.235-41.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p.241.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p.251.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p.254.

John Harford, who was not a close acquaintance of Wilberforce until 1812, published his own *Recollections of William Wilberforce* in 1865. He wrote that he ‘one day asked Mr. Wilberforce what had first induced him to take up the slave-trade question’.<sup>57</sup> According to Harford’s account, Wilberforce stated that he began to consider slavery in 1780, in response to Sharp’s work, his attention was further captured by Clarkson’s pamphlet, and in 1787 he ‘seriously resolved to take up the question.’<sup>58</sup> The same year, Pitt suggested to Wilberforce that he introduce a motion on the slave trade in parliament. The reasons Pitt gave for doing so were that Wilberforce was already interested in it, and that someone else might take up the cause if he did not.<sup>59</sup> Although he is not mentioned by name, this probably refers to Charles James Fox, the MP who led the opposition to Pitt’s ministry.<sup>60</sup> The narrative implied that Wilberforce was working independently, without direct contact with other abolitionist thinkers, until Pitt’s suggestion. While this independence is not an accurate portrayal of events, it is notable that it mentions Sharp and Clarkson as more important influences than they are anywhere else, and that apparently Wilberforce emphasised the importance of his political friends. Harford was also an Evangelical, and so it might be expected that Wilberforce would have stressed the importance of religion when discussing the matter with him, rather than parliamentary concerns.

Wilberforce dictated an autobiographical memo to an amanuensis, covering the period 1759-92, at an unspecified date. Naturally, this recounts his early life, election as an MP, travels in Europe and his change in religious views. After describing the reaction to this, he discussed the slave trade:

I think it was about the Year 1787 that I commenced my enquiries concerning the African Coast & the nature & effects of the Slave Trade. The publick attention had been pretty generally turned to that subject & meetings naturally took place of those who are interested in the cause.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> John S. Harford, *Recollections of William Wilberforce, Esq.* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1865), pp.1, 138.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, pp.138-9.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p.139.

<sup>60</sup> At the beginning of the parliamentary campaign, Fox says that he was considering doing so himself – *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, p.161.

<sup>61</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.43, f.17, f.20, autobiography.



Having described these meetings briefly, mentioning Clarkson and Middleton, as well as unnamed slave traders, he then stated that:

I then began to talk the matter over with Pitt & Grenville & at length I well remember after a conversation in the open Air at the root of an old tree at Holwood, just above the steep descent to the Valley of Teston I resolved by their advice to give notice in the house of my intention to bring the subject forward.<sup>62</sup>

It is at this point in his narrative that he recalls his own previous interest in the West Indian colonies, referencing the letter sent to a friend, here named as Gordon, to inquire about the enslaved population. His sons noted that this was in relation to Antigua; James Gordon, son of the Chief Justice of that island, was at St John's College, Cambridge during the same period as Wilberforce.<sup>63</sup> Wilberforce did not discuss his influences explicitly, but the thread from his religious conversion, to his decision to be more diligent an MP, to his resumed studies and time with friends, to the place of the slave trade in the popular consciousness, to the meetings with other people, gives weight to the idea, repeated by his sons, that there were 'many impulses giving to my mind the same direction.'<sup>64</sup> The document gives the impression that there were several influences that led to the conversation with Pitt and Grenville.

As mentioned above, there are common threads throughout the narratives. The three that are largely, if not wholly, based on Wilberforce's own recollections (Harford, *Life*, his autobiographical memo, and his diary), describe Wilberforce researching the slave trade and slavery to varying degrees throughout the 1780s. They give varying reasons for this: Harford credits Sharp and Clarkson, his sons point to his religious convictions, and Wilberforce's dictation refers to popular antislavery sentiment. However, he took no action until 1786-7, at which point all the accounts have Wilberforce in conversation with Middleton, Clarkson, and others, and then with Pitt and Grenville, culminating in a resolution to introduce a motion in the House of Commons. This conversation, then, was the trigger for his prominent role in the campaign.

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<sup>62</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.43, f.17, f.20, autobiography.

<sup>63</sup> 'James Gordon', *Legacies of British Slave-ownership Database*, <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/1271272987>> [accessed 06 March 2020].

<sup>64</sup> *Life*, I, p.147.

As discussed in the Introduction, the exclusion of Clarkson from the sons' account is the result of their conflict with Clarkson about the extent to which he or Wilberforce were responsible for abolition campaign, and an impression on the part of his sons that Clarkson was claiming credit for bringing Wilberforce into the campaign.<sup>65</sup> However, six years after the original publication of the *Life*, and ten years after Robert and Samuel first accused Clarkson of this, they wrote to Clarkson 'to acknowledge that we were wrong, in the manner in which we treated you in the Memoir of our Father,' apologising for the 'prejudice' they had held against Clarkson.<sup>66</sup> This suggests that they deliberately excluded Clarkson from parts of their narrative, and that his influence on the development of Wilberforce's abolitionist sympathies was therefore more important than Wilberforce's biographers have suggested. However, in the absence of a diary covering late-1786 and 1787, it is not possible to know when they first met, or how often they communicated.

Wilberforce's sons are the only ones to emphasise the importance of Wilberforce's Evangelical conversion. One of the central features of Evangelicalism as described by Beddington is activism, and Wilberforce's increased activity in the House of Commons and in other matters, such as the Proclamation Society, can be seen as connected to this. However, while the majority of Wilberforce's move towards the campaign happened after his conversion, he had started to engage with the topic beforehand. Wilberforce's Evangelicalism, was, however, important in the Teston Set's decision to approach him as a potential parliamentary ally.<sup>67</sup> Although the autobiographical memo suggests that Wilberforce was increasingly interested in questions surrounding slavery after his conversion, this was in a more intellectual than active manner, what Brown described as 'antislavery sentiment without abolitionism,' and was not a new development.<sup>68</sup> While there is little to suggest that he sought out the campaign – and his focus had been on slavery rather than the trade – he was certainly searching for something.

At the same time that he was becoming more involved in anti-slave trade agitation, Wilberforce, in collaboration with Bishop Porteus, was instrumental in the re-

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<sup>65</sup> For more on this see 'Literary Memorials: Clarkson's *History* and *The Life of William Wilberforce*' in J.R. Oldfield, *Chords of Freedom: Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) pp.33-55.

<sup>66</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.7, f.233-4, Robert and Samuel Wilberforce to Clarkson, 15 November 1844.

<sup>67</sup> La Trobe, *Letters*, p.22.

<sup>68</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, p.37.

issuing of the 1760 Royal Proclamation for the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue, on 1 June 1787, and founded the Proclamation Society in the autumn to enforce it, inspired by a similar society from the later Stuart era. The Society focused on elite immorality, such as gambling and duelling, and became the first in a series of societies aimed at moral and social reform that Wilberforce was involved in.<sup>69</sup> As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the ‘reformation of manners’ featured in Wilberforce’s religious journal before he included the slave trade as one of his ‘great objects.’<sup>70</sup> In the same year, Wilberforce and other Evangelicals, including Newton, successfully lobbied for a chaplaincy to be established in the new penal colony of New South Wales.<sup>71</sup> At around the same time, possibly in 1788, Charles Grant, then a member of the Board of Trade, brought the exclusion of missionaries from territory under East India Company control to Wilberforce’s attention, although there is no sign that he took any concrete action on the matter at this stage.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, the first bill he introduced to the House of Commons, as discussed earlier in this chapter, had some evangelical influence, and he introduced it in 1786, after his conversion.<sup>73</sup> Wilberforce seems to have pursued these matters under his own initiative, alongside his networks, rather than being invited into them as in the abolition campaign. It was the founding of the Proclamation Society that, Ford Brown argued, cemented his place as leader of the Evangelicals.<sup>74</sup>

The slave trade and public morals were not, however, separate concerns. Evangelicals and other devout Anglicans, like Newton, Clarkson, and Sharp, had come to see the slave trade as a national sin that had provoked divine vengeance against Britain, in the guise of American Independence.<sup>75</sup> As Wilberforce became increasingly concerned about his own spiritual state, he also became concerned about that of the nation. The providentialist nature of evangelicalism and the condemnation of slavery in Granville

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<sup>69</sup> Richard R. Follett, *Evangelicalism, Penal Theory and the Politics of Criminal Law Reform in England, 1808-30* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1988), pp.93-4; ‘reformation of manners’ in Iain McCalman (ed.), *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture, 1776-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p.671; Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Leicester: Apollos, 2004), p.238; Wolffe, *Expansion of Evangelicalism*, p.169.

<sup>70</sup> *Life, I*, pp.149, 130.

<sup>71</sup> Noll, *Rise of Evangelicalism*, p.217.

<sup>72</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.43, f.20, autobiography.

<sup>73</sup> Devereaux, ‘Inexperienced Humanitarians’, pp.880-3, 885.

<sup>74</sup> Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp.2-3

<sup>75</sup> Boyd Hilton, ‘Why Britain Outlawed her Slave Trade’ in Derek Peterson (ed), *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp.63-83, pp.75-9; John Coffey, ‘“Tremble Britannia!”: Fear, Providence and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1758-1807’, *English Historical Review*, 127 (2012), pp.844-81, pp.855-9.

Sharp and others' interpretation of scriptural passages combined to create a sense of urgency in evangelical abolitionism, as well as impetus towards other moral reforms.<sup>76</sup> The influence of Newton, who had been involved in the slave trade before (and indeed, after) his own conversion, on Wilberforce during the winter 1785-6, may have further directed him towards the trade as an example of the sinfulness of the British nation. Similarly, his Evangelicalism strengthened his connections with the Middletons and other devout reformers.<sup>77</sup>

It is important not to overemphasise Wilberforce's prior interest in the slave trade. Firstly, he appears to have thought more about reforming slavery than about abolishing it or the trade. Secondly, public opposition to slavery and the slave trade was increasing throughout the 1780s, as a result of Sharp and Ramsay's work, and there is little to suggest that his early engagement went beyond this. After the Quakers petitioned the House of Commons in 1783, they circulated one of Benezet's pamphlets to all MPs, but Wilberforce did not (based on the sources available) react to either of these calls to action.<sup>78</sup> He himself did not claim to have aimed to abolish the slave trade from the start – in his first major speech on it in May 1789, he said that the horrors of the transatlantic voyage 'did not occur to his mind when he first took this business under consideration.'<sup>79</sup> What is significant about Wilberforce's early interactions with antislavery ideas is the timing of the change in focus, which was around the same time that the early abolitionists were beginning to make more definite plans about how to campaign against the trade.

What, then, does revisiting the manuscript sources tell us about Wilberforce's motivations at the beginning of the campaign against the slave trade? The historiography has previously focused on two factors: his evangelical conversion, and the influence of other people, to varying degrees. The fact that Wilberforce did not seek out the abolition campaign of his own accord, suggests that his conversion alone was not the motivation behind his involvement. However, this does not negate the underlying influence of his

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<sup>76</sup> Roger Anstey, 'The Pattern of British Abolitionism in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', in Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (eds), *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey* (Folkestone: Wm Dawson & Sons Ltd, 1980) pp.19-42, p.21; Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (New Jersey, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975), pp.184-99; Coffey, 'Tremble Britannia', p.846.

<sup>77</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, pp.341-2; E.M. Howse, *Saints in Politics: The 'Clapham Sect' and the Growth of Freedom* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1952), pp.10-27.

<sup>78</sup> Drescher, *Abolition*, p.210.

<sup>79</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789; 'Parliamentary Intelligence', *The Times* (London), 13 May 1783, p.3.

religious convictions on his actions, and how he interpreted events. It was one of the reasons that the Middletons had seen him as a suitable candidate and had changed how he viewed his role in parliament towards an interest in moral reform.

Regarding the influence of other people, what Wilberforce described as ‘many impulses’ can be seen as several networks.<sup>80</sup> The Teston Set and Clarkson had an influence on his focus shifting from conditions in the colonies to the slave trade, and Pitt and Grenville had an influence on the translation of thought into action. Wilberforce was in a unique position: his evangelicalism connected him to the Teston Set; his personal fortune was not connected to slavery or the slave trade; his independence in the House of Commons and the fact that he did not need to strive for a paid ministerial position meant that he was able to take a potentially unpopular stance without risk to his career; and his friendship with Pitt gave him access to other government figures. At the same time, Pitt was encouraging him to take up the question. Pitt’s motives for this are unclear – Eric Williams suggested that it was a desire to defeat the French economically, while John Ehrman and Alan Rees argued that Pitt genuinely supported abolition, but was less passionate about it than Wilberforce.<sup>81</sup> Examination of the sources clarifies the reasons both for Wilberforce’s interest, and for why he was targeted by abolitionists as a potential leader. It also shows that early abolitionist networks sought out Wilberforce, rather than being sought out by him.

### **The Early Campaign, 1787-1788**

The early abolitionists were aware that they would face opposition from the West India interest. The negative reaction to Ramsay’s earlier publications, and the increasing amount of anti-abolition literature published in the 1780s had already made this clear.<sup>82</sup> In December 1787, Ramsay wrote to Wilberforce to encourage him to try and think of

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<sup>80</sup> *Life*, I, p.147.

<sup>81</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: Deutsch, 1964, originally University of North Carolina Press, 1944), pp.147-8; John Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt/vol.1: The Years of Acclaim* (London: Constable, 1969), p.392; Alan M. Rees, ‘Pitt and the Achievement of Abolition’, *The Journal of Negro History*, 39, no.3 (1954), pp.167-184, p.172.

<sup>82</sup> Paula K. Dumas, *Proslavery Britain: Fighting for Slavery in an Era of Abolition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp.51-8; Folarin Shyllon, *James Ramsay: The Unknown Abolitionist* (Edinburgh: Canongate Publishing, 1977), pp.42-74; Brown, *Moral Capital*, pp.372-7; Srividhya Swaminathan, ‘(Re)Defining Mastery: James Ramsay vs the West Indian Planter’, *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, 34, no.3 (2016), pp.301-23.

objections to pro-abolition arguments before they were made.<sup>83</sup> However, they were broadly optimistic about their chances. In early 1788, Wilberforce wrote to Rev. Christopher Wyvill, the political reformer, that ‘there is little doubt of my motion for the African trade being carried in the House of Commons.’<sup>84</sup> He expressed similar optimism in correspondence with others, writing to John Cartwright, another political reformer, that ‘no long time I trust will elapse before this foul dishonour to the character of a [Chris]tian nation will be done away.’<sup>85</sup>

The London Committee first met on 22 May 1787, shortly after the dinner party at which Wilberforce told Clarkson and others that he was willing to represent the cause in parliament.<sup>86</sup> The same month, the Committee published and circulated Clarkson’s third pamphlet, *A Summary View of the Slave Trade*.<sup>87</sup> This summarised the conditions of the slave trade and outlined the arguments in favour of its abolition, detailing the benefits to Britain of the abolition of the trade, with a clear view to convince people that abolition was the right course of action.<sup>88</sup> Although these had all featured in previous publications, the *Summary View* was considerably shorter than previous pamphlets, and was intended to encourage popular support for the Committee’s emergent campaign.<sup>89</sup> It can therefore be taken as a sort of mission statement from the abolitionists. Shortly after this, in June 1787, Clarkson set off on a tour of the country, with the intention of gathering evidence to support the Committee’s case.<sup>90</sup> In addition to the collection of anecdotal and statistical evidence, Clarkson met people who also opposed the slave trade. These groups formed their own provincial Abolition Societies, which in turn organised the collection of signatures for petitions to be sent to Parliament. Although initially these activities were not directly linked to the London Committee, over time more collaborative networks were developed and the London Committee began to direct popular support for abolition to better support their activities.

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<sup>83</sup> Bodl., MS. Brit. Emp. s.2, f.28, Ramsay to Wilberforce, 27 December 1787.

<sup>84</sup> NYRO., ZFW/7.2.59, f.13, Wilberforce to Wyvill, 25 January 1788.

<sup>85</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.56, p.72, Wilberforce to Cartwright, 18 April 1788; see also BL., Add MS 34427, ff.183-5, Wilberforce to Eden, 07 December 1787.

<sup>86</sup> Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, p.42.

<sup>87</sup> Ellen Gibson Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson: A Biography* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), p.28.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *A Summary View of the Slave Trade: and of the Probable Consequences of its Abolition* (London: James Phillips, 1787).

<sup>89</sup> Jennings, *Business*, p.35. *Summary View* is 16 pages long, compared to Ramsay’s *Essay* (321) and Clarkson’s *Essay* (289).

<sup>90</sup> Wilson, *Clarkson*, pp.28-38; Clarkson, *History*, pp.292-440.

One of the things that encouraged the abolitionists' optimism was this outpouring of support by the British public. When Clarkson was gathering information and witnesses, he learnt that a petition against the trade was being organised in Manchester, which was sent to the House of Commons in December 1787.<sup>91</sup> The London Committee then offered the Manchester petition as an example for other towns or groups.<sup>92</sup> Wilberforce's early reaction to the petitioning campaign was broadly supportive. He encouraged Wyvill to organise one in Yorkshire, although he quickly asserted a desire for the petition to be a 'respectable declaration of the sense of our County Gentlemen,' rather than being a mass petitions like the one sent from Manchester.<sup>93</sup> Wilberforce's request for a petition seems to have been out of concern that there was not a petition from the region that he represented in the House of Commons, rather than a belief that these petitions would be a deciding factor in the success of the campaign.<sup>94</sup> A petition sent from York in 1788 had 1800 signatures, and can be therefore considered a mass petition, rather than the 'respectable' list Wilberforce had suggested.<sup>95</sup>

As well as gathering further information in England, possibly still from slave traders and other sections of the West India interest, Wilberforce also investigated the slave trade as carried out by other European powers.<sup>96</sup> While the London Committee was coordinating the campaign at home, Wilberforce asked Pitt for support in reaching out to other countries. Sir James Harris, ambassador to Holland, and William Eden (later Lord Auckland), envoy to France and ambassador to Spain, reported back to Grenville and Pitt with information in 1787, which they then passed on to Wilberforce.<sup>97</sup> Grenville told Wilberforce that there would be no benefit in sending someone to Paris specifically to pursue the question, but Wilberforce and Eden had an extended correspondence about the French slave trade.<sup>98</sup> Pitt was also involved in this discussion. Eden suggested a

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<sup>91</sup> Clarkson, *History*, pp.415-16.

<sup>92</sup> J.R. Oldfield, 'The London Committee and Mobilization of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade', *The Historical Journal*, 35, no.2, (1992), pp.331-43, pp.336-7.

<sup>93</sup> NYRO., ZFW/7.2.59, ff.13-18, Wilberforce to Wyvill, 25 January 1788 to 17 March 1788; f.16, 25 February 1788.

<sup>94</sup> NYRO, ZFW/7.2.59, ff.13-18, Wilberforce to Wyvill, 25 January 1788.

<sup>95</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilisation in Comparative Perspective* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.75.

<sup>96</sup> Clarkson said that he and Wilberforce continued to exchange information but does not say who Wilberforce got information from, in his autobiography Wilberforce wrote that he was in contact with slave traders but came to distrust their information, although he does not say when: Clarkson, *History*, I, p.249; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.43, f.20, autobiography.

<sup>97</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.17, f.10-12, Grenville to Wilberforce, 18 December 1787.

<sup>98</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.17, f.10-12, Grenville to Wilberforce, 18 December 1787; BL., Add MS 34427 Auckland Papers.

method for abolition in letters addressed to the French and Spanish monarchies, and sent a copy to Pitt, although he did not think that Pitt and Wilberforce would fully approve of it.<sup>99</sup> These early efforts to encourage other governments to consider abolishing their slave trades do not often feature in general histories of British abolitionism, except as an indicator of Pitt's support.<sup>100</sup>

Wilberforce was not a member of the London Committee at this time, and so these two paths – encouraging popular support and seeking diplomatic cooperation – can be taken separately.<sup>101</sup> It is unlikely that he made the Committee aware of his actions. In his correspondence with Eden, he said that he was 'labouring to keep a number of people quiet in London & elsewhere, who are extremely humane & extremely imprudent.'<sup>102</sup> Additionally, Ramsay and Clarkson's 1788 publications – Clarkson's *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* and Ramsay's *Address on the Proposed Bill* – do not suggest that other nations might also abolish their slave trades, which suggests that they were either unaware of Wilberforce's actions, or were keeping them quiet as his request.<sup>103</sup> This is not to say that the Committee were not interested in this approach; in the summer of 1788 they were in contact with the Marquis of Lafayette, the French aristocrat and revolutionary figure, and the King of Sweden.<sup>104</sup> This drive for secrecy, coming from Wilberforce, further demonstrates that the early efforts for a multi-national approach to abolition were his own contribution to the campaign, and not one that is widely discussed in the historiography.

Wilberforce's correspondence with Eden was mostly an exchange of information, comparing the British and French slave trades, and popular attitudes to them. The two men also discussed methods to encourage French abolition, and both seemed optimistic about the chances of an agreement being reached on the slave trade.<sup>105</sup> Eden was in France negotiating a commercial treaty, and was in contact with the Comte de

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<sup>99</sup> KHLc., U1590/S5/O1/5, Eden to Pitt, 13 December 1787.

<sup>100</sup> The diplomatic efforts are not mentioned in J.R. Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-slavery, c.1787-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), but are included in scholarship on Pitt: Ehrman, *Years of Acclaim*, pp.392-3; Rees, 'Pitt and the Achievement of Abolition', pp.169-70; and mentioned in Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, p.323-24.

<sup>101</sup> Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, p.88.

<sup>102</sup> BL., Add MS 34427, ff.121-5, Wilberforce to Eden, 23 November 1787.

<sup>103</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade, in two parts* (London: James Phillips, 1788); Rev James Ramsay, *An Address on the Proposed Bill*.

<sup>104</sup> BL., Add MS 21255, pp.27, 33, Fair Minute Books of the Committee for the abolition of the Slave-trade, 2, 10 June 1788, 15 July 1788.

<sup>105</sup> BL., Add MS 34427, f.49, Wilberforce to Eden, 7 November 1789; BL., Add MS 34427, f.56, Eden to Wilberforce, n.d.



Montmorin, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Navy, who gave Eden information about the French slave trade and discussed abolition plans with him. Wilberforce expressed a desire to secure French support before the question was raised in Britain, and for this to be extended to include as many countries as possible, mentioning Spain and Holland.<sup>106</sup> His continuing pursuit of diplomatic cooperation, and concern about how the continuance of one nation's trade could affect the abolition of another's, shows an awareness of the full scale of the slave trade, and a concern about the enslavement of Africans beyond British involvement in it.<sup>107</sup> Wilberforce's enthusiasm for European abolition could cynically be seen as a strategic way to combat pro-slave trade counter-arguments in Britain, but the details that he went into regarding the French slave trade suggest a real interest in the question beyond securing British abolition.

Wilberforce's actions are indicative of his ambition to go beyond abolishing the British slave trade from the start. In his letters to Eden, he also expressed hope that the abolition of the slave trade would lead to improvement in the treatment of enslaved populations and could eventually lead to emancipation.<sup>108</sup> The link between abolition and amelioration was a common feature of abolitionist literature; the hope was that once slave-owners could no longer import newly enslaved Africans, they would treat the enslaved populations better. In 1787-8, hints of a desire for eventual emancipation were included in newer anti-slave trade literature, with both Clarkson and Ramsay mentioning it, despite the narrower aim of the campaign at that time.<sup>109</sup> Opposition to slavery as well as the slave trade was not new – Sharp had been a vocal advocate for emancipation since the 1770s – but its inclusion in literature specifically targeting the slave trade shows that it was never considered in isolation from slavery.<sup>110</sup> These public references to a possible future emancipation are then reflected in Wilberforce's private correspondence, which demonstrates that these ideas were shared across the campaign.

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<sup>106</sup> BL., Add MS 34427, f.49, Wilberforce to Eden, 7 November 1789; BL., Add MS 34427, f.121, Wilberforce to Eden, 23 November 1787; BL., Add MS 34427, f.183, Wilberforce to Eden, 07 December 1787.

<sup>107</sup> BL., Add MS 34427, ff.183-6, Wilberforce to Eden, 07 December 1787; BL., Add MS 34427, ff.366-7, Wilberforce to Eden, 05 January 1788.

<sup>108</sup> BL., Add MS 34427, ff.183-6, Wilberforce to Eden, 07 December 1787.

<sup>109</sup> Clarkson, *Summary View*, p.16; Ramsay, *Objections*, p.8.

<sup>110</sup> G. M. Ditchfield, 'Sharp, Granville (1735-1813)' *ODNB*, October 2012 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/25208>> [accessed 13 March 2020].

The correspondence also throws light on his attitude to popular support in Britain. He discussed the emergence of abolition societies in Manchester and Birmingham in positive terms, using ‘these Demonstrations of the general spirit that is gone abroad’ as a reason for his optimism regarding the chances of success in the House of Commons.<sup>111</sup> However, he also expressed wariness about the emergence of a similar society in France, presumably the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, suggesting that the French court ought to lead rather than follow ‘the general opinion,’ and later questioning whether the society was ‘respectable from the Rank, character & number of its members’.<sup>112</sup> In contrast to the British abolition campaign, which was founded on a basis of popular support, the French abolition society was more based on elite support.<sup>113</sup> Wilberforce’s anxiety about the social composition of the French society reflects his desire for elites, rather than the masses, to sign the proposed petition in Yorkshire, but suggests that he was not familiar with the *Amis des Noirs*. The society was formed in Paris in 1788, after Jacques Pierre Brissot, one of the founders, visited England and, having met Clarkson, was introduced to the London Committee and encouraged to establish a similar one in France.<sup>114</sup> Whether Brissot and Wilberforce met is unclear; at the time he was not a member of the London Committee, and the visit was during the missing period of his diaries. The two societies became closely associated, with British abolitionists providing literature to be translated, and the funds to publish it.<sup>115</sup> While Wilberforce and Pitt were in conversation with French *ancien régime* ministers, Clarkson was in conversation with those attempting to convince the French people of the need for abolition. In 1789, Clarkson travelled to Paris to supply the growing society with literature and to encourage them to mimic the British movement and take the matter to the French Constituent Assembly.<sup>116</sup>

Shortly after his correspondence with Eden, Wilberforce wrote to Lafayette, another founding member of the *Amis des Noirs*, who he had met during his time in

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<sup>111</sup> BL., Add MS 34427, f.401, Wilberforce to Eden, January 1788.

<sup>112</sup> BL., Add MS 34427, ff.183-6, Wilberforce to Eden, 07 December 1787; BL., Add MS 34427, ff.366-7, Wilberforce to Eden, 05 January 1788.

<sup>113</sup> Daniel P. Resnick, ‘The Société des Amis des Noirs and the Abolition of Slavery’, *French Historical Studies* 7, no.4 (1972), pp.558-69, pp.561-2.

<sup>114</sup> Lawrence C. Jennings, ‘The Interaction of French and British Antislavery, 1789-1848’, *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 15 (1992), pp.81-91, pp.81-2.

<sup>115</sup> BL., Add MS 21255, pp.3-5, Fair Minute Books, 2, 05 March 1788; Marcel Dorigny, ‘Antislavery, Abolitionism, and Abolition in France from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the 1840s’, in Pascal Blanchard et al (eds), *Colonial Culture in France since the Revolution* (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp.56-74, p.65.

<sup>116</sup> Jennings, ‘Interaction of French and British Antislavery’, p.82.

France in 1783.<sup>117</sup> From the Frenchman's response, it appears that Wilberforce wrote to him to suggest coordinating efforts against the trade. Lafayette's wrote that the French national assembly was not likely to do so, but that 'a great deal must be expected from the example of a nation the more enlightened in affairs of commerce,' supporting Wilberforce's hope that other countries would emulate British abolition.<sup>118</sup> He also agreed with Wilberforce's ideas about the probable outcome of abolition, and that emancipation would be damaging to both the slave owners and the enslaved. By writing to acquaintances in France, Wilberforce was going beyond the government negotiations being carried out by Eden to try and secure support among other members of the French government, potentially preparing to pursue the question further once British abolition had been passed.

The first motion against the slave trade was planned for February 1788, the same month that Pitt instigated a Privy Council Inquiry into the trade, but Wilberforce became very ill and left London for Bath.<sup>119</sup> Wilberforce told Wyvill that he would be introducing the motion 'in two to three weeks' at the beginning of February, but did not mention what form that the motion would take.<sup>120</sup> He asked Pitt to introduce the motion in his stead when it became clear that he would not be able to return to London before the end of the parliamentary session. In April 1788, Pitt promised to 'take my part in it as actively as if I was myself the mover,' although he was unsure if 'circumstances will admit of its being brought forward this session.'<sup>121</sup> Although Wilberforce's trust in Pitt later became a point of criticism, because of Pitt's inconsistent support for abolition (which will be discussed in Chapter Two), it was not necessarily a naïve request at the time.<sup>122</sup> Pitt had, after all, encouraged Wilberforce to pursue abolition, and they were close friends.

The following month, Pitt gave a speech in which he suggested that matters relating to abolition were 'unfit topics for immediate discussion' due to 'the advanced period of the session, and the want of proper materials for the full information of the

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<sup>117</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.43, p.7, autobiography.

<sup>118</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.13, ff.334-7, Lafayette to Wilberforce, 25 February 1788.

<sup>119</sup> For more on the Privy Council Inquiry, see: Jane Webster, 'Collecting for the Cabinet of Freedom: The Parliamentary History of Thomas Clarkson's Chest', *Slavery and Abolition*, 38, no.1 (2017), pp.135-54; 'Report of the Lords of the Committee of Council appointed for the Consideration of all Matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations...', *Sessional Papers*, 69 (1789).

<sup>120</sup> NYRO., ZFW/7.2.59, Wilberforce to Wyvill, 8 February 1788.

<sup>121</sup> Pitt to Wilberforce, 08 April 1788, in *Private Papers*, pp.17-19.

<sup>122</sup> Fiona Spiers, 'William Wilberforce: 150 Years On' in Jack Hayward (ed), *Out of Slavery: Abolition and After* (London: Frank Cass, 1985), pp.47-68, pp.53-5.

House.’ He suggested that it might be better left to a later date, after further information had been collected by the Privy Council.<sup>123</sup> Pitt had pre-warned members of the London Committee that the slave trade could not be ‘fully investigated in the present Session’ because of the ongoing Privy Council inquiry, but that he would commit the House to a full discussion in the next session.<sup>124</sup> Pitt’s speech ended with a motion to this effect, and the debate that followed was about whether this was necessary, and whether the trade ought to be regulated rather than abolished. MPs also discussed the Privy Council inquiry, questioning why it was not being held by the House of Commons, given that the petitions had been addressed to the latter.<sup>125</sup>

While Pitt’s motion did little to further the abolitionist cause, towards the end of the debate, Sir William Dolben, MP for Oxford, rose to offer support for abolition, and to suggest regulation, ‘independent of the general question,’ to target the high mortality on the Middle Passage in the meantime.<sup>126</sup> Later that month, Dolben introduced a regulatory bill to the House. Titled ‘An Act to Regulate for a Limited Time the Shipping and Carrying Slaves in British Vessels from the Coast of Africa’ (Dolben’s Act), it regulated the number of slaves a ship was permitted to carry from Africa, and some of the conditions of the voyage, including the presence of surgeons on board.<sup>127</sup> Although Dolben’s first comments suggest he intended for the regulation to be complementary to the abolition campaign, abolitionists expressed concern about its consequences. Both Samuel Whitbread, the independent MP, in correspondence with Sharp, and John James Hamilton, Eliot’s half-brother, in the Commons debates, suggested that the bill could be seen as sanctioning the slave trade, because there was no specific legislation on it.<sup>128</sup> Despite this concern, Whitbread seconded Dolben’s Bill.<sup>129</sup> Although Wilberforce was recovering in Bath when the Act was passed, he must have been aware of it; Whitbread’s letter to Sharp is among his papers in the Bodleian.<sup>130</sup> There is no indication of what Wilberforce’s opinion was at the time; however, in 1791 he alluded to the insufficiency

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<sup>123</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 23, 21 May 1788, pp.597-8.

<sup>124</sup> BL., Add MS 21255, p.14, p.16, Fair Minute Books, 2, 22 April 1788, 29 April 1788.

<sup>125</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 23, 21 May 1788, pp.598-609.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, p.606.

<sup>127</sup> James W. LoGerfo, ‘Sir William Dolben and “The Cause of Humanity”: The passage of the Slave Trade Regulation Act of 1788’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 6, no.4 (1973), pp.431-51.

<sup>128</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce d.17, f.13, Samuel Whitbread to Granville Sharp, 12 May 1788; *PR 1780-1796*, 23, 21 May 1788, p.737.

<sup>129</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 23, 21 May 1788, p.735.

<sup>130</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce d.17, f.13, Samuel Whitbread to Granville Sharp, 12 May 1788.

of regulation as a means for abolition, and in 1792 stated that Dolben's Act had made no difference to mortality rates.<sup>131</sup>

Even though we do not know what form Wilberforce's proposed motion was going to take, the debates in May 1788 indicate the prevailing attitudes to the slave trade in the House of Commons, and therefore a suggestion for how a motion might have been received. The statements for support were all made on moral grounds, rather than any suggestion of practical benefit. The opposition to the measures demanded proof of the abuses associated with the slave trade by the abolitionists. Both of these reactions were repeated in 1789 in response to Wilberforce's first motion, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

As this chapter has demonstrated, Wilberforce's experience at the beginning of the campaign was defined by the networks that he was a part of, both religious and political. His involvement was influenced by the desires of those around him, both in engaging him further in the ideas about abolition that were circulating, and in leading him to take up a prominent role in the emerging campaign. Networks continued to be important in his early actions within the campaign, with his friendship with Pitt connecting him to Eden. His ideas at the beginning of the campaign were also shaped by these networks, and his plans for abolition were a combination of those pursued by the other extra-parliamentary abolitionists and his own perspective from parliament. Of all the moral reform movements that he was involved in during the period, 1786-8, he was more self-motivated in the formation of the Proclamation Society and the pursuit of penal reform than he was in becoming involved in the abolition campaign.

The Quakers had met with Pitt in 1784 to discuss legislative action, but he had suggested that they should not push the question until they were more likely to get support.<sup>132</sup> The petition sent in 1783 had been signed by 273 men. Five years later, when Wilberforce introduced the first Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade to Parliament, 60,000 signatures on petitions were sent to Parliament in support. The tide that Pitt had seen as against abolishing the slave trade in 1784 had turned in the favour of the

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<sup>131</sup> PR 1780-1796, 29, 18 April 1791, p.218; PR 1780-1796, 32, 02 April 1792, p.171.

<sup>132</sup> Seymour Drescher, 'Public Opinion and Parliament in the Abolition of the British Slave Trade', *Parliamentary History*, 26, (2007) pp.42-65, p.45.

abolitionists. However, as this chapter has shown, this had more influence on Wilberforce, than Wilberforce had on it.

## Chapter 2

### The Parliamentary Campaign, 1789-1807: I: Strategy

The British parliamentary campaign against the Atlantic slave trade continued for almost twenty years, from 1789 to 1807. Thomas Clarkson ended the first volume of his *History of the Rise and Progress* with the passage of Dolben's Act, and the second volume begins: 'Matters had now become serious. The gauntlet had been thrown and accepted.'<sup>1</sup> This chapter analyses the abolitionists' approach in parliament across the eighteen year period, demonstrating that Wilberforce exercised growing influence over it, from acting on behalf of the London Committee and on the advice of others in 1789, to reaching out to new collaborators in 1806. It also considers criticisms of Wilberforce, both contemporary and historiographical, to assess whether his decisions did or did not affect the success of the bills he proposed. The chapter demonstrates that the approach used by abolitionists changed in response to events in the West Indian colonies and Europe. It shows that Wilberforce engaged with and used popular support in ways that suggest that, initially, he viewed it more positively than the historiography portrays. However, this changed after the French Revolution.

The most comprehensive overview of the parliamentary campaign, Roger Anstey's *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition*, concluded that its success was the result of the 'consummate tactical skill' and 'doggedness' of the abolitionists.<sup>2</sup> However, other historians are more critical of Wilberforce's work in parliament, questioning whether Wilberforce rather than James Stephen and Lord Grenville deserve the credit for the final manoeuvres in 1806-7. James Walvin described Wilberforce as inefficient and unpredictable.<sup>3</sup> Fiona Spiers characterised his approach as veering 'from tactical sophistication to almost unbelievable political naivety' – although he was a gifted speaker, he did not understand the House of Lords, and could not consistently guarantee enough support to pass motions.<sup>4</sup> Dale Porter, together with Spiers and Walvin, points to

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, II (London: R. Taylor & Co., 1808), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (New Jersey, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975), pp.409, 412.

<sup>3</sup> James Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776-1838* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), pp.106-7.

<sup>4</sup> Fiona Spiers, 'William Wilberforce: 150 Years On', in Jack Hayward (ed), *Out of Slavery: Abolition and After* (London: Frank Cass, 1985), pp.47-68, pp.53-5.

Wilberforce's uncompromising insistence on immediate abolition as a reason for the failure of his motions.<sup>5</sup> Spiers and Porter were also critical of what they see as an over-reliance on his friendship with Pitt.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Porter viewed the fact that Wilberforce stepped back in 1806-7, when the bills were finally successful, as proof that he had been more of a hindrance than a help.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the broadly narrative nature of biographies of Wilberforce, they do analyse the efficacy of Wilberforce's actions in parliament. Furneaux does not offer much analysis of the subject, but criticises Wilberforce's refusal to 'play politics over Abolition.'<sup>8</sup> When discussing the final success of the bills, Furneaux concluded that 'all the Abolitionist stars had to be in conjunction,' rather than a specific tactical decision.<sup>9</sup> The overall impression of Pollock's biography, in regard to the parliamentary efforts, is that Wilberforce was over-reliant on Pitt, and he suggested that Pitt's death in January 1806 'transformed the Abolition situation.'<sup>10</sup> Early in the narrative, Pollock also stated that 'at the last it would be Stephen's genius which outflanked and routed the entrenched defenders of the Trade,' later writing that the idea of Wilberforce as a 'master-mind' came from his sons' writings after his death.<sup>11</sup> Hague directly addressed the negative view of Wilberforce's tactics taken by historians, defending Wilberforce's early approach on the basis that no one could have known how much the situation would change in the 1790s.<sup>12</sup> He wrote that Wilberforce was naïve in his early optimism, but that in 1806-7 he 'reacted to the new situation with a series of astute tactical judgements' alongside Stephen's idea for a new approach.<sup>13</sup> When discussing the eventual success of the campaign, Hague argued that 'Wilberforce's role had been crucial,' both in the eyes of his parliamentary colleagues and in the role that the Saints played in its final years.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond Anstey's account and the biographies of Wilberforce, historiography on abolition is less interested in high politics and the parliamentary context than in the

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<sup>5</sup> Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom*, pp.106-7; Spiers, 'William Wilberforce', p.54; Dale H. Porter, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade in England, 1784-1807* (USA: Archon Books, 1970), p.142.

<sup>6</sup> Porter, *Abolition of the Slave Trade*, p.142; Spiers, 'William Wilberforce', pp.53-5.

<sup>7</sup> Porter, *Abolition of the Slave Trade*, p.142.

<sup>8</sup> Furneaux, *William Wilberforce*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), p.85.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p.258.

<sup>10</sup> John Pollock, *Wilberforce*, bicentenary edition (Eastbourne: Kingsway Communications, 2007) p.249.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pp.122, 254.

<sup>12</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the great Anti-slave trade Campaigner* (London: HarperCollins, 2007), pp.185-6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, pp.142-3, 330-32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.353.



popular, extra-parliamentary movement. John Oldfield's *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery* quotes a letter from Thomas Clarkson to Matthew Montagu, MP for Tregony and a friend of Wilberforce, in 1793, in which he wrote that 'Mr Wilberforce is unknown, for he has had no dealings personally with them.'<sup>15</sup> Wilberforce supported petitioning, within limits, but was only directly involved in the popular campaign within the London Committee or in correspondence with personal acquaintances, and was less supportive of other forms of political agitation. He had objected to a proposed public meeting in London, and saw Clarkson's tours as useful for information gathering, but was less enthusiastic about them as a means for organising popular support.<sup>16</sup> While his parliamentary speeches were reported in newspapers and published as pamphlets, he did not speak publicly on the subject (outside of the House of Commons).<sup>17</sup> David Turley described the two campaigns, inside and outside parliament as 'connected but separate'; Wilberforce's focus was parliamentary.<sup>18</sup> Although extra-parliamentary pressure had increased after the Wilkite movement in 1769 and the Yorkshire Association in the 1780s, the early failures of the abolition campaign demonstrate that popular support did not translate into parliamentary success, and that the interest groups in parliament continued to be powerful.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the period 1787-1807, the parliamentary context in which Wilberforce acted saw more continuity than change. Although the political power of the monarch had been in decline from 1783, the hostility of the King continued to prevent some issues, including the abolition of the slave trade, being adopted as government

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<sup>15</sup> J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.83; 'Matthew Montagu (1762-1831)', *History of Parliament Online*, <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/montagu-matthew-1762-1831>> [accessed 20 March 2020]; see also: Leo d'Anjou, *Social Movements and Cultural Change: The First Abolition Campaign Revisited* (New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1996), pp.69-206; Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilisation in Comparative Perspective* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp.67-88; Seymour Drescher, 'Public Opinion and Parliament in the Abolition of the Slave Trade', *Parliamentary History*, 26, S1 (2007), pp.42-65.

<sup>16</sup> David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.52.

<sup>17</sup> *The Speech of William Wilberforce, Esq., ... on the question of the abolition of the slave trade* (London: J Walter, 1789); *The Debate on a motion for the abolition of the slave-trade... April, 1791* (London: W. Woodfall, 1791); *The Debate on a motion for the abolition of the slave-trade... April, 1792* (London: W. Woodfall, 1792); In 1788, for example, there were at least 27 public meetings about abolition – Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery*, p.75.

<sup>18</sup> Turley, *Culture of English Antislavery*, p.4.

<sup>19</sup> Bob Harris, 'The House of Commons, 1707-1800' in Clyve Jones (ed), *A Short History of Parliament: England, Great Britain, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Scotland* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2009), p.181-2; Peter Jupp, *The Governing of Britain, 1688-1814: The Executive, Parliament and the People* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p.109.

measures.<sup>20</sup> Despite the prominence of Pitt and Fox on either side of the House of Commons, which created a ‘two-party atmosphere’, the majority of MPs continued to consider themselves Independent, and tended to vote with the government, rather than the opposition.<sup>21</sup> Wilberforce drew on support from across the House in his efforts to pass abolition measures.<sup>22</sup>

The narrative of parliamentary efforts for abolition can be broken down into three periods: the early years in 1789-92 when popular support was at its peak, its stagnation and decline in 1793-1803, and final success in 1804-7. The chapter has been divided like this to reflect major changes within the campaign, and the different levels of historiographical attention it has received. These changes are based on the fluctuating momentum behind abolitionism; in the first and third periods, the campaign attracted popular support, and in the third period this was combined with changes in parliament. In contrast, during the second period, Wilberforce’s anti-slave trade activities were defeated more quickly and were eventually suspended. A full timeline of the parliamentary activity can be found in Appendix 1, which serves as a companion to this chapter, with additional details about motions and votes.

## 1789-1792

Wilberforce’s illness in 1788 postponed debate on the slave trade until the next parliamentary session; not until 12 May 1789 was the subject fully debated by the House of Commons for the first time.<sup>23</sup> Instead of introducing a bill for the abolition of the slave trade, Wilberforce concluded his speech by moving for a vote on twelve propositions, intended to be adopted as resolutions by the House. The full text of these is included in Appendix Two. The propositions were based on the facts of the slave trade, with evidence drawn from the 1788 Privy Council inquiry.<sup>24</sup> Wilberforce introduced the propositions by stating that he wanted MPs to consider them individually, rather than to consider the

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<sup>20</sup> Jupp, *Governing of Britain*, pp.111-12; Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.27, 40, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Hilton, *Mad, Bad and Dangerous People*, p.50; Jupp, *Governing of Britain*, p.124; Frank O’Gorman, *The Emergence of the British Two-Party System, 1760-1832* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982); B.W. Hill, *British Parliamentary Parties, 1741-1832: From the Fall of Walpole to the First Reform Act* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), p.154.

<sup>22</sup> O’Gorman, *Emergence of the British Two-Party System*, pp.21-2.

<sup>23</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 23, 5 May 1788, p.545; *PR 1780-1796*, 23, 9 May 1788, pp.597-8.

<sup>24</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, pp.150-54; see Appendix 2.

whole question, or to come to an immediate decision on abolishing the trade. This was presumably intended to take the temperature of the Commons prior to introducing a bill for the abolition of the slave trade, and he did not pretend that that was not his eventual intention.<sup>25</sup>

The decision to introduce propositions was criticised, both at the time and later. In Wilberforce's unfinished autobiographical memo, he said that this was done at Pitt and Grenville's suggestion and that he was later criticised for causing delay by not taking advantage of the popular mood. He refuted this, because of the opposition the measure faced in parliament.<sup>26</sup> Fox immediately said that voting on all the propositions was unnecessary.<sup>27</sup> The decision to introduce evidence-based propositions rather than the general principle gave the West India interest an opportunity to defeat Wilberforce's motion without relying on a vote. Opponents of abolition were aware of the content of the propositions, and planned their response in advance.<sup>28</sup> They focused their objections on the question of whether the Privy Council's evidence was admissible in the House of Commons.<sup>29</sup> The debate was then postponed repeatedly on the basis that the House was not well enough attended, until the matter was withdrawn.<sup>30</sup>

The question of evidence continued to be the key issue surrounding abolition in 1790. In late January, Wilberforce moved that the House, as a Committee, 'consider the circumstance of the Slave Trade complained of in several petitions which have been presented to this House, relative to the state of the African Slave Trade.'<sup>31</sup> While the hearing of evidence in the House of Commons after the publication of the Privy Council's report was obviously a delay to the introduction of a bill for abolishing the slave trade, without the House of Commons hearing the evidence itself, the same question would likely have been raised in answer to any attempt by Wilberforce to move against the slave trade. Wilberforce made it clear in his speech that the measure was 'actuated rather by a

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<sup>25</sup> 'Parliamentary Intelligence', *The Times*, 13 May 1789, p.1; 'House of Commons' *General Evening Post*, 12-14 May 1789, p.2.

<sup>26</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce c.43, ff.22-3, autobiography.

<sup>27</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, p.160.

<sup>28</sup> BRO., SMV/7/2/15, H. Cruger to J. Osborne, 10 May 1789; 'Henry Cruger (1739-1827)', *History of Parliament Online* <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/member/cruger-henry-1739-1827>> [accessed 20 March 2020]; 'Jeremiah Osborne' *UCL Legacies of British Slave-ownership* <<https://www.depts-live.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/26642>> [accessed 16 March 2020].

<sup>29</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 21 May 1789; BRO., SMV/7/2/15, H. Cruger to J. Osborne, 10 May 1789.

<sup>30</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 21 May 1789; see Appendix 1 for postponed debates.

<sup>31</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 27, 25 January 1790, p.8.

desire to accommodate other gentlemen, than any personal wish to gratify an inclination of his own,' a response to the calls for evidence in 1789.<sup>32</sup>

In April 1791 Wilberforce introduced the subject for debate again. Rather than asking the House of Commons to vote on resolutions regarding the slave trade, as he had done two year earlier, Wilberforce concluded his three and a half hour speech by moving for leave to bring in a bill 'to prevent the farther importation of slaves into the British colonies in the West Indies'.<sup>33</sup> At the beginning of his speech, Wilberforce explained this change in approach, stating that he had been persuaded to do so by 'friends with whom he was connected in the business'.<sup>34</sup> Presumably, he had been criticised by other abolitionist MPs or the London Committee for introducing propositions instead of a bill in 1789. However, the motion was defeated by a majority of 75, after two days of debate.<sup>35</sup>

In April 1792, Wilberforce brought together both of the approaches he had used previously. At the end of his speech, he introduced two motions: the first for a resolution against the trade, the second for leave to bring in a bill on the subject.<sup>36</sup> Private-member bills which failed on first introduction were often regarded as trial-runs, and were revised and re-introduced the following session, and so it was not unusual that Wilberforce brought the question forward again after its defeat in 1791.<sup>37</sup> While an attempt by Robert Banks Jenkinson, MP for Rye, to delay the debate failed, another amendment proposed by Henry Dundas, the Home Secretary, to insert the word 'gradually' into the resolution succeeded, and the amended question passed, with the House of Commons declaring that the slave trade ought to be gradually abolished.<sup>38</sup> Two days later, Wilberforce declared that he had no intention of bringing in a bill for the gradual abolition of the slave trade, referring the matter to Dundas.<sup>39</sup> Wilberforce's public rejection of gradual abolition is perhaps the strongest support for the criticism that his approach to the parliamentary campaign against the slave trade was too narrow-minded and uncompromising.

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<sup>32</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 27, 25 January 1790, pp.7-8; *An Abstract of the Evidence delivered...for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London: James Phillips, 1791).

<sup>33</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.220.

<sup>34</sup> 'House of Commons', *Morning Chronicle*, 19 April 1791, p.2.

<sup>35</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.239.

<sup>36</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.175.

<sup>37</sup> Jupp, *Governing of Britain*, p.220.

<sup>38</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32 2 April 1792, pp.257-8.

<sup>39</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 4 April 1792, pp.276-7.

In his 1792 speech, Wilberforce referred to the recent rebellion in French St Domingue, as ‘a lesson’ that proved the necessity of abolition for colonial security.<sup>40</sup> The enslaved-led uprising had started in August 1791, and news had reached Britain in the autumn. Claudius Fergus argues that the revolution was ‘the pivotal moment’ for British abolitionism.<sup>41</sup> British slaveowners called for a greater military presence in the West Indian colonies, and blamed Wilberforce and other abolitionists for the revolt. Abolitionists argued that newly imported slaves were more likely to rebel, and that abolishing the slave trade would reduce the likelihood of a similar rebellion in British colonies. However, Wilberforce was also aware of the negative effect that news of the rebellion would probably have on support for abolition.<sup>42</sup> There is some debate about how much of an impact the rebellion had on the abolition campaign and its defeat in 1792.<sup>43</sup> David Geggus argues that it bolstered support in 1792, and later in 1804, when it was high in the public consciousness, but hindered it at other times.<sup>44</sup> In 1804, the colony declared its independence from France and the leaders of the rebellion renamed the territory Haiti. Wilberforce and other abolitionists continued to use events in Haiti as an example of the threat to colonial security from newly enslaved persons. Fedon’s Rebellion, an uprising in Grenada, 1795-6, led by the free black population of the island, was suppressed, and the Trelawny Maroons were transported to Nova Scotia and thence to Sierra Leone in the 1790s; Haiti continued to be the most threatening example.<sup>45</sup> Wilberforce’s rhetoric on rebellions is analysed in Chapter Three.

As well as this addition to the arguments in favour of abolition, the way in which the popular agitation against the slave trade was used in parliament was different in 1792. Typically, petitions would be presented to parliament after a bill had been introduced.<sup>46</sup> In 1792, however, Wilberforce requested the arrival of petitions against the slave trade

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<sup>40</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.162.

<sup>41</sup> Claudius K. Fergus, *Revolutionary Emancipation: Slavery and Abolitionism in the British West Indies* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), p.12.

<sup>42</sup> Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), p.60.

<sup>43</sup> Fergus, *Revolutionary Emancipation*, pp.68-75.

<sup>44</sup> David Geggus, ‘British Opinion and the Emergence of Haiti, 1791-1805’ in James Walvin (ed), *Slavery and British Society, 1776-1846* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), pp.123-149, p.149.

<sup>45</sup> Edward L. Cox, ‘Fedon’s Rebellion 1795-96: Causes and Consequences’, *The Journal of Negro History*, 67, no.1 (1982), pp.7-19; Kit Candlin, *The Last Caribbean Frontier, 1795-1815* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.1-6; James D. Lockett, ‘The Deportation of the Maroons of Trelawny Towns to Nova Scotia, then Back to Africa’, *Journal of Black Studies*, 30, no.1 (1999), pp.5-14; Ruma Chopra, *Almost Home: Maroons between Slavery and Freedom in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), pp.1-3.

<sup>46</sup> Jupp, *Governing of Britain*, p.220.

before his initial motion, rather than after.<sup>47</sup> This tactic was possibly borrowed from the opposition to abolition, who had deliberately organised petitions to be presented before the debate in 1789, with the intention of making the petitioners' opinion stand out in the minds of the MPs present.<sup>48</sup> 519 pro-abolition petitions were then presented before the end of March 1792.<sup>49</sup> Wilberforce was now a member of the London Committee, and so was able to influence the timing and format of petitions, although he had been in close contact with them previously.<sup>50</sup> It was also the first year that Wilberforce referred to popular support for the measure in the main body of his speech, saying that 'the people of England had expressed their sense against the trade.'<sup>51</sup> The change in the timing of petitions and how they were mentioned in the debate, as a key argument rather than in a supporting statement by someone else, and the more detailed discussion of colonial security and rebellions, show Wilberforce changing his arguments in an attempt to persuade more MPs to vote in favour of abolition. Although he supported petitioning, he was less supportive of other forms of popular agitation, fearing that the abstention movement would 'alienate moderates.'<sup>52</sup>

In the event, there was no further debate on the question of abolition until 23 April, when Dundas rose to present his own motion on the subject, focussing on the gradual abolition of the trade.<sup>53</sup> He suggested twelve resolutions to be adopted by the House of Commons, in an echo of Wilberforce's first motion. The twelve propositions laid out a plan for the enactment of gradual abolition over the following eight years, reflecting Dundas' criticism of Wilberforce in the earlier debate.<sup>54</sup> The full text of these is replicated in Appendix Two.

Wilberforce declared that he would vote against the resolutions, and that Dundas' principles and reasoning supported immediate abolition.<sup>55</sup> Despite saying that he would prove this statement when Dundas' first resolution was debated, he was the last to speak

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<sup>47</sup> Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, p.59; BL, Add MS 21256, p.39, Fair Minute Books of the Committee for the abolition of the Slave-trade, 3, 24 January 1792.

<sup>48</sup> BRO., SMV/7/2/15, H. Cruger to J. Osborne, 28 April 1789.

<sup>49</sup> Judith Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the Slave Trade* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), p.71.

<sup>50</sup> Jennings, *Business*, p.65; Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp.253-4, Wilberforce was elected to membership 26 April 1791, but did not attend a meeting until 07 June 1791, BL, Add MS 21256, pp.18-19, 26, Fair Minute Books, 3; BL, Add MS 21256, p.39, Fair Minute Books, 3, 24 January 1792.

<sup>51</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.174.

<sup>52</sup> Drescher, 'Public Opinion and Parliament', p.55.

<sup>53</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 23 April 1792, p.333.

<sup>54</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 23 April 1792, pp.346-50; *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.222; Appendix 2.

<sup>55</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 23 April 1792, pp.352-3.

before the House voted, and confined his remarks to restating his belief in the need for immediate abolition.<sup>56</sup> Two days later, Wilberforce spoke to defend himself from comments made by MPs earlier that day, to reiterate that the enslaved population could be maintained through higher birth rates and lower mortality rates, and to appeal to justice and humanity.<sup>57</sup> At the end of the second debate, it was resolved that the slave trade should be abolished from 1 January 1796 instead of 1800, as suggested by Lord Mornington and Henry Addington.<sup>58</sup>

After this amendment to his resolution, Dundas declared that he would not continue to pursue his proposed abolition measures, like Wilberforce had the previous month.<sup>59</sup> Pitt then moved that some of Dundas' other proposed resolutions be adopted, and passed resolutions in favour of abolishing the slave trade to foreign colonies, of banning new ships being brought into the trade, and of introducing additional regulations and restrictions.<sup>60</sup> These resolutions were presented to the House of Lords, the first time the question had reached that stage, on 3 May. The question of evidence was raised immediately, with several Lords calling for the evidence to be heard in that chamber, in an echo of the Commons' rejection of the Privy Council evidence in 1789.<sup>61</sup> In June, Fox reported to the Commons that it was unlikely that any legislation to abolish the trade would be passed that session because of the delay in the Lords, and the matter was dropped.<sup>62</sup>

The period 1789-92 is often thought of as the high-tide of abolitionism, largely due to the high levels of popular support, as demonstrated by the number of petitions sent to the House of Commons, as well as other abolitionist activities, such as the anti-saccharite movement boycotting West-Indian grown sugar.<sup>63</sup> In the House of Commons, however, the picture is less clear. The resolutions were dismissed in 1789 by an unrecorded majority, and the first bill was defeated in 1791 by a majority of 75. In 1792, when the number of petitions reached its peak, Wilberforce's motion was amended by a majority of 68, and then the amended motion passed by a majority of 145.<sup>64</sup> Presumably,

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<sup>56</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 25 April 1792, pp.417-18.

<sup>57</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 27 April 1792, pp.437-8.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, pp.424-47.

<sup>59</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 1 May 1792, p.498-9.

<sup>60</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 1 May 1792, p.503; Appendix 2.

<sup>61</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 33, 3 May 1792, pp.391-3.

<sup>62</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 5 June 1792, pp.227-31.

<sup>63</sup> Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery*, pp.78-9.

<sup>64</sup> Appendix 1.

the amendment had been opposed by ardent abolitionists and anti-abolitionists alike, but the motion itself attracted the support of abolitionists who had voted against its amendment. The arguments made by both sides had not changed dramatically over the period, which supports the idea that Wilberforce's emphasis on immediate abolition was the main reason for his lack of success, given the difference in the numbers voting in favour of the motions. However, without surviving division lists, it is impossible to tell whether MPs who had voted against abolition in 1791 voted for gradual abolition in 1792, or whether the difference in the votes can instead be attributed to who was present in the House of Commons.

Events outside of Britain were beginning to directly affect the abolition campaign from late 1792 onwards. While the French Revolution had been viewed negatively in Britain since the publication of Burke's denunciation in November 1790, the declaration of war in autumn 1792 and the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793 heightened the reaction to perceived Jacobinism and fears of insurrection.<sup>65</sup> The conservative response in Britain led to the suppression of popular radicalism, through both the enforcement of existing laws, and the passing of the Treasonable and Seditious Practices Act and the Seditious Meetings Act in 1795.<sup>66</sup> The negative connotations that came to be connected with popular political movements meant that Wilberforce and other parliamentary abolitionists could not utilise widespread support, and the London Committee stopped meeting regularly.<sup>67</sup> The crackdown on radicalism had an impact on the reception of abolitionist ideas in the House of Commons, because abolitionism and reform were now widely seen as the thin end of a wedge that could end in a British version of the Terror, a view reinforced by the connection of radicals to the abolition movement.<sup>68</sup> Wilberforce was granted honorary French citizenship by the National Assembly in 1792, and the men tried under the new anti-radicalism laws were often also associated with their local

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<sup>65</sup> Hilton, *Mad, Bad and Dangerous People*, pp.57-64; H.T. Dickinson, 'Introduction: The Impact of the French Revolution and the French Wars 1789-1815' in H.T. Dickinson (ed), *Britain and the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1989), pp.1-20, p.8; Gregory Claeys, *The French Revolution Debate in Britain: The Origins of Modern Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007), p.154.

<sup>66</sup> Frank O'Gorman, 'Pitt and the 'Tory' Reaction to the French Revolution 1789-1815' in Dickinson (ed), *Britain and the French Revolution*, pp.21-38, pp.30-33.

<sup>67</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.223; Jennings, *Business*, pp.81-2, 85.

<sup>68</sup> John Dinwiddy, 'Interpretations of anti-Jacobinism' in Mark Philp (ed), *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.38-49, p.48.



abolition societies.<sup>69</sup> However, Wilberforce was not a radical; he supported Pitt's anti-sedition bills, and was forced to travel to Yorkshire in 1795 to defend this to his constituents.<sup>70</sup>

### 1793-1803

Wilberforce attempted to renew the 1792 resolution to gradually abolish the slave trade in February 1793, but his proposed debate on the motion was delayed beyond the end of the parliamentary session by an amendment.<sup>71</sup> Three months later, he tried a different approach, introducing two new bills to the House.<sup>72</sup> The first was aimed at the British slave trade to foreign territories; the second was an attempt to reduce the number of enslaved Africans imported into British territories. Although the former progressed to a second reading of the bill, the latter was rejected from the start, and neither was successful enough to be passed on to the Lords.<sup>73</sup> Having received support from the West India interest, and with a reduction in the volume of the foreign slave trade during the war with France, Wilberforce reintroduced the foreign slave trade bill in February 1794. The renewed bill was initially successful, passing through the Commons, but it was rejected by the Lords through a series of delays.<sup>74</sup> Although Grenville supported abolition, he wrote to Wilberforce to say that he felt the foreign slave trade bill would be unsuccessful and would delay the ongoing presentation of evidence to the Lords. Instead, he moved to postpone the discussion until the inquiry had been completed.<sup>75</sup>

The attempt to abolish the foreign slave trade marked a departure from Wilberforce's determination in favour of total, immediate abolition. Judith Jennings argued that this change in focus was inspired by the wartime economy, while Anstey suggested that it was inspired by Dundas' propositions.<sup>76</sup> In Wilberforce's speech introducing the bill, he compared the supply of enslaved persons to foreign colonies to

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<sup>69</sup> Bodl., MS Wilberforce, d.14, f.154, French Minister of the Interior to Wilberforce, 10 October 1792; Jennings, *Business*, p.84; Michael T. Davis, 'Walker, Thomas (1749-1817)', *ODNB*, May 2009 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/6303>> [accessed 13 March 2020].

<sup>70</sup> *Life*, II, pp.122-32.

<sup>71</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 35, 26 February 1793, pp.615-27.

<sup>72</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 35, 14 May 1793, pp.539-41.

<sup>73</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 35, 22 May 1793, pp.561-3; 14 May 1793, p.541.

<sup>74</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 41, 7 February 1794, pp.323-31; 17 March 1794, pp.585-7.

<sup>75</sup> BL., Add MS 58978, f7, Grenville to Wilberforce, 4 April 1794; *PR 1780-1796*, 41, 2 May 1794, pp.724-78.

<sup>76</sup> Jennings, *Business*, pp.80-1; Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, p.279.

the supply of provisions, which was prohibited in wartime, supporting Jennings' analysis.<sup>77</sup> This temporary change in approach, suspending efforts at total abolition and focusing on a branch of the trade reduced because of the war, shows Wilberforce beginning to take more control of the abolition campaign. The London Committee officially stopped meeting in spring 1794, and with the shift to target the foreign slave trade, Wilberforce showed an understanding of the decline in support for total abolition, although the attempt to renew the 1792 Resolution suggests that it took defeat for him to realise this.<sup>78</sup> From this point on, Wilberforce's key allies were other MPs, rather than the leaders of the popular campaign. It suggests that on his own, Wilberforce was more willing to compromise with partial abolition, but that after this was defeated, he returned to total abolition.

On the basis that the date agreed on in 1792 for the total abolition of the trade was approaching, in February 1795 he pushed for the House of Commons 'to act upon the resolution to which they had then come,' but his motion to bring in a bill was postponed six months, and in the end came to nothing, as in 1793.<sup>79</sup> However, in comparison to 1793, Wilberforce did not ask the House of Commons to vote for the resolutions against the slave trade made in 1792 again, but took the resolution as a given. Considering his discussion in his autobiography about the possible delays to bills engendered by resolutions, the decision to move for the introduction of a bill rather than a new resolution against the trade could be considered an attempt to make the process of abolishing the trade more efficient.<sup>80</sup> He pursued a similar line in 1796, again framing the motion as enforcing the resolution that the slave trade should have been abolished on 1 January 1796.<sup>81</sup> The initial motion was successful, to Wilberforce's surprise, but as there was not a bill prepared, the first reading was delayed until March.<sup>82</sup> On the second reading the bill was narrowly defeated, and Wilberforce recorded in his diary that there were 'Enough at the opera to have carried it,' as well as 10 or 12 supporters out of town.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> 'House of Commons', *The Times*, 15 May 1793, p.2.

<sup>78</sup> Jennings, *Business*, p.85.

<sup>79</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 26 February 1795, pp.4-5, 26.

<sup>80</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce c.43, f.22, autobiography.

<sup>81</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 18 February 1796, p.62.

<sup>82</sup> Bodl., MS Wilberforce, c.34, f.102, diary for 18 February 1796; *PR 1780-1796*, 44 18 February 1796, pp.61-87; NYRO., ZFW/7.2.106, Wilberforce to Wyvill, 20 February 1796.

<sup>83</sup> Bodl., MS Wilberforce, c.34, f.106, diary for 15 March 1796.

Spier's criticism that Wilberforce could not consistently guarantee the attendance of his supporters, in this case possibly because he was not prepared, can be seen as valid here.<sup>84</sup>

Although Wilberforce's abolition bill was unsuccessful, it was not the only effort he made in 1796. In April, when Dolben's Act came up for its annual renewal, Wilberforce suggested that further limits on the number of enslaved Africans per ton on slave ships should be introduced in order to prepare the West Indian colonies for the end of the trade.<sup>85</sup> This attempt to further the abolition cause after the defeat of the abolition bill can be seen as Wilberforce again trying new tactics in the face of failure. However, given the initial opposition to Dolben's Act, and the need to renew it each year, efforts to increase the limitations it put on the trade were unlikely to be successful, as in this case.

Charles Ellis, a slave-owner, successfully introduced a motion in April 1797 calling for an Address from George III to the West Indian colonial assemblies, to request them to introduce measures to improve the conditions of enslavement.<sup>86</sup> A year before, Philip Francis, a supporter of abolition, had unsuccessfully introduced a bill on the same subject.<sup>87</sup> Ellis' motion was, however, an attempt to defeat the repeated abolition motions by suggesting that the slave trade could be gradually brought to an end from within the West Indian colonies, as amelioration increased the birth rate and reduced mortality, arguing that abolition legislation would be unenforceable.<sup>88</sup> According to Wilberforce's diary Pitt encouraged him to try and modify the Address, but there is no mention of Wilberforce moving for an amendment in the reports of the debate.<sup>89</sup> This could be seen as another example of Wilberforce's stubbornness preventing progress on abolition, but an amendment proposed by Dudley Ryder, who supported abolition, was defeated, and so it is unlikely that Wilberforce's amendment would have been successful. The West

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<sup>84</sup> Spiers, 'William Wilberforce', p.54.

<sup>85</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 26 April 1796, p.526-9.

<sup>86</sup> 'Charles Rose Ellis (1771-1845)', *History of Parliament Online* <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/ellis-charles-rose-1771-1845>> [accessed 20 March 2020]; H.M. Stephens and H.C.G. Matthew, 'Charles Rose Ellis, first Baron Seaford (1771-1845)' *ODNB*, January 2008 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8688>> [accessed 13 March 2020]; *Journals of the House of Commons 1688-1834*, 52, 6 April 1797, p.461.

<sup>87</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 11 April 1796, pp.396-422; 'Philip Francis (1740-1818)', *History of Parliament Online* <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/francis-philip-1740-1818>> [accessed 20 March 2020].

<sup>88</sup> 'Charles Rose Ellis', *History of Parliament Online*; House of Commons, *The Times*, 07 April 1797, p.2.

<sup>89</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.34, f.136, diary for 6 April 1797; House of Commons, *The Times*, 07 April 1797, p.2; House of Commons, *General Evening Post*, 07 April 1797, p.1.

India interest supported the Address, probably because it was suggested by one of their own and did not make any serious commitment for abolition.

The success of Ellis' motion was a contributing factor in the failure of Wilberforce's abolition bills in May 1797 and April 1798. In the responses to Wilberforce's motions, the Address was portrayed as the beginning of gradual abolition from the West Indian colonies, negating the need for legislation from Britain.<sup>90</sup> In 1798, the major factor was a miscalculation about the volume of support, but the Address was mentioned more than once in opposition to the motion.<sup>91</sup> By the time Wilberforce introduced the next bill in March 1799, the Jamaican assembly had refused to introduce the suggested measures. He argued that this demonstrated the need for Parliament rather than the colonial assemblies to take the lead in abolishing the trade.<sup>92</sup> Despite this, the 1799 motion was defeated by the largest margin of the three years, because fewer supporters of abolition were present (see Appendix One for details about the votes).

Throughout the period 1795-9, Wilberforce approached the slave trade in general terms, introducing motions for leave to bring in bills for its total abolition. The criticisms of Wilberforce have pointed to this insistence on total abolition as a reason for the lack of support the motions received.<sup>93</sup> In 1799, the *Cambridge Intelligencer* described Wilberforce's motions as 'tragi-comic farces' and the failure of the motion as predictable.<sup>94</sup> The failed attempts to abolish part rather than all of the trade had perhaps suggested to Wilberforce that partial abolition was as unpopular as any other form. At the same time, it was not until 1797, after the Address moved by Ellis, that MPs other than Dundas argued for gradual abolition in opposition to Wilberforce's motions. Although Dundas' repeated calls for gradual abolition could support Walvin's argument that Wilberforce's approach alienated more moderate MPs, there were no further attempts to amend Wilberforce's motions in favour of gradual abolition.<sup>95</sup> However, although the general motion did not change, Wilberforce's arguments did, as will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Three.

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<sup>90</sup> *The Times*, Tuesday 16 May 1797; *London Chronicle*, 13-16 May 1797; *PR 1796-1802*, 5, 3 April 1798, pp.525-32.

<sup>91</sup> Bodl., MS Wilberforce c.34, f.151, diary, 3 April 1798; *PR 1796-1802*, 3 April 1798, pp.533-5, 570-2.

<sup>92</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 8, 1 March 1799, p.136.

<sup>93</sup> Spiers, 'William Wilberforce', p.54.

<sup>94</sup> as quoted in J.R. Oldfield, '(Re)mapping Abolitionist Discourse during the 1790s: The Case of Benjamin Flowers and the *Cambridge Intelligencer*', in Cora Kaplin and John Oldfield (eds), *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp.33-46, p.38.

<sup>95</sup> Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom*, pp.106-7.

Throughout this period, motions were either delayed or defeated, suggesting that Spiers was right to argue that Wilberforce was unable to ensure consistent levels of support in the House of Commons.<sup>96</sup> The motions to delay the debates were never unsuccessful. The incident in 1796, when several supporters were at the opera, has already been discussed above. If Wilberforce had not expected his motion to fail, and had prepared a bill, it may have passed through the House of Commons before people left town, and before the excitement of a new opera. There was a similar incident in 1798 where he wrongly thought there were enough supporters present, which suggests that where he did make the effort to rally support, he was neither sure of how many votes he needed, nor of people's voting intentions.<sup>97</sup> In 1799, when he lost by a larger margin because not enough people were present, he had become disheartened, and had potentially not put as much effort into encouraging supporters to be present on the day of the debate. This pessimistic approach to the motion is discussed in more detail below. While there was inconsistency, then, it seems to have been more related to Wilberforce's optimism or preparation, rather than his ability to rally support.

The typical historiographical narrative of the parliamentary campaign is that there was little abolitionist activity in the following years. Anstey's description of the period 1800-4 was that 'it was for tactical reasons' that Wilberforce did not introduce motions in 1800, 1801 and 1803, and that in 1802 he could not introduce it early enough.<sup>98</sup> Thomas Clarkson's *History* supports this idea, recording that Wilberforce:

thought it prudent not to press the abolition as a mere annual measure, but to allow members time to digest the eloquence, which had been bestowed upon it for the last five years, and to wait till some new circumstances should favour its introduction.<sup>99</sup>

However, after the defeat of Henry Thornton's Slave Trade Limitation Bill in the House of Lords in July 1799, Wilberforce wrote in his diary that he was 'Never so disappointed and grieved by any defeat'.<sup>100</sup> These comments, and his speech in March 1799 when introducing his general motion, suggest that the period of quiet was because of a sense

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<sup>96</sup> Spiers, 'William Wilberforce', pp.53-4.

<sup>97</sup> Bodl., MS Wilberforce c.34, f.151, diary, 3 April 1798.

<sup>98</sup> Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, p.321.

<sup>99</sup> Clarkson, *History*, II, p.489.

<sup>100</sup> quoted in *Life*, II, p.340.

of hopelessness, rather than a calculated withdrawal. In 1801, during a debate regarding peace with France, Wilberforce mentioned the slave trade, saying that ‘he had discontinued his exertions upon it, from finding them ineffectual’.<sup>101</sup> Soon after this, he lobbied Addington and Lord Hawkesbury (previously Jenkinson) in an effort to have the slave trade included in peace negotiations.<sup>102</sup> Anstey describes Wilberforce’s decision in 1801 as a tactical one, in order to avoid clashing with his suggestion to abolish the trade through the peace treaty, but Wilberforce’s public and private comments suggest otherwise.<sup>103</sup>

In 1802, Wilberforce gave notice of another motion on the slave trade. However, it was postponed indefinitely, and eventually cancelled, because of a motion proposed by George Canning, the Pittite MP, to prevent the importation of enslaved persons into Trinidad, ceded by the Spanish in 1797, to be confirmed in the Treaty of Amiens in 1802.<sup>104</sup> Trinidad was to become an important colony in the abolitionists’ plans, used as an ‘experimental colony.’<sup>105</sup> His diary includes conversations with Pitt and Henry Addington, then Prime Minister, and James Stephen, about restricting the slave trade to Trinidad from late-1801 onwards, until Canning informed him of his planned motion in February 1802.<sup>106</sup> Then, at the beginning of 1803, Wilberforce was very ill, and therefore unable to introduce a planned motion. Before he recovered, an order by George III for military preparations had made another war with France look probable, which made support for abolition impossible to secure, as he lamented to Babington.<sup>107</sup> It is only in 1802, then, that there is clear evidence that Wilberforce’s reticence in bringing forward abolition bills was the tactical consideration described by Anstey. Although he intended to introduce a motion in 1803, his illness prevented him from doing so before the impending war made it impossible to do so, both of which were unavoidable obstacles, rather than tactical decisions.

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<sup>101</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 16, 4 November 1801, p.146.

<sup>102</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.35, pp.31-32, diary, 21 January 1802.

<sup>103</sup> Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, p.326; *PR 1796-1802*, 16, 4 November 1801, p.146.

<sup>104</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 17, 12 February 1802, pp.16-17; *PR 1796-1802*, 18, 18 June 1802, p.745.

<sup>105</sup> Gelien Matthews, ‘Trinidad: A Model Colony for British Slave Trade Abolition’, *Parliamentary History*, 26, S1 (2007), pp.84-96, p.84; Claudius Fergus, ‘The “Siete Partidas”: A Framework for Philanthropy and Coercion during the Amelioration Experiment in Trinidad, 1823-34’, *Caribbean Studies*, 36, no.1 (2008), pp.75-99, p.77.

<sup>106</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.35, pp.24, 27, 35-6, 37, diary, 24 November 1801, 02 December 1801, 03-04 February 1802, 11 February 1802.

<sup>107</sup> Letters to Babington, quoted in *Life, III*, n.d., p.87; 22 March 1803, pp.87-8.

The parliamentary record indicates that abolition did not disappear from the agenda, despite Wilberforce's decision not to continue introducing the then-annual bill. After Wilberforce's defeat in 1799, Henry Thornton, one of the 'Saints,' and Pitt both introduced measures relating to the slave trade. In March, Thornton introduced a bill he had first proposed in 1798, to restrict the areas on the coast of Africa where the slave trade was conducted, in part to protect Sierra Leone; the bill was eventually defeated in the House of Lords.<sup>108</sup> Pitt gave notice in July that he would bring in a motion to limit the number of enslaved persons imported into British colonies, and to abolish the British slave trade to foreign colonies, but when asked about it a year later responded that other business had forced its postponement.<sup>109</sup> These attempts to restrict the size of the slave trade had the potential, as demonstrated by the relative successes of 1793-4, to attract wider support than general abolition. Thornton and Pitt's involvement also show Wilberforce taking a less prominent role in motions against the slave trade, and according to Anstey in 1799 this was done deliberately to avoid it being defeated by association with abolition.<sup>110</sup>

The period 1800-4 also saw a change in the political context of the House of Commons. The King's opposition to the admission of Roman Catholics into the Commons led to Pitt's resignation in February 1801; Cabinet ministers followed 'in sympathy.'<sup>111</sup> Addington, who had been elected Speaker the month before, was invited to form a new government, and immediately worked for peace with France.<sup>112</sup> Several of the newly appointed ministers, including Addington, were conservative royalists, unlikely to support abolition because the monarchy opposed it.<sup>113</sup> The lack of ministerial support may have contributed to Wilberforce's less assertive approach to abolition in the years that followed. Addington had voiced opposition to the slave trade and support for gradual abolition through regulation in 1792 and 1796 but had not spoken in the rest of the abolition debates and voted against Wilberforce's motion in the latter year.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 6, 04 May 1798, p.100; *PR 1796-1802*, 8, 05 March 1799, pp.216-17; *PR 1796-1802*, 9, 05 July 1799, pp.532-57.

<sup>109</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 8, 11 July 1799, pp.575-6; *PR 1796-1802*, 11, 8 May 1800, p.569; KHLIC., U1590/S5/O3/6, Minute of 10 July 1799.

<sup>110</sup> Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, p.320.

<sup>111</sup> Hilton, *Mad, Bad and Dangerous People*, pp.96-7; Hill, *British Parliamentary Parties*, pp.174-6.

<sup>112</sup> Hill, *British Parliamentary Parties*, p.179.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, p.179.

<sup>114</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, pp.228-31; *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 18 February 1796, p.87; 'Henry Addington (1757-1844)', *History of Parliament Online*

The period 1793-1803 has been largely overlooked by the literature as a period when the parliamentary and popular campaigns subsided. As this section has shown, it was not a silent period in this history of abolition, and Wilberforce attempted to find ways for abolition to fit in with other events. The introduction of measures by other MPs, such as Francis and Ellis's motions relating to the amelioration of conditions in the West Indian colonies, and Canning's motion on the slave trade to Trinidad, show that it was not only Wilberforce who continued to be interested in the subject. Canning wrote to Wilberforce prior to his motion, saying that he believed measures preventing new cultivation would have more success than abolition measures, but the letter shows that he pursued the measure independently of Wilberforce's plans.<sup>115</sup> Although the repeated failures eventually convinced Wilberforce that pursuing general abolition was hopeless, this was only temporary. There were only two years where no one attempted a motion about the slave trade, and Wilberforce still mentioned the issue when it seemed relevant. For example, he referred to the slave trade in debates about other subjects, such as Peace with France in 1801 and the Grenada Loan Bill in 1803.<sup>116</sup>

### 1804-1807

If Wilberforce had, as Anstey suggested, been waiting since 1799 for a more favourable situation, in May 1804 the time seemed ripe. Wilberforce argued in the House of Commons that there was an opportunity to abolish the slave trade without any financial loss, because the Napoleonic War had led to the suspension of large parts of the trade.<sup>117</sup> The reinstatement of Pitt as Prime Minister that same month may also have contributed to his renewed optimism, although Pitt's second administration was not as strong as his first had been.<sup>118</sup> In addition, there was an opportunity to recruit the one hundred new Irish MPs to the cause, potentially boosting abolitionist numbers in the Commons. The abolitionists' calculations, if they were calculations, proved to be accurate – the bill passed its second reading by a margin of 58, with a drastic reduction in the number of votes against the bill compared to 1799 and an equally drastic increase in the numbers of

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<<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/addington-henry-1757-1844>> [accessed 20 March 2020].

<sup>115</sup> BL., Add MS 89143/1/1/167, Canning to Wilberforce, 05 February 1802.

<sup>116</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 16, 04 November 1801, pp.143-6; *PR 1802-1805*, 2, 07 April 1803, pp.602-4.

<sup>117</sup> HC Deb, 30 May 1804, series 1, 2, c.441.

<sup>118</sup> Hilton, *Mad, Bad and Dangerous People*, p.104.



votes for.<sup>119</sup> However, the House of Lords called for evidence to be presented again, and the parliamentary session ended before this could happen.

One of the criticisms levelled at Wilberforce by Spiers is that he did not understand the House of Lords.<sup>120</sup> In 1804, as Spiers notes, Wilberforce wrote to Grenville prior to the discussion of the abolition bill in the House of Lords to inform him that the Bishop of London had just explained some aspects of how the Lords worked.<sup>121</sup> At this point Wilberforce had been an MP for 24 years, and so not understanding how the House of Lords worked does sound egregious. This new knowledge was that:

in the House of Lords, a Bill from the House of Commons, is in a destitute and orphan state, unless it has some Peer of consideration to adopt & take the conduct of it – any Bill wherein I have been concerned, when relating to private property has found some Peer who was interested in it, & when of a public nature, some Peer, who had originally a Share in its formation, has taken charge of it – Therefore I was never before in a Situation, in which it became apprised, that when a Bill was brought up to your Lordship's Bar, it was a necessary precaution previously to have secured for it a Patron.<sup>122</sup>

His ignorance had, as he wrote, not impacted on his other parliamentary business, or he probably would have learnt this before 1804. The repeated failure of abolition bills in the Commons meant that 1804 was only the fourth time that an abolition measure was debated in the Lords (1792 Resolutions, 1794 Foreign Slave Trade Bill, 1799 Slave Trade Limitation Bill), in comparison to the fourteenth time in the Commons. As mentioned earlier, Grenville wrote to Wilberforce to explain why he would not be supporting the 1794 Foreign Slave Trade Bill in the Lords, and he had also supported the bills in 1792 and 1799.<sup>123</sup> This previous support suggests that, as with other parliamentary business, the 1804 bill might have been adopted by Grenville unasked. Wilberforce's prior lack of

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<sup>119</sup> HC Deb, 7 June 1804, series 1, 2, cc.543-58, Appendix 1.

<sup>120</sup> Spiers, 'William Wilberforce', p.54.

<sup>121</sup> BL., Add MS 69038, f.163, Wilberforce to Grenville, 27 June 1804.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> BL., Add MS 58978, f.7, Grenville to Wilberforce, 04 April 1794; *PR 1780-1796*, 33, 3 May 1792, pp.391-3; *PR 1796-1802*, 9, 05 July 1799, pp.532-6.

understanding about the House of Lords, then, is not a point of criticism that had had a major impact on the campaign's failures.

The London Committee had recommenced meetings in 1804, which Oldfield noted was 'presumably at the instigation of Wilberforce.'<sup>124</sup> Its renewed activities were aimed at lobbying MPs rather than organising popular support, in part due to a change in the leadership of the Committee. James Stephen, Zachary Macaulay, and Henry Brougham were all elected to the Committee, and parliamentary members began to outnumber Quaker members.<sup>125</sup> Although Stephen and Macaulay were not MPs, they were both actively involved in preparing for parliamentary activity, Stephen through drafting the bills, and Macaulay through collating information. The first meeting in 1804 was on 23 May, only a week before Wilberforce introduced his motion, and months after he had given notice of it. Its first decision was to circulate Brougham's recently published pamphlet, *A Concise Statement of the Question regarding the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, to MPs.<sup>126</sup> This targeting of MPs is illustrative of a change in approach that continued up until the passage of the Abolition Act three years later.

Despite optimism after the success of 1804, in 1805 the Committee made efforts to ensure that they had the numbers to pass the bill, creating a sub-committee 'for endeavouring to procure the support of both Houses of Parliament,' as well as considering who might be able to give evidence in a potential inquiry by the House of Lords, on the assumption that it would pass through the Commons again.<sup>127</sup> The question of evidence for an inquiry continued to occupy Wilberforce after the bill was defeated, and he proposed that the Committee, and Clarkson in particular, begin to organise witnesses.<sup>128</sup> Clarkson then went on another tour, similar to those he had made in the 1780s, at the beginning of the parliamentary campaign.<sup>129</sup> The Committee was, therefore, actively making efforts to resolve obstacles to the success of future bills before solutions were needed. In 1806, the Committee decided that 'private applications from Individuals to Members of Parliament ... will be more advisable at this time than the holding of

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<sup>124</sup> Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, p.63.

<sup>125</sup> Jennings, *Business*, pp.100-3.

<sup>126</sup> Jennings, *Business*, pp.100-2; BL, Add MS 21256, p.99, Fair Minute Books, 3, 23 May 1804; Henry Brougham, *A Concise Statement of the Question regarding the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London: J. Hatchard, 1804).

<sup>127</sup> BL., Add MS 21256, p.104, Fair Minute Books, 3, 22 January 1805.

<sup>128</sup> BL., Add MS 21256, pp.110-11, Fair Minute Books, 3, 29 April 1805.

<sup>129</sup> Ellen Gibson Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson: A Biography* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990), pp.107-8; Clarkson, *History*, II, pp.502-3.

public meetings.’<sup>130</sup> Although Clarkson organised a pro-abolition petition in response to a petition from the West India interest in 1806, it was a last-minute addition, and the majority of their activities were targeted at parliament.<sup>131</sup>

Wilberforce proposed a motion for an abolition bill again in mid-February 1805, seemingly having been reminded of the perils of introducing it later in the session the previous year.<sup>132</sup> The bill was effectively defeated before its second reading at the end of February by General Gascoyne, who moved that the reading of the bill be postponed for six months.<sup>133</sup> The West India interest had not been prepared to oppose an abolition bill in 1804, but had since recruited some of the Irish MPs, and were more successful in their opposition to the measure.<sup>134</sup> Prior to the first debate, Sir William Young had presented information about the state of West Indian trade and the potential effects of abolition, which may have worked in a similar way to the presentation of pro-slave trade petitions prior to the 1789 motion, putting the arguments against abolition at the forefront of MPs minds.<sup>135</sup> Rather than any specific decision or lack of preparation by Wilberforce, it was the resurgence of organised resistance to the measure that led to its defeat. Although he perhaps should have anticipated this, it was in many ways out of his control.

Up until this point, despite Wilberforce and Pitt’s friendship, there had been no government-led action on the slave trade, because of the opposition of other ministers and the monarch. In 1804, however, Pitt had suggested an Order in Council to prevent the extension of the slave trade into new colonies, which had also been included in his planned motion in 1800.<sup>136</sup> The ‘new’ colonies that Britain had gained over the previous couple of years – Trinidad in the 1802 Treaty of Amiens, and Dutch Guiana (Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo) in 1804 – were seen by abolitionists and slave traders alike as potential new markets for the British slave trade.<sup>137</sup> Between Pitt’s suggestion and 15 August 1805, when an Order was issued against the importation of enslaved Africans into colonies acquired in wartime, Wilberforce continued to pressure Pitt on the

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<sup>130</sup> BL., Add MS 21256, pp.116-17, Fair Minute Books, 3, 07 March 1806.

<sup>131</sup> Seymour Drescher, ‘Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the British Slave Trade’, *Past & Present*, 143, no.1 (1994), pp.136-66, p.142-3.

<sup>132</sup> HC Deb, 15 February 1805, series 1, 3, c.521.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, cc.641, 645.

<sup>134</sup> *Life*, III, p.212; Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp.345-6.

<sup>135</sup> *PR 1802-1805*, 1, 8 February 1805, p.132.

<sup>136</sup> Undated diary (presumably 3 July 1804) quoted in *Life*, III, p.184; KHLc., U1590/S5/O3/6, ‘Minute of 10 July 1799’.

<sup>137</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* second edition (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), p.100.

subject.<sup>138</sup> According to Wilberforce's sons' biography, a Proclamation had been prepared in May 1805, but Wilberforce declared 'it is in a very unsatisfactory state' and asked Pitt to prevent its publication at that time.<sup>139</sup> The rejected Proclamation has not survived, and there is no record of what Wilberforce's objection was.

After the 1805 attempt to abolish the slave trade, and the passing of the Order in Council, there were major changes to the parliamentary context in which Wilberforce was working. Pitt's health declined, and on 23 January 1806 he died. A new 'Ministry of All the Talents' was formed by Grenville and Fox, and although there was some continuity, it was the biggest ministerial change since 1784.<sup>140</sup> Grenville and Fox, the new Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary respectively, were both supporters of abolition, and although Lord Sidmouth (Addington), now Lord Privy Seal, was not, the slave trade became one of the issues that united most ministers.<sup>141</sup> Anstey suggested that, after 1806, Sidmouth was the only obstacle to total abolition of the slave trade.<sup>142</sup> The major concern was not the House of Commons, which had recently shown willingness to pass abolition legislation, but the House of Lords, which was more likely to acquiesce with George III's anti-abolition stance.<sup>143</sup>

In 1806, several motions were introduced related to the slave trade. First, the government introduced a bill to enforce the 1805 Order in Council regarding the slave trade to new colonies, which as the Foreign Slave Trade Act extended to include a ban on British ships supplying enslaved Africans to other territories.<sup>144</sup> Second, Fox introduced a resolution to abolish the slave trade 'in such manner, and at such period, as may be deemed advisable'.<sup>145</sup> Third, the only motion made by Wilberforce that year, was an Address to the king to request negotiation with foreign powers for 'a concert and agreement for abolishing the African Slave Trade,' which passed.<sup>146</sup> Fourth, shortly after the passing of the Foreign Slave Act and the Address, Fox introduced a bill to stop new

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<sup>138</sup> *Life*, III, pp.184-5; 'At the Court at Weymouth', *The London Gazette*, 1584, Saturday 7-Tuesday 10 September 1805; TNA., PRO/30/8/189, f.158, Wilberforce to Pitt, 1 June 1805.

<sup>139</sup> TNA., PRO/30/8/189, ff.154-5, Wilberforce to Pitt, 05 May 1805 and 11 May 1805, quoted in *Life*, III, p.230.

<sup>140</sup> Hilton, *Mad, Bad and Dangerous People*, p.107.

<sup>141</sup> Hill, *British Parliamentary Parties*, p.186; Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp.357-8.

<sup>142</sup> Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, p.390.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, p.364.

<sup>144</sup> HC Deb, 31 March 1806, series 1, 6, c.598; House of Commons Journals, 31 March 1806, c.187; HC Deb, 1 April 1806, series 1, 6, cc.193-4; HC Deb, 18 April 1806, series 1, 6, c.228.

<sup>145</sup> HC Deb, 10 June 1806, series 1, 6, c.585.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, c.603.

ships entering into the slave trade.<sup>147</sup> As a result, at the end of the parliamentary session the size of the British slave trade had been restricted to the supply of enslaved persons to British colonies. Additionally, the House of Commons had resolved to abolish the remaining trade as soon as possible.

Although the Foreign Slave Trade Act was a government measure, it was directly influenced by Wilberforce. He suggested the bill to Grenville after Stephen suggested it to him, on the basis that ‘an Act of Parliament has often, or even generally, been found necessary for rendering an order of his Majesty in Council really effectual’.<sup>148</sup> Instead of introducing it himself, however, he pushed for the bill to be a government measure, a degree of support which previous bills relating to the abolition of the slave trade had not had. In Fox’s speech prior to moving for a resolution against the trade, he explained that the abolitionists had asked him to bring the matter into the House instead of Wilberforce.<sup>149</sup> This explicit acknowledgement by Fox that the resolution was connected to Wilberforce’s previous efforts for abolition, and Wilberforce’s speech during the debate, is in direct contrast to Spiers’ argument that ‘all the abolition legislation...was passed without Wilberforce’s direct leadership.’<sup>150</sup> Any benefit theoretically gained from Wilberforce stepping down as the one to initiate the debate, would presumably have been negated by referring to Wilberforce at the beginning of the opening speech.

While the motions made by other MPs were clearly influenced by Wilberforce, his own motion that year was influenced by Dundas and his proposed resolutions from 1792. When planning the motion in correspondence with Grenville in 1806, Wilberforce directly referenced Dundas’ motion, not only for the idea, but also for the wording of the Address.<sup>151</sup> It was suggested as a way to counter the argument by anti-abolitionists that other nations would extend their slave trades if Britain ceased. This had become the strongest argument against abolition and had been made repeatedly during the debates in 1804 and 1805. Having already restricted the size of the trade through the other motions, Wilberforce was targeting one of the remaining reasons given for opposing abolition; the

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<sup>147</sup> HC Deb, 13 June 1806, series 1, 7, c.661.

<sup>148</sup> BL., Add MS 58978, f.13, Wilberforce to Grenville, 24 March 1806.

<sup>149</sup> HC Deb, 10 June 1806, series 1, 6, c.580-5.

<sup>150</sup> HC Deb, 10 June 1806, series 1, 6, cc.593-6; Spiers, ‘William Wilberforce’, p.55.

<sup>151</sup> BL., Add MS 58978, f.37, Wilberforce to Grenville, 5 June 1806; BL., Add MS 58978, f.43, Wilberforce to Grenville, 9 June 1806.

argument had been made in opposition to Fox's resolution in favour of general abolition.<sup>152</sup>

Grenville introduced the final abolition bill to the House of Lords first, on 2 January 1807, and it was then passed to the Commons on 10 February, where it was finally passed on 16 March, a reversal of the usual order of business.<sup>153</sup> In contrast to Wilberforce's decision-making behind the scenes in 1806, in 1807, Grenville suggested this switch. His explanation of the change was that:

This will give the opening for discussing the question whether we must go into fresh enquiry, and if we find that cannot be resisted we shall have the whole session before us for it, & so leave them no hope of weathering the question merely by delay.<sup>154</sup>

Grenville had suggested that the question should be broached in the Commons at the same time as the Lords, but the decision was made to delay instead.<sup>155</sup> After the success of the Foreign Slave Trade Bill, Wilberforce suggested that the Abolition Bill should be introduced by Fox again, rather than himself. After Fox's death in September 1806, it was decided that his successor as Foreign Secretary and Leader of the Commons, Viscount Howick, would do so instead.<sup>156</sup> Wilberforce had no intention of introducing the bill, arguing that there would be 'material Benefit from my relinquishing the Conduct of it,' and that it would mirror Grenville's actions if Fox (and later Howick), as his counterpart in the House of Commons, the Leader of the Commons, introduced the bill.<sup>157</sup> Again, despite Wilberforce's less prominent role, his influence was not a secret; before the bill was referred to the House of Commons, he informed the House that no bill had been introduced against the slave trade because it was under consideration in the Lords.<sup>158</sup> He was also not silent during the debates, responding to arguments made by

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<sup>152</sup> HC Deb, 10 June 1806, series 1, 6, cc.591-3.

<sup>153</sup> HC Deb, 10 February 1807, series 1, 8, c.717; see appendix 1; HC Deb, 16 March 1807, series 1, 9, cc.114-40.

<sup>154</sup> BL., Add MS 58978, f.78, Grenville to Wilberforce, 5 November 1806.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> 'Charles Grey (1764-1845)', *History of Parliament Online* <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/grey-charles-1764-1845>> [accessed 20 March 2020].

<sup>157</sup> BL, Add MS 58978, f.31, Wilberforce to Grenville, 29 May 1806.

<sup>158</sup> HC Deb, 29 January 1807, series 1, 8, c.564.

opposition to the measure throughout its progress.<sup>159</sup> This further reinforces that Wilberforce had not entirely stepped down from the leadership of the campaign, publicly or privately.

As well as these decisions about the business of introducing the bill, Wilberforce made another major effort to counter obstacles to abolition before they arose. In 1806, when the Foreign Slave Trade bill was progressing towards the House of Lords, Wilberforce had asked Grenville if he could ‘recommend a little tracts’ being circulated among the Hou[se] of Lords to explain & vindicate the measure’.<sup>160</sup> *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade: Addressed to the Freeholders and other Inhabitants of Yorkshire*, was published in late January 1807, aimed at the Peers in the House of Lords. It explained the arguments in favour of abolition and included evidence to support them. As work on the *Letter* progressed, Wilberforce had suggested to Grenville ‘that the Work might be of Use with a certain Class of Readers, among the Lords, particularly those who hitherto have heard little of the real merits of the Case’.<sup>161</sup> Wilberforce’s first publication on the slave trade, twenty years after he became involved in the campaign, was at least partly a manoeuvre aimed at pre-empting a call for evidence and preventing a repeat of the delays which had defeated the bills in 1792 and 1804.

The day after the passing of the Foreign Slave Trade Act, George Rose, a supporter of Pitt who was listed as ‘adverse’ to abolition, directly criticised Wilberforce’s approach.<sup>162</sup> He ‘declared himself to have been a friend of abolition originally, and he thought that it might have taken place long before this, if it had not been for the ill-judged manner in which the right honourable gentleman introduced it, and the pertinacity with which he persevered in it.’<sup>163</sup> Wilberforce had already stepped back from the measure at this point, and the timing of Rose’s statement could then be taken as an explanation of Rose’s change from opposition to support of the measure, although without division lists it is not possible to say which way Rose voted. However, Wilberforce had previously

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<sup>159</sup> HC Deb, 20 February 1807, series 1, 8, cc.941-2; HC Deb, 23 February 1807, series 1, 8, cc.994-3; HC Deb, 16 March 1807, series 1, 9, c.138.

<sup>160</sup> BL., Add MS 58978, f.25, Wilberforce to Grenville, 5 May 1806.

<sup>161</sup> BL., Add MS 58978, f.90, Wilberforce to Grenville, 15 January 1807.

<sup>162</sup> ‘George Rose (1744-1818)’, *History of Parliament Online*  
<<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/rose-george-1744-1818>>  
[accessed 20 March 2020].

<sup>163</sup> HC Deb, 2 May 1806, series 1, 6, c.1028.

written to Grenville indicating that despite Rose's uncertainty on the question, he had said he would support the measure.<sup>164</sup>

Wilberforce's restraint in the 1806 and 1807 debates has been identified as proof that he did not deserve the credit for the abolition of the slave trade that he received at the time and has continued to be given posthumously.<sup>165</sup> Although he was quiet in these final debates, and left the introduction of the majority of the motions and bills to other people, throughout the debates MPs continued to refer to Wilberforce as the originator of the question in parliament. Fox in 1806 directly addressed the fact that it was him rather than Wilberforce introducing the motion, and Wilberforce's comment in January 1807 about the bill being in the House of Lords demonstrated that he was still involved in the planning of the question. At times the correspondence between Wilberforce and Grenville in 1806 and 1807 gives the impression of Wilberforce acting as a messenger for James Stephen's thoughts and ideas about the process of the various bills. However, it also demonstrates his continuing involvement behind the scenes, as do letters sent to various members of the Lords. By conveying Stephen's ideas to Grenville, Wilberforce was continuing to act as the primary point of contact between the London Committee and parliamentary abolitionists, a connection which had been established twenty years before.

Rose was not the first MP to criticise Wilberforce's approach to abolition in the House of Commons, though others did so in less vague terms. The length of the introductory speeches which he made was criticised on two grounds. The first criticism, made by Thomas Grosvenor in 1791, was that if Wilberforce's arguments were as obvious or as unobjectionable as he said, he would not need to speak for as long to convince people.<sup>166</sup> The second, made by Edward Hyde East in 1795, was that the length of the debate in 1792 had pushed the voting on the motion to the early hours of the next morning, by which time MPs were too tired to think as rationally as they would in normal hours.<sup>167</sup> Wilberforce did not respond to either of the criticisms of the length of his speeches. Although he mentioned in 1792 that 'he should spare the House the fatigue of listening, and himself the labour of entering into much detail' on the grounds that the

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<sup>164</sup> BL., Add MS 58978, f.18, Wilberforce to Grenville, 23 April 1806.

<sup>165</sup> Porter, *Abolition of the Slave Trade*, p.142; Stephen Farrell, 'Contrary to the Principles of Justice, Humanity, and Sound Policy': The Slave Trade, Parliamentary Politics and the Abolition Act, 1807', *Parliamentary History*, 26, S1 (2007), pp.141-202, p.150.

<sup>166</sup> Dumas, *Proslavery*, p.117; *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, pp.224-5.

<sup>167</sup> Dumas, *Proslavery*, pp.128-9; *PR 1780-1796*, 41, 26 February 1795, pp.10-11.



subject matter was well known, the report of his speech was no shorter than on previous occasions.<sup>168</sup> In 1795 he made a similar comment, and his speeches over the next few years were, on the basis of the report in the *Parliamentary Register*, shorter, although this could have been because newspapers had not reported them at as much length as previously.<sup>169</sup> However, in 1804, he mentioned the length of the earlier debates as a supporting factor in passing new legislation.<sup>170</sup> Whether his potentially shorter speeches were a response to the criticisms, or a genuine belief that MPs were now familiar with the arguments and evidence, Wilberforce later used the length of the debates to add weight to the previous decisions of the House, attempting to turn what had been a criticism into an argument in his favour.

The timing of the motions was also criticised on several occasions, either because of when during the parliamentary session they were made, or because of the ongoing war with France.<sup>171</sup> The timing of motion within the parliamentary session, as has been demonstrated, led to the defeat of several bills because the House of Lords did not have enough time to consider the measure. However, several other bills that were introduced earlier in the session were then deliberately delayed by the opponents of abolition; poor timing was both a point of criticism and a tool used by anti-abolitionists. Regarding the question of wartime abolition, as has been shown, Wilberforce attempted to use the suspension of the trade to foreign colonies during wartime to pass partial abolition legislation in 1793-4. When this failed, he returned to calls for total abolition. The final legislation was passed during the Napoleonic Wars, and while previous motions had been more popular during peacetime, war did not prove to be an obstacle to the final abolition bill.

As well as his parliamentary campaigning, Wilberforce was involved in other initiatives closely connected to abolitionism. After the initial attempt by the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor to establish a settlement in Sierra Leone failed, in 1792, Granville Sharp, Wilberforce, Clarkson, and others, founded the Sierra Leone

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<sup>168</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 02 April 1792, p.156.

<sup>169</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 43, 26 February 1795, p.2; his speeches (in *PR*) in 1789-1792 are on average 24 pages long in *PR*, in 1795-1799 they are on average 8 pages long.

<sup>170</sup> *HC Deb*, series 1, 2, 30 May 1804, c.441.

<sup>171</sup> Dumas, *Proslavery*, pp.129-30.

Company.<sup>172</sup> Although Wilberforce reports talking to Clarkson about ‘the free Blacks in America to be settled in Africa’ in 1789, Sierra Leone itself is not mentioned in his diaries until late July 1791.<sup>173</sup> The settlement had originally been populated by destitute Africans from London and Black Loyalists who had been emancipated after American Independence and settled in London; in 1792 Black Loyalists who had settled in Nova Scotia emigrated to Sierra Leone, paid for by the Company.<sup>174</sup> Maroons who surrendered in Jamaica in 1796 were re-located first to Nova Scotia and then to Sierra Leone in 1800.<sup>175</sup> However, although the Company was endeavouring to prove that the slave trade was not the only commerce with West Africa that would be profitable, Wilberforce only mentioned it once during the abolition debates, in 1795.<sup>176</sup> Thornton, who was chairman of the Company, referred to Sierra Leone during the debates more often; in 1798 he discussed it at length during the abolition debates, and later that year he used Company reports to support his case for restricting slave-trading in the area around the settlement when he first proposed the Slave Importation Bill.<sup>177</sup> It is not mentioned alongside abolition again until 1804, when opponents of abolition pointed to the failure of the Company and the proposed transfer of the colony to the Crown as proof that abolition was not possible.<sup>178</sup> However, the problems that the Company had, with repeated failed harvests, rebellions by settlers, and resistance from neighbouring populations, probably explains why Sierra Leone did not feature more prominently in debates, as the situation could be used by Wilberforce’s opponents as evidence against abolition.<sup>179</sup>

In a letter to Lord Muncaster in early June 1805, Wilberforce described a meeting at which the slave trade to ‘conquered settlements’ had been discussed, referring to the territories included in the 1805 Order in Council. After he had informed the parliamentary supporters of abolition present that Pitt was pursuing the matter he ‘saw

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<sup>172</sup> Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom’s Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), p.11; Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp.14-28.

<sup>173</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce b.2, f.20, diary, n.d.

<sup>174</sup> John Peterson, *Province of Freedom: A History of Sierra Leone* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), pp.22-3, 27-8.

<sup>175</sup> Chopra, *Almost Home*, pp.1-3.

<sup>176</sup> Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labour versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.91-2, Scanlan, *Freedom’s Debtors*, p.12; *PR 1780-1796*, 41, 26 February 1795, p.5.

<sup>177</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 5, 03 April 1798, pp.545-51; *PR 1796-1802*, 6, 04 May 1798, p.100.

<sup>178</sup> HC Deb, 13 June 1804, series 1, 2, cc.656-7; HC Deb, 27 June 1804, series 1, 2, c.869.

<sup>179</sup> Scanlan, *Freedom’s Debtors*, p.13; Cassandra Pybus, ‘‘A Less Favourable Specimen’’: The Abolitionist Response to Self-Emancipated Slaves in Sierra Leone, 1793-1808’, *Parliamentary History*, 26, S1 (2007), pp.97-112, pp.100-109.

certain significant winks and shrugs, as if I was taken in by Pitt, and was too credulous and soft &c'.<sup>180</sup> Pitt's commitment to abolition, or lack thereof, and Wilberforce's relationship with him, is one of the repeated criticisms made of Wilberforce's approach to abolition by historians.<sup>181</sup> For the most part Wilberforce's differences with Pitt stemmed from religion, as well as disagreements over war with France. Pitt was influential in Wilberforce's championing the abolition cause, but the campaign was not the priority for Pitt that it was for his friend. In 1788, Pitt initiated the Privy Council Inquiry into the slave trade and gave abolitionists access to customs figures on the question, although he was also criticised for the Inquiry because it created a delay.<sup>182</sup> In 1789, Pitt was involved more than at any other stage. The twelve propositions were Pitt's suggestion (and were criticised by Fox), Pitt persuaded Wilberforce to delay the motion until after the Committee of Trade report on the slave trade was published, and he may have delayed a general election to accommodate the motion.<sup>183</sup> Prior to the French Revolution, as shown in Chapter One, Pitt also made efforts to negotiate with France on the subject. In 1792, it was Pitt who introduced the motions that passed some of Dundas' resolutions and introduced the abolition question to the House of Lords for the first time. However, in both 1788 and 1800 Wilberforce entrusted Pitt with introducing the question in his stead, and in both instances Pitt did not do so. Throughout the lead up to the 1805 Order in Council, Wilberforce complained of Pitt's procrastination, which he later described as one of 'his great vices,' writing to him in June 1805 to say that he felt 'extremely uneasy' about the matter, and that 'Bankes & I are placed in a very unpleasant situation by this delay.'<sup>184</sup> When the Order in Council was finally issued in August, Wilberforce told Muncaster that this was Castlereagh's doing, rather than Pitt's.<sup>185</sup>

Although Wilberforce's abolitionist friends were dubious of Pitt's commitment, most of the contemporary criticisms of the relationship focused on Wilberforce's support for Pitt's anti-sedition measures. One of the obstacles faced by abolitionists after the

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<sup>180</sup> Wilberforce to Muncaster, n.d. June 1805, quoted in *Life*, III, p.233.

<sup>181</sup> Porter, *Abolition of the Slave Trade*, p.142; Spiers, 'William Wilberforce', pp.53-5.

<sup>182</sup> John Ehrman and Anthony Smith, 'Pitt, William [known as Pitt the Younger] (1759-1806)', *ODNB* May 2009 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/22338>> [accessed 13 March 2020]; David Beck Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.178.

<sup>183</sup> Jennifer Mori, *William Pitt and the French Revolution, 1785-1795* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997), p.34, p.79; John Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt/vol.1: The Years of Acclaim* (London: Constable, 1969), pp.396-7.

<sup>184</sup> RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1814, 24-26, Wilberforce to Harrison, 22 October 1814; TNA., PRO/30/8/189, f.158, Wilberforce to Pitt, 1 June 1805.

<sup>185</sup> *Life*, III, pp.230-4.

French Revolution was the association between abolition and radical politics.<sup>186</sup> Wilberforce's votes for anti-sedition bills were in direct opposition to those of many supporters of abolition. The *Cambridge Intelligencer* mocked Wilberforce's eventual support for war with France in contrast to his professed piety, and when he travelled to York in 1795 to defend his support for the sedition bills, the newspaper called him 'Pitt's principal minion.'<sup>187</sup> As well as radicalism affecting support for abolition in parliament, parliament's actions affected how radical supporters of abolition viewed Wilberforce.

Biographers of Pitt tend to emphasise his early commitment to abolition, arguing that he was unable to make abolition a government measure after he had to threaten to resign to pass Dolben's Act in 1788. They also suggest that had he been able to do so, it would not have made a dramatic difference.<sup>188</sup> His efforts to contact other governments and negotiate for abolition beyond Britain are frequently mentioned as indicative of his support for it.<sup>189</sup> With the exception of John Ehrman, Pitt's biographers do not mention abolitionism after 1792, when Pitt passed Dundas' resolutions, because as the government became more reactionary in response to the French Revolution, new cabinet members were more opposed to abolition than those in the 1780s, and so Pitt was less active on the question. Also, Pitt's actions in 1792 caused tensions between the prime minister and the King, and Pitt's active involvement in the campaign reduced to keep his position.<sup>190</sup> The third volume of Ehrman's biography describes the continuing campaign, and Pitt's hesitancy on the subject, especially regarding the 1805 Order in Council, but does not mention the proposed motion in 1799.<sup>191</sup> Throughout the period, Pitt spoke in favour of, and voted for, abolition. After 1789, when he suggested Wilberforce introduce resolutions rather than a bill, Pitt was not actively involved in planning any abolition motions, other than in 1800.

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<sup>186</sup> Mori, *Pitt and the French Revolution*, pp.30-1, 84, 109.

<sup>187</sup> 12 December 1795, *Cambridge Intelligencer*, p.3; 18 January 1794, *Cambridge Intelligencer*, p.3, 26 April 1794, *Cambridge Intelligencer*, p.3.

<sup>188</sup> John W. Derry, *William Pitt* (London: Batsford, 1962) pp.57-8; Derek Jarrett, *Pitt the Younger* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), pp.123-4.

<sup>189</sup> Ehrman, *Years of Acclaim*, pp.392-3; Mori, *Pitt and the French Revolution*, pp.32-4.

<sup>190</sup> Ehrman, *Years of Acclaim*, pp.392-6; John Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt/vol.2: The Reluctant Transition* (London: Constable, 1983), p.190, 420.

<sup>191</sup> John Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt/vol.3: The Consuming Struggle* (London: Constable, 1996), pp.425-35.

In summary, Wilberforce took an increasingly central role in the abolition campaign over time. Although he had agreed to champion the cause in 1787, in 1788-9, the parliamentary efforts were shaped more by Pitt than by Wilberforce. The changes in approach after 1792, when the London Committee stopped meeting, show Wilberforce acting independently of the popular movement for the first time. His continuing efforts for abolition beyond this period show that he was not a figurehead, but took ownership of the measure, regardless of how he had become involved. In 1804, when the London Committee reformed, Wilberforce and the new members he introduced made lobbying parliament their focus, rather than the popular focus of the original group. When he was less publicly involved in parliamentary activity during the final years of the campaign, 1806-7, and abolition became a government measure, he continued to influence activity behind the scenes.

Overall, the general approach was to push for total, immediate abolition, but occasional changes in response to circumstances. Within this, the specific approach to each motion and bill, especially the arguments Wilberforce emphasised, shifted in response to the situation in which abolition would take place and to recent events connected to the slave trade and the West Indian colonies. Although a partial abolition was proposed by Wilberforce in 1793 and 1794, after that was not successful, he returned to the more ambitious general abolition that he had originally aimed at. The eventual retreat of abolitionist efforts in the House of Commons was in response to the lack of success, the proposal of related measures by other parties, and the reduced support for the measure from Addington's administration.

This chapter has also re-evaluated contemporary and modern critiques of Wilberforce. The majority of these, like Wilberforce's struggles to guarantee enough support in the House of Commons and his ignorance regarding the House of Lords, were not unfounded, but were not deciding factors in the failure or success of bills. His friendship with Pitt was, as the early abolitionists had hoped, a bonus at the beginning of the campaign, and other than in 1800, Pitt did not renege on promises made to the abolitionists, although he could never prioritise abolition measures as much as they wanted, because of other political pressures. Wilberforce's attempts to pass partial abolition bills, and Thornton's failed slave trade limitation bill, show that efforts to compromise were no more successful than the uncompromising total, immediate abolition bills that Wilberforce repeatedly introduced. However, Anstey's conclusions

that the abolitionists' success being based on perseverance is more valid than his comment about their 'tactical skill'; for much of the period Wilberforce was learning by trial and error.<sup>192</sup> In much the same way the extra-parliamentary support has been viewed as having created a model for popular agitation, there was no clear precedent for Wilberforce to follow in parliament.

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<sup>192</sup> Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, p.409.

## Chapter 3

### The Parliamentary Campaign, 1789-1807 II: Rhetoric

Wilberforce's contemporaries praised his speeches on the slave trade, especially in 1789. His reputation as an orator has survived over time, with the first speech on the slave trade, made in May 1789, included in anthologies of historic speeches.<sup>1</sup> Wilberforce's talent for public speaking was commented on throughout his life: Isaac Milner recollected using the young Wilberforce as an example during his school years, and a speech he gave at the castle yard in York in 1784, before his election as MP for Yorkshire, was widely reported as a triumph.<sup>2</sup> A well-made speech, however, was no guarantee of success, as Wilberforce was to find out. This chapter focuses on the rhetoric used by Wilberforce to show that he developed a core set of arguments in favour of abolition. In a similar manner to his initial involvement, these were not solely based on his religious views. Although he repeatedly referred to the immorality of the slave trade, he did not otherwise use religious arguments as much as other ones. I argue that while the changes in the arguments he used reflect tactical shifts and contemporary events, overall their rhetoric had little impact on the success or failure of the bills introduced. The chapter also suggests that Wilberforce's speeches did not exist in political isolation but reflected the rhetorical culture of the time. Finally, I analyse Wilberforce's *Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, published in 1807, to compare his written to his spoken rhetoric on the question.

The previous chapter has established the chronology of the parliamentary campaign; the rhetoric will be analysed thematically. The arguments used, in a simplified form, will be discussed first, to demonstrate how they changed over time and to provide a basis for further discussion. The chapter will then investigate some of the core arguments in greater detail, including religion and the threat of slave uprisings. Detailed rhetorical analysis of speeches has focused on the early campaign in 1789-92.<sup>3</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> William Wilberforce, 'Let us make reparation to Africa (1789)', in Brian MacArthur (ed), *The Penguin Book of Historic Speeches* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), pp.134-138; William Wilberforce, 'Let us put an end at once to this inhuman traffic (12 May 1789)' in Andrew Burnet (ed) *Chambers Book of Great Speeches* (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers, 2006), pp.929-932.

<sup>2</sup> *Life*, I, pp.4, 54.

<sup>3</sup> Jeff D. Bass, 'An Efficient Humanitarianism', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 75, no.2 (1989), pp.152-165; Brycchan Carey, 'William Wilberforce's Sentimental Rhetoric: Parliamentary Reportage and the Abolition Speech of 1789', *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, 14 (2003), pp.281-305; Amanda T.

in looking at the full period, 1789-1807, this chapter will consider whether the analyses of the early speeches stand true for the whole of the campaign. In analysing the whole of the campaign, shifting from a chronological analysis to one that looks at the campaign thematically prevents repetition and allows for analysis of the rhetorical shifts on different topics over time.

Antislavery sentiment had, as described in Chapter One, been increasing in Britain throughout the 1780s. The increase in pro-abolition literature throughout the decade, led by Rev. James Ramsay and Thomas Clarkson, established an abolitionist rhetoric before the launch of the parliamentary campaign. Ramsay and Clarkson's pre-1788 writing described the slave trade, emphasising its immorality, and discussed the potential benefits to Britain and the West Indian colonies if it were abolished.<sup>4</sup> As public interest increased, and the London Committee began campaigning against the trade in earnest, more writers published on the subject. Rev. John Newton and Thomas Gisborne focused, as Ramsay and Clarkson had done, on the moral case against the slave trade, emphasising 'human policy' and applying moral philosophy to the question.<sup>5</sup> William Dickson, in contrast, looked at the evidence on the slave trade and slavery and the practical questions surrounding abolition.<sup>6</sup> The key arguments in these publications were designed to appeal on practical as well as moral grounds, responding to the anticipated and actual reasons given for the continuance of the trade. They also included anecdotes to demonstrate the suffering involved. As will be shown later in this chapter, both the structure and themes of Ramsay and Clarkson's writing were recreated in Wilberforce's early speeches on abolition. His speeches also mimicked their use of extended quotes from eyewitness accounts and discussion of the authors' own experiences of the slave trade. However, parts of these books, especially those by Clarkson and Dickson, also considered the question of emancipation, which was excluded from the parliamentary

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Perry, 'A Traffic in Numbers: The Ethics, Effects and Affect of Mortality Statistics in the British Abolition Debates', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 12, no.4 (2012), pp.78-104.

<sup>4</sup> James Ramsay, *An Inquiry into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade, and of Granting Liberty to the Slave in the British Sugar Colonies* (London: J. Phillips, 1784); Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species; particularly the African* (London: J. Phillips, 1786); Thomas Clarkson, *A Summary View of the Slave Trade, and the Probable Consequences of its Abolition* (London: J. Phillips, 1787).

<sup>5</sup> John Newton, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, (London: J. Buckland, 1788); Thomas Gisborne, *The Principles of Moral Philosophy Investigated* second edition (London: T. Bensley, 1790).

<sup>6</sup> William Dickson, *Letters on Slavery*, (London: J. Phillips, 1789).



campaign. Wilberforce did not make religious appeals as extensively or as explicitly as the extra-parliamentary campaign did, which will be discussed in more depth later on.

### **Balance of Arguments**

The balance of arguments used in the debates about abolition – whether the majority of reasons given in favour of or against abolition were moral or practical – has been studied for some of the debates, but this scholarship has not considered the full period of the campaign. Seymour Drescher identified 25 frequently used arguments in 1791-2 and 1806-7, on both sides of the debates, and divided them into three categories: moral, economic, and security. Overall, he concluded that the divide between moral and policy (economic and security) based arguments was broadly equal, with abolitionists relying more on the moral case and anti-abolitionists making more policy-based claims, with the exception of 1806.<sup>7</sup> David Beck Ryden argued that for the majority of the campaign, the abolitionists focused on justice and humanity, and that the economic case was not strongly featured until 1806, at the end of the campaign, but does not mention other reasons like colonial security.<sup>8</sup> Jeff Bass argued against dividing arguments in this way, because neither side of the debate ‘attempted to separate economics from morality’ in the debates in 1791 and 1792.<sup>9</sup> The abolitionists had their own taxonomies: justice, humanity and policy being the most common.

To analyse the balance over the course of the parliamentary campaign, the arguments made have been divided into moral and policy categories, broadly following the same grouping as Drescher. In addition to statements about the general immorality of the trade, moral arguments included: the treatment of the enslaved, both during the transatlantic voyage and in the West Indian colonies; national guilt and the sinfulness of the trade (and warnings about divine vengeance); public sentiment against the trade; appeals to justice and humanity; the deaths of sailors involved in the trade; and the trade preventing the spread of ‘civilisation’ in Africa. Policy-based reasons included: economic ruin or the possibility of establishing new commerce with Africa; the likelihood of other countries expanding their slave trades to replace the British trade; the

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<sup>7</sup> Seymour Drescher, ‘People and Parliament: The Rhetoric of the British Slave Trade’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 20, no.4 (1990), pp.568-74, 570.

<sup>8</sup> David Beck Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.179-80.

<sup>9</sup> Bass, ‘An Efficient Humanitarianism’, p.153.

possibility of maintaining enslaved populations through increased birth rates and reduced mortality rates; colonial security and the threat of enslaved-led rebellion; parliamentary procedure and previous decisions made by the House of Commons. These are not definitive lists but are examples of some of the arguments made that could be placed in the two broad categories.

This has been applied to the eleven debates initiated by Wilberforce between 1789 and 1804, further divided into: Wilberforce's speeches, other pro-abolition speakers, and the responses by anti-abolitionists.<sup>10</sup> This can then give insight into the balance of arguments throughout the campaign, and how that shifted over time. However, this method does not include the number of times a reason was advanced in the House of Commons, and so disguises the rhetorical weight given to them at different times, although it does include instances where other abolitionists have repeated arguments made by Wilberforce. For example, over two debates in 1804, four opponents of abolition argued that if Britain abolished the slave trade, other nations would expand theirs, but it is only counted once in this overview.<sup>11</sup> The debate in 1805, although initiated by Wilberforce, has been excluded from this analysis, because there is no record of his introductory speech, only the motion for leave to bring in a bill. This analysis has also excluded the debates on Dundas' 1792 resolutions, because they focused on how to abolish the trade rather than why, and so the subject of debate had changed.<sup>12</sup> The speeches analysed are the versions as reported in the *Parliamentary Register*; the difficulties in recreating speeches not recorded verbatim are discussed later in the chapter, when looking at certain arguments in more detail.

With the exception of 1793 and 1794, when Wilberforce only used policy arguments to introduce bills on the foreign slave trade, he made a wider range of moral than policy-based cases in favour of abolition. Overall, in five of his speeches (1789, 1791, 1795, 1796, 1797), the moral case against the slave trade predominated. In four other years (1792, 1798, 1799, 1804), the appeal to policy was uppermost. The two most successful years for the abolition campaign prior to its final success, in 1792 and 1804, were years that saw policy arguments outnumber moral arguments, but this does not account for rhetorical weight. Wilberforce's speeches were therefore more balanced

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<sup>10</sup> The included speeches are marked \* in Appendix 1.

<sup>11</sup> HC Deb, 30 May 1804, 7 June 1804, series 1, 2, cc.459-76, 543-59.

<sup>12</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 23 April 1792, pp.333-66; 25 April 1792, pp.367-418; 27 April 1792, pp.422-47.

between the moral and the practical reasons in favour of abolition than Drescher described. Ryden's conclusion only included one policy reason, and so the more even spread of policy than he observed is largely the result of the variety of arguments within that category, although the economic case was not as absent in the second half of the 1790s as he suggested.

Other abolitionist MPs used a similar balance of arguments to Wilberforce, including repeating those made by Wilberforce. In 1793 and 1794, when Wilberforce focused on policy, other abolitionists referred to the moral case as well. The moral case was the most used category in four of the other debates (1789, 1791, 1796, 1797), while policy was used more in three debates (1795, 1799, 1804), and in 1792 they were roughly evenly balanced. With the exception of 1793-4, then, other abolitionists presented a similar case for abolition to Wilberforce.

The balance of arguments used by the anti-abolitionists overwhelmingly relied on policy. They did not offer many moral reasons for the slave trade, but it was almost always present in the eleven debates between 1789 and 1804, with the exceptions of 1791 and 1793. It is within the anti-abolition policy arguments that the range of ideas that can be included in the category is most obvious. Throughout the campaign opponents of abolition used the full variety of sub-categories (economic circumstances in Britain and in the colonies, parliamentary precedent and procedure, the security of the colonies), whereas in Wilberforce's arguments the range increased over time.

As well as the parliamentary debates, Drescher also looked at the phrasing of a sample of petitions to parliament. The 1783 Quaker petition, as discussed in Chapter One, called for the abolition of the trade on 'the Principles of justice and humanity,' and in 1788 Pitt added 'sound policy' to the phrase. In Drescher's sample, all the petitions included the moral case and mentioned 'humanity.' About one-eighth referred to policy as well.<sup>13</sup> Counting the use of these three words (justice, humanity, policy) and their opposites (injustice, inhumanity, impolicy) in Wilberforce's speeches as reported in *Parliamentary Register* gives another view of the rhetorical balance of his overall line of reasoning. Mirroring the petitioning campaign, 'humanity' was the most used of the three over the full period of the campaign, with a peak in 1792. In 1796 Wilberforce did not use the word 'justice' at all (according to *Parliamentary Register*), and in 1799 he did

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<sup>13</sup> Drescher, 'People and Parliament', pp.566-7.

not use the word ‘policy’ at all. However, 1792 and 1799 were years in which he offered more policy than moral-based reasons – a simple count of words does not reflect the balance of arguments, nor the rhetorical weight given to them.

In 1789, Wilberforce’s speech was essentially the same as the views expressed in pamphlets that had been circulating since 1784.<sup>14</sup> He described the slave trade from its origins in Africa, through the Middle Passage, to the conditions of enslavement in the West Indian Colonies and the mortality rates of both enslaved persons and sailors. He discussed various possibilities: establishing natural population increase among enslaved persons; using machinery to alleviate working conditions, and so reduce the need for labour; and the potential for French abolition. He argued that the slave trade was unprofitable, and also that it was murder and would incur divine vengeance. After this, Wilberforce gave new reasons to abolish the trade each year, from various sources, as well as re-iterating the following core arguments. Wilberforce’s main case for abolishing the trade was based on: ideas about national sin, Providence and divine vengeance; the connection between the newly enslaved and rebellions; the deaths of sailors; the idea that there were enough enslaved persons in the West Indian colonies to maintain both production and population; after 1792, the previous decisions made by the House of Commons on the subject; the impact of the slave trade on the morals of those involved; and a general appeal on the basis of justice and humanity. Some of these arguments are explored in detail in the next section of this chapter, to consider how the rhetoric surrounding key themes changed over time.

The new reasons he gave, often only once, show that Wilberforce tried different rhetorical angles. For example, Edmund Burke, who Clarkson considered an abolitionist forerunner, and John Courtenay, a Foxite MP, both mentioned the potential for a new trade with Arica in 1789, and it was then mentioned by Wilberforce in 1791, the only time he included it.<sup>15</sup> Another case made for the first time in Wilberforce’s 1791 speech was that newly enslaved persons were more likely to rebel.<sup>16</sup> This was in reaction to increasing concerns about slave insurrection in the immediate aftermath of the St. Domingo revolution, but also borrowed from Dickson and ‘the historian of Jamaica,’

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<sup>14</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, pp.130-50.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade, I* (London: R. Taylor & Co., 1808), pp.55-6; *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, pp.155-158; 21 May 1789, pp.189-90; *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, pp.182-220.

<sup>16</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, pp.182-220.

Edward Long.<sup>17</sup> Wilberforce continued to make new arguments based on recent events, such as the cessation of trading during wartime, or using Jamaica's rejection of the 1797 Address as proof that the colonies would not take the lead in the abolition of the trade. The war with France was used as a rhetorical set-up to discuss the impact of the slave trade on the nation's reputation and character from 1796 onwards.

### Arguments in Focus

The reporting of parliamentary debates in the period means that there is not one, reliable record of the campaign against the slave trade. Although after 1771 there were few attempts to prevent newspapers reporting on the debates, and after 1783 journalists in the gallery were allowed to take notes, as Peter D. G. Thomas suggests, 'at best only the general patterns of the speeches are the same: the wording is entirely different' when different reports of the same speech are compared.<sup>18</sup> It is therefore impossible to know exactly what was said in parliament, and for a better impression of the rhetoric of the debates, it is necessary to look at multiple accounts. The multitude of reports can then be used to recreate the substance and tone of the speeches made, but not the exact phrasing.<sup>19</sup> As well as the reduced detail in newspaper reports, there are other issues. The conditions in the gallery and the restrictions of space within newspapers meant that speeches could not be reported in full, and parts of the speeches might have been missed because of the acoustics of the House.<sup>20</sup> In some cases, there are no reports of a speech, either because the gallery was full before reporters arrived, or because they were barred that day, and at times the reporters were dismissed during the debate, in addition to the gallery being cleared during voting.<sup>21</sup> The differences in word use or coverage between the reports will be discussed alongside the rhetorical analysis where relevant.

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<sup>17</sup> Dickson, *Letters*, p.131; *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.217.

<sup>18</sup> Peter D.G. Thomas, 'The Beginning of Parliamentary Reporting in Newspapers, 1768-1774', *The English Historical Review*, 74, no.293 (1959), pp.623-36, p.636.

<sup>19</sup> Carey, 'William Wilberforce's Sentimental Rhetoric', p.282; Dror Wahrman, 'Virtual Representation: Parliamentary Reporting and Languages of Class in the 1790s', *Past and Present*, 136 (1992), pp.83-113, p.109.

<sup>20</sup> Kathryn Rix, '“Whatever Passed in Parliament Ought to be Communicated to the Public”: Reporting the Proceedings of the Reformed Commons', *Parliamentary History*, 33, no.3 (2014), pp.453-74, p.459; Thomas, 'Beginning of Parliamentary Reporting', pp.632-3.

<sup>21</sup> The exclusion of strangers is commented on in 1789: *The Times*, 24 June 1789, p.2; *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 24 June 1780, p.288; in 1791 John Fenton Cawthorne moved for the gallery to be cleared before the end of the debate, *The Times*, 20 April 1791, p.3; in 1806 one report comments on the gallery being cleared for the division 'as usual', *Morning Chronicle*, 11 June 1806, p.3.

The analysis of parliamentary rhetoric that follows is based on three reports – *The Parliamentary Register* (1789-1803) and *Hansard* (1803-1807), *The Times*, and the *Morning Chronicle*. The two newspapers have been chosen because: a) they follow the debates about abolition through the whole period, giving a continuous account; b) they fall on either side of the political divide, with *The Times* considered to be a government paper, and the *Morning Chronicle* considered to be an opposition paper;<sup>22</sup> and c) they are among the newspapers which were most likely to be an original report of proceedings, rather than one based on reports from other publications. *The Parliamentary Register* and *Hansard* were both based on newspaper reports, and although at times MPs would also contribute their own accounts of the speeches, there is no evidence that Wilberforce did this.<sup>23</sup> The non-verbatim nature of reporting meant that at times speeches were misrepresented in newspapers. In 1798, Wilberforce complained of this in the House of Commons, within debates stemming from the publication of a report in *The Times*, but said that he ‘was not against the practice in itself.’<sup>24</sup> Although in his diary he did occasionally say that he felt the newspapers had not represented his speeches accurately, for example complaining in 1812 that a speech about naval discipline was ‘most vilely us’d in the Npapers,’ he did not do so in response to published debates on the slave trade.<sup>25</sup>

The reporting of Wilberforce’s speech on 12 May 1789 demonstrates one of the issues with the reporting of speeches. His notes for the speech were included as an appendix to the second volume of *The Life of William Wilberforce*, and comparing the two shows the less detailed nature of newspaper reports.<sup>26</sup> The notes are vague, more like prompts than a plan (although the speech followed the same order), but include details not included in the reports, mostly relating to statistics and sources. For example, the reports mention complaints by Liverpool merchants about the profitability of the trade in general terms, but Wilberforce’s notes include the names and figures for this claim. Reports of debates were published as pamphlets as well as in newspapers, and Wilberforce was in possession of a bound copy of the 1791 and 1792 speeches, which he

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<sup>22</sup> Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People? England, 1783-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p.51.

<sup>23</sup> Rix, ‘Whatever Passed in Parliament’, p.457.

<sup>24</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 7, 27 December 1798, pp.436-42; *PR 1796-1802*, 7, 31 December 1798, pp.466-85.

<sup>25</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, p.145, diary, 15 April 1812.

<sup>26</sup> Appendix, *Life*, II, pp.438-441.

annotated, and which have not previously been used.<sup>27</sup> Where he corrected the reporting of his own words, it was usually to strengthen a phrase or two, rather than to change the overall point being made. However, the publication date for the 1791 debate is 1792, at least eight months after the fact, and so Wilberforce's own recollection of his phrasing is not particularly reliable, in light of time passed. He could also have been noting what he should have said instead. Some of his more extensive additions give additional detail, in a similar manner to the discrepancy between his notes and the reported speech in 1789. Among the papers preserved at the Bodleian are two sheets labelled 'Notes of the speech of WW, May 30 1804.' Rather than simply notes made in preparation, as in 1789, these appear to have been annotated during the debate as well. Alongside details such as revenue calculations not included in the reports of the speech, there are notes on arguments made against abolition, and responses to them.<sup>28</sup> As with the 1789 notes, they add little to a consideration of Wilberforce's rhetoric.

Wilberforce's religious views were well-known in the House of Commons, and he discussed this aspect of the arguments in favour of abolition in all the introductory speeches except for 1793 and 1794. In 1789, he said that his reason for campaigning against the slave trade was rooted in the commandment 'Thou shalt do no murder,' one of his strongest reported statements on the sinfulness of the trade.<sup>29</sup> Wilberforce also discussed his religious motivations in 1796, saying that they were based on 'a principle sacred and divine' rather than 'from any temporal feeling.'<sup>30</sup> Most of Wilberforce's discussion of religion in other abolition debates falls into two sections: responding to claims made by anti-abolitionists of scriptural support for the slave trade, and the actual or potential workings of Providence. Typically, the latter, more abstract, discussion came towards the end of the speeches, after he had set out the other reasons for the measure, whereas the counter arguments tended to be more integrated into his earlier statements. This connection between abolition and Providence had already been made in abolition literature and was associated with evangelicalism; Wilberforce's mention of the threat of divine vengeance reflected the popular campaign, as many of his speeches did, but less intensely.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM:2014.13, bound copy of speeches.

<sup>28</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.4, ff.40-41, Notes of the speech of WW, 30 May 1804.

<sup>29</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, p.149; 'Parliamentary Intelligence', *The Times*, 13 May 1789, p.2.

<sup>30</sup> 'British Parliament', *Morning Chronicle*, 19 February 1796, pp.1-2.

<sup>31</sup> John Coffey, "'Tremble Britannia!': Fear, Providence and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1758-1807", *English Historical Review*, 127 (2012), pp.844-81, pp.859-67.

In 1791, according to the newspaper reports, he dismissed the idea that ‘because they [the enslaved] are black divine vengeance should pursue them,’ but the *Parliamentary Register* account includes a more in-depth response to this racial interpretation of ‘the Curse of Ham.’ It was, he declared, ‘nothing less than a gross and impious blasphemy.’<sup>32</sup> Claims of scriptural support for the slave trade were also refuted in 1804, when Wilberforce described them as ‘profane’ and those who made them as having ‘little claim to religion.’<sup>33</sup> In his introductory speeches, Wilberforce briefly rejected the claims, giving them little extended discussion. However, in 1806, in response to Gascoyne’s claim of scriptural support, Wilberforce not only rejected it, but emphasised the prohibition of the slave trade by Christianity, calling it ‘the glory of our religion.’<sup>34</sup> It is notable that in 1806 Wilberforce was not introducing the motion, but replying to comments made in response to the Attorney-General’s speech; he used stronger terms when speaking more spontaneously than when making planned speeches. In this instance, Wilberforce’s rejection of claims of support for the slave trade connected to his 1789 description of the slave trade as a sin, a view which he repeated throughout the campaign when discussing the threat of divine vengeance in response to the continuation of the trade.

In 1792, according to the *Parliamentary Register*, he implied that events in the Caribbean (i.e. the Haitian Revolution) had been ‘permitted by Heaven’ to indicate divine disapproval of the trade.<sup>35</sup> According to *The Times*, he stated that ‘the political interests of a nation could never be set against the laws of God,’ more of an abstract statement than the connection made in the *Parliamentary Register*.<sup>36</sup> This line of reasoning was more frequently used by Wilberforce than the counter arguments described above, and in relatively abstract terms. In 1795, Wilberforce referred to the House recently ‘invoking the blessings of Providence’ on other matters in contrast to the continuation of the slave trade as a potential reason that those blessings would not be received.<sup>37</sup> This was as far as the newspapers reported on, but in the *Parliamentary Register* the discussion of the slave trade as a sin and an insult to God, and the effect this would have on the prosperity

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<sup>32</sup> ‘House of Commons’, *The Times*, 19 April 1791, p.2; *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.197.

<sup>33</sup> HC Deb, 30 May 1804, series 1, 2, c.448.

<sup>34</sup> HC Deb, 10 June 1806, series 1, 6, c.593.

<sup>35</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 02 April 1792, p.174.

<sup>36</sup> ‘House of Commons’, *The Times*, 03 April 1792, pp.1-3.

<sup>37</sup> ‘House of Commons’, *The Times*, 27 February 1795, pp.1-2.



of the country, was more extensive.<sup>38</sup> According to both the *Parliamentary Register* and the *Morning Chronicle*, in 1796 Wilberforce mentioned the country's professed 'regard for religion' as contradictory to the slave trade, but did not pursue the subject.<sup>39</sup> Wilberforce returned to Providence in 1797, saying that it would destroy the commerce of the country as punishment for the slave trade.<sup>40</sup> He repeated the warning in 1798, going on to explain that divine vengeance was not enacted by natural disasters but that 'vice was productive of misery; imprudence of misfortune.'<sup>41</sup> Wilberforce made similar claims in 1799, according to the *Parliamentary Register*, denying that punishment from Providence could be predicted, and again suggesting that the misfortunes facing the country were punishment for the slave trade.<sup>42</sup> The newspapers did not mention this as a question of Providence, although they did make connections between the contemporary situation and the slave trade.<sup>43</sup>

Given that Wilberforce claimed in Parliament that religion was the basis of his involvement in the abolition campaign, it is perhaps surprising that explicitly religious ideas did not feature more in his speeches. Such arguments were readily available: Ramsay published a book specifically addressing this question in 1788, in response to claims of scriptural support for the trade, and other early abolitionist literature made frequent use of the threat of divine vengeance. However, evangelicalism was unpopular in the House of Commons. In the years preceding the abolition campaign, other politicians with similar religious views to Wilberforce had either been ridiculed when they expressed them in the House of Commons, as in the case of Sir Richard Hill, or avoided the subject entirely, as had the earl of Dartmouth.<sup>44</sup> Wilberforce was aware of how his new piety was viewed, and that relying on religious arguments and rhetoric could have worked against him within the parliamentary setting.<sup>45</sup> In January 1786, he

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<sup>38</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 41, 26 February 1795, p.8.

<sup>39</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 18 February 1796, p.64; 'British Parliament', *Morning Chronicle*, 19 February 1796, pp.1-2.

<sup>40</sup> 'British Parliament', *Morning Chronicle*, 16 May 1797, p.3; 'House of Commons', *The Times*, 16 May 1797, p.2.

<sup>41</sup> 'British Parliament', *Morning Chronicle*, 4 April 1798, p.1.

<sup>42</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 8, 1 March 1799, p.141.

<sup>43</sup> 'House of Commons', *The Times*, 2 March 1799, pp.1-2; 'British Parliament', *Morning Chronicle*, 2 March 1799, p.2

<sup>44</sup> C.L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p.380.

<sup>45</sup> E.M. Howse, *Saints in Politics: The Clapham Sect and the Growth of Freedom* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1971), pp.vii, 31, 122 – Howse notes that the term 'Saints' was used mockingly and that they were 'derided' by opponents.

commented in his diary that he was ‘universally given out to be a Methodist’; as Wesleyan Methodism became increasingly divided from the Church of England in the 1790s, this became a greater concern, and his references to religion, as demonstrated above, decreased.<sup>46</sup> In 1806, after responding to Bamber Gascoyne, MP for Liverpool, Wilberforce went on to say that ‘he should ever deprecate the introduction of such appeals to sacred authority in that house as tending rather to ridicule than to any satisfactory result.’<sup>47</sup> Having been criticised by Bryan Edwards in 1797 for invoking the threat of divine vengeance, and aware of how his religious convictions were perceived, Wilberforce’s reference to ‘ridicule’ is indicative of his previous experience of making religious statements.<sup>48</sup> They also reflect his opinion of the religious attitude of the House of Commons as superficial and dissuaded him from using religious rhetoric more in the abolition campaign. The limited use of religious rhetoric in Wilberforce’s speeches was a matter of strategy, rather than any lack of conviction.

This is not to say that Wilberforce never discussed religious concerns in the House of Commons. In 1799, he seconded a motion to bring in a bill to prohibit Sunday newspapers.<sup>49</sup> Responding to a motion to postpone the second reading of the bill, in which Richard Sheridan, a Foxite MP, argued that newspapers were not the most serious example of breaking the Sabbath, Wilberforce argued that ‘The people could only innocently recreate themselves by attending to their religious duties.’ He went on to say that if Sunday newspapers were permitted, ‘it would very soon become an ordinary day of labour,’ ending his speech with a brief discussion of the legality of the measure.<sup>50</sup> Although the question was not discussed in much length that day, Wilberforce was not the only MP to view it through a religious lens. Sir Richard Hill, who as mentioned above was no stranger to making religious arguments despite being mocked for them, made a comment similar to Wilberforce’s reference to the potential long-term effects, in stronger terms, and several other MPs discussed the way in which the Sabbath was, or was not, observed.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Bodl., MS Don. e.164, p.93, diary, 12 January 1786; John Wolffe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2006), pp.36-7.

<sup>47</sup> HC Deb, 10 June 1806, series 1, 6, cc.593-4.

<sup>48</sup> ‘House of Commons,’ *The Times*, 16 May 1797, p.2.

<sup>49</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 8, 27 May 1799, p.603.

<sup>50</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 8, 30 May 1799, pp.608-10.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p.610.

Wilberforce discussed religion and the slave trade more freely in his correspondence, but typically only with those who also had a strong faith, Evangelical or otherwise. This is particularly evident in letters to and from Isaac Milner and Rev. John Newton, both of whom were influential in Wilberforce's evangelical conversion, and later in correspondence with James Stephen.<sup>52</sup> However, these letters had a religious tone whether they discussed the slave trade or not. At no point in the correspondence is there evidence of Wilberforce changing the tone of his writing to a more religious one when discussing the slave trade in comparison to other subjects. In correspondence with other parliamentarians and political figures, Wilberforce almost exclusively discussed the abolition of the slave trade as a question of policy. When writing to William Eden and Lord Holland it was framed as a matter of security and of diplomacy, and his letters to and from Lord Grenville include extensive discussion of parliamentary strategy.<sup>53</sup> His surviving correspondence with Pitt is similarly practical.<sup>54</sup> Overall, unless he was corresponding with other members of the London Committee or people who shared his religious views, Wilberforce continued to focus on policy, rather than religion or sympathy. Similarly, while abolition literature was typically more overtly religious than Wilberforce's speeches, his *Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, which as discussed in Chapter Two was aimed at the House of Lords, was also more focused on policy.<sup>55</sup>

Although Wilberforce frequently referred to the principle of humanity, and to the humane or inhumane treatment of enslaved persons, there was little variety in how he did so. 'Humanity' was typically an abstract appeal, within broader emotional rhetoric; as with Hume's writing, humanity and sympathy were connected principles.<sup>56</sup> The only major exception to this relative consistency was in 1796, when he called on the House to 'show the world that they respected the true and substantial rights of human nature,' relating it to the anti-sedition measures that had recently been passed, which he described

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<sup>52</sup> For example: Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.15, f.38, Newton to Wilberforce, 27 March 1794; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.49, Wilberforce corresp. with Newton; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.17, f.28, Isaac Milner to Wilberforce, 17 July 1792; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.16, ff.40-1, Wilberforce to Stephen, 20 November 1804.

<sup>53</sup> BL., Add MS 34427, Auckland Papers; BL., Add MS 51820, Holland House Papers; BL., Add MS 69038, Dropmore Papers.

<sup>54</sup> KHL., U1590/S5/O4/13, Letters from William Wilberforce to Wm Pitt; TNA., PRO/30/8/189, Correspondence of William Pitt the Younger.

<sup>55</sup> William Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Addressed to the Freeholders and Inhabitants of Yorkshire* (London: Luke Hansard & Sons, 1807).

<sup>56</sup> Ryan Patrick Hanley, 'David Hume and the "Politics of Humanity"', *Political Theory*, 39, no.2 (2011), pp.205-233, pp.214-20.

as ‘false and visionary pretensions.’<sup>57</sup> In connecting abolition to ‘the cause of rational liberty,’ he attempted to separate the campaign from the concept of liberty espoused by British radicals such as Thomas Walker, who had been chairman of the Manchester Abolition Society before being tried for treason in 1794.<sup>58</sup> The connection with recent government actions is recorded in *The Times* and later in the *Parliamentary Register*, but not in the *Morning Chronicle*; the political affiliations of the two papers is the best explanation for this difference, as the opposition did not support the conservative reaction embodied in anti-sedition measures, and so connecting abolition to them could have a negative effect on support for the bill (the *Chronicle*, as mentioned earlier, was an opposition newspaper). There was also an exception in 1799, when Wilberforce referred to his previous arguments wholesale and said that ‘they belonged to human nature.’<sup>59</sup> As a passing comment, it was not an important part of the rhetoric used that year, but in comparison to other years it gave a glimpse of an idea that Wilberforce did not discuss much. His references to ‘human nature’ were appeals to empathy, rather than an endorsement of the emergent ideas about human rights. Other than William Dickson, none of the abolitionist literature drew on these new ideas, and the abolitionists did not refer to their campaign as ‘humanitarian’ until after the end of the campaign against the slave trade.<sup>60</sup> The abolition campaigns are often framed as precursors to ideas about human rights, but ‘the rights of man’ as they featured in revolutionary writing were not associated with the abolition campaigns, and changed before they became applicable to populations beyond Europe.<sup>61</sup>

At the outset of the campaign, *The Times* described Wilberforce as ‘at a loss’ when discussing calculations.<sup>62</sup> Brycchan Carey argued that Wilberforce placed statistics after more emotive language because he ‘was aware of the limitations of hard evidence in the parliamentary forum.’<sup>63</sup> Amanda Perry argued that the numerical evidence gained rhetorical weight when paired with specific examples of abuse, amplifying one example

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<sup>57</sup> ‘Parliamentary Intelligence’, *The Times*, 19 February 1796, p.2.

<sup>58</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 18 February 1796, p.63; Michael T. Davis, ‘Walker, Thomas (1749-1817)’, *ODNB*, May 2009, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/6303>> [accessed 13 March 2020].

<sup>59</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 8, 1 March 1799, p.133; British Parliament’, *Morning Chronicle*, 2 March 1799, p.2.

<sup>60</sup> Dickson, *Letters*, pp.53, 99, 141-2, 163; George Cotkin, ‘History’s Moral Turn’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69, no.2 (2008), pp.293-315, p.312.

<sup>61</sup> Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp.32-3; Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co, 2007), pp.22, 187.

<sup>62</sup> ‘The Liverpool Merchants return’, *The Times*, 14 May 1789, p.3.

<sup>63</sup> Carey, ‘William Wilberforce’s Sentimental Rhetoric’, p.291.

as representative of the slave trade as a whole.<sup>64</sup> In the 1789 debate to which these judgements relate, the statistics, mostly mortality rates, were interspersed throughout the debate, but they were not integrated into the rest of the speech.<sup>65</sup> In later speeches, the statistics continued to focus on demographics, but rather than mortality rates, Wilberforce tended to report raw numbers.<sup>66</sup>

Statistics became more integrated into speeches after 1789, tailored to be additions of fact into rhetorical discussion of various topics. For example, in 1799, when arguing against delaying abolition until the British West Indian colonies were fully cultivated, Wilberforce related the number of unused acres in Jamaica and the number of enslaved persons already imported. This was the basis of an estimate of how many more enslaved would be required, over what period of time, to cultivate the whole island.<sup>67</sup> Over time, then, Wilberforce's use of statistics developed to reflect the way in which he was most comfortable using in the debates. This was primarily by emphasizing the size of the trade to bolster the more emotive rhetoric, as described by Perry, rather than attempting to relay in-depth statistics in which both Wilberforce and his audience might struggle to follow the calculations - the 'limitations' described by Carey. The timing of the use of statistics, after the more emotional appeal, is what Carey described as 'emotional subversion,' in which a more sentimental passage is followed by evidence, to make the audience more likely to accept the facts offered.<sup>68</sup>

The previous chapter discussed Wilberforce's relationship with the extra-parliamentary campaign and petitions in favour of abolition from a tactical perspective. When introducing his motion in 1789, Wilberforce moved 'to take into consideration the petitions which had been presented against the slave trade,' using the petitioning of the previous months and years to frame the debate, but without reflecting on the popular support.<sup>69</sup> The only other mention Wilberforce made of the petitions was in 1792, when towards the conclusion of his speech he talked of the 'unanimous sentiment' of the nation:

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<sup>64</sup> Perry, 'A Traffic in Numbers', p.80.

<sup>65</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, p.140; 'Parliamentary Intelligence', *The Times*, 13 May 1789, pp.1-2.

<sup>66</sup> For example: *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.170; *PR 1796-1802*, 8, 1 March 1799, p.136.

<sup>67</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 8, 1 March 1799, p.136; 'House of Commons', *The Times*, 2 March 1799, pp.1-2; 'British Parliament', *Morning Chronicle*, 2 March 1799, p.2.

<sup>68</sup> Carey, *Rhetoric of Sensibility*, p.43.

<sup>69</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, p.130.

the people of England had expressed their sense against the trade, fully and forcibly, and had addressed the House, as they valued the favour of Heaven, to abolish it. If the petitions of the people of England were attended to, and surely they ought not to be disregarded...<sup>70</sup>

The use of ‘sentiment’ and ‘sense’ are more suggestive of feeling than opinion, which contrasts with the more forceful end of the statement. This inconsistency suggests that Wilberforce was unsure how to talk about petitions. The statements are only included in the *Parliamentary Register*, not in the newspapers, which indicates how limited the discussion of them by Wilberforce was. The less time given to an argument in a speech, the less likely it was to be included in a newspaper report, due to space limitations. Other MPs were more likely to mention petitions, and would refer to the wishes of their constituents, or to the popular support more generally.<sup>71</sup>

In contrast to how little Wilberforce discussed petitions in the House of Commons, he had an extended exchange with Rev. Christopher Wyvill about the potential for a petition from Yorkshire. At the beginning of the campaign, as discussed in Chapter One, in January 1788, Wilberforce wrote that ‘the public Voice should be enacted in our support as loudly & as universally as possible.’<sup>72</sup> He continued to raise the question until 1792, but wanted it to stem from a ‘respectable’ meeting.<sup>73</sup> Although he was in favour of petitioning, Wilberforce was more interested in the perceived social standing of the signatories rather than quantity of the signatures. This was the opposite of what has since been seen as noteworthy about the abolition petitions by historians, where the range and number of signatures has been of particular interest.<sup>74</sup>

When talking about colonial security, Wilberforce’s argument throughout the campaign was, as already mentioned, that newly enslaved persons were the most likely group to rebel. Therefore, by abolishing the trade, rebellions that threatened the British

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<sup>70</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, pp.173-4.

<sup>71</sup> For example, James Martin in 1791, *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, pp.226-8.

<sup>72</sup> NYRO., ZFW/7.2.59, Wilberforce to Wyvill, 25 January 1788.

<sup>73</sup> NYRO., ZFW/7.2.74, Wilberforce to Wyvill, 19 December 1791; N.Y.R.O., ZFW/7.2.74, Wilberforce to Wyvill, 18 January 1792.

<sup>74</sup> e.g. Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870*, (London: Routledge, 1992); John Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

West Indian colonies in a similar manner to the revolt in Saint Domingue would be less likely. Wilberforce based this assertion on Long's *History of Jamaica*, which, as noted above, he referenced the first time he mentioned the issue in Parliament in 1791, and Dickson's *Letters*. He also connected it to the treatment and legal protection of the enslaved.<sup>75</sup> Wilberforce reflected on the Haitian Revolution in more depth in 1792, trying to disconnect the violence there from discussions of abolition in Europe. Thereafter, the events in the French colonies were used as a warning, linked to the numbers of newly enslaved Africans imported. In 1804, Wilberforce discussed colonial security and rebellions at greater length than at any other time.<sup>76</sup> Rather than only mentioning the threat posed by newly imported enslaved persons, he also discussed slave-owners concerns, including the Jamaican Assembly's recent request for additional troops to be stationed there. He claimed that the enslaved population were more likely to rebel because they knew about the Haitian Revolution than because of debates about the slave trade in Britain. He concluded by expressing surprise that a similar rebellion had not already occurred in the British colonies, similar to the when-not-if style warnings he had issued previously.<sup>77</sup>

The terms in which Wilberforce discussed a potential revolution in British colonies became increasingly urgent over time. Where in 1791, he refers to 'insurrections' and 'general rebellion,' in 1792, he brings in mention of 'plots and assassinations,' 'misery' and 'destruction.'<sup>78</sup> Between 1792 and 1795, 'dangers' became 'extreme danger' and 'critical state,' and instead of the chance of rebellion being 'multiplied tenfold,' it was 'everywhere on the wing.'<sup>79</sup> He then renewed the warnings more urgently in 1796, pointing to the capture of Guadeloupe and St Lucia by the French, and the uprising in Grenada as new examples of the danger of continuing the slave trade. Instead of an abstract rebellion, Wilberforce's description of the threat was more specific in 1796, saying that 'every new-imported slave should lift up his arm in rebellion and strike at his oppressor,' that 'we increase our enemies,' and that 'in case they should be provoked or incited to acts of revolution, what army should we be able to raise against

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<sup>75</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.217; Dickson, *Letters on Slavery*, p.131.

<sup>76</sup> HC Deb, 30 May 1804, series 1, 2, cc.455-6.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, cc.455-6.

<sup>78</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.217; *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.162, p.160.

<sup>79</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.162; *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 26 February 1795, p.6; 'House of Commons', *The Times*, 27 February 1795, p.2.

them?’<sup>80</sup> The uprising in Grenada, which had started in March 1795, was the first rebellion in British-held territory since the beginning of the abolition campaign.<sup>81</sup> This was, however, the only time he mentioned the rebellion, which had not been led by enslaved persons. He continued to link the number of enslaved persons to rebellions after this, describing it in 1799 as ‘beyond all bounds of safety,’ and referring to ‘the ruin of these colonies,’ declaring himself free of guilt in the violence that would ensue.<sup>82</sup>

Over time, Wilberforce’s warnings about rebellions became less abstract, and this gave enslaved persons more agency in the discussion. Increasingly, warnings about the potential for enslaved violence became more descriptive of what that violence would look like. However, overall Wilberforce assigned limited agency to the enslaved. In the descriptions of instances of cruelty and the conditions of slavery, no enslaved person was ever named, by Wilberforce or by anyone else, at most being described in terms of age and gender. Despite the presence of black abolitionists in Britain, such as Olaudah Equiano, who published his own experiences of the slave trade, Wilberforce’s evidence was entirely based on reports by white Europeans. This reflects the probable negative reception that such a citation would have in parliament.

Wilberforce’s initial interest in abolitionism was, as discussed in Chapter One, focused on the conditions of slavery, rather than the slave trade, but he did not include it in all his speeches on the slave trade. In 1789, he made three arguments related to this: a) mortality among the enslaved; b) the potential to replace the slave trade through a higher birth rates and lower mortality rates; and c) the possibility of using machinery to replace some parts of slave labour.<sup>83</sup> Population growth through increased births continued to be the main reason he gave for improving the conditions of slavery, tying it into discussions about the practical consequences of abolishing the slave trade.<sup>84</sup> The other case in favour of abolition he made most frequently was that of the moral degradations of enslavement, which he first mentioned in 1791.<sup>85</sup> He raised the question of religious instruction for the enslaved in 1791 as well, pointing to the success of

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<sup>80</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 18 February 1796, p.6, p.63; ‘British Parliament’, *Morning Chronicle*, 19 February 1796, pp.1-2.

<sup>81</sup> Edward L. Cox, ‘Fedor’s Rebellion 1795-96: Causes and Consequences’, *The Journal of Negro History*, 67, no.1 (1982), pp.7-19; Kit Candlin, *The Last Caribbean Frontier, 1795-1815* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.1-6.

<sup>82</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 8, 1 March 1799, pp.141-2.

<sup>83</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, pp.137-43.

<sup>84</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.173; *HC Deb*, 30 May 1804, series 1, 2, cc.450-2.

<sup>85</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.199.



Moravian missionaries on Antigua as evidence of its potential benefits in terms of productivity.<sup>86</sup> In other years, he is reported as speaking about slavery more briefly, or framing it differently. For example, in 1799 he pressed for regulations similar to those of the French *Code Noir* (*Black Code*), and in 1804 he compared slavery in the West Indian colonies to slavery in the United States.<sup>87</sup>

The way in which Wilberforce framed these statements hints as to why he did not discuss conditions more frequently. Firstly, by talking about how to reduce mortality rates and increase birth rates, he was focusing on the idea of reforming slavery to ensure a continuing supply of enslaved labour. In doing so, he was implicitly countering suggestions that the abolition of the slave trade was intended as a means to abolish slavery. Although abolitionists had expressed this hope, Wilberforce was potentially targeting those among the West India interest he hoped could be persuaded to support a ban on the slave trade by focusing on maintaining the size of the enslaved population. Secondly, the longer discussions of slavery itself were accompanied by a statement clarifying that he was not accusing all slave-owners of cruelty, while still acknowledging that ‘there were some evils of almost universal operation.’<sup>88</sup> Given the presence of slave-owners in the House of Commons, Wilberforce was presumably trying not to single anyone out for insult, and to spread the blame. In regard to the conditions of slavery, there was a tactical element to Wilberforce’s rhetoric, in both the choice and the framing of the arguments.

Wilberforce only spoke at length in the abolition debates to introduce his original motion. When these motions were successful and the bills were read for a second, and sometimes third, time, he simply announced the reading, but responded to anti-abolitionists later in the debate. For example, in 1805, before the second reading of the abolition bill, he ‘reserved to himself the right of replying to any arguments that might be advanced against the motion.’<sup>89</sup> After his opponents had made their objections known, he pointed out that they agreed that the trade was ‘inconsistent with justice and humanity,’ and asked them to provide their own plan for the gradual abolition of the trade. He did not offer any new reasons, mentioning the debts of slave-owners and the

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<sup>86</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.199.

<sup>87</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.173; *PR 1796-1802*, 8, 1 March 1799, p.142; HC Deb, 30 May 1804, series 1, 2, cc.450-3.

<sup>88</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.199.

<sup>89</sup> HC Deb, 28 February 1805, series 1, 3, c.641.

potential benefits of abolition, before reminding them of the threat of rebellion from the enslaved population.<sup>90</sup> The major difference between this response and his longer speeches was that he used examples given by the West India interest as the basis of his claims, for example in 1805 the request for troops by the Jamaican Assembly, using their own evidence and statements more specifically than he did in the main speech.

Similar to these responses, in 1806 and 1807 he gave short speeches after bills had been introduced by members of the Cabinet. The day after the passage of the Foreign Slave Trade Bill through the House of Commons in 1806, he briefly spoke about the Spanish transatlantic slave trade, to clarify something that had been said in the earlier debates.<sup>91</sup> Then, in the debate on Fox's resolution against the trade, he replied to opponents of the measure. These responses were mostly related to the plan for abolition and the history of the campaign, but he also argued that the Bible did not sanction the slave trade, and said that since 1792 the continuation of the trade had been a victory of interest over philanthropy.<sup>92</sup> Wilberforce's short speeches in 1807 focused on the parliamentary process, arguing against calls for the evidence to be heard again, and re-focusing the debate on the slave trade, rather than slavery.<sup>93</sup> During another debate on the bill that year, he 'replied to the principal arguments which had been urged against the bill,' and refuted the claims that Rev. Thomas Malthus's work supported the trade.<sup>94</sup> At this final stage of the campaign, the subject matter of Wilberforce's contribution, and his rhetoric, was dictated by the debate, because he did not make prepared speeches as he had done previously.

### **Broader Rhetorical Culture**

Thus far this chapter has discussed Wilberforce's rhetoric in terms of how he made various specific arguments at the core of his speeches. I will now consider how it fits into the rhetorical culture of the time, and how it compares to the rhetoric used by other abolitionist MPs. Aristotle's conceptual triad (*ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*) was a central part of rhetorical theory in the eighteenth-century, and work on the rhetoric of both the abolition campaign and the Houses of Parliament more generally has mapped onto

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<sup>90</sup> HC Deb, 28 February 1805, series 1, 3, cc.669-73.

<sup>91</sup> HC Deb, 02 May 1806, series 1, 6, cc.1027-8.

<sup>92</sup> HC Deb, 10 June 1806, series 1, 6, cc.593-6.

<sup>93</sup> HC Deb, 20 February 1807, series 1, 8, cc.941-2; HC Deb, 16 March 1807, series 1, 9, cc.138-9.

<sup>94</sup> HC Deb, 23 February 1807, series 1, 8, c.993.

these.<sup>95</sup> When describing the rhetoric of sensibility, for example, Carey looked at the development of rhetoric in the eighteenth century, including new theories that were circulating on the subject. Hume's 'Of Eloquence', according to Carey, called for an increase in the use of *pathos*, connecting it with the 'theory of sympathy,' while over the course of the seventeenth century it had increasingly been associated with efforts to effect pity and sadness over other emotions.<sup>96</sup> Thus, the rhetoric of sensibility was *pathos*, which connects Carey's theory with the discussion of the rhetoric of the eighteenth-century House of Commons by Christopher Reid. Reid's work focused in part on the importance of moral character, what Aristotle called *ethos*.<sup>97</sup> Over the course of the eighteenth century, new ideas about rhetoric had begun to circulate, and the importance of *ethos* had increased among rhetorical theorists such as Adam Smith and Hugh Blair, influenced by *belles-lettres*, after what Bullard described as the 'ethical turn,' around 1760.<sup>98</sup>

After the first debate on abolition in May 1789, *The Times* reported that Wilberforce's speech 'was allowed by both sides of the House that it was one of the best speeches ever delivered in Parliament.'<sup>99</sup> The notice, published two days after the debate, praised the 'pathetic' and 'argumentative' parts of the speech, but, as discussed earlier in the chapter, noted that 'in the drier part of calculations he was several times at a loss.'<sup>100</sup> The 'pathetic' and 'argumentative' correspond to *pathos* and *logos* respectively.

One feature of eighteenth-century rhetoric was a need for speakers to establish their moral standing in order to imbue their speech with a sense of trustworthiness. Within Wilberforce's abolitionist speeches, the part devoted to this understanding of *ethos* typically came at the beginning. Looking at the opening statements of his speeches over the course of the nineteen years, almost all of them included some reflection on his role as the agitator of the question. At the beginning of the campaign, he was self-deprecating, 'concerned at my own inadequacy to such a task,' but willing to proceed at

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<sup>95</sup> Arthur Walzer, 'Origins of British Enlightenment Rhetoric', in Michael J. MacDonald (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Rhetorical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp.523-34; Carey, *Rhetoric of Sensibility*, pp.23-37; Christopher Reid, *Imprison'd Wranglers: The Rhetorical Culture of the House of Commons, 1760-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.157-8.

<sup>96</sup> Carey, *Rhetoric of Sensibility*, pp.29, 37.

<sup>97</sup> Reid, *Imprison'd Wranglers*, 'Where Character is Power', pp.156-187.

<sup>98</sup> Paddy Bullard, *Edmund Burke and the Art of Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 'The Ethical Turn in Early Modern Rhetoric, 1600-1760', pp.25-51; Walzer, 'Origins of British Enlightenment Rhetoric', pp.523-34.

<sup>99</sup> 'The Liverpool Merchants return', *The Times*, 14 May 1789, p.3.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

the request of others, before changing in 1792 to assuring the House of his commitment to the subject.<sup>101</sup> This statement of commitment, that the question had ‘so long and so earnestly occupied his mind,’ followed by a short reflection on the history of the campaign or a reminder of the previous decisions of the House continued until the hiatus of the campaign after 1799.<sup>102</sup> In 1804, on resuming the campaign, *ethos* did not feature until the end of the speech, although the reminders of the previous decisions were present at the start. His discussion of his own role here focused on giving reasons for his recent relative silence on the subject, before again stating his commitment to the issue.<sup>103</sup> Stating that his motivation in the campaign was religious, as discussed above, also established Wilberforce’s moral character, because of his well-known piety. Wilberforce used *ethos* in this way consistently throughout the campaign.

As a way of encouraging people to view the victims of the slave trade with sympathy, *pathos* made up a considerable portion of Wilberforce’s rhetorical strategy. Carey argued that Wilberforce’s *A Practical View* suggests that he had a ‘troubled relationship’ with sensibility, wherein he was critical of insincerity but aware of the impact it could have. This discomfort with appeals to sympathy can also be seen in his 1789 speech, when he shifts from description to statistics saying that he wished ‘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,’ suggesting that he did not want to rely on sentiment as the basis of the case in favour of abolition. At the same time, however, these appeals were expected due to the prevalence of the rhetoric of sensibility. Carey also argued that newspapers and periodicals enhanced the sentimental tone of speeches to appeal to a broader audience, and that in Wilberforce’s speeches government newspapers did this more than others.<sup>104</sup> Looking at the more collated versions of the speeches in the *Parliamentary Register*, drawn from newspaper reports across the political spectrum, provides a potentially more rounded view of this particular theme in the speeches.

Wilberforce’s appeals to emotion typically came in the first half of his speeches, in the discussion of the conditions of the slave trade in Africa and on the voyage across

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<sup>101</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, p.131; *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.182-3; *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.156.

<sup>102</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 26 February 1795, p.2; *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 18 February 1796, p.61; *PR 1796-1802*, 3 April 1798, p.525 (quote); *PR 1796-1802*, 3 April 1798, pp.131-2.

<sup>103</sup> *HC Deb*, 30 May 1804, series 1, 2, cc.458-9.

<sup>104</sup> Carey, *Rhetoric of Sensibility*, pp.162-3.

the Atlantic, where efforts to encourage MPs to sympathise with the enslaved would be most natural. *Pathos* was particularly focused on the Middle Passage, in the discussion of which Wilberforce implored MPs to ‘imagine’ or ‘represent to themselves’ the conditions he described.<sup>105</sup> He also used the word ‘horror’ to describe both specific instances of cruelty that he used as examples and the impression he thought people should have of the slave trade.<sup>106</sup> After 1792, either Wilberforce’s speeches were shorter or newspapers gave less space to reporting on them, but the volume of appeals to emotion reduced, as he focused more on policy. He discussed the origins of enslavement and the Middle Passage less over time, which were the parts of the question best suited to *pathos*. This is not to say that Wilberforce did not use emotive language, or remind MPs of the ‘incurable injustice and cruelty’ of the trade, but he spent less time describing them (at least according to the reports).<sup>107</sup> *Pathos* was also applied to the conditions of slavery, with instances of cruelty in the West Indian colonies, rather than on board slave ships, highlighted.<sup>108</sup>

The third and final Aristotelian category, *logos*, refers to logic and reasoning. The sections of Wilberforce’s speeches where he discussed the policy arguments in favour of abolishing the slave trade, presumably what *The Times* meant when it referred to the ‘argumentative’ parts, are where *logos* was the most useful form of rhetoric. As well as these sections, however, in the early period of the campaign, at the beginning of his speeches Wilberforce asked MPs to consider the slave trade with ‘cool and impartial reason.’<sup>109</sup> Despite the fact that he then went on to discuss the subject in emotional terms, he continued to hold the reason behind the question at the centre of his speeches, devoting large portions of his speeches to the ‘policy’ rather than the justice or humanity of abolition. After 1792, Wilberforce stopped including an appeal to reason, but always reminded the House of its previous resolutions on the subject. This was, in a sense, a different way of appealing to logic – the House had already made the decision, he was simply asking them to act upon it.

As well as the Aristotelian categories, there were other rhetorical tools that Wilberforce could use. One of these, highlighted by Reid, was the use of quotations to

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<sup>105</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, p.134; *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.195.

<sup>106</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.212; *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.157.

<sup>107</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 26 February 1795, p.3.

<sup>108</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 3 April 1798, pp.529-30.

<sup>109</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, p.131; *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.183; *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.156.

demonstrate belonging to specific cultural groups, and to make appeals on common ground.<sup>110</sup> Reid suggested that these were underreported in newspapers, and were a more common rhetorical tool than an analysis of reports there would indicate. Spontaneous use of quotations, especially classical ones, gave the speaker an air of sincerity and education, as demonstrated by Pitt in his speech on the slave trade in 1792.<sup>111</sup> Pitt was not the only one to use quotations in the abolition campaign. Wilberforce quoted in two different ways: a brief quotation from a well-known text, and, more frequently, longer quotation from letters or other evidence that supported his case. These latter quotes, which were presumably pre-selected, used experts or eyewitnesses as evidence for an argument. This was the more common form of quotation, related to the use of facts rather than rhetorical tricks. Wilberforce used several longer quotes in each speech at the beginning of the campaign, and continued to use them, albeit more sparingly, at least as far as 1804. In comparison, there are only two recorded instances of shorter, cultural quotations, in 1791 and 1792.<sup>112</sup> These are generally not included in newspaper reports, except for part of an Oliver Goldsmith poem quoted in 1792 in the *Morning Chronicle* but both are in the *Parliamentary Register's* account. The quotes are located towards the end of the speeches and gave additional rhetorical emphasis to the topic that preceded them. For example, in 1791, he quoted Macbeth: 'Here's the smell of blood on the hand still, and all the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten it.'<sup>113</sup> This emphasized the national guilt associated with the campaign, which Wilberforce had just discussed, without drawing on religious examples, which as mentioned above were not well-received in parliament.

While Wilberforce was praised for his speech-making, in *The Times* and elsewhere, he was speaking at a time when there were many highly regarded orators in the House of Commons, including the de facto leaders of the two sides of the House, Pitt and Fox.<sup>114</sup> Both men were present throughout the abolition campaign, and contributed to the majority of debates. Comparing the speeches all three made in 1791 is a way of considering Wilberforce's speeches in the rhetorical culture of the time and contrasting to other MPs who supported his motions. In order to simplify and make direct

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<sup>110</sup> Reid, *Imprison'd Wranglers*, p.218.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, pp.235-6.

<sup>112</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.219; *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.173.

<sup>113</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.219.

<sup>114</sup> Speeches by Pitt and Fox on the slave trade and other subjects are included in the same collections of speeches as Wilberforce – William Pitt the Younger, 'A barbarous traffic in slaves (1792)' and Charles James Fox, 'The Spirit of Freedom (1795)', in MacArthur, *Historic Speeches*, pp.138-47, 147-50; Charles James Fox, two speeches, in Burnet, *Great Speeches*, pp.316-321.

comparisons, and because newspaper reports gave less space to the responses, here I only draw from the *Parliamentary Register*, and examine the rhetoric surrounding the same arguments. All three speeches discussed the origins of the trade in Africa, the conditions of the Middle Passage, and the possibility of bringing down the mortality rates and increasing birth rates among the enslaved population. In addition, Fox discussed questions of personal freedom, the conditions of slavery, and the equality of Africans, whereas Pitt discussed emancipation and differences between the different British West Indian colonies. Wilberforce also included deaths of sailors, rebellions, the conditions of slavery, and the potential for other trade with Africa in his speech. Wilberforce and Pitt discussed the subjects in similar terms, but Fox's rhetoric was different. For example, on the circumstances of enslavement in Africa, Wilberforce and Pitt both made statements about the moral corruption related to the trade; Wilberforce said that it 'corrupted the moral principle of those who carried it on,' and Fox called it a 'perverted system.'<sup>115</sup> Fox's comment, that the trade was 'sufficient to strike us with horror,' however, is based on the appropriate response of those not involved.<sup>116</sup> Similarly, Wilberforce's claims that abolition 'would not be injurious to their [slaveowners'] interests' because the population could be maintained through increased birth rates and reduced mortality rates was echoed by Pitt, who argued that there would be 'no material detriment.'<sup>117</sup> Fox, in contrast, was more metaphorical, comparing the question to breeding horses.<sup>118</sup> Fox used more *pathos* throughout his speech than Wilberforce and Pitt, who combined *pathos* and *logos* more.

Overall, Wilberforce's rhetoric was closer to Pitt's, which could be for several reasons. Firstly, they were similar ages (Fox was ten years older), and had a personal as well as political relationship, so there were social similarities between them. Secondly, Wilberforce modelled his rhetorical style on Pitt, as a peer of his who had established himself as an orator in the House of Commons earlier. John Harford later recollected that Wilberforce once noted that the best way to prepare to speak in the Commons was 'diligent attendance' to committees and debates, by which 'a man...would soon acquire the habit of reasoning and expressing himself correctly and with parliamentary tact,'

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<sup>115</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.188; *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 19 April 1791, p.295.

<sup>116</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 19 April 1791, p.301.

<sup>117</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.210; *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 19 April 1791, p.290.

<sup>118</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 19 April 1791, p.198; for more on this subject see Katherine Paugh, *The Politics of Reproduction: Race, Medicine, and Fertility in the Age of Abolition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

implying that he had modelled his own oratory on that of others, including Pitt.<sup>119</sup> Thirdly, although he was an independent MP, there may have been fewer ideological differences between Wilberforce and Pitt, because of their friendship, than between Wilberforce and Fox. This is particularly evident in the other arguments the three made that year; neither Wilberforce nor Pitt discuss liberty or equality, but Fox does. This also reflects the differences emerging between the Pittite and Foxite Whigs, which, as briefly mentioned in Chapter Two, were increasingly similar to political parties.

For the most part, there is little to suggest that the rhetoric of the debates had much influence on whether other MPs supported abolition or not. Praise for Wilberforce in the abolition campaign often focused on the morality of the cause, or his long-running efforts, rather than on his abilities as a speaker. Between 1804 and 1805, Irish MPs were lobbied outside of the House by the West India interest, and this convinced them more than Wilberforce's oratory skill.<sup>120</sup> It was more likely that MPs would declare that they had heard nothing to change their minds, rather than that a speech had convinced them. For example, General Tarleton, MP for Liverpool, twice praised Wilberforce's 'eloquence,' but said that nothing had convinced him to change his mind on the subject.<sup>121</sup> In 1791, Dudley Ryder, a Pittite MP, said that 'he had come to the House...very much undecided on the subject; that he, however, was so strongly convinced by the arguments he had heard, that he was become equally earnest for the abolition.'<sup>122</sup> However, this does not unequivocally mean that Wilberforce convinced him; the debate stretched over two days and many other MPs also argued in favour of the bill. In addition, at the beginning of the campaign, when this comment was made, there was less awareness of the issues surrounding the slave trade, and so the speeches had more power to convince people.

### ***Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade***

Wilberforce not only argued for abolishing the slave trade in the House of Commons; in late January 1807, while the House of Lords was discussing abolition, he published *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. This was addressed to his constituents in

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<sup>119</sup> John S. Harford, *Recollections of William Wilberforce, Esq...* second edition (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1865), pp.44-6.

<sup>120</sup> *Life*, III, p.212; Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp.345-6.

<sup>121</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 18 April 1791, p.220; *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 18 February 1796, p.64.

<sup>122</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 29, 19 April 1791, p.308.



Yorkshire but aimed at the Peers considering the question at the time. In many ways the *Letter* was a continuity of his parliamentary rhetoric, but they were separate rhetorical exercises. Wilberforce explained his reasons for publishing to Sidmouth, commenting on the ‘general ignorance on the subject (even among many friends of abolition...).’<sup>123</sup> The *Letter* was both a reminder of the arguments and evidence in favour of abolition, and an effort to generate more support for the measure. Although his speeches had been published in newspapers and as standalone texts, this involved the transfer of spoken word to the page, whereas the book was written to read rather than heard.<sup>124</sup> Wilberforce’s *Letter*, then, can be compared to his parliamentary speeches, to consider how he built his rhetoric in his own words, rather than through second- and third- party reporting.

The structure of the *Letter* is very similar to that of Wilberforce’s speeches, and there is also a broad similarity in the language used. His introductory remarks can be categorised as *ethos*: he laid out his reasons for writing a pamphlet at this point in the campaign, and confirmed his commitment to abolition, in similar language to that used in the Commons eighteen years earlier.<sup>125</sup> In both instances he emphasised the ‘magnitude’ of the issue, and in his most recent speeches he had also referenced the present situation as a motivation for speaking on the subject.<sup>126</sup> The next part of the text addresses ‘the existence of practices discreditable to the Slave Trade,’ launching into an extended discussion of the circumstances of the trade in Africa and during the Middle Passage. Again, this is similar to the parliamentary speeches in the combination of details and anecdotes, although these were not as associated with appeals to sensibility and *pathos* as it was in the speeches, with a far greater proportion of the written work given to explanation and evidence. This continued in the discussion of the conditions of enslavement, before shifting to demography and the possibility of replacing the slave trade with increased birth rates. The *logos* element of the text extends from this into other practical considerations, such as the slave trade of other nations, again with a similar range to the parliamentary campaign. After this, there is a section with more *pathos* than the rest of the pamphlet, with appeals to religion and a return to relating tales of misery

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<sup>123</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.16, ff.61-2, Wilberforce to Sidmouth, 30 January 1807.

<sup>124</sup> This is discussed in relation to Burke in: Bullard, *Edmund Burke*, pp.13-14.

<sup>125</sup> Wilberforce, *Letter*, pp.1-9.

<sup>126</sup> Wilberforce, *Letter*, p.1, p.4; *PR 1780-1796*, 26, 12 May 1789, pp.130-1; *HC Deb*, 7 June 1804, series 1, 2, c.441.

resulting from the slave trade, which continues into the conclusion. Placed at the end of the *Letter*, rather than relatively evenly spread throughout, this diverges from the rhetorical pattern of the speeches, but leaves the reader with an emotional appeal.

The similarity between the parliamentary speeches and the *Letter* is partly because of the intended audience; although the *Letter* was circulated generally, Wilberforce wrote it with the House of Lords in mind, and so employed many of the same rhetorical tools that he used in parliament. The book ending with *pathos* supports Carey's argument about the centrality of the rhetoric of sensibility in the abolition campaign.<sup>127</sup> It also demonstrates that Wilberforce approached rhetoric in spoken and written formats differently. The other major difference between the reports of Wilberforce's speeches and the *Letter* is the level of detail, which can be explained by the confines of both speaking in the House of Commons and reporting from the Commons Gallery, because the sources of evidence and the anecdotes are similar.<sup>128</sup>

The content of Wilberforce's *Letter* was more similar to that of the earlier abolitionist literature in its description of all the aspects of the slave trade, rather than the more recent publications that connected the slave trade with current events. Abolitionist literature had initially continued in a similar vein to the 1780s, focusing on evidence and what this chapter has defined as policy arguments, with the moral message partially assumed. They also responded to the parliamentary campaign.<sup>129</sup> However, as awareness of the issue became more widespread, they began to be more reactive, in a similar way to Wilberforce's shifting rhetoric in the House of Commons. In addition to responses to events in parliament, pamphlets that considered the relationship between current events and the slave trade were published, such as Clarkson's explanation of the Haitian Revolution.<sup>130</sup> After the relative decline of the popular movement in the 1790s, these publications became the norm, with Clarkson addressing slave traders on the question of compensation after the subject was raised in parliament, and James Stephen writing about

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<sup>127</sup> Carey, *Rhetoric of Sensibility*, p.11.

<sup>128</sup> For example, Wilberforce references Long in speeches [1791, 1804], and also cites him in footnotes in the *Letter*; and refers to the evidence presented to the House of Commons in 1790-91 in speeches and in the *Letter*.

<sup>129</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *Letters on the Slave Trade and the State of the Natives in that Part of Africa, which are Contiguous to Fort St Louis and Goree* (London: James Phillips, 1791); Thomas Gisborne, *On Slavery and the Slave Trade* (London: James Phillips, 1792); Thomas Gisborne, *Remarks on the Late Decision of the House of Commons respecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, (London: R. White & Sons, 1792).

<sup>130</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The True State of the Case respecting the Insurrection at St Domingo* (Ipswich: J. Bush, 1792).

the question of French attempts to reclaim Haiti, and slipping references to the slave trade into seemingly unrelated books, *War in Disguise* and *The Dangers of the Country*.<sup>131</sup> When the London Committee resumed activities in 1804, no new general abolition literature was produced, other than Brougham's *Concise Statement of the Question*, circulated to MPs.<sup>132</sup>

This chapter has demonstrated that Wilberforce's public and parliamentary rhetoric followed that of the popular campaign, particularly during the first phase of the campaign. His 1807 *Letter* demonstrated the continuity of the ideas that he placed at the centre of his speeches, and was similar to earlier, rather than contemporary, abolitionist literature. It repeated the arguments that had become the core of Wilberforce's case for the abolition of the slave trade: the previous decisions of the House of Commons in favour of abolition; the immoral and irreligious nature of the trade; national guilt and divine vengeance; the increased threat of rebellion from newly enslaved persons; the increased mortality rate among sailors involved in the trade compared to other maritime endeavours; and the question of whether more enslaved persons were needed in the West Indian colonies, based on the current size of the enslaved population. Both the speeches and the *Letter* also made appeals to justice, humanity and policy, reflecting the early campaign and subsequently reflected in the final legislation.

In emphasising policy, and in downplaying the religious message, he adapted the campaign's message to appeal to the House of Commons; this occurred in both the balance of arguments used and the rhetorical structure of the speeches. The continuing division between religion and policy in Wilberforce's private correspondence further support the idea that Wilberforce strategically tailored his rhetoric to suit the audience. His previous experience in the House of Commons informed his use of rhetoric and so his speeches reflected the rhetorical culture of parliament and the habits of his peers. However, the speeches made little difference to the campaign in terms of how many MPs he convinced to support the abolition of the slave trade through the parliamentary

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<sup>131</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *Three Letters to the Planters and Slave Merchants principally on the Subject of Compensation* (London: Phillips & Fardon, 1807); James Stephen, *The Crisis of the Sugar Colonies* (London: J. Hatchard, 1802); James Stephen, *War in Disguise; or the Frauds of the Neutral Flags*, (London: C. Whittingham, 1805); James Stephen, *The Dangers of the Country* (London: J. Butterworth, 1807).

<sup>132</sup> Jennings, *Business*, pp.100-1; Henry Brougham, *A Concise Statement of the Question regarding the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London: J. Hatchard, 1804).

debates, despite the praise he received. It was his perseverance rather than his rhetoric that made the deepest impression.

**PART TWO:**

**1807 - 1833**

## **Chapter 4**

### **After Abolition I: The Suppression of the Slave Trade, 1807-1824**

The passage of the Abolition Act in 1807 was not the end of Wilberforce and his circle's campaigning. They quickly began to work on two fronts: one, enforcing and extending British abolition legislation; the other, encouraging and later enforcing abolition in other nations. These two campaigns became the focus of the activity of a new abolitionist organisation, the African Institution, founded days after the Act was passed. This chapter centres on the methods and arguments that Wilberforce used in these new campaigns, chronologically by region. First, the chapter addresses efforts to enforce British abolition. It argues that while there was a general push for enforcement legislation by abolitionists, Wilberforce himself was increasingly interested in questions about slavery. Second, the chapter examines efforts to collaborate with the United States, because this had a similar starting point to the British campaign. The third and four sections explore the European campaign, split between 1807-15 and 1815-25. The campaign 1807-15 was partly based on the abolitionists' experiences in Britain, but also established new patterns that would be followed over the next decade. During 1815-25, abolitionists continued to build on these, but Wilberforce's interest was by this time in steady decline, with the exception of a final publication on the slave trade in 1822.

There is a small amount of literature on the activity of the African Institution, of which Wilberforce was a founding member, most notably by Wayne Ackerson, who assessed the Institution's success against its original goals of encouraging new commerce with Africa and enforcing abolition.<sup>1</sup> Within the broader historiography, most discussion of abolitionist activity between 1807 and 1823 focuses on the activities of the Institution. This literature, including Ackerson, often treats Wilberforce, other abolitionists, and the African Institution as interchangeable.<sup>2</sup> This chapter tries to unpick which of Wilberforce's actions were a part of the Institution's official activity, and which were his own initiatives (although other members of the Institution, especially Stephen and

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Ackerson, *The African Institution (1807-1827) and the Antislavery Movement in Great Britain* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.218.

Macaulay, would probably have been aware of them). As shown in Chapters One and Two, before 1807 Wilberforce acted at times at the behest of the London Committee, and at times of his own accord. This chapter shows that this divide continued after 1807, especially with regards to the efforts to convince other countries to follow Britain's lead and abolish their slave trades, and to enforce it.

The literature on British anti-slave trade activity after 1807 typically focuses on efforts to suppress the slave trade internationally. David Eltis has shown that British and American abolition in 1807 was not a watershed moment in the volume of the slave trade, because of the size of other countries' transatlantic trades, especially the Portuguese.<sup>3</sup> Lord Castlereagh, the British Foreign Secretary, included slave trade abolition in diplomatic negotiations with Europe and the United States, tying Britain to the history of abolition internationally. This has been analysed into two ways. The first discusses British efforts on an international scale, including naval patrols off the West coast of Africa and an international legal structure to support these, which continued until the 1860s and the better suppression of the illegal slave trade to Cuba.<sup>4</sup> The second considers the abolition of the slave trade by other countries, often focusing on one nation at a time.<sup>5</sup> John Oldfield, for example, analysed the efforts to replicate the popular support seen in Britain in Europe, including the renewal of the outpouring of abolitionist sentiment in Britain in response to the 1814 peace treaty with France.<sup>6</sup> Wilberforce is included in these

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<sup>3</sup> David Eltis, 'Was Abolition of the U.S. and British Slave Trade Significant in the Broader Atlantic Context?', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 66, no.4 (2009), pp.715-36, p.729.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Huzzey identified five periods of this campaign, 1807-30, 1830-50, 1850-8, 1858-65, 1865-9, Richard Huzzey, 'The Politics of Slave-trade Suppression' in Robert Burroughs and Richard Huzzey (eds), *The Suppression of the Atlantic Slave Trade: British Policies, Practices and Representations of Naval Coercion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp.17-53; See also: essays in Keith Hamilton and Patrick Salmon, *Slavery, Diplomacy and Empire: Britain and the Suppression of the Slave Trade, 1807-1975* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2009); Robin Law, 'International Law and the British Suppression of the Atlantic Slave Trade' in Derek Peterson, *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp.150-74.

<sup>5</sup> For example: Paul Kielstra, *The Politics of Slave Trade Suppression in Britain and France, 1814-48: Diplomacy, Morality and Economics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); David Murray, *Odious Commerce: Britain, Spain, and the Abolition of the Cuban Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Leslie Bethell, *The Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade: Britain, Brazil and the Slave Trade Question, 1807-1869* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Betty Fladeland, *Men and Brothers: Anglo-American Antislavery Cooperation* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> J.R. Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-Slavery, c.1787-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp.200-3.

histories as an abolitionist lobbying the government, as a key member of the African Institution, and because of his government connections.<sup>7</sup>

These themes are reflected in the biographies of Wilberforce. Furneaux dedicated a chapter to ‘Enforcing Abolition,’ covering both the background to and passage of the Registry Act in 1819, and the beginnings of the European campaign.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Pollock addressed the Congress of Vienna, which made a general declaration against the trade, in a chapter titled ‘Lost Opportunity, 1814’, and also discussed the Registry Act.<sup>9</sup> Hague focused on the Registry Act and Castlereagh’s efforts at the Congress of Vienna.<sup>10</sup> He mentioned further diplomatic efforts briefly, but did not investigate Wilberforce’s role in them in any depth.<sup>11</sup> The full extent of Wilberforce’s activities, then, are not included in the biographical literature, and are also overlooked in the academic historiography. This chapter is in part an effort to re-balance this.

An overview of the events across Britain, the United States, Latin America, and Europe constitutes Appendix Three. The number of countries involved makes a discussion of Britain’s diplomatic actions regarding the slave trade complicated to follow; the timeline in Appendix Three is intended to clarify this somewhat. The structure of this chapter separates abolitionist measures in Britain from those abroad. The appendix places these next to each other. It includes treaties that are not discussed in detail in this chapter, because Wilberforce played only a minor role in them, to show the full scope of activity (those Wilberforce was involved in are highlighted in the appendix).

## **Britain, 1807-1822**

The Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade received Royal Assent on 14 April 1807. Twenty days later, members of the Abolition Society, along with several prominent politicians, founded the African Institution, ‘to adopt such measures as are best calculated to promote [Africans’] civilization and happiness’ through ‘legitimate and far more extended commerce,’ and to ‘watch over the execution of the laws...for abolishing the

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Kielstra discusses Wilberforce and his circle at length in his introduction, *Politics of Slave Trade Suppression*, pp.7-15

<sup>8</sup> Furneaux, *William Wilberforce*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), pp.332-45.

<sup>9</sup> John Pollock, *Wilberforce*, bicentenary edition (Eastbourne: Kingsway Communications, 2007), pp.301-10, 312-15.

<sup>10</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the great Anti-slave Trade Campaigner* (London: HarperCollins, 2007), pp.415-26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pp.433-8.



African Slave Trade.’<sup>12</sup> This second, supplementary goal, soon became their focus. Although the volume of the British transatlantic slave trade reduced dramatically from the beginning of 1808, when the Act came into effect, over time it became clear to Wilberforce and the African Institution that it had not disappeared entirely. The volume of the illegal slave trade is hard to estimate, because of the use of foreign flags and forged papers by traders to disguise their activities. Zachary Macaulay counted 36 suspected slave ships leaving Britain in the first seventeen months after abolition; of 50 ships captured between 1808 and 1817, all but two were British or American.<sup>13</sup> In 1811, the Institution’s annual report re-stated their commitment to ‘the civilisation and improvement of Africa,’ but went on to ask ‘what rational expectation can be formed of any material progress in the attainment of those ends, while the Slave Trade continues to flourish?’<sup>14</sup>

A year after the slave trade was banned, Clarkson spoke to Wilberforce about ‘our Peoples trick thro’ Sweden,’ and asked him to speak to George Canning, then Foreign Secretary, on the issue.<sup>15</sup> The following year, in 1810, the African Institution’s annual report stated that British slave traders were using the Swedish flag, and the Swedish island of St. Barthélemy, as a means of smuggling enslaved persons into British colonies.<sup>16</sup> In October 1809, Wilberforce congratulated Macaulay on the seizure of a slave ship, writing that he was ‘the more glad on account of the effect likely to be produced on the mind of Perceval [the Prime Minister] and his Secretary,’ presumably hoping that proof of a continuing illegal trade would encourage the government to take further action.<sup>17</sup> After 1811, while the Institution continued to be interested in developments in Sierra Leone and the West Indian colonies, the majority of its efforts were focused on the slave trade, both as illegally carried on in British ships and legally by other European powers.

At the end of the parliamentary session in June 1810, with more evidence emerging of the continuation of the slave trade, a new resolution was passed in the House

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<sup>12</sup> *Rules and regulations of the African Institution*, (London: William Phillips, 1807), pp.8-12.

<sup>13</sup> David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp.53-6.

<sup>14</sup> *Fifth Report of the directors of the African Institution* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1811), p.1.

<sup>15</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, f.26, diary, 11 February 1809.

<sup>16</sup> *Fourth Report of the directors of the African Institution*, (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1810), pp.1-3.

<sup>17</sup> Wilberforce to Z. Macaulay, 19 October 1809, in *Corresp., II*, p.58.

of Commons, proposed by Henry Brougham, an abolitionist who had recently become an MP.<sup>18</sup> The resolution was to consider measures that would enforce abolition more effectively. He introduced a bill ‘for rendering more effectual the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade’ in March 1811, which would classify the slave trade as a felony, punishable by penal transportation rather than a fine.<sup>19</sup> It passed unanimously, but Wilberforce recorded in his diary that the House was ‘rather cold on the subject so could not pressed as wish’d for compensatg Africa.’<sup>20</sup> This suggests that the abolitionists were planning to pursue other measures at this time, but that the reception of Brougham’s motion convinced them otherwise, and there are no indications of what Wilberforce meant by the comment. Other legislation was also passed to restrict British involvement in the slave trade; in 1815 Joseph Foster Barham, a slave-owner who had supported gradual abolition, introduced a bill to prohibit financial involvement in other countries’ slave trades, and Wilberforce another to prevent smuggling and ‘the holding free persons in Slavery’ more effectively.<sup>21</sup>

In the summer of 1811, Wilberforce had started to consider the future of his parliamentary career. The king’s poor state of health made a general election appear likely, and Wilberforce became preoccupied by the question of whether or not to resign his seat as MP for Yorkshire when an election was called. Throughout August, he corresponded with his closest friends on the subject, and while their advice varied (resign Yorkshire, retain Yorkshire, retire entirely), his reasoning was consistent across his letters. His primary reasons for quitting, as recorded in his diary, were considerations of his family’s needs and his own health. He also wrote that ‘services to religion ... might perhaps be rendered by persons not labouring under the stigma of Methodism.’<sup>22</sup> As Chapter Three noted, Wilberforce had supported various religious matters during his time in the House of Commons, such as opposing Sunday newspapers. He was also involved in founding groups like the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Church Missionary Society (CMS). However, he had recently clashed with Lord Sidmouth over Sidmouth’s attempt to restrict licenses to dissenting ministers, and so his religious views had come

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<sup>18</sup> HC Deb, 15 June 1810, series 1, 17, cc.658-689.

<sup>19</sup> HC Deb, 05 March 1811, series 1, 19, cc.233-39; Eltis, *Economic Growth*, p.56.

<sup>20</sup> HC Deb, 05 March 1811, series 1, 19, c.239; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, f.89, diary, 5 March 1811.

<sup>21</sup> Foster Barham’s bill: HC Deb, 18 April 1815, series 1, 30, cc.657-58; HC Deb, 05 May 1815, series 1, 31, cc.167-77; Wilberforce’s bill: HC Deb, 05 July 1815, series 1, 31, cc.1127-33.

<sup>22</sup> Diary, 24 August 1811, *Life*, III, p.535.

under suspicion again, as they had in the aftermath of his conversion.<sup>23</sup> Religion was, however, also the main reason he gave for continuing in parliament. To some of his correspondents he referred to 'religious and human purposes' in a relatively abstract sense, but to Babington he elaborated that he was currently involved in measures 'concerning the poor slaves, and the missionaries.'<sup>24</sup> He connected his religious conviction to colonial matters more prominently here than he had in the abolition campaign, but as discussed in Chapter Three, he was more inclined to discuss religion with his close circle, and the people he wrote to about retiring all shared his views. Wilberforce's thoughts on the West Indian colonies and Africa will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Five, but it is noteworthy that the slave trade, and continuing fight to suppress it, is not mentioned in 1811.

The redefinition of the slave trade as a criminal act was not the only legislative effort the abolitionists made to suppress it. In 1810, as a result of conversations within the African Institution, Wilberforce contemplated pushing for an Order in Council to create a register of enslaved persons in Trinidad. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the colony had already been used as a trial-run for abolitionist measures in 1802, and it continued to attract attention from both sides of the abolition debate. Crown rule in the newly-seized island meant that there was not a colonial assembly to oppose the plans, but Wilberforce's diary suggests that Perceval was not receptive to the idea.<sup>25</sup> As a compromise, in 1813, Lord Liverpool, the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, and James Stephen agreed to create a slave registry in Trinidad, as an alternative to introducing a bill for a registry throughout the British West Indian colonies.<sup>26</sup> The abolitionists hoped that the results would prove the necessity of a general register, and portrayed the findings as evidence that enslaved persons were being smuggled into the colonies. However, as A. Meredith John has noted, the discrepancies could also have been the result of the initial register being inaccurate.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> HL Deb, 09 May 1811, series 1, 19, cc.1128-33; HL Deb, 17 May 1811, series 1, 20, cc.196-8; HL Deb, 21 May 1811, series 1, 20, cc.233-55; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, pp.101-102, diary, 14 May 1811; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, p.102, diary, 21 May 1811.

<sup>24</sup> Wilberforce to Stephen, [n.d.], *Life, III*, p.539; Wilberforce to Babington, 22 August 1811, *Life, III*, p.544.

<sup>25</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, p.59, diary, 17 May 1810.

<sup>26</sup> A. Meredith John, 'The Smuggled Slaves of Trinidad, 1813', *The Historical Journal*, 31, no.2 (1988), pp.365-75, p.366.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, pp.370-1.

The African Institution considered introducing a bill to extend the registry across the West Indian colonies in 1814 but decided not to on the basis that in the aftermath of the defeat of Napoleon it was best to focus its efforts on the possibility of negotiating European abolition – ‘to push for Convention for Gen’l Abolition’ as Wilberforce wrote in his diary.<sup>28</sup> Despite this, the desire for a Slave Registry Bill continued to be a centrepiece of African Institution activity over the next few years. In 1815, when the campaign for a general registry began in earnest, the Institution published a pamphlet in support of the measure.<sup>29</sup> However, the abolitionists were not unanimous in their level of support for the idea, and it became a source of conflict for them. Despite his own reluctance, Wilberforce introduced the bill in June 1815.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, Stephen resigned his seat as MP for East Grinstead in February 1815 because the government did not put its support behind the bill.<sup>31</sup> The following year, Wilberforce delayed another bill twice, the first time because he felt that ‘The stream runs violently against us,’ and the second time because Castlereagh persuaded him to do so.<sup>32</sup> Despite Stephen’s enthusiasm the previous year, he was critical of Wilberforce’s decision to try again in 1816, as were others.<sup>33</sup> Sir Samuel Romilly and Brougham explained that they felt that even if it had been successful, they would have gained little more than if they had announced the intention to bring the matter forward early in the next session.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Wilberforce’s reluctance to introduce, and willingness to postpone, bills for the proposed Slave Registry, he continued to build the case in its favour. In June 1816 Wilberforce moved for an Address to the Prince Regent for tax records relating to slaves in Jamaica to be published in the House of Commons, with Castlereagh’s support.<sup>35</sup> In his speech, Wilberforce discussed the Registry Bill at length, trying to use the records for poll taxes as evidence that the slave trade to Jamaica was continuing illicitly (the poll tax in Jamaica was applied to the number of enslaved persons that were owned, and so the

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<sup>28</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, pp.15-16, diary, 28 April 1814 (a copy of this section of the diaries is also available at Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.37).

<sup>29</sup> African Institution, *Reasons for Establishing a Registry of Slaves in the British Colonies*, (London: J Hatchard, 1815), p.1.

<sup>30</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.42, diary, 03 June 1815, 07 June 1815.

<sup>31</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.27, diary, 24 June 1814; ‘James Stephen’, *History of Parliament Online* <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/stephen-james-1758-1832>> [accessed 20 March 2020].

<sup>32</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.52, diary, 14 February 1816; HC Deb, 22 May 1816, series 1, 34, cc.719-723.

<sup>33</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.45, diary, 11 May 1816.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, pp.45-6, diary, 15 May 1816.

<sup>35</sup> HC Deb, 19 June 1816, series 1, 34, cc.1151-225.

population could be tracked through those records). Although he supported the measure, he did not prioritise it, and his actions on the subject were motivated by the African Institution's wishes, rather than his own.

Wilberforce was not involved in the planning of the final Registry Bill, which was introduced by Goulburn, Undersecretary of State for War and the Colonies, in June 1819.<sup>36</sup> Five days beforehand, Wilberforce recorded in his diary that he left church early 'to get to the House for Goulburn's motion abt A London Registry (which He never has named to Stephen)'; it was not mentioned in the diaries before then.<sup>37</sup> His correspondence for 1819 is more concerned with efforts to declare slave trading as piracy than with the Registry Bill, which he was more actively corresponding about in 1816. Goulburn's bill was focused on the issue of a continuing trans-Atlantic slave trade to British colonies, with little mention of the trade between British colonies, which Wilberforce and his circle had also been working to suppress, although it had not been covered in the 1815 bill.<sup>38</sup> In 1818, the question of shipping enslaved persons to Demerara-Essequibo and Berbice from other British West Indian colonies had been debated in the House, as part of a bill introduced to apply the Slave Trade Acts retrospectively to colonies in South America as well as the West Indian islands.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, a ban on shipping enslaved persons between British colonies may have been excluded because it was considered to have already been settled in 1818.<sup>40</sup> The Institution called it a 'spontaneous measure' in its annual report, but criticised it on the grounds that it was not as effective as Wilberforce's 1815 version would have been.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to efforts outlined above to enforce abolition through legislation, Wilberforce also moved for several Addresses to the King or Prince Regent, to direct the government on matters relating to the slave trade. In 1810, the Address was aimed at better enforcing the 1807 Act. After 1814, the Addresses Wilberforce moved tended to be on the subject of European negotiations, similar to the one passed immediately after the resolution against the slave trade in 1806, and typically connected to various

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<sup>36</sup> HC Deb, 08 June 1819, series 1, 40, cc.976-9.

<sup>37</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.183, diary, 03 June 1819— a 'London Registry' refers to a centralised register of slaves, rather than registers administered by each island individually.

<sup>38</sup> John, 'Smuggled Slaves', pp.370-1; David Eltis, 'The Traffic in Slaves between the British West Indian Colonies, 1807-1833', *The Economic History Review*, new series, 25, no.1 (1972), pp.55-64.

<sup>39</sup> HC Deb, 03 April 1818, series 1, 37, cc.1185-6.

<sup>40</sup> Bill to explain Acts for Abolition of Slave Trade, *PP*, 1818 I [151].

<sup>41</sup> *Fourteenth Report of the directors of the African Institution* (London: Ellerton and Henderson), pp.7-8.

Congresses and treaty negotiations. By doing so, Wilberforce used his position in the House of Commons to keep the slave trade on the government's official agenda when it had ceased to be an immediate matter of domestic concern.<sup>42</sup>

### **America, 1807-1824**

As discussed in Chapter One, the British abolitionist networks emerged out of a Quaker tradition of anti-slavery sentiment. This can also be traced in the history of the Quaker-dominated state, and former English colony, of Pennsylvania.<sup>43</sup> In Christopher Brown's words, 'the American Revolution shifted the terms of debate.'<sup>44</sup> Within revolutionary America, the rhetoric of liberty had called into question slave-holding practices.<sup>45</sup> In 1787, when the campaign against the slave trade in Britain began in earnest, the leaders of the newly independent states met in Philadelphia, to draft the United States Constitution. Abolitionists were hopeful that this meeting would lead to an end to slavery in the United States. The final decision, to allow slavery to continue, to include a clause about returning fugitive enslaved persons, and to guarantee that the slave trade would not be interfered with before 1808, did not live up to those hopes. Granville Sharp wrote to Benjamin Franklin in protest against this final provision in particular, and the London Committee was in contact with the Abolition Society in Philadelphia up until 1794.<sup>46</sup> When the Committee resumed meeting in 1804, they considered writing to James Monroe, the U.S. Ambassador, 'desiring information relative to the Laws of the United States respecting the abolition of the Slave-Trade,' and reached out to the Abolition Society in Philadelphia.<sup>47</sup>

Wilberforce's hopes regarding the United States were similar to his aims in Britain regarding the enforcement of abolition. The U.S. also passed abolition legislation

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<sup>42</sup> HC Deb, 09 July 1817, series 1, 36, cc.1321-1336; HC Deb, 07 July 1819, series 1, 40, cc.1542-1547; HC Deb, 26 June 1821, series 2, 5, cc.1325-1340; HC Deb, 27 June 1822, series 2, 7, cc.1399-1406.

<sup>43</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, second edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.291-333, 487-9; David L. Crosby, 'Anthony Benezet's Transformation of Anti-Slavery Rhetoric', *Slavery and Abolition*, 23, no.3 (2002), pp.39-58; Brycchan Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657-1761* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>44</sup> C.L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p.55.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, pp.105-10.

<sup>46</sup> Fladeland, *Men and Brothers*, pp.44-5.

<sup>47</sup> BL., Add MS 21256, pp.100, 102, Fair Minute Books of the Committee for the abolition of the Slave-trade, III, 06 June 1804, 24 July 1804.

in 1807, a few weeks before the British Act, and both laws came into effect at the beginning of 1808. The passage of the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves was less protracted, and less controversial, than it had been in Britain. The Constitution had included an article that prevented the U.S. government interfering in the slave trade before 1808, but most states had already passed their own legislation restricting or prohibiting the slave trade, with the notable exception of South Carolina, which had reopened the trade in 1803.<sup>48</sup> The trade was abolished at the federal level at the earliest opportunity; unsuccessful efforts in 1805 and 1806 to introduce legislation did not propose earlier abolition. Senator Bradley introduced the successful bill in response to Jefferson's annual message to Congress, and the conversation in Congress focused on the details, rather than the general principle.<sup>49</sup> The matter received little attention outside of Congress when it was being debated, because Americans were more concerned with Aaron Burr's plotted southern secession, and Napoleon's activities in Europe, and because it was less controversial among slave-owners.<sup>50</sup>

Before abolition in either country came into effect, Wilberforce sent Monroe a copy of his 1807 *Letter*. Monroe's response was complimentary on the subject of abolition, expressing hopes of its success, but there was no suggestion of cooperation on the subject.<sup>51</sup> A little over a year later, Wilberforce noted in his diary that he was 'now writg to [Thomas] Jefferson in America to obtain some agreement betn the 2 Nations for givg Effect to aboln by allowg each country to take each other's slave ships.'<sup>52</sup> Concerned about the illicit use of the American flag by British slave traders, Wilberforce asked the President to consider a mutual right of search, to enforce the laws of both countries. Wilberforce wrote to Jefferson in his role as chairman of the African Institution, rather than as a politician, and expressed a hope that cooperation in the suppression of the slave trade could be considered as a separate measure to commercial treaties.<sup>53</sup> He pursued the same line of inquiry with John Jay, the retired American politician, in 1809, attempting to secure his support for the question of mutual right of search, so that both nations would

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<sup>48</sup> Matthew Mason, 'Slavery Overshadowed: Congress debates prohibiting the Atlantic slave trade to the United States, 1806-1807', *Journal of the Early Republic*, 20, no. 1 (2000), pp.59-81, pp.61-2.

<sup>49</sup> Mason, 'Slavery Overshadowed', pp.61-4; Fladeland, *Men and Brothers*, pp.72-3.

<sup>50</sup> Mason, 'Slavery Overshadowed', pp.59-60.

<sup>51</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.14, f.27, Monroe to Wilberforce, 13 July 1807.

<sup>52</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, f.10, diary, 24 August 1808.

<sup>53</sup> Wilberforce to Jefferson, 05 September 1808, via *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified 13 June 2018 [<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-8773>] [accessed 02 November 2018].

be allowed to search each other's ships for evidence of slave-trading.<sup>54</sup> Although Jay responded positively to the idea, he did not think it would be possible, because 'whether the times are propitious to such a convention, is another question.'<sup>55</sup> Although there had been limited opposition to abolition, public opinion in the United States was strongly opposed to what seemed like an infringement on maritime rights.<sup>56</sup> The U.S. Congress had rejected the Monroe-Pinkney treaty in 1806 for a similar reason, and opinion had not changed over time.<sup>57</sup>

In 1810, Wilberforce believed that the relationship between Britain and the United States was 'taking a more favourable turn,' but they were soon declining again, and the outbreak of war in 1812 put a stop to negotiations.<sup>58</sup> After the signing of the Treaty of Ghent in December 1814, which included an article stating that both countries 'shall use their best endeavours to accomplish' abolition, the British attempted to secure more concrete agreements.<sup>59</sup> However, Castlereagh's letter to John Quincy Adams, then American Ambassador to Britain, suggesting mutual right of search received no reply.<sup>60</sup> Wilberforce approached Adams himself, meeting him in June 1817 to discuss 'Abolition measure Execution betn the 2 Countries.'<sup>61</sup> Adams elaborated on the meeting further in his own diary, calling the proposal 'barefaced and impudent.'<sup>62</sup> After the British hopes regarding European abolition were disappointed at the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1818, Britain resumed efforts to secure mutual rights of search with the U.S., but ongoing debates about slavery in Missouri made progress difficult.<sup>63</sup>

In March 1819, Wilberforce discussed the possibility of both England and the United States declaring the slave trade as piracy with Richard Rush, the U.S. Ambassador and son of the Philadelphia abolitionist Benjamin Rush, after the idea had been proposed unsuccessfully in Europe at Aix-la-Chapelle (discussed in more detail below). Rush

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<sup>54</sup> Wilberforce to Jay, 01 August 1809, in *Corresp.*, II, pp.50-2.

<sup>55</sup> Jay to Wilberforce, 08 November 1809, in *Corresp.*, II, pp.61-2.

<sup>56</sup> James C. Duram, 'A Study of Frustration: Britain, the USA, and the African Slave Trade, 1815-1870', *Social Science*, 40, no. 4 (1965), pp.220-225, p.223.

<sup>57</sup> Donald R. Hickey, 'The Monroe-Pinkney Treaty of 1806: a reappraisal', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 44, no.1 (1987), pp.65-88.

<sup>58</sup> Wilberforce to Jay, 10 July 1810, in *Corresp.*, II, pp.67-72.

<sup>59</sup> Article X, Treaty of Peace and Amity between H.M. and United States of America, Ghent, December 1814, *PP*, 1814 XIII [011], pp.139-50.

<sup>60</sup> Fladeland, *Men and Brothers*, p.113.

<sup>61</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, f.71, diary, 17-20 September 1810; Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.79, diary, 06 June 1817.

<sup>62</sup> David Waldstreicher and Matthew Mason (eds), *John Quincy Adams and the Politics of Slavery: Selections from the Diary* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp.42-4.

<sup>63</sup> Fladeland, *Men and Brothers* pp.125-9.



encouraged Wilberforce to pursue piracy legislation in England first, rather than proposing ‘doing it conjointly.’<sup>64</sup> This was then discussed by members of the African Institution later the same month, and included in their annual report.<sup>65</sup> Wilberforce sent a draft of a piracy bill to Grenville in June 1819. Grenville convinced him not to take any further action for two reasons: it was too late in the session, and there was a chance that the enforcement of the bill could result in war with Spain as a result of ‘mutual irritation.’<sup>66</sup> Wilberforce then introduced a motion at a meeting of the African Institution to postpone the bill on the grounds that it was too late to be successful, and did not mention piracy in an Address to the Prince Regent about the suppression of the slave trade in July 1819.<sup>67</sup> Betty Fladeland wrote that ‘British abolitionist circles seemed to accept American constitutional objections at face value,’ although diplomats were more sceptical.<sup>68</sup> The African Institution’s annual reports repeated assurances made by Rush to Castlereagh that portray constitutional restrictions as the main obstacle to further action, and ‘observe with pleasure, that the American Government appears to evince an earnest desire’ for measures to suppress the slave trade.<sup>69</sup>

No more overtures were made until 1822, although Wilberforce mentioned the United States’ decision to declare the slave trade piracy in the House of Commons in 1821.<sup>70</sup> Stratford Canning, the ambassador to the U.S., reported in 1822 that the United States ambassador to France, Albert Gallatin, ‘has received orders to urge the French Gov’t to act up to its professions on the slave trade, but not to make that application in concert with Great Britain.’<sup>71</sup> Despite the fact that the Americans seemed to be adopting similar positions to the British regarding the slave trade of other European powers, they were unwilling to coordinate those efforts. However, in 1823 conversations about greater cooperation recommenced, led by the British government. As part of ongoing negotiations with the U.S., Canning introduced a slave trade piracy bill in 1824.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.163, diary, 4 March 1819.

<sup>65</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.168, diary, 25 March 1819; *Thirteenth Report of the directors of the African Institution* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1819), pp.19-40.

<sup>66</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.46, f.36, Grenville to Wilberforce, 22 June 1819.

<sup>67</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.186, diary, 24 June 1819; BL., Add MS 69038, f.179, Wilberforce to Grenville, 02 July 1819; HC Parliamentary Papers, 07 July 1819, series 1, 40, cc.1542-6.

<sup>68</sup> Fladeland, *Men and Brothers*, p.128.

<sup>69</sup> *Thirteenth Report*, pp.40-44; *Fourteenth Report*, p.31.

<sup>70</sup> HC Deb, 26 June 1821, series 2, 5, cc.1331-2.

<sup>71</sup> RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1822, 10-11, Canning to Wilberforce, 19 October 1822.

<sup>72</sup> HC Deb, 16 March 1824, series 2, 10, cc.1092-8; Peter Dixon, *Canning: Politician and Statesman* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), pp.223-4; Fladeland, *Men and Brothers*, pp.139-40.

Between January and March, Britain and the United States had negotiated a Convention against the slave trade, which would establish mutual rights of search, with restrictions to reduce American concerns about maritime rights. One of the articles of the Convention required that both countries pass legislation to declare the slave trade piracy, and although the U.S. Congress eventually rejected the treaty, the British parliament had already passed the legislation.<sup>73</sup> Wilberforce's diary for early 1824 is more focused on events in the West Indian colonies, especially the Demerara rebellion, further highlighting the changing priorities of the British abolitionists in the 1820s towards the reform and abolition of slavery, which contributed to the failure of the treaty by alarming the southern states.<sup>74</sup>

Efforts to define the slave trade as a form of piracy show the development of an increasingly international approach as more countries moved towards abolition.<sup>75</sup> There was more progress made towards mutual rights of search with European powers, which will be discussed below, than with the United States, despite the early agreements. Over the course of these negotiations, tensions between Britain and the former colonies had an impact on the extent to which cooperation on abolition could be established. Despite the inclusion of anti-slave trade agreements in the Treaty of Ghent in 1814, after the War of 1812, there continued to be distrust of Britain's intentions in suppressing the illegal transatlantic trade, which was heightened by the split in the goals of abolitionists when the British emancipation movement gained momentum in the 1820s.

It is not clear whether Wilberforce's letter to Jefferson, framed as being on behalf of the African Institution, was written because of a suggestion from other abolitionists, or because Wilberforce saw it as an opportunity. Later on, Wilberforce pushed back against the Institution's plans and postponed a piracy bill, as he had the earlier Registry Bill, even though it appears that he had raised the issue with the African Institution after discussing it with Rush. Developments in the United States regarding the suppression of the slave trade were frequently described in the African Institution's reports, in a similar

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<sup>73</sup> Fladeland, *Men and brothers*, pp.136-45.

<sup>74</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.55, pp.61-3, diary, January-March 1824 – his diary for this period ends before the piracy bill is passed, because he became ill; Fladeland, *Men and brothers*, pp.136-45.

<sup>75</sup> Jenny S. Martinez, *The Slave Trade and the Origins of International Human Rights Law* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.3-98; Maeve Ryan, 'The Price of Legitimacy in Humanitarian Intervention: Britain, the Right of Search, and the Abolition of the West African Slave Trade, 1807-1867', in Brendan Simms and David Trims (eds), *Humanitarian Intervention: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.321-56; Law, 'Abolition and Imperialism', pp.150-74.

manner to developments in other countries, but the focus was on enforcement and the potential for collaboration.

### Europe, 1807-1815

Although the French Revolution had forced Wilberforce and Pitt to abandon their diplomatic efforts in 1789, abolitionists remained aware of the European slave trade. The abolition of the Danish slave trade, announced in 1792 to come into effect in 1803, was a cause for celebration despite its small size in comparison to other slave trading nations and the delay built into the decree.<sup>76</sup> The abolition of both the slave trade and slavery by the French National Assembly in 1794 was seen by Rev. John Newton as a possible ‘precedent’ for British abolition, and in 1796 Stephen suggested that French expansion in the West Indian colonies could abolish the slave trade and slavery through the application of the 1794 legislation to conquered territory, despite the resistance of slaveowners in French colonies.<sup>77</sup> Other than the events of the Haitian Revolution, it was only enacted in French Guiana and Guadeloupe, and slaveowners in Mauritius expelled the officials appointed to do so in 1796.<sup>78</sup> The same year, Robert Banks Jenkinson also connected abolition with the spread of French revolutionary ideas, but framed it as a counterargument to abolitionism.<sup>79</sup> Wilberforce did not mention French abolition in his parliamentary speeches until 1799, when he criticised the continuing British trade by comparison.<sup>80</sup> In 1806 Wilberforce successfully moved for an Address to the King to request negotiations with foreign powers on the subject, and instructions were given to diplomats in Portugal to encourage abolition there.<sup>81</sup> The 1805 Order in Council was

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<sup>76</sup> Pernille Røge, ‘Why the Danes Got There First – A Trans-Imperial Study of the Abolition of the Danish Slave Trade in 1792’, *Slavery & Abolition*, 35, no.4 (2014), pp.576-592; *PR 1780-1796*, 32, 2 April 1792, p.173.

<sup>77</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce d.15, f.38, Newton to Wilberforce, 27 March 1794; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce d.15, ff.55-56, Stephen to Wilberforce, 24 June 1796.

<sup>78</sup> Miranda Spieler, ‘Abolition and Reenslavement in the Caribbean: The Revolution in French Guiana’ in Suzanne Desan et al (eds), *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp.132-47, p.134; Richard B. Allen, ‘Licentious and Unbridled Proceedings: The Illegal Slave Trade to Mauritius and the Seychelles during the Early Nineteenth Century’, *The Journal of African History*, 42, no.1 (2001), pp.91-116, pp.92-3.

<sup>79</sup> *PR 1780-1796*, 44, 18 February 1796, pp.70-1.

<sup>80</sup> *PR 1796-1802*, 8 01 March 1799, pp.140-1.

<sup>81</sup> Matthew Mason, ‘Keeping Up Appearances: The International Politics of Slave Trade Abolition in the nineteenth-century Atlantic World’, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 66, no.4 (2009), pp.809-32, pp.811-12.

designed to prevent the British trade being extended to colonies captured during war, and the continuing prohibition of the trade was to be a condition of their return.<sup>82</sup>

Abolition measures became a condition of British financial aid for Portugal in 1810. After Britain helped to evacuate the Portuguese monarchy to Brazil during the Napoleonic wars, the Portuguese agreed to restrict their trading activity in Africa to Portuguese territory, and to consider how to abolish the slave trade throughout the Portuguese Empire.<sup>83</sup> Wilberforce pressured Perceval in December 1810 to alter these terms, possibly looking for a more concrete agreement than gradual abolition after expressing frustration to Brougham that ‘Wellesley has been blundering sadly’ a few months earlier.<sup>84</sup> After this, Canning and Wilberforce both urged the Marquis of Wellesley, ambassador to Spain, to see if they might follow suit, which Wilberforce had prompted him to do the year before.<sup>85</sup> Agustín Argüelles, a Spanish liberal politician, introduced resolutions against the slave trade to the Spanish parliament in April 1811, but the reaction of Cuban planters prevented any progress.<sup>86</sup> In 1813, abolition clauses were included in treaties with the Dutch and Swedish. At the same time, newly independent states in South America, formerly Spanish territories, banned the slave trade of their own accord, which Wilberforce and his circles welcomed.<sup>87</sup> However, most of the negotiations and declarations against the trade in this early period did not have much impact on the volume of the slave trade overall, which was still around two-thirds as large as it had been at its peak, because of the increased imports of enslaved persons to Cuba.<sup>88</sup>

After the defeat of Napoleon and the declaration of peace of France in April 1814, the abolitionists saw an opportunity to encourage the newly restored Bourbon monarchy to abolish the slave trade before it could be restarted by French merchants.

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<sup>82</sup> ‘At the Court at Weymouth’, *The London Gazette*, 1584, Saturday 7<sup>th</sup>-Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> September 1805.

<sup>83</sup> Leslie Bethell, ‘Britain, Portugal and the Suppression of the Brazilian Slave Trade: The Origins of Lord Palmerston’s Act of 1839’, *The English Historical Review*, 80 (1965), pp.761-84, p.762; Article X, Treaty of Friendship and Alliance between H.M. and Prince Regent of Portugal, Rio de Janeiro, February 1810, *PP*, 1810 XI [009], p.p.509-21.

<sup>84</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, p.75, diary, 06 December 1810; UCL, Brougham Papers, 10,954, Wilberforce to Brougham, 05 October 1810.

<sup>85</sup> Murray, *Odious Commerce*, pp.27-8; BL., Add MS 37309, ff.287-9, Wilberforce to Wellesley, 07 June 1809.

<sup>86</sup> Murray, *Odious Commerce*, pp.32-9.

<sup>87</sup> Appendix C, *Seventh Report of the directors of the African Institution* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1813), pp.84-5; Appendices D & E, *Eighth Report of the directors of the African Institution* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1814), pp.79-89.

<sup>88</sup> Eltis, *Economic Growth*, p.45.

Despite Napoleon lifting the ban on the trade in 1802, the outbreak of war in 1803 had stopped it again.<sup>89</sup> The African Institution's first instinct was to pursue the question at a government level. Before the defeat of Napoleon, in March 1814, Wilberforce and the African Institution had started to lobby Lord Liverpool (formerly Jenkinson), now Prime Minister, for a convention of European powers, and Wilberforce also made contact with European intellectuals who were sympathetic to the cause, and who could be able to influence matters, such as Alexander von Humboldt and Madame de Staël-Holstein.<sup>90</sup> In the spring of 1814, he wrote a private letter to the Russian Tsar Alexander I on the subject, and was summoned to see him in June.<sup>91</sup> The approach reflected his experience towards the end of the abolition campaign in Britain, when the London Committee had focused on lobbying government.

When the Peace of Paris was announced, it included an agreement in an additional article that the French would abolish their slave trade within five years. The abolitionists knew about the article before it was announced in the House of Commons, and had heard rumours of French refusal to abolish before that; according to Wilberforce's diary, Mme de Staël told Macaulay in Paris, who then told abolitionists in Britain.<sup>92</sup> Immediately after the treaty was submitted to the House, Wilberforce rose to discuss the agreements made about the slave trade. He described the treaty as 'the death warrant of a multitude of innocent victims,' singling out for particular criticism the return of France's colonies without an abolition agreement, and the probable volume of the unrestricted trade.<sup>93</sup> The African Institution organised a petitioning campaign in Britain, under a Committee chaired by Thomas Clarkson, to pressurise the government to re-negotiate the article.<sup>94</sup> Although Wilberforce expressed disquiet about this in his diary he 'felt best to acquiesce.' This was because he was unsure how much support they could rally 'owing to the Country's being full of joy for the peace & afraid of the Abolition proceedings being deemed Opposition party measures,' rather than an objection to a petitioning campaign.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Roger Anstey, 'The Slave Trade of the Continental Powers, 1760-1810', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 30, no. 2 (1977), p.264.

<sup>90</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.8, diary, 12 March 1814; BL., Add MS 52452, ff.167-8, Wilberforce to Mackintosh, 18 April 1814; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce c.46, ff.107, 111, correspondence with Humboldt; Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, pp.1-6, diary, February 1814.

<sup>91</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, pp.16-22, p.24, diary May 1814, 12 June 1814.

<sup>92</sup> RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1814, 10, Wilberforce to Harrison, 26 May 1814; Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.22, diary 3-4 June 1814; HC Deb, 06 June 1814, series 1, 27, cc.1078-84.

<sup>93</sup> HC Deb, 06 June 1814, series 1, 27, cc.1078-82.

<sup>94</sup> *Eighth Report*, p.39.

<sup>95</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, pp.25-7, diary, 15 June 1814, 23 June 1814.

Despite this initial uncertainty, and perhaps because of the positive reception of the idea, Wilberforce proposed a motion to the Church Missionary Society ‘abt petition Parl’t for Abolitn’ in July 1814, as well as presenting the initial petition from the African Institution to the House of Commons.<sup>96</sup> The African Institution reported that ‘nearly a million of the adult male inhabitants of the United Kingdom’ signed 806 petitions on the subject, but that figure has since been revised to over a million, at least double the number of signatures in 1792.<sup>97</sup>

At the same time as appealing to the British public to petition against the terms of the peace agreement as they related to the slave trade, Wilberforce and his circle wanted to encourage French popular support for abolition. He was initially hopeful: J.C.L. Simonde de Sismondi, the Swiss political economist, wrote a pamphlet in support of abolition, which Wilberforce saw as ‘an Indicatio Provid<sup>ce</sup> favours us for the French govern’d by public Opinion & the Literati the formers of it.’<sup>98</sup> However, there was little immediate support for it, and a few weeks later he expressed frustration that they were unable to get anything in favour of abolition published in French newspapers.<sup>99</sup> He had previously expressed hopes for ‘a select Society of Literary men’ who would write and circulate abolition pamphlets, and get articles into newspapers, to Alexander von Humboldt.<sup>100</sup> John Bacon Sawrey Morritt, a politician from Yorkshire, who travelled to France in 1814, reported that abolition was associated with the principles of the Revolution, and that ‘they remember with horror Gregoire, the Amis des Noirs, & the massacres of St Domingo,’ leading to opposition from those who did not have an economic interest in the trade.<sup>101</sup> The French also believed that in pressing the question of abolition, the British were trying to injure the nation, a reaction reminiscent of American suspicion of British plans for coordination.<sup>102</sup> William Sidney Smith, the naval officer, met with Prince Talleyrand-Perigord, French Minister of Foreign Affairs, and reported to Wilberforce that public opinion in France was that the slave trade was

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<sup>96</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.29, diary, 18 July 1814; *Eighth Report*, p.38.

<sup>97</sup> *Eighth Report*, p.39, p.47; Kielstra, *Politics of Slave Trade Suppression*, p.30; Mark Jones, ‘The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade and Slavery: Popular Abolitionism in National and Regional Politics, 1781-1838’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 1998), p.73.

<sup>98</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce c.39, p.40, diary, 06 October 1814; J.C.L. Simonde de Sismondi, *De l’Intérêt de la France à l’Égard de la Traite des Nègres* (Geneva: J.J. Paschoud, 1814).

<sup>99</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.39, pp.41-2, diary, 17 October 1814.

<sup>100</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.46, ff.111-12, Wilberforce to Humboldt, 16 September 1814.

<sup>101</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.48, ff.60-2, Morritt to Wilberforce, 24 October 1814.

<sup>102</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.15, ff.93-4, Gen. Macaulay to Wilberforce, 05 November 1814.

necessary to restore the economic strength of French colonies.<sup>103</sup> All signs pointed to a popular opposition to, rather than support for, abolishing the slave trade.

Wilberforce considered going to Paris himself in April 1814.<sup>104</sup> A month later, he recorded in his diary that ‘On reflection it occur’d to me my Chief Strength lies in the H of Coms, therefore tho’ more Éclat in going over it would not be politic...but surely especy as I don’t speak French tis better not.’<sup>105</sup> Zachary Macaulay went to Paris soon after ‘as an Encyclopaedia of Abolition Information’ and a non-political figure to whom the matter could not be delegated by officials.<sup>106</sup> Although he returned ten days afterwards, ‘utterly unsuccessful,’ Wellington ‘sent for Macaulay’ a few months later.<sup>107</sup> At around the same time, Clarkson began to talk about going to Vienna to press for abolition at the planned Congress, but settled on going to Paris beforehand, with Castlereagh’s support, because both Wilberforce and the Foreign Secretary objected to his original plan.<sup>108</sup> In Paris, Clarkson met with Wellington to discuss the slave trade, but when Clarkson sent Wilberforce a report of this meeting, Wilberforce doubted its honesty.<sup>109</sup> General Macaulay, Zachary’s brother, and James Stephen also headed to the city before the beginning of the Congress in Vienna.<sup>110</sup> The limited physical presence that British abolitionists were able to establish made other strategies more important, but where they could send someone to support government negotiations, they did.

At the same time that Wilberforce was contemplating going to France, he sent Castlereagh a copy of his 1807 *Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* ‘advising the translation into French of some piece for the New Fr Govt,’ as well as sending information to Wellington, who encouraged the distribution of literature.<sup>111</sup> He lamented that he had not already prepared anti-slave trade literature ‘in all the Modern Languages,’ a sentiment he echoed in later correspondence about translated publications.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.50, ff.22-4, Sidney Smith to Wilberforce, 05 December 1814.

<sup>104</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, pp.14-15, diary, 20 April 1814.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p.19, diary, 19 May 1814.

<sup>106</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.19, diary, 19 May 1814; BL., Egerton MS 1964, ff.10-12, Wilberforce to Lady Olivia Sparrow, 31 May 1814.

<sup>107</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.39, p.35, diary, 07 August 1814.

<sup>108</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.45, f.38, Clarkson to Wilberforce, 10 August 1814; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.45, ff.42-4, Clarkson to Wilberforce, 15 August 1814.

<sup>109</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce c.45, f.45, Clarkson to Wilberforce, 27 August 1814.

<sup>110</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.39, p.39, diary 23 September 1814.

<sup>111</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.14, diary, 17 April 1814; Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism*, pp.203-6.

<sup>112</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.14, diary, 17 April 1814; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.50, ff.31-3, Wilberforce to Southey, 21 November 1816.

Wilberforce was not alone in these efforts; the African Institution as a whole was involved in the translation and distribution of texts in Europe, including those by Clarkson and Sismondi, possibly at Wilberforce's suggestion to Thomas Harrison, the Institution's secretary.<sup>113</sup> Translation was necessarily a collaborative effort with abolitionists abroad: in September 1814, Wilberforce notes in his diary that a Mr Pettier was translating his pamphlet, which was re-translated before publication the following month by Mme de Staël's daughter, Albertine.<sup>114</sup> The pamphlet, *Lettre à ... le Prince de Talleyrand*, was published in English as *Letter to his Excellency the Prince of Talleyrand Perigord &c &c &c on the Subject of the Slave Trade*.<sup>115</sup> Castlereagh circulated copies to attendees at the Congress of Vienna, and reported having written a pamphlet to distribute at the Congress himself, based on Clarkson's work, with the addition of evidence about the lack of negative effects of abolition.<sup>116</sup> This linking of the moral case for abolition to the proof that it was not ruinous to the colonies or to the economy reflects the French distrust regarding Britain's reasons for pursuing European abolition, but also reflects the way in which Wilberforce married the moral case to the policy question in the British campaign. The publication and circulation of the letter in France meant that it could have the twin effects of informing the French public and lobbying Talleyrand, in a similar manner to much of the literature that formed part of the British abolition campaign. The publication of the *Letter* in English was perhaps to show that Wilberforce and his friends were actively pursuing the abolition of the French slave trade, given the public interest in it.

Wilberforce's *Letter to Talleyrand* built on his core arguments from the British abolition campaign. He outlined the reasons for the delay in British abolition and recounted the narrative of the horrors of the trade, before addressing the question of French abolition.<sup>117</sup> Wilberforce appealed to the French national character and used

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<sup>113</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism*, p.204; *Ninth Report of the directors of the African Institution* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1815), p.12; RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1814, 16, Wilberforce to Harrison, 26 April 1814.

<sup>114</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.39, p.39, diary, 18 September 1814; John Clainorne Isbell. 'Voices Lost? Staël and Slavery, 1786-1830' in Doris Y. Kadish, *Slavery in the Caribbean Francophone World: Distant Voices, Forgotten Acts, Forged Identities* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2016), pp.39, 45.

<sup>115</sup> William Wilberforce, *A Letter to His Excellency the Prince of Talleyrand Perigord &c &c &c on the Subject of the Slave Trade* (London: J. Hatchard, 1814); William Wilberforce, *Lettre à son Excellence Monseigneur le Prince de Talleyrand Périgord... au Sujet de la Traite des Negres* (London: Schulze and Dean, 1814).

<sup>116</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.15, f.95, Castlereagh to Wilberforce, 11 November 1814.

<sup>117</sup> Wilberforce, *Letter to Talleyrand*, pp.20-36.



Britain as proof that it was not economically ruinous. The main argument, which Wilberforce returned to several times in the letter, was that there would be no economic disadvantage to ‘establish *by law*, that same discontinuance of the traffic, which for twenty years has subsisted *in fact*.’<sup>118</sup> The final statements warned Talleyrand that in future the French population would turn against the trade and blame him for its continuance. Wilberforce framed the letter in the context of his role in the African Institution, rather than as a politician, in a similar manner to his letter to Jefferson in 1808.<sup>119</sup> At the beginning of the letter, he referred to the lack of information circulated on the slave trade in French, and suggested that reversing this ignorance would have a significant effect on the opinion of the French public on the slave trade, as it had done on the British public.

Wilberforce also wrote a letter to Tsar Alexander I. Oldfield suggested that he abandoned this project, but Wilberforce informed Lady Olivia Bernard Sparrow that he ‘put into the hands of the Duchess of Russia a long letter to the Emperor Alex’r about the Slave Trade’ in May, and asked her to keep that knowledge private, and he then met the Emperor in London in June 1814.<sup>120</sup> His sons quote from the letter in the *Life*, but there is no indication of where the original might be.<sup>121</sup> A private letter to Talleyrand was sent at around the same time; he replied to Wilberforce in June 1814, and the published *Letter* was written and published after this date.<sup>122</sup> In his reply, Talleyrand referred to the recent peace treaty, saying that it proved Louis XVIII agreed with Wilberforce about abolition. The delay, according to Talleyrand’s letter, was that France needed time to prepare for abolition, comparing it to the caution of the British government in passing the abolition bill.<sup>123</sup>

With regards to the slave trade, the Congress of Vienna made little practical progress. There was a general declaration against the slave trade made by all countries

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<sup>118</sup> Wilberforce, *Letter to Talleyrand*, pp.43, 54, 63.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, pp.47-8.

<sup>120</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism*, p.204; BL., Egerton MS 1964, ff.10-12, Wilberforce to Lady Sparrow, 31 May 1814; Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.24, diary, 11-12 June 1814.

<sup>121</sup> *Life*, IV, pp.180-82. Among his sons’ correspondence there is a letter about them contacting the woman who translated the letter to the Tsar: Bodl. Library, MS. Wilberforce, c.66, f.20, Macaulay to R. Wilberforce, 20 June 1836.

<sup>122</sup> The *Letter* was dated 10 October 1814, and written in August 1814: Wilberforce, *Letter to Talleyrand*, p.1; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.39, p.35, pp.41-2, diary, 03-04 August 1814, 17 October 1814.

<sup>123</sup> Talleyrand to Wilberforce, 01 June 1814, *Corresp.*, II, pp.135-7.

involved, but it did not include any agreements as to when or how it would be done.<sup>124</sup> France, Spain, and Portugal had all declared their intention to abolish the trade in the future, as well as having placed restrictions on the existing trade, before the Congress. An article limiting the Spanish slave trade to Spanish territories, and banning the use of the Spanish flag by ships of other nations, was added to a treaty as a condition of a loan to Spain in 1814, the first in a series of instances where the British government used Spain's financial need as leverage for abolition.<sup>125</sup> In 1814 the Portuguese offered to abolish their slave trade in eight years, in return for being released from a commercial treaty of 1810, but instead it was agreed that the Portuguese would abolish their trade north of the equator, the smallest part of their trade.<sup>126</sup>

Towards the end of the Congress, Wilberforce and Samuel Whitbread, the Foxite Whig, both separately asked in the House of Commons what had been achieved on the subject of the slave trade. After the terms were discussed following Whitbread's question in March 1815, Wilberforce 'expressed his satisfaction at what had been done.'<sup>127</sup> Wilberforce's question in June 1815 was specifically aimed at potential future changes, if Napoleon was defeated after he escaped exile on Elba.<sup>128</sup> The final stages of the Congress pass without comment in Wilberforce's diary; once the question of the slave trade had been dealt with, it appears he was not as interested in the other details of the treaty. The only major change to the slave trade during the Congress was the declaration of immediate French abolition by Louis XVIII. This was not, however, because of the negotiations, but because Napoleon had done so when he escaped from Elba.<sup>129</sup>

As well as diplomatic and political figures, Wilberforce and his circle also hoped to gain the support of religious figures. To this end, British abolitionists and diplomats tried to persuade Pope Pius VII to support abolishing the slave trade, because the countries which had not abolished were all Catholic. Wilberforce's correspondence with Humboldt in 1814 supported the idea that a declaration from the Pope would have the desired effect in Spain and Portugal, and other abolitionists and politicians agreed.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Act No XV, Declaration of the Powers on the Abolition of the Slave Trade of the 8<sup>th</sup> February 1815, General Treaty signed in Congress at Vienna, June 1815, *PP*, 1816 XVII [004], pp.132-3.

<sup>125</sup> Murray, *Odious Commerce*, p.51.

<sup>126</sup> Bethell, *Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade*, p.13.

<sup>127</sup> HC Deb, 20 March 1815, series 1, 30, c.305.

<sup>128</sup> HC Deb, 05 June 1815, series 1, 31, c.609.

<sup>129</sup> Kielstra, *Politics of Slave Trade Suppression*, pp.56-8; Murray, *Odious Commerce*, p.57.

<sup>130</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.13, f.228, Humboldt to Wilberforce (postscript), 30 August 1814; RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1814, 16, Wilberforce to Harrison, 26 April 1814; Canning

When Lord Holland, the Whig politician and Fox's nephew, was in Rome in 1814, he distributed Wilberforce's pamphlet, including sending one to the Pope.<sup>131</sup> Castlereagh petitioned the Pope through Cardinal Consalvi, the papal Secretary of State, who was the delegate from Rome at the Congress of Vienna.<sup>132</sup> Castlereagh later asked the Pope not to send out a letter to Louis XVIII that had been written in return for Britain's support to return the Papal States to Roman control in 1815; despite his pleas, the letter was sent.<sup>133</sup>

When John Harford was in Rome in 1815-17, he also became acquainted with Consalvi. Wilberforce advised him to use this connection to encourage the Vatican to put pressure on Spain and Portugal on the subject of abolition.<sup>134</sup> His hope was still that the Catholic monarchies would be better persuaded by a Papal statement on the subject than by diplomatic negotiations with Britain, and he sent information to Harford to give to Consalvi.<sup>135</sup> This was, Wilberforce admitted, 'out of the ordinary diplomatic course,' a similar attempt to his letter to Jefferson in 1808 to frame the slave trade as a different subject to other diplomatic negotiations.<sup>136</sup> All official relations with the Holy See were prohibited by English law, despite the recent appointment of a consul to the Roman states, so all diplomatic communications were officially unofficial.<sup>137</sup> However, Wilberforce and Harford's actions were separate to these semi-official communications as well. He was optimistic about the probability of letters to the Court of Madrid and to Brazil having a positive effect on the question of abolition in those countries.<sup>138</sup> However, there was no immediate effect from the ecclesiastical letters in either 1814 or 1817, which suggests that they were either not heeded, or were not as explicitly anti-slave trade as the British may have hoped. Neither letter is mentioned in the African Institution's reports. The first was a government initiative that formed part of the Congress negotiations, although Wilberforce was independently pursuing a similar goal. The second, which in

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mentions the importance of Rome in a letter to Wilberforce, RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1814, 19, 04 September 1814.

<sup>131</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.46, f.6, Holland to Wilberforce, 01 December 1814.

<sup>132</sup> Kielstra, *Politics of Slave Trade Suppression*, p.33.

<sup>133</sup> Kielstra, *Politics of Slave Trade Suppression*, p.33; Matthias Buschkühl, *Great Britain and the Holy See, 1746-1870* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1982), p.51.

<sup>134</sup> John S. Harford, *Recollections of William Wilberforce, Esq., MP* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1865), pp.71-2.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, pp.72-5.

<sup>136</sup> RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1818, 5, Wilberforce to Harford, 1816, (also quoted in Harford, *Recollections*, pp.72-5).

<sup>137</sup> Buschkühl, *Great Britain and the Holy See*, p.59.

<sup>138</sup> RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1817, 3, Wilberforce to Harford, 07 May 1817.

fact may not have been sent, was suggested by Wilberforce through someone who was not a member or subscriber to the Institution, so was probably also an independent action.

Another agreement reached at the Congress of Vienna was to have conferences on the slave trade in London, to discuss abolition. When this happened in August 1816, European powers made little progress towards universal abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.<sup>139</sup> Wilberforce's correspondence does not mention the conference, nor does his diary. There was also no mention of the meeting in the next report of the African Institution.<sup>140</sup> He focused his attention on people going to Haiti, and on writing letters to be sent with them, rather than on the European trade.<sup>141</sup> In the absence of relevant records, it is not possible to say what Wilberforce's thoughts on the conference were, or why he was not interested, but he seems to have been more invested in specific efforts, rather than in general negotiations, at this point in time.

As well as the re-commencement of the slave trade, Wilberforce and his peers were concerned about the interest of the restored French regime in Haiti.<sup>142</sup> The former colony had declared itself independent from France in 1804, after Napoleon had failed to reclaim the territory from the enslaved revolutionaries. The British government agreed not to interfere in any French attempt to re-conquer the territory, which they kept secret from British abolitionists. After the failure of efforts to negotiate with the Haitian leaders, however, the French government began to believe that any attempt made without British military help would not succeed.<sup>143</sup> Rather than being negotiated, the French acceptance (but not recognition) of Haitian independence was the result of experience. Although Wilberforce expressed concern about the future of the colony in his *Letter to Talleyrand*, the abolitionists were unable to be as involved in the question of Haitian independence as they were in the question of the reinstated slave trade, because of the secrecy with which the government approached the matter.<sup>144</sup>

Overall, during what could be considered the first wave of diplomatic efforts against the slave trade, Wilberforce and the other abolitionists continued the methods

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<sup>139</sup> Brian Vick, 'Power, Humanitarianism and the Global Liberal Order: Abolition and the Barbary Corsairs in the Vienna Congress System', *The International History Review*, 40, no. 4 (2018), pp.939-60, pp.943-4.

<sup>140</sup> *Eleventh Report of the Directors of the African Institution*, (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1817).

<sup>141</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, pp.57-61, diary, August 1816.

<sup>142</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press), pp.175-6.

<sup>143</sup> Kielstra, *Politics of Slave Trade Suppression*, pp.38, 53-4.

<sup>144</sup> Wilberforce, *Letter to Talleyrand*, pp.38-41.

that had been successful during the campaign against the British slave trade. The main difference was that Wilberforce was more confident in using forms of popular pressure other than petitioning than he had been during the British campaign and hoped to encourage the same abroad. Wilberforce and his circle used the changing situation in Europe to their advantage, pushing abolition of the slave trade more securely onto the diplomatic agenda than it had been during the Napoleonic Wars. The treaties signed in 1814 included more effective measures against the slave trade than the vague statements made, for example, in the Portuguese treaty in 1810, but this could not be replicated at the Congress of Vienna. Although the volume of the slave trade was not dramatically different at the end of 1815 in comparison to 1808, the situation looked hopeful; the general declaration against the slave trade and the promises to abolish in future placed the European campaign in a similar position to the British campaign in 1792.

### **Europe, 1815-1822**

Between 1815 and 1818, Britain continued to pursue greater abolition through treaty negotiations. Wilberforce's personal involvement in these efforts varied. For example, his diaries and correspondence do not include much mention of the establishment of mutual right of search and courts of mixed commission, or Portuguese abolition north of the equator in 1817 (see Appendix Three). However, he was actively involved in pressing Castlereagh for the inclusion of abolition measures as conditions of a loan to Spain in the same year.<sup>145</sup> The Spanish agreed to abolish the slave trade entirely in 1820, and immediately to the north of the equator, in return for a £400,000 loan.<sup>146</sup> Although the volume of the Spanish slave trade had, theoretically, decreased since 1814, Wilberforce singled out Spain for criticism in an Address to the Prince Regent on the subject of other countries' slave trades in July 1817, highlighting the proximity of Spanish slave-trading in Africa to Sierra Leone and the size of the trade north of the equator.<sup>147</sup>

Wilberforce supported the treaty with Spain in the House of Commons, defending the government against the claim made by Sir Gilbert Heathcote, MP for Rutland, that it

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<sup>145</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.70, diary, 30 April 1817.

<sup>146</sup> Murray, *Odious Commerce*, pp.63-7.

<sup>147</sup> HC Deb, 09 July 1817, series 1, 36, cc.1321-36.

would be a waste of money.<sup>148</sup> In the same debate, Castlereagh said ‘that a disposition had been unequivocally evinced on the part of Portugal to abandon the traffic in slaves altogether,’ and that it was under the Spanish flag that the illicit slave trade was continuing.<sup>149</sup> This statement, in addition to Wilberforce’s comments on the Spanish trade in 1817, might explain why he seems to have been less interested in the Portuguese negotiations. The Portuguese slave trade had by this time been abolished north of the equator, and so had no bearing on the West Indian colonies, whereas the continuing Spanish-led trade to Cuba brought an active slave trade into the vicinity of British colonies, a point made by Liverpool in a letter to Wilberforce in 1815.<sup>150</sup> The annual reports of the African Institution mentioned negotiations with both countries (as well as others, included in the Appendix 3), with treaties included as appendices, which suggests that Wilberforce’s own involvement was a question of interest or urgency, rather than awareness.<sup>151</sup>

Wilberforce’s political activity was not his sole involvement in the matter. He continued to be involved in the preparation of pamphlets for circulation abroad in various languages. Before the Congress of Vienna, in 1814, Wilberforce had been contacted by Joseph Blanco-White, a Spanish author under Lord Holland’s patronage, who suggested translating Wilberforce’s 1807 *Letter* for Spanish circulation.<sup>152</sup> In the end, Blanco-White wrote a new pamphlet, based on Wilberforce’s work, but aimed at a Spanish, Catholic audience. The *Bosquexo del Comercio en Esclavos* compared enslavement to Napoleon’s rule in Spain, drawing on his brother’s experience as a prisoner of war, and included a direct response to the pro-slavery arguments made by the Cuban slave-owner Francisco de Arnago y Parreña.<sup>153</sup> Blanco-White continued to work with abolitionists as a Spanish translator.<sup>154</sup> The next year, Stephen published *An Inquiry into the Right and Duty of Compelling Spain to Relinquish her Slave Trade in Northern Africa*, which

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<sup>148</sup> HC Deb, 09 February 1818, series 1, 37, cc.232-60; Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, ‘Anti-Slavery in Spain and its Colonies, 1808-86’ in William Mulligan and Maurice Bric (eds), *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp.137-48, p.137.

<sup>149</sup> HC Deb, 09 February 1818, series 1, 37, cc.232-60.

<sup>150</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.3, ff.147-8, Liverpool to Wilberforce, 01 October 1815.

<sup>151</sup> *Twelfth Report of the directors of the African Institution* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1818), appendices A-C; treaties and conventions feature in the appendices of most of the *Reports*.

<sup>152</sup> *Eighth Report*, pp.20-22; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.51, ff.84-5, Blanco-White to Wilberforce, 15 December 1815.

<sup>153</sup> Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, ‘Wilberforce Spanished: Joseph Blanco-White and Spanish Antislavery, 1808-1814’, in Josep M. Fradera and Christopher Schmidt-Nowara (eds) *Slavery and Antislavery in Spain’s Atlantic Empire*, (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2016) pp.158-75, p.161.

<sup>154</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.17, f.271, Blanco-White to Wilberforce, 13 August 1817.

Wilberforce believed ‘produced some Effect’ in Spain, although it is unclear if it was translated into Spanish.<sup>155</sup>

As a result of the reported effect of Blanco-White’s pamphlet, in 1816 Wilberforce suggested to Robert Southey, the poet and historian, that ‘something or other be written forthwith in Portuguese.’<sup>156</sup> Southey pointed him in the direction of Henry Koster, an Englishman who lived in Brazil, who had recently published *Travels in Brazil*. This book included chapters on slavery and the slave trade; while this was published in English, his long-term residency in Brazil meant that he was both fluent in Portuguese and familiar with public opinion there regarding the slave trade.<sup>157</sup> As with publications in French, the plan was for these Spanish and Portuguese publications to be based on work in English.<sup>158</sup> In comparison with the circulation of French pamphlets, the abolitionists had to start from scratch for other European audiences; in the 1780s, their continental efforts had not extended beyond France, and so they had to build new networks, rather than reaching out to old ones. Although Wilberforce was optimistic about the impact that the publications had, they were ‘unread and unnoticed’ in France 1814, and there are no signs that they were more effective anywhere else.<sup>159</sup>

Abolitionists were optimistic about what could be achieved at the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle in October and November of 1818.<sup>160</sup> They pursued similar strategies to 1814, circulating literature among the delegates and appealing directly to sovereigns they perceived as allies. By then, all European powers had abolished, or had plans to abolish, their slave trades, regardless of how well-enforced the measures were. Louis XVIII had issued a declaration against the slave trade in 1817, but it was largely ignored.<sup>161</sup> Rather than working for abolition legislation, Wilberforce and his circle were pushing for measures that would better enforce it throughout the Atlantic world. Clarkson went to Aix-la-Chapelle to appeal to delegates in person and discussed the matter with

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<sup>155</sup> RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1815, 20, Wilberforce to Harrison, 14 December 1815; BL., Add MS 51820, f.20, Wilberforce to Holland, 15 April 1816; James Stephen, *An Inquiry into the Right and Duty of Compelling Spain to Relinquish her Slave Trade in Northern Africa* (London: J. Butterworth, 1816).

<sup>156</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.50, ff.31-3, Wilberforce to Southey, 21 November 1816.

<sup>157</sup> Henry Koster, *Travels in Brazil*, (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1816), pp.402-56.

<sup>158</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.50, ff.34-7, Wilberforce to Southey, 09 October 1816.

<sup>159</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism*, p.210.

<sup>160</sup> *Thirteenth Report*, p.15.

<sup>161</sup> Martin A. Klein, ‘Slaves, Gum, and Peanuts: Adaptation to the End of the Slave Trade in Senegal, 1817-48’, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 66, no 4 (2009), pp.895-914.

Castlereagh. His two foci, he reported to Wilberforce, were reducing the period for which the Portuguese trade would continue, and piracy. He, alongside other abolitionists, was optimistic about the influence of Tsar Alexander I on the opinions of the other delegates.<sup>162</sup> He was also there to represent the Kingdom of Haiti. He did not correspond with or report to Wilberforce as much as he had during 1814-15, and planned to leave after meeting the Tsar, which he saw as the most useful thing he could achieve.<sup>163</sup>

Clarkson's presence, and the pressure applied by the abolitionists both at home and abroad, forced the question of mutual rights of search and a future declaration of piracy onto the agenda, although the government correctly assumed that it would not be successful.<sup>164</sup> The Tsar did not live up to the abolitionists' expectations, and in fact contributed to the failure of the Congress to achieve anything on the international slave trade.<sup>165</sup> Wilberforce was not as focused on the Congress as he had been in 1815; there is a gap in his diary at around this time (June-December 1818), and other than his correspondence with Clarkson, he does not mention it in many letters. In a letter to Thomas Harrison in September, he expressed little hope for what the Congress might achieve, but declared that 'no probable opportunity of doing good ought to be neglected.'<sup>166</sup> He was more concerned about the situation in Haiti, indicative of changing priorities with a shift in his interest towards the West Indian colonies rather than the slave trade.

The effort to have the slave trade declared piratical, closely connected to the efforts for European abolition, began in the House of Commons before the Congress of Aix-le-Chapelle. The slave trade was referred to as piracy in the House in a rhetorical sense before it was seen as a solution to the poor enforcement of abolition; in 1810, Brougham called slave traders 'suborners of piracy and mercenary murder' when he introduced a motion for better enforcement of abolition, and in 1817, Castlereagh referred to the illegal slave trade as piracy.<sup>167</sup> Wilberforce declared in 1818 that 'he hoped

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<sup>162</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.45, ff.71-2, Clarkson to Wilberforce, 8 October 1818; Kielstra, *Politics of Slave Trade Suppression*, pp.86-9; Ellen Gibson Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson: A Biography* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1990), pp.147-150.

<sup>163</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.45, ff.71-2, Clarkson to Wilberforce, 8 October 1818.

<sup>164</sup> Kielstra, *Politics of Slave Trade Suppression*, p.89; *Thirteenth Report of the African Institution*, pp.19-20.

<sup>165</sup> Kielstra, *Politics of Slave Trade Suppression*, p.88-90.

<sup>166</sup> RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1818, 11, Wilberforce to Harrison, 06 September 1818; King Henri Christophe had recently died.

<sup>167</sup> HC Deb, 15 June 1810, series 1, 17, cc.658-89; HC Deb, 09 July 1817, series 1, 36, cc.1321-36.



to see the day...when the slave trade should assume its true name and character, be called nothing less than piracy, and be visited with the punishment due to that crime.’<sup>168</sup> As well as these public declarations, Lord Holland wrote in 1815 that unless the slave trade was treated as piracy, ‘we shall not have rescued the world from evil,’ saying it was something that could be achieved once other countries had also abolished their slave trades.<sup>169</sup> Clarkson brought up the question again in the lead up to the Congress of Aix-le-Chapelle in 1818, as a more effective means of suppressing the trade than the naval squadrons on the coast of Africa and the mutual rights of search being arranged.<sup>170</sup> It was not, however, pursued to any real effect until Canning was negotiating with the United States.

Wilberforce continued to contact prominent figures across Europe when he saw an opportunity to encourage them to pursue abolition. After the coup d’état in Spain in 1820, Wilberforce wrote to Argüelles, who had earlier proposed abolition measures in the Spanish parliament, on his release from prison, expressing hopes that the revolution would not stop the abolition of the Spanish slave trade, due in May 1821.<sup>171</sup> However, he was less involved in some efforts to encourage public support for abolition. A new French society, the *Société de la Morale Chrétienne*, founded in autumn 1821, had founded a committee on the slave trade in April 1822 at the suggestion of Joseph Price, an English Quaker.<sup>172</sup> However, Wilberforce’s diary and correspondence did not include any mention of this, and it is only briefly mentioned in the African Institution reports, although it did include an appendix with further information in 1822.<sup>173</sup> Nonetheless, there was a resurgence of efforts by British abolitionists to encourage French support, with both new and re-issued publications translated into French.

One of these new publications was another by Wilberforce, again in the form of a letter, this time addressed to Tsar Alexander I.<sup>174</sup> The *Lettre à l’Empereur sur la Traite*

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<sup>168</sup> HC Deb, 09 February 1818, series 1, 37, cc.232-60.

<sup>169</sup> RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1815, 19, Holland to Wilberforce, 13 November 1815.

<sup>170</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.45, f.67, Clarkson to Wilberforce, 23 July 1818.

<sup>171</sup> Wilberforce to Argüelles, 28 March 1820, in *Corresp.*, II, pp.242-4 – the original agreement had been May 1820, but negotiations about a grace period were on-going, Murray, *Odious Commerce*, pp.74-5.

<sup>172</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism*, pp.218-19; Jennings, *French Antislavery*, pp.9-10; Lawrence C. Jennings, ‘French Anti-slavery under the Restoration: The *Société de la Morale Chrétienne*’, *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer*, 81, no. 304 (1994), pp.321-31, 322-6.

<sup>173</sup> *Sixteenth Report of the Directors of the African Institution* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1822), pp.25-6, pp.275-9.

<sup>174</sup> Also: Thomas Clarkson, *The Cries of Africa to the Inhabitants of Europe: or, A Survey of that Bloody Commerce called the Slave-Trade* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1822).

*des Noirs* was translated into French before its publication in February 1822, and unlike in 1814 was not published in English.<sup>175</sup> The African Institution then contributed to funding its circulation in France and other slave-trading countries.<sup>176</sup> This second public letter has not received much scholarly attention; it is mentioned but without any further details.<sup>177</sup> It has probably been overlooked because, compared to the *Letter to Talleyrand*, it was written at a less important juncture of the abolition campaign. However, it is an interesting mirror of the 1814 letter: one written at the beginning of the Congress system and one at the end, with similar goals. Overall, the arguments are broadly similar, although there was some change in the rhetoric. Other than adjustments for intended audiences, Wilberforce's arguments on the slave trade were consistent from 1789 to 1822. The only major change was that when addressing European arguments, he did not discuss the conditions of slavery in either the British West Indian colonies or the colonies of other European powers.

The letter begins with Wilberforce reminding the Tsar of the promises made at Vienna in 1815 and renewed at Aix-la-Chapelle in 1818, and in many ways follows the traditional format of abolitionist literature. After his introductory statements, Wilberforce described the slave trade in Africa and the Middle Passage, and then recounted the British abolition campaign to respond to what he saw as one of the major objections to abolition in Europe: that the British had taken twenty years to abolish their slave trade, but expected other countries to follow suit immediately. This had been mentioned by correspondents in 1814-15, including Talleyrand, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Wilberforce then repeated the agreements made at Vienna, reminding the Tsar that the slave trade had been 'judged, justly condemned and denounced as a universal abhorrence.'<sup>178</sup> He continued to recount the history of the efforts to encourage European powers to abolish their slave trades, writing about the pressure put on Portugal at Aix-la-Chapelle, bringing his history of the trade up to the date of writing. Next, he responded to another objection: that the British were acting in their own interest in urging other countries to abolish their slave trades. Again, this was an objection that Wilberforce had been told about at the beginning of the European campaign. In the final section of the

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<sup>175</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.257, diary, 20 January 1822; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.13, ff.1-2, Tsar Alexandre to Wilberforce, 14 March 1822.

<sup>176</sup> *Sixteenth Report of the African Institution*, pp.28-9.

<sup>177</sup> Kielstra, *Politics of Slave Trade Suppression*, p.120; Fladeland, 'Abolitionist Pressures', pp.370-1.

<sup>178</sup> Wilberforce, *Lettre à l'Empereur*, p.41 – 'La Traite traduite au tribunal de l'Europe fut jugée, justement condamnée et dénoncée à l'exécration de l'univers.'

*Lettre*, Wilberforce described the situation in the Netherlands and France, and narrated the story of *Le Rôdeur*, a French slave ship, and how it continued to trade in enslaved persons after abolition. The letter ends with a plea to the Tsar to intervene in the matter, especially with France, claiming that ‘the intervention of Your Majesty was never more urgent.’<sup>179</sup> Compared to other abolitionist literature by Wilberforce, there was more emphasis put on religion, especially when addressing the Tsar directly, but overall the arguments put forward were essentially the same as had been made during both the British campaign and Wilberforce’s 1807 *Letter*, and during the European campaign to date including Wilberforce’s 1814 *Letter to Talleyrand*.

The Tsar privately replied to the *Lettre* in March 1822, writing that he had encouraged other countries to abolish the slave trade as much as he could without impinging on their independence and that he would continue to do so, but only to encourage them to do so voluntarily.<sup>180</sup> However, Wilberforce was not only hoping to persuade the Tsar to intervene more. The public circulation of the letter, which may have been, as in 1814, a different letter to the private one, was intended to make more people aware of the continuing slave trade, and to gain more public support for abolition measures throughout Europe, which is why the African Institution funded its circulation. At the beginning of the letter, in the introductory statements, Wilberforce described the way that awareness of the slave trade had grown in Britain during the abolition debates there, but said that this was not the case in Europe, and that most people were ignorant of the facts of the trade.<sup>181</sup> Although the letter was partly written to influence the Tsar ahead of the Congress of Verona later in 1822, the eight months between the publication of the letter in February and the meeting of diplomats in October could have allowed for an increase in popular support for abolition in other countries before the Congress. This in turn could have created an atmosphere in which European powers might have agreed to more progress on abolition.

After Castlereagh’s death in August 1822, and Canning’s subsequent appointment as Foreign Secretary, the Duke of Wellington went to the Congress of Verona as the British representative.<sup>182</sup> Wellington was issued with instructions for the

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid, p.78 – ‘Jamais l’intervention de Votre Majesté ne fut plus urgente.’

<sup>180</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.13, ff.1-2, Tsar Alexandre to Wilberforce, 14 March 1822.

<sup>181</sup> Wilberforce, *Lettre à l’Empereur*, pp.4-5.

<sup>182</sup> Irby C. Nichols, Jr., ‘The Congress of Verona, 1822: A Reappraisal’, *The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, 46, no. 4 (1966), pp.385-99, pp.386-7.

Congress, but was told that ‘the Slave Trade requires no comments.’<sup>183</sup> Liverpool told Wilberforce that Wellington’s instructions, inherited from Castlereagh, were to ‘remonstrate with the other Foreign Powers in the strongest manner...upon the subject of the Slave Trade.’<sup>184</sup> Wellington unsuccessfully pressed for an economic boycott of Portugal, the only country where the slave trade had not been entirely abolished, and for the slave trade to be declared piracy.<sup>185</sup> Although the African Institution continued to follow their usual pattern of activity, with William Allen going to Verona instead of Clarkson, Wilberforce’s activity was focused before the Congress, rather than during it. As well as the letter to Tsar Alexander I earlier in the year, he moved for another Address to the King on the subject in June 1822, before the end of the parliamentary session.<sup>186</sup> Wilberforce’s slowly declining public activity regarding the slave trade can be seen as an indication of faith that the British government would continue to pursue it diplomatically without his lobbying, as well as of his increasing interest in slavery instead.

Despite his reduced public action on the slave trade, Wilberforce continued to correspond with Canning, re-appointed Foreign Secretary after Castlereagh’s death, on the subject. During the Congress of Verona, Wilberforce saw instructions and dispatches that were sent between Wellington and Canning, and the African Institution continued to lobby the government.<sup>187</sup> Canning seems to have taken some of Wilberforce’s suggestions on board, and the two men consulted on various ideas relating to the slave trade, such as another attempt to secure support from Pope Pius VII via Cardinal Consalvi.<sup>188</sup> Their discussion suggests that the abolitionists were less hopeful of cooperation through the Congress, and so were investigating several options at the same time, in both general and specific cases. They also revisited the idea of American cooperation, culminating in the 1824 Convention against the Slave Trade. Although there is nothing to suggest that Canning made any definite plans on the question of papal support for abolition, the question of the Portuguese-Brazilian slave trade became the

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<sup>183</sup> Quoted in Betty Fladeland, ‘Abolitionist Pressures on the Concert of Europe’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 38, no 4 (1966) pp.355-373, p.372.

<sup>184</sup> BL., Add MS 38416, ff.389-90, Liverpool to Wilberforce, 07 September 1822.

<sup>185</sup> Fladeland, ‘Abolitionist Pressures’, pp.372-3; Kielstra, *Politics of Slave Trade Suppression*, pp.120-3.

<sup>186</sup> HC Deb, 27 June 1822, series 2, 7, cc.1399-4061.

<sup>187</sup> Kielstra, *Politics of Slave Trade Suppression*, p.121.

<sup>188</sup> RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1822, 10-12, Canning to Wilberforce, 19 October 1822 and 31 October 1822.

focus of renewed abolition efforts in both the African Institution and the British government.

The Portuguese and Spanish were supposed to have abolished their slave trades in 1822, according to the agreements signed in 1814, and the continuing trade led to renewed diplomatic efforts. Brazilian independence in 1822 meant that for a time Britain focussed on negotiating with Brazil rather than Portugal.<sup>189</sup> Wilberforce suggested to Canning that England should not recognise the new nation until it agreed to abolish the slave trade, but while Canning agreed in principle, he was aware that mercantile interests would not be sympathetic to the measure.<sup>190</sup> However, the abolitionists themselves had been targeting public opinion in Brazil for some time by this stage, with publications intended for Brazilian rather than Portuguese circulation issued in 1816. The focus on Brazil rather than Portugal before Brazilian Independence was the result of the continuing presence of the Portuguese Court in Rio de Janeiro, and the trans-Atlantic, rather than triangular, nature of the slave trade to Brazil. The new impetus in this direction after 1822 might also have been related to Canning's appointment as Foreign Secretary; he had served as ambassador to Lisbon and when he was Foreign Secretary in 1807-1809, he had been heavily involved in Iberian affairs.<sup>191</sup> There may have been hopes among the British abolitionists that, as a director of the African Institution, he would be more likely to implement their ideas than his predecessor had been, although they had not doubted Castlereagh's commitment to internationalizing abolition.<sup>192</sup>

Less than a year after the publication of the *Lettre à l'Empereur*, Wilberforce began work on his *Appeal on behalf of the negroes*.<sup>193</sup> Even before this, in 1818, Wilberforce had moved for copies of all laws passed by colonial assemblies 'respecting the condition and treatment of Slaves...and also respecting the condition of the free coloured Population' to be presented to the House of Commons, indicating that he was becoming more interested in slavery than the slave trade.<sup>194</sup> In parliament, the 1824 Piracy Act was connected to negotiations with the United States for enforcing abolition.

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<sup>189</sup> Bethell, 'Britain, Portugal and the Suppression of the Brazilian Slave Trade', p.764.

<sup>190</sup> RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1822, 12, Canning to Wilberforce, 31 October 1822; Schmidt-Nowara, 'Anti-Slavery in Spain and its Colonies', p.140.

<sup>191</sup> Wendy Hinde, *George Canning* (London: Collins, 1973), pp.195-231, 258-76; Dixon, *Canning*, pp.107-28, 157-83.

<sup>192</sup> Fladeland, 'Abolitionist Pressures', p.371.

<sup>193</sup> *Life*, V, pp.162-168; Bodl. MS. Wilberforce, d.55, p.273-275, diary, January-February 1823.

<sup>194</sup> HC Deb, 22 April 1818, series 1, 38, cc.294-6.

The African Institution continued to report the evidence of illegal slave trading by other powers; in 1823 thirteen Portuguese ships were condemned at Sierra Leone, and there were reports of French slave trading activity.<sup>195</sup> However, Wilberforce's personal focus had shifted to the emancipation campaign, a process that had started publicly in around 1818, but which the next chapter will show had a longer history. In 1811 and in 1820, he contemplated leaving the House of Commons, and on both occasions, he mentioned enslaved persons and a desire to ameliorate the conditions of slavery, rather than the slave trade, among his reasons for continuing his parliamentary career.<sup>196</sup>

This chapter has shown that Wilberforce involved himself in the majority of the efforts to suppress the slave trade and extend abolition. How he did this, however, was not consistent, and he tended to only be involved in one part of the campaign at a time. At times his involvement mimicked that of the early years of the abolition campaign, in which he introduced bills at the urging of an extra-parliamentary organisation, rather than of his own accord. He used the African Institution as a means to frame letters to foreign leaders without directly interfering in diplomatic negotiations. Throughout the period, he lobbied the Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister and moved for Addresses to the King and Prince Regent from the House of Commons in order to keep the slave trade on the diplomatic agenda. As in the British abolition campaign, Wilberforce used his personal and political networks to further abolition. He had used his relationships to pass the final legislation in 1807; with regards to the United States, he encouraged more effective slave trade suppression through his networks both at home and abroad. Whereas during the British abolition campaign it was clear when Wilberforce was acting on behalf of the Abolition Society, it is more difficult to draw a line between his activities after 1807 and the African Institution. There are some efforts, for example the papal letters, or the correspondence with public figures abroad, which were not included in the Institution's reports, which suggests that they were more independent actions. At the same time, Wilberforce did not always pursue legislation that the African Institution proposed. He postponed motions for the registry and piracy bills because he or others did not think that

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<sup>195</sup> *Seventeenth Report of the directors of the African Institution* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1823), pp.25-30.

<sup>196</sup> Letter to Babington, 22 August 1811, *Life*, III, p.544; Wilberforce to Stephen, 29 October 1820, *Life*, V, p.80.

they would be successful, acting more independently of the organisation than he had of the London Committee at the beginning of the British abolition campaign.

Overall, Wilberforce's arguments regarding the slave trade changed little over the period. Other than the addition of arguments based on the lack of negative effects from British abolition, and the removal of discussion of conditions of slavery, the only changes between his 1807 *Letter to the Inhabitants of Yorkshire*, his 1814 *Letter to Talleyrand*, and his 1822 *Lettre à l'Empereur* were rhetorical. Similarly, the methods he used did not change dramatically, nor did his focus on abolition from government initiatives rather than popular pressure.

## Chapter 5

### After Abolition, 1807-1833 II: Slavery

Wilberforce's interest in issues surrounding slavery after 1807 extended beyond the slave trade and the efforts to enforce and extend abolition outlined in the previous chapter. This period of Wilberforce's parliamentary career, and his continued involvement after his retirement, have received considerably less attention than his role in the campaign against the slave trade. As this chapter shows, his view on the amelioration and gradual abolition of slavery was consistent from the 1780s through to the 1830s. It begins with Wilberforce's role in managing both enslaved persons and free blacks in the 1810s prior to the launch of the amelioration and emancipation campaign. In particular, this chapter examines his involvement in a little-known Treasury Commission for the Management of Crown Slaves (known as the Berbice Commission), 1811-16, as well as his relationship with the government of Haiti, and Sierra Leone. It then focuses on the campaign for gradual emancipation, starting with the first steps towards amelioration legislation in 1818, and then the main efforts from 1823. Wilberforce retired from the House of Commons in 1825, and the chapter ends with a discussion of his continuing involvement in abolitionism up until his death in 1833.

There were two stages to the British abolitionists' work with regards to slavery, rather than the slave trade. The first, for amelioration, 1818-23, was focused on reforming slavery, to institute the changes that the abolitionists had hoped would happen as a natural consequence of the end of the slave trade. The second, for first gradual and later immediate emancipation, began in 1823, when the failure of amelioration convinced abolitionists that more radical change was necessary. The historiography on amelioration has in part focused on how successful it was in the West Indies.<sup>1</sup> Trevor Burnard and Kit Candlin argue that in Britain the subject for debate was 'more about who would impose amelioration policy than over amelioration itself.'<sup>2</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, during the anti-slave trade campaign the West India interest proposed improving the conditions

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<sup>1</sup> J.R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery, 1750-1834: The Process of Amelioration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.7; Christa Dierksheide, *Amelioration and Empire: Progress and Slavery in the Plantation Americas* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2014), pp.180-209.

<sup>2</sup> Trevor Burnard and Kit Candlin, 'Sir John Gladstone and the Debate over the Amelioration of Slavery in the British West Indies in the 1820s', *Journal of British Studies*, 57 (2018), pp.760-82, p.761.



of slavery as a means to head off the abolitionists and maintain the slave trade; in the 1810s, abolitionists began to take an increasingly active role in pursuing amelioration. The historiography on the emancipation campaign focuses on parliament, but does not include much mention of Wilberforce, because with the appointment of Thomas Fowell Buxton as his successor in 1821, and his retirement in 1825, he was no longer as involved.<sup>3</sup> Robin Blackburn, for example, mentioned Wilberforce four times in a chapter on British emancipation, with half being in reference to his retirement.<sup>4</sup> Wilberforce's main contribution at this stage, speeches to Antislavery Societies that were printed in the *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, have not been studied in detail. The abolition of the slave-trade received a lot of scholarly attention in the lead up to the 2007 bicentenary; the abolition of slavery has not (yet) received the same.

Wilberforce's close involvement in Sierra Leone, even after the transfer in governance to the British Crown, is well known.<sup>5</sup> His involvement in slave colonies on the other side of the Atlantic is less documented: the Berbice Commission, mentioned above, is only discussed at length by Alvin O. Thompson.<sup>6</sup> However, despite these interactions, as Michael Craton has argued, 'the anti-slavery lobby... never acknowledged or recognized the limited relevance of their ideas and actions to the slaves.'<sup>7</sup> John Gladstone's pro-slavery amelioration efforts have been described as leaving the enslaved 'culturally bereft' and Wilberforce's plans were similar.<sup>8</sup> Amelioration measures were blamed by the West India interest for slave uprisings in Barbados in 1816 and in Demerara in 1823.<sup>9</sup> Although the enslaved viewed Wilberforce

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<sup>3</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.245-67; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2015), pp.261-71; Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery* (London: Pan Books, 2012), pp.322-49; Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992) is a notable exception, focusing women's contributions to the popular campaign.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 2011 reprint), pp.419-472.

<sup>5</sup> Christophe Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp.26-8, 105-6; John Peterson, *Province of Freedom: A History of Sierra Leone* (London: Faber, 1969), pp.22, 54; Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), pp.11, 63.

<sup>6</sup> Alvin O. Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants: Crown Slaves in Berbice, Guyana, 1803-1831* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), pp.69-102.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982) p.242.

<sup>8</sup> Burnard and Candlin, 'Sir John Gladstone and the Debate over Amelioration', p.762.

<sup>9</sup> Claudius K. Fergus, *Revolutionary Emancipation: Slavery and Abolitionism in the British West Indies* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2013); Hilary McD. Beckles, 'The Slave-drivers' War: Bussa and the 1816 Barbados Slave Rebellion' *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*,

as their ‘saviour,’ because of the prominence of his name in West Indian polemics on abolitionist measures, slave rebellions put the abolitionists on the defensive.<sup>10</sup>

The biographies of Wilberforce for this period spend more time discussing his other interests. Pollock briefly discussed Wilberforce’s relationships with Sierra Leone and Haiti, but he wrote more about his other religious and political activities than the amelioration and emancipation campaign.<sup>11</sup> The biography by Hague, written to coincide with the bicentenary of 1807, goes into more detail about the emergent emancipation campaign, but focuses more heavily on his other political interests.<sup>12</sup> Furneaux devotes a similar amount of space to issues surrounding slavery as to other subjects, but similarly gives less room to the years after 1807 than he does the years before.<sup>13</sup> All the biographies become much less detailed after Wilberforce’s retirement – Hague and Furneaux mention Wilberforce’s appearances at the Anti-Slavery Society’s meetings, but little else about his continuing engagement with abolitionist efforts.<sup>14</sup> This reflects, with added detail, the balance of the sons’ biography, in which the emancipation campaign received only passing references after 1825.

## **The Atlantic World, 1807-1818**

### ***Sierra Leone***

After the passing of the Abolition Act in 1807, Wilberforce and his circle turned their attention to enforcing the new legislation, establishing the African Institution. Several of the founding members, including Henry Thornton, Zachary Macaulay, James Stephen, Thomas Clarkson, and Samuel Whitbread, as well as Wilberforce, had also been involved in the Sierra Leone Company (SLC), and the African Institution continued to take an interest in the territory after its transfer to the British crown in 1808. Wilberforce had written to Lord Grenville concerned about the trade being re-introduced to Sierra Leone despite its prohibition under Company administration, and urged the government to keep

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39 (1985), pp.84-110; Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Craton, *Testing the Chains*, pp.425-90.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Craton, ‘Proto-Peasant Revolts? The late slave rebellions in the British West Indies, 1816-1832’, *Past & Present*, 85 (1979), pp.99-125, p.104.

<sup>11</sup> John Pollock, *Wilberforce* bicentenary edition (Eastbourne: Kingsway Communications, 2007), pp.272-350.

<sup>12</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the great Anti-slave Trade Campaigner* (London: HarperPress, 2007), pp.477-88.

<sup>13</sup> Robin Furneaux, *William Wilberforce* (London: Hamilton, 1974), pp.332-414.

<sup>14</sup> Hague, *Wilberforce*, pp.497-8; Furneaux, *Wilberforce*, pp.431, 441-7.

in mind the ‘moral interests of the settlement & of Africa at large.’<sup>15</sup> Despite his widely-known involvement as a founding member of the SLC, Wilberforce had rarely mentioned Sierra Leone during the parliamentary debates on the slave trade, leaving Thornton, the chairman, to represent it in parliament.

The SLC’s aim was to create a free settlement, separate to the slave trade and the systems of slavery that existed in the region. This was made more complicated than expected by the interactions between the Company and the surrounding area. The Directors had not understood how central slavery was to the local economy, and over time the Company became increasingly involved in trading slave-produced goods. Under Zachary Macaulay’s leadership, the Company began to mimic the trading patterns of slave-traders in acquiring commodities to trade but had to cooperate with them to do so. The Company’s plans to introduce agriculture failed because the ground was not suitable and the settlers preferred to trade, rather than farm. Efforts to protect settlers from slave traders and the French, who attacked the colony in 1794, resulted in a permanent military presence from 1800, and increasing government involvement.<sup>16</sup> The SLC used this to pave the way for the transfer of the colony to the Crown, but when it was successful in 1808, the former Directors continued to influence the British government.<sup>17</sup> For instance, Wilberforce nominated the first Crown governor, and continued to suggest plans for development.

The 1807 Abolition Act included the enlistment or apprenticeship of any enslaved persons re-captured from a slave ship, for fourteen years. Before Thomas Perronet Thompson, the governor nominated by Wilberforce, arrived to take control of the colony, Thomas Ludlam, the Company’s last governor, applied this policy to 167 Africans taken from a captured slave ship.<sup>18</sup> Apprenticeship, which was later expanded to all enslaved persons in the West Indian colonies in 1834, was a period of ‘partially unpaid servitude,’ an adaptation of traditional trade apprenticeships used as a transition between enslavement and freedom; in Sierra Leone, the practice became that settlers could

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<sup>15</sup> BL., Add MS 58978, ff.64-5, Wilberforce to Grenville, 20 September 1806.

<sup>16</sup> Fyfe, *History of Sierra Leone*, pp.28-104; Peterson, *Province of Freedom*, p.27-44; Scanlan, *Freedom’s Debtors*, pp.28-65; BL., Add MS 41085, ff.33-6, Wilberforce to Dundas, 01 August 1800.

<sup>17</sup> Scanlan, *Freedom’s Debtors*, p.13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.67.

purchase apprentices, often children, as labour.<sup>19</sup> On his arrival in Sierra Leone, Thompson felt that he had been misinformed by the SLC directors. He found the system of apprenticeship to be little different to slavery, especially given the purchasing of apprentices, and felt that the Company's trading practices were tantamount to involvement in the slave trade. His efforts to expose this, and to force the Saints to defend their actions regarding both the Company's activities and apprenticeship, led to a push for Thompson's replacement.<sup>20</sup> Wilberforce and Stephen lobbied Lord Castlereagh, the Foreign Secretary, directly for his removal, although Wilberforce's diary suggests that he was unsure about this course of action. In November 1808, seven months after Thompson's departure, Stephen and Macaulay began pushing for Thompson's dismissal on the grounds that he was insane. Wilberforce wrote that 'I think Stephen takes it too strongly ... I acquiesce in what they deem right & necessary.'<sup>21</sup> He later noted that his main concern was 'of a Quarrel w some native powers, & Blood Shed,' rather than the accusations of hypocrisy Thompson made, which are not mentioned in the diary.<sup>22</sup> Wilberforce's uncertainty about Thompson's dismissal, and to a lesser extent the later clarification of his concerns in his diary, show that he was not the driving force behind it. However, he did not oppose his friends' conclusions. He also commented on two occasions that he was in contact with Thompson's father about the matter, and expressed relief that he 'takes Sons recal admirably.'<sup>23</sup> Wilberforce had nominated Thompson for the position in part because of his friendship with the family and was concerned with the impact of his dismissal on that relationship.

Dr Robert Thorpe, chief justice of the colony, was similarly critical of apprenticeship. He pursued the issue further than Thompson, publishing these criticisms as *A Letter to William Wilberforce* in early 1815. In an unusually passionate diary entry, Wilberforce called Thorpe 'that vile demon,' and suggested that he was insane, mirroring the earlier conversations about Thompson.<sup>24</sup> Apprenticeship was only one of the issues

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<sup>19</sup> Drescher, *Abolition*, p.263; Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*, pp.21-2; Suzanne Schwarz, 'Reconstructing the Life Histories of Liberated Africans: Sierra Leone in the Early Nineteenth Century', *History in Africa*, 39 (2012), pp.175 -207, pp.191-3, 195; Fyfe, *History of Sierra Leone*, pp.106.

<sup>20</sup> Michael J. Turner, 'The Limits of Abolition: Government, Saints and the 'African Question', c.1780-1820', *The English Historical Review*, 112, no.446 (1997), pp.319-357; Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*, pp.65-97.

<sup>21</sup> Bodl., MS Wilberforce d.54, p.17, diary, 13 November 1808.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.20, diary, 25 December 1808.

<sup>23</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce d.54, p.20, p.36, diary, 25 December 1808, 07 August 1809; Turner, 'Limits of Abolition', p.349.

<sup>24</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce c.39, f.28, diary, 11 February 1815.

Thorpe raised, and he finished his pamphlet asking Wilberforce to ‘resign the prominent part you have so unsuccessfully taken,’ and leave the ongoing negotiations with other European powers to Castlereagh.<sup>25</sup> Thorpe had previously met with Wilberforce and other parties privately to express his concerns, and at the end of the pamphlet he accused the abolitionists of deliberately concealing the issues he and Thompson had raised.<sup>26</sup> Over the following months, Wilberforce’s diary includes reference to several meetings about the pamphlet among members of the African Institution.<sup>27</sup> In the end, Macaulay published a response, addressed to the Duke of Gloucester, which focused on Thorpe’s attacks on his own character rather than the criticisms made of the whole project, and a Special Report on the matter was published by the African Institution.<sup>28</sup> Wilberforce did not publicly respond, but diary entries from March and April 1815 indicate that he was involved in preparing Macaulay’s pamphlet.<sup>29</sup>

Wilberforce and Thornton continued to discuss the colony, especially the progress of Africans sent to Sierra Leone from captured slave ships. In 1814, after Thornton met with Kenneth Macaulay, the acting-governor of the colony, he wrote that ‘It is really delightful to contemplate this independent black yeomanry... so lately forming the contents of slave ships & now rising in knowledge.’<sup>30</sup> This reflected what Wilberforce had said about the idea of a free black peasantry in the West Indies during the abolition campaign, rather than the reality of the experience in Sierra Leone. Whether this is a case of misinformation, of Kenneth Macaulay telling Thornton what he wanted to hear, or of wilful naivety on the parts of Thornton and Wilberforce, is unclear. Thorpe’s pamphlet was published a month after Thornton died in January, and in Wilberforce’s diary, he wrote that ‘Poor dear Heny was well qualified to explain & justify all,’ an acknowledgement that Thornton was more involved in the colony than Wilberforce.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Thorpe, *A Letter to William Wilberforce, Esq. M.P. ...* (London: Law and Gilbert, 1815), p.65.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp.67-9.

<sup>27</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.39, ff.29-32, diary, 15 February 1815-14 March 1815.

<sup>28</sup> Zachary Macaulay, *A Letter to His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1815); *Special Report of the Directors of the African Institution...* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1815).

<sup>29</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, pp.30-33, diary 25 March 1815, 01 April 1815, 03 April 1815.

<sup>30</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.51, f.47, Thornton to Wilberforce, 28 September 1814.

<sup>31</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce c.39, f.28, diary, 11 February 1815.

The economic failure of the SLC, and the subsequent transfer of Sierra Leone to the crown, had a continuing impact on the abolitionists' reputations. In 1809, Wilberforce expressed concern to Henry Brougham that the perceived failure of the initiative was making it more difficult to raise subscriptions for the African Institution because it '[proved] the fallaciousness of all such Expectations' regarding introducing civilisation to Africa.<sup>32</sup> Wilberforce thought that a pamphlet arguing that the Company failed because of the costs of defending the territory from slave traders would be helpful in remedying this.<sup>33</sup> In light of Thompson and Thorpe's claims, this proposed pamphlet can also be seen as an attempt to divert criticism of the colony before the accusations came to light.<sup>34</sup> In the longer term, the African Institution reports discussed the current situation in Sierra Leone in an increasingly optimistic manner.

### ***Berbice***

As well as this continued interest in the government of Sierra Leone, Wilberforce became involved in the management of Crown-owned estates in Berbice, a Dutch colony that had been ceded to the British in 1804.<sup>35</sup> In April 1811, a Treasury Commission was appointed to manage the Crown's estates in Berbice, and by extension the enslaved persons attached to those estates. The Commission is not mentioned in the biographies of Wilberforce, including that written by his sons, and also is not included in many histories of abolition.<sup>36</sup> Although Wilberforce's name was listed first in the document setting up the Commission, it was Stephen who was influential in both the establishment of and the appointments to the Commission.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the six months before it was created, Stephen corresponded with Prime Minister Spencer Perceval about its organisation. Wilberforce was clearly aware of the proposed Commission, although his focus was on the members, the original choice of which he thought would be invite 'the imputation of

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<sup>32</sup> UCL, Brougham Papers, 10,953, Wilberforce to Brougham, 16 September 1809.

<sup>33</sup> UCL, Brougham Papers, 10,953, Wilberforce to Brougham, 16 September 1809; Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors*, p.64.

<sup>34</sup> Turner, 'The Limits of Abolition', p.338.

<sup>35</sup> G. Oostindie, "'British Capital, Industry and Perseverance' versus Dutch 'Old School'? The Dutch Atlantic and the Takeover of Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo, 1750-1815', *BMGN – The Low Countries Historical Review*, 127, no.4 (2012), pp.28-56; Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, pp.69-102.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, pp.69-102; Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labour vs Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.113-14.

<sup>37</sup> Coms of Appointment for Management of Crown's Estates in Berbice and S. America, April and July 1811, *PP*, 1811 X, [355]; see Alvin O Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, pp.69-102.

Methodism' (at least according to what Stephen then related to Perceval).<sup>38</sup> Wilberforce's diary from the same period lists the potential Commissioners as 'Stephen H Th<sup>n</sup> Bab<sup>n</sup> W Smith & M<sup>f</sup> and Macaulay; neither Thornton nor Babington were appointed to the commission, which included Nicholas Vansittart, James Gordon and Charles Long.<sup>39</sup>

The Commission ended in 1816, after a private Dutch company, the Sociëteit van Berbice, claimed ownership of the estates involved during negotiations at the Congress of Vienna.<sup>40</sup> In May 1816, the Commissioners wrote a report for the Lords of the Treasury outlining what the Commission had done, and the current state of the estates and enslaved persons. This report explained why, in the Commissioners' opinion, the estates did not generate a profit during the five years. The main reasons they gave were: the original state of the plantations; the mismanagement of their second agent, after the death of the first agent; opposition from other planters; and the end of the Commission's tenure before the positive effects of the third agent's actions came to fruition.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the report, the Commissioners insisted that they did not take on the role as an experiment in amelioration, although they emphasized that they were motivated by humanitarian concern and hopes of combatting high mortality among the enslaved population.<sup>42</sup> The instructions given to the first agent, Lieut. Colonel Duncan Macalister, and repeated to Alexander De la Court and James Walker in turn, correlate with the potential changes mentioned during the anti-slave trade campaign and the regulations later included in amelioration legislations, although many were not put in practice until Walker arrived in Berbice in 1815.<sup>43</sup> These included: religious instruction, encouragement of marriage, more time and land for growing provisions to encourage a more Christian use of Sundays, and changes to the treatment of enslaved women and children. As well as these moral concerns, the instructions also related to the organisation of labour on the Commission-run estates. The agents were asked to introduce task-work, to put an end to night-work, and to increase the use of livestock and machinery to alleviate labour. They were also instructed to restrict the use of the whip, either as

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<sup>38</sup> BL., Add MS 49183, ff.164-171, Stephen to Perceval, 24 September 1810.

<sup>39</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, p.71, diary, 17-20 September 1810; Coms of Appointment, *PP*, 1881 [355].

<sup>40</sup> Oostindie, 'British Capital, Industry and Perseverance', pp.34-5; Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, pp.101-2.

<sup>41</sup> Report of Coms. for Management of Crown Estates in Colony of Berbice, *PP*, 1816 VIII [528], pp.406-55.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, pp.610-611.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, pp.81-4, 95.

punishment or to 'drive' labour, and to use other disciplinary actions such as isolation or additional work. The instructions also referred to the behaviour of the agents, prohibiting them from owning slaves.<sup>44</sup>

In June 1816, Anthony Browne, the parliamentary agent for the Leeward Islands, proposed a motion calling for more information about the Berbice Commission to be presented to the House of Commons, supported by Joseph Marryat, the parliamentary agent for Grenada (and previously for Trinidad). Wilberforce and William Smith, the commissioners present, defended their actions and Wilberforce began to recount the report. However, the debate was cut short due to the low attendance in the Commons that day, and the matter was not raised again at a later date.<sup>45</sup> Wilberforce described this in his diary as 'a sad Brangle.'<sup>46</sup> The lack of any lasting change as a result of the Commission might explain why it was not more prominent at the time and in the historical record. Wilberforce's experience through the Commission, however, may have had an impact on how he viewed the process of gradual emancipation. Unlike his closest colleagues, Stephen and Macaulay, he had never been to the West Indian colonies or been involved in managing enslaved persons.<sup>47</sup> Although he and others did not refer to the Commission during the later campaign, they urged for similar measures to be adopted, especially regarding religion and marriage.<sup>48</sup>

Within a month of this debate, Marryat published *An Examination of the Report of the Berbice Commission*, criticising the choice of Commissioners and their decisions (he also published a pamphlet criticising the Registry Bill).<sup>49</sup> An extract from the *Examination* was published in the *London Courier* on 20 July 1816, along with a letter criticising the African Institution, where he noted the overlap in membership between the two groups.<sup>50</sup> Following this, two letters, signed anonymously by 'Truth,' assumed to be Stephen, were published in the *Courier* defending the Commission and responding to

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<sup>44</sup> Paper B, Papers relating to the Crown Estates in Colony of Berbice, *PP*, 1816 VIII [509], pp.481-7.

<sup>45</sup> HC Deb, 26 June 1816, series 1, 32, cc.1267-70.

<sup>46</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.49, diary, 26 June 1816.

<sup>47</sup> Patrick C. Liscomb, 'Stephen, James (1758-1832)', *ODNB*, September 2005 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/26373>> [accessed 17 March 2020]; J. R. Oldfield, 'Macaulay, Zachary (1768-1838)', *ODNB* May 2009, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/17350>> [accessed 17 March 2020].

<sup>48</sup> HC Deb, 15 May 1823, series 2, 9, cc.257-360.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Marryat, *An Examination of the Report of the Berbice Commissioners and An Answer to the Letter of James Stephen, Esq...* (London: Hughes and Baynes, 1817), the original publication date is assumed from the date of the extract published in the *London Courier*, below; Joseph Marryat, *Thoughts on the Abolition of the Slave Trade ...* (London: J. Ridgeway, 1816).

<sup>50</sup> 20 July 1816, *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, p.2.



Marryat's criticism.<sup>51</sup> Marryat responded to these letters both in the *Courier*, and in an addition to his pamphlet.<sup>52</sup> Throughout these, Marryat mentioned Stephen more than Wilberforce. Other than his brief speech in the House of Commons, and his name attached to documents, there is little published evidence of Wilberforce's involvement. In Marryat's pamphlet, he did not mention the Commissioners' names until his response to the letters by 'Truth', which focuses on Stephen; he only mentioned Wilberforce when criticising James Stephen Jr.'s appointment as private Counsel.<sup>53</sup> Wilberforce did not mention Berbice or the Commission in his surviving correspondence from the period of its operation. In his diary, he noted when he attended meetings about Berbice, but without any specific detail about the conversations. For example, before the Commission was announced, Wilberforce noted a meeting with Vansittart, a member of the Commission, 'abt W Indn commission,' where issues about funding were discussed, and he also noted meetings with Stephen and Perceval on the subject.<sup>54</sup> Overall, he mentioned the Commission less than the African Institution, stopped mentioning the meetings after 1813, and did not record attending meetings more than a few times a year – three in 1811 and 1813, and six in 1812.<sup>55</sup> In February 1816, as the Commission was coming to an end, he met with Walker, the final agent, and continued to meet with him after the publication of the report, but his diary does not record what their conversations were about.<sup>56</sup>

Wilberforce did, however, mention the Commission later. In July 1816, he wrote to Robert Southey, lamenting that the abolitionists were being attacked and that he did not have the time or talent to respond to the accusations. The example he gave of this was the Berbice Commission, implying that there was more that could be said about it, and that the experience supported his thoughts on how best to reform slavery.<sup>57</sup> In a letter to Hannah More in April 1817, after the publication of Marryat's extended pamphlet, Wilberforce wrote that 'the last or Berbice pamphlet is both the most plausible and in some particulars the most abusive of all charges Stephen & myself with subscribing our names knowingly to a falsehood.'<sup>58</sup> He also noted that Marryat 'advocates for all

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<sup>51</sup> 26 July 1816 *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, p.2; 05 August 1816, *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, p.2.

<sup>52</sup> 08 August 1816, *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, p.2; Marryat, *An Examination*.

<sup>53</sup> Marryat, *An Examination*, p.75.

<sup>54</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, p.78, p.96, p.104, diary 03 January 1811, 13 April 1811, 24 May 1811.

<sup>55</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, pp.105-109, pp.16-149, pp.169-179, diary; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.39, p.8, diary.

<sup>56</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM.2005.5787, p.49, p.51, p.52, diary, 1816.

<sup>57</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.50, ff.27-30, Wilberforce to Southey, 23 July 1816.

<sup>58</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.48, ff.8-12, Wilberforce to More, 11 April 1817.

anecdotes to illustrate the character & conduct of the Saints,' suggesting that Wilberforce and his circle were being held by Marryat to a higher standard than other people.<sup>59</sup>

When these letters are considered alongside Wilberforce's comments to Stephen about the members of the Commission in 1810, and his reaction to Thompson and Thorpe's allegations about Sierra Leone, a pattern emerges. In 1810, he had been concerned that the Commission would be criticised as Methodist. At around the same time, he was working to prevent a scandal about coercive labour practices in Sierra Leone which would damage the SLC directors' reputations. When Thorpe's pamphlet was published, one of the first worries the abolitionists had was that it was 'doing Harm in France,' at the same time that they were endeavouring to establish popular opposition to the slave trade there.<sup>60</sup> In 1816-17, he expressed concern about the perception of the Commission and its members, separate to the Commission's actions. The lasting impact that the Commission and its supposed failures could have on other projects, such as the Registry Bill, seems to have been more present in Wilberforce's mind than the Commission itself was. This supports C.L. Brown's theory in *Moral Capital* that the Saints used the moral victory of abolition to leverage influence and support for other goals.<sup>61</sup> In 1810-11 Wilberforce had been lobbying Thomas Douglas, the earl of Selkirk, and a Mr Inglis who was involved in the North West Company, a fur-trading operation, about stopping sales of alcohol to Indigenous peoples in Canada.<sup>62</sup> In his diary, Wilberforce swore 'to addict myself to African Matters & N. American Indians matters Cetera w. View to carry through the other by gaining Influence.'<sup>63</sup>

However, Wilberforce was not singled out for particular criticism. With regards to Sierra Leone, Thompson and Thorpe were more critical of Macaulay than of anyone else, especially the multiple roles he played in the colony.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, criticism of the Berbice Commission focused on Stephen, because of his central role in the creation of the Commission, and its defence after 1816. There is no obvious reason that Wilberforce

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<sup>59</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.48, ff.8-12, Wilberforce to More, 11 April 1817.

<sup>60</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.39, f.29, diary, 13 February 1815.

<sup>61</sup> C.L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp.457-8; Zoë Laidlaw, 'Investigating Empire: Humanitarians, Reform and the Commission of Eastern Inquiry', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40, no.5 (2012), pp.749-68.

<sup>62</sup> Bodl. Library, MS. Wilberforce d.54, p.59, p.88, p.89, diary, 31 May 1810, 28 February 1811, 09 March 1811; Selkirk was involved in settlement efforts in Nova Scotia, and the North West Company was based in Montreal.

<sup>63</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.54, p.89, diary, 10 March 1811.

<sup>64</sup> Turner, 'The Limits of Abolition', p.345; Thorpe, *Letter*, pp.29-30.

was not named. However, in June 1821, an inquiry into corruption in the administration of justice in Tobago was proposed after the resignation of the attorney-general in protest at the ‘unjust practices prevailing.’<sup>65</sup> When introducing the motion, Lord Nugent said that anyone who opposed corruption in the West Indian colonies, ‘was denounced as a person connected with the African Institution, or he was termed a Wilberforcean,’ going on to describe the more positive connotations of Wilberforce’s name in Britain.<sup>66</sup> The abolitionists’ critics in the 1810s would have known about the positive opinion of Wilberforce that prevailed, and may have felt that attacking him could discredit the message of the pamphlets. Although Macaulay and Stephen were prominent abolitionists, they were less well-known than Wilberforce, as private rather than public figures, and therefore better targets for criticism.

## *Haiti*

As his involvement in Berbice declined, Wilberforce became increasingly influential on the government of the Kingdom of Haiti. Dessalines had declared Haitian independence with the end of armed conflict with France in 1804, but it divided into two states after his death in 1806. In 1811, Henri Christophe, who had become President of the northern state in 1807, declared himself to be King and created the Kingdom of Haiti, with the State of Haiti continuing as a republic in the south.<sup>67</sup> During negotiations with France in 1814-15, Wilberforce and Stephen had encouraged Castlereagh and Wellington to dissuade the French from attempting to re-conquer the island, and they continued to monitor the situation, informing Christophe in 1818 that it looked unlikely, and assuring him that they would warn him if the idea was revisited.<sup>68</sup> Wilberforce had no direct contact with Haiti until January 1815, when he received a letter from the Count de Limonade, the Haitian Secretary of State.<sup>69</sup> Later that year, possibly related to this correspondence, he encouraged Prince Saunders, a free black educator from Massachusetts, to become Christophe’s advisor, and sent a supply of vaccines to Haiti

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<sup>65</sup> HC Deb, 06 June 1821, series 2, 5, cc.1119, 1123.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) pp.141-166.

<sup>68</sup> Wilberforce to Henri Christophe, 08 October 1818, in *Corresp.*, I, pp.366-87.

<sup>69</sup> Wilberforce to Macaulay, 07 January 1815, in *Life*, IV, pp.226-7; Pollock, *Wilberforce*, pp.316-17 – Pollock says Wilberforce was in contact with Christophe, but his correspondence suggests otherwise.

with him.<sup>70</sup> In 1816, Wilberforce and Christophe entered into a correspondence about the latter's planned reforms. Although Wilberforce was unsure about the propriety of corresponding with foreign powers, especially as the frequency with which he wrote to Christophe increased in 1817, he decided that if he showed the letters to Lord Liverpool, then Prime Minister, he would 'avoid all misconstruction.'<sup>71</sup>

In 1816, at Christophe's request, Saunders asked Wilberforce for help to send English teachers to Haiti, to set up schools and help introduce English into common use. Six teachers (at least some of whom were also missionaries) travelled to Haiti over the next two years.<sup>72</sup> Wilberforce and Christophe also corresponded about principles of government, with Wilberforce sending Christophe *Dialogues on Political Economy*, a collection of works by political economists including Adam Smith. Christophe expressed a wish to emulate the British rather than the French through language as 'the only means of preserving our independence,' and also to convince his subjects to convert to Anglicanism, because the Roman Catholic clergy were known as 'the apostles and the defenders of slavery.'<sup>73</sup> Wilberforce also encouraged Christophe to make religious principles the basis of his government.<sup>74</sup> In 1819, Wilberforce and Arthur Young, the agriculturalist, coordinated to send ploughs, and later ploughmen, to Haiti, after Wilberforce commented on the fact that they were not used there.<sup>75</sup> As he had regarding education, Wilberforce tried to ensure that the ploughmen were of 'good moral character,' combining religious and practical considerations.<sup>76</sup>

Wilberforce emphasised religion in his correspondence with Henri Christophe, and he reflected on Christophe's morality when defending him in correspondence. To Lord Teignmouth in 1817, he denied taking any political stance regarding Haiti, but praised Christophe for 'promoting the intellectual and moral improvement of the people over whom he presides.'<sup>77</sup> After Christophe's death, he made similar comments to Lord

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<sup>70</sup> Arthur O. White, 'Prince Saunders: An Instance of Social Mobility Among Antebellum New England Blacks', *The Journal of Negro History*, 60, no.4 (1975), p.528; Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p.317.

<sup>71</sup> *Life*, IV, p.353.

<sup>72</sup> Job B. Clement, 'History of Education in Haiti, 1804-1915', *Revisita de Historis de América*, no.88 (1979), pp.35-36; Wilberforce to Henri Christophe, 08 October 1818, in *Corresp.*, I, pp.366-387.

<sup>73</sup> Henri Christophe to Wilberforce, 18 November 1816, in *Corresp.*, I, pp.357-363, Bodl., MS. Wilberforce c.45, ff.23-6, contemporary translations.

<sup>74</sup> Wilberforce to Henri Christophe, 08 October 1818, in *Corresp.*, I, pp.366-387.

<sup>75</sup> BL., Add MS 35133 ff.44-5, 448-50, 452-3, corresp. between Wilberforce and Young; postscript, Wilberforce to Henri Christophe, 08 October 1818, in *Corresp.*, I, vol 1, pp.366-87.

<sup>76</sup> BL., Add MS 35133, ff.448-50, Wilberforce to Young, 25 October 1819.

<sup>77</sup> Wilberforce to Teignmouth, 18 June 1817, in *Corresp.*, I, pp.363-5.

Holland, asking him to take the disadvantages that Christophe was working against into consideration, having formerly been enslaved along with his subjects.<sup>78</sup> However, Wilberforce was less involved in the political side of Haitian affairs than Thomas Clarkson, who was in more frequent contact with Christophe and members of his government. In 1818, Henri Christophe appointed Clarkson his agent in Europe, and Clarkson delivered letters and lobbied on Christophe's behalf at the Congress at Aix-la-Chapelle, alongside his efforts against the slave trade.<sup>79</sup> During the abolition campaign, Wilberforce had used Haiti as an example of the risk to colonial security of continuing the transatlantic slave trade. After abolition, Wilberforce and other abolitionists pointed to Haiti as an example of the potential to civilise Africans and Creoles. However, this support focused on the Kingdom of Haiti and Henri Christophe, not the southern republic. After Christophe's suicide in October 1820, the island was re-unified under Jean-Pierre Boyer, and Wilberforce distanced himself from the new regime.<sup>80</sup>

### ***Barbados***

Marryat used abolitionist support of Henri Christophe as evidence of the Berbice Commission's unsuitability to govern in the West Indian colonies.<sup>81</sup> This was not the only reason that the abolitionists' intervention in colonial matters was criticised. In April 1816, enslaved persons in Barbados had rebelled against the white population of the island, burning sugar cane and taking possession of arms from the militia armouries. The revolt was swiftly suppressed by the militia, and the majority of the enslaved persons involved were then executed or deported.<sup>82</sup> The Barbados Colonial Assembly published a *Report... into the Origin, Causes and Progress of the Late Insurrection* in January 1818, 21 months after the rebellion, and the abolitionists, through the Registry Bill, were blamed.<sup>83</sup> News of the slave revolt had, however,

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<sup>78</sup> BL., Add MS 51820, ff.34-5, Wilberforce to Vassal-Holland, 11 December 1820.

<sup>79</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p.318; BL., Add MS 41266, Clarkson Papers, vol.VI.

<sup>80</sup> UCL, Brougham Papers, 10,958, Wilberforce to Brougham, 23 April 1821.

<sup>81</sup> 20 July 1816, *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, p.2; 08 August 1816, *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, p.2.

<sup>82</sup> Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982, pp.254-65; Hilary McD. Beckles, 'The Slave-drivers' War: Bussa and the 1816 Barbados Slave Rebellion' *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, 39 (1985), pp.84-110.

<sup>83</sup> *The Report from a Select Committee of the House of Assembly appointed to Inquire into the Origin, Causes and Progress of the Late Insurrection* (Barbados: W. Walker, 1818).

reached England within two months.<sup>84</sup> In his speech on a motion about legislation passed in Jamaica, on 19 June 1816, Wilberforce referred to Barbados, saying that ‘the recent disturbance was not owing to the Registry Bill, but to the violent language of the planters.’<sup>85</sup> Later in 1816, a pamphlet titled *Remarks on the Insurrection in Barbadoes, and the Bill for the Registration of Slaves* was published anonymously, making a similar argument.<sup>86</sup> The report published by the Barbados Assembly also said that the cause of the rebellion had been the spread of a rumour, common in cases of insurrection, that the colonial newspapers said enslaved persons were to be freed, and that the white population was going to deny them this.<sup>87</sup> The two reports agreed, therefore, on the essential cause of the revolt, a rumour regarding emancipation based on reports about the Registry Bill, but the two sides blamed each other as the source of the rumour.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the abolitionists were keen to explain that the Registry Bill was not the first step towards emancipation, but a way to better enforce slave trade abolition. The Barbados Assembly accused the African Institution of hypocrisy for stating that their ultimate goal was emancipation while also denying any connection between that and the Registry Bill.<sup>88</sup> In January 1817, between the rebellion and the publication of the report, the Barbados Assembly had, however, passed legislation creating a register of slaves, overturning a resolution against the measure passed a year earlier.<sup>89</sup> It was the only island to do so, despite an Address from both Houses recommending the measure to the colonial assemblies, and Craton suggested that this was intended to prevent any interference from the British parliament.<sup>90</sup> This pattern of apparent cooperation through limited colonial legislation to avoid interference by the British government continued into the 1820s, when the campaign to reform and abolish slavery began.

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<sup>84</sup> ‘Barbadoes’, *Morning Post*, 05 June 1816, p.3.

<sup>85</sup> HC Deb, 19 June 1816, series 1, 34, c.1158.

<sup>86</sup> *Remarks on the Insurrection in Barbadoes, and the Bill for the Registration of Slaves* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1816), pp.3-4 – Beckles suggests that the African Institution was responsible for the report: Beckles, ‘The ‘Slave-drivers’ War’, p.86.

<sup>87</sup> *Report from a Select Committee*, pp.6, 11; Wim Klooster, ‘Slave Revolts, Royal Justice, and a Ubiquitous Rumour in the Age of Revolutions’, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 71, no.1 (2014), pp.401-424.

<sup>88</sup> *Report from a Select Committee*, p.19.

<sup>89</sup> *Eleventh Report of the Directors of the African Institution* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1817), pp.21-2, 114-124; appendix to *Report from a Select Committee*, pp.57-8.

<sup>90</sup> Craton, *Testing the Chains*, p.265.

## A New Campaign, 1818-1825

In April 1818, Wilberforce moved for all laws related to the treatment of enslaved persons to be laid before the House of Commons. This marked a shift in the abolitionists' policies; as well as working against the slave trade in Europe, they also campaigned against the abuse of enslaved persons in the British West Indian colonies. Pollock argued that this shift towards emancipation was influenced by Wilberforce's positive experience with Haiti, but this discounts the influence of Wilberforce's other experiences with Sierra Leone and Berbice.<sup>91</sup> Wilberforce presented his motions in two parts: first, for all laws passed in the colonies relating to the treatment of enslaved persons, the prevention of illegal slave trading, and the condition of the free black population to be presented to the House of Commons; and second, for accounts of the increase or decrease of enslaved, free black, and white populations in the colonies since 1807 to be presented, as well as laws and correspondence relating to the Address from June 1816 calling for the promotion of the moral and religious improvement of enslaved persons.<sup>92</sup> All the motions were passed.

Immediately after this, Sir Samuel Romilly introduced a motion about the treatment of enslaved persons in Dominica.<sup>93</sup> This was the first of three he successfully presented over six weeks; the following two related to Nevis and St. Christopher respectively.<sup>94</sup> Romilly highlighted specific examples of ill-treatment and injustice in the colonies, calling for inquiries into the cases. As well as the debates being indicative of increasing interest in reforming the treatment of enslaved persons, Wilberforce's contributions reveal his immediate concerns on the matter. His first response was a statement on the treatment of enslaved persons:

The general state of negro degradation must be cured by the wisdom and kindness of provident laws, before it would be practicable to elevate the slaves into the scale of civilized society; they must endeavour to promote their moral and religious

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<sup>91</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p.318.

<sup>92</sup> HC Deb, 22 April 1818, series 1, 38, cc.294-8.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, cc.298-323.

<sup>94</sup> HC Deb, 20 May 1818, series 1, 38, cc.841-55; HC Deb, 03 June 1818, series 1, 38, cc.1201-7.

instruction; above all they must promote the practice of marriage, if they desired to fit them for higher distinctions in life.<sup>95</sup>

As well as calling for reforms to colonial laws, Wilberforce was suggesting that this could in turn lead to the emancipation of the enslaved population – the ‘higher distinctions in life.’ The Berbice Commission had applied similar ideas to the enslaved persons they managed, and this is therefore indicative of continuity in Wilberforce’s thought. His responses to the second two proposed inquiries focused on the administration of justice in the colonies, which he criticised as inconsistently applied and corrupt.<sup>96</sup>

Ahead of the general election in August 1818, Wilberforce decided to continue as MP for Bramber. He mentioned this decision in his diary, writing that if he left public life two years later, ‘I Hope to have previously sown the seeds & laid the foundation of the W Ind. Reform.’<sup>97</sup> However, the abolitionists did not pursue any further parliamentary action until 1821. When parliament resumed after the summer in 1818, the Congress at Aix-la-Chapelle was imminent, and the question of the European slave trade was the abolitionists’ priority again. This break continued into 1819, when Wilberforce’s parliamentary speeches were mostly on penal reform, and then in 1820, Wilberforce became embroiled in the debates about George IV’s divorce and Queen Caroline’s conduct. They had been separated since 1796, and Caroline left Britain in 1814, having been excluded from court and separated from her daughter during the Regency, but returned when George IV assumed the throne, at which time her alleged infidelity became the subject of parliamentary debate when the king tried to divorce her.<sup>98</sup> Pollock devoted a chapter to Wilberforce’s role in this, which centred on the exclusion of the queen’s name from the liturgy.<sup>99</sup> Hague claims that ministers dissuaded Wilberforce from pursuing matters related to slavery further, ‘so as not to prejudice their efforts to win greater international agreement on the [slave] trade.’<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> HC Deb, 22 April 1818, series 1, 38, c.322.

<sup>96</sup> HC Deb, 20 May 1818, series 1, 38, c.846; HC Deb, 03 June 1818, series 1, 38, c.1206.

<sup>97</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM 2005.5787, p.135, diary, 10 May 1818; also discussed in Hague, *Wilberforce*, p.449.

<sup>98</sup> E. A. Smith ‘Caroline [Princess of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel] (1768-1821)’, *ODNB*, January 2008 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/4722>> [accessed: 13 March 2020].

<sup>99</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, pp.339-50.

<sup>100</sup> Hague, *Wilberforce*, p.477.



Wilberforce was still actively involved in parliamentary matters related to slavery at this point, but he started to prepare to withdraw from the leadership of the campaign. In May 1821 he wrote to Thomas Fowell Buxton, an independent MP (for Weymouth) and an Evangelical, to ask him to take over as leader of the abolitionists in the House of Commons. Buxton was a member of the African Institution, a director of the London Missionary Society, and had supported Wilberforce's motions about Queen Caroline.<sup>101</sup> When he approached Buxton, Wilberforce wrote that:

Now for many, many years, I have been longing to bring forward that great subject, the condition of the Negro slaves in our Trans-Atlantic colonies ... a cause recommended to me, by every consideration of religion, justice, and humanity. Under this impression I have been waiting ... for some member of Parliament, who, if I were to retire or to be laid by, would be an eligible leader in this holy enterprise. I have for some time been viewing you in this connection...<sup>102</sup>

Buxton did not accept the request for another eighteen months, in October 1822, taking time to consider the matter. According to his memoir, his hesitation was due to concern that pushing for amelioration might lead to slave revolts in the West Indian colonies.<sup>103</sup> The West India interest repeated this in the aftermath of rebellions and in any conversations in the House of Commons about slavery, and Buxton's hesitation shows how convincing they were.

Although Wilberforce and Buxton had similar interests and connections, and Buxton had close links to the Quakers through his family, he was not necessarily the obvious successor to the leadership. Buxton had only entered the House of Commons in 1818, and so was not a long-standing abolitionist in that space. Brougham, who had first entered the House of Commons in 1810 and had been in correspondence with Wilberforce about abolition before that, seemed to think the role should have been his. In 1825, Wilberforce mentioned this in a letter to Buxton, writing that he had been

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<sup>101</sup> Thomas Fowell Buxton (1786-1845), *History of Parliament Online* <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/buxton-thomas-1786-1845>> [accessed 20 March 2020]; Bodl., MS. Brit. Emp. s.18/C106, ff.1-2, Wilberforce to Buxton, [1820].

<sup>102</sup> Bodl., MS. Brit Emp s18/C106, f.4, Wilberforce to Buxton, 24 May 1821, also quoted in Charles Buxton (ed.), *Memoirs of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, Baronet, with selections from his correspondence* (London: John Murray, 1848), pp.117-19.

<sup>103</sup> Buxton, *Memoirs*, pp.121-2.

concerned about Brougham's affiliation with the opposition in the Commons, in comparison to Buxton's independence and evangelicalism.<sup>104</sup>

Buxton's delay did not leave the abolitionists in limbo. In June 1821, Wilberforce introduced a motion regarding the West Indian colonies. The proposed Address was for an inquiry into the number of apprenticed or enlisted Africans who had been taken from captured slave ships, and the consideration of measures to help them when their terms of service were ending.<sup>105</sup> The motion was the result of the decision made in 1807 to apprentice or enlist re-captured Africans for a period of 14 years. However, the order did not stipulate what was to happen at the end of the period, which was rapidly approaching for the earliest captives. His suggestion was that those in the West Indian colonies ought to be re-located to Sierra Leone, as some of the Africans who had been enlisted instead of apprenticed had been.<sup>106</sup> Although the bill did not directly contribute to the campaign against slavery, it is demonstrative of the scope of Wilberforce's interest in the West Indian colonies, and abolitionist motions for information often included the legal situation of free Blacks.<sup>107</sup> However, Wilberforce did not try to change the original practice, despite the previous controversy surrounding apprenticeship in Sierra Leone.

After the Congress of Verona in 1822, the abolitionists began to focus their efforts on gradual emancipation. It was becoming clear to Wilberforce and others that the efforts for amelioration were unsuccessful. Before these efforts aimed at the West Indian colonies began in earnest, however, he turned his attention to the increasing British presence in Africa, especially at the Cape of Good Hope. In July 1822, he moved for an Address to His Majesty to prohibit the establishment of slavery in new settlements in the region.<sup>108</sup> Although this was intended to place territorial limits on slavery, rather than abolish it, Wilberforce again hinted at plans for emancipation, more openly than he had in 1818:

Not I only, but all the chief advocates of the abolition of the slave trade ... scrupled not to declare, from the very first, that their object was ... to be surely though slowly

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<sup>104</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM 2005.5811, Wilberforce to Buxton, 23 February 1825; Pollock, *Wilberforce*, pp.348-9 – Pollock emphasises the religious side, the correspondence the political side.

<sup>105</sup> HC Deb, 28 June 1821, series 2, 5, cc.1444-5.

<sup>106</sup> 'Parliamentary Intelligence', *The Times*, 29 June 1821, p.2.

<sup>107</sup> HC Deb, 05 July 1815, series 1, 31, cc.1127-33; HC Deb, 22 April 1818, series 1, 38, cc.294-6.

<sup>108</sup> HC Deb, 25 July 1822, series 2, 7, cc.1783-801.

advancing towards the period when these unhappy beings might exchange their degraded state of slavery for that of a free and industrious peasantry. To that most interesting object, doubtless, I still look forward; though I confess, that perhaps of late we have been chargeable with not having paid due attention to that subject.<sup>109</sup>

He also drew on the idea of British liberty and said that it was unnecessary to explain that slavery was a moral evil. Despite this more overtly antislavery tone, Wilberforce rejected immediate emancipation, saying that slavery was ‘reconcilable with those principles only on the grounds of necessity’ where it already existed.<sup>110</sup> This was, presumably, a way of passing an explicitly antislavery Address without it being seen as a threat to slavery in the West Indian colonies. It also reiterated the abolitionist view that enslaved persons were not ready for freedom, because of their enslavement.

The Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Dominions (henceforth the Anti-Slavery Society) first met in January 1823, modelled on the Liverpool Anti-Slavery Society founded in October 1822 by James Cropper, a merchant.<sup>111</sup> With the foundation of the new society, the African Institution, which had reported on some of the issues relating to the treatment of enslaved persons since 1811, began to decline, and stopped meeting in 1827, having focused only on the foreign slave trade since 1823.<sup>112</sup> There was a considerable overlap between the leading members of the two societies, including the Duke of Gloucester as President, but their goals and structures differed.<sup>113</sup> The Anti-Slavery Society used the same methods as the campaign against the slave trade, circulating literature and calling for petitions prior to motions in parliament. The new society had five sub-committees to organise publications, newspaper reports, the collection of evidence, finances, and petitions and societies in other towns.<sup>114</sup> Following the methods used against the slave trade, in 1823 the society published 50,000 copies of an initial summary, entitled *A Brief View of the Nature and Effects of Negro Slavery*. Before setting out its arguments, *A Brief View* provided information about slavery, and made statements about the continuing abuses of

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<sup>109</sup> HC Deb, 25 July 1822, series 2, 7, c.1785.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, c.1793.

<sup>111</sup> Mark Jones, ‘The mobilisation of public opinion against the slave trade and slavery: Popular abolitionism in national and regional politics, 1781-1838’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 1998), pp.144-6.

<sup>112</sup> Ackerson, *African Institution*, pp.193, 208, 217-18.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p.194.

<sup>114</sup> Jones, ‘Mobilisation’, p.148.

the system, and collective national guilt. It ended with a statement of hope that the subject would soon be considered in parliament, and a call for petitions.<sup>115</sup> More than 200 petitions for amelioration were sent to the House of Commons in 1823, although only 158 of them arrived before Buxton's motion.<sup>116</sup> In both *A Brief View* and a similar 3-page pamphlet, the abolitionists argued that gradual emancipation was the best way to ensure the total abolition of the slave trade, and included a refusal to assign individual blame, targeting the system rather than slave-owners.<sup>117</sup>

In March 1823, Wilberforce published *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire in behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies*, outlining his argument for the education and gradual emancipation of enslaved persons. He began by writing that 'the present embarrassments and distress of our country ... powerfully enforce on me the urgency of the obligation under which we lie, to commence, without delay, the preparatory measures' for emancipation.<sup>118</sup> The main intention of the pamphlet seems to have been to raise awareness of the continuing poor conditions of slavery, with a large section of the work dedicated to describing them. One of the features he focused on was that Christian marriage among enslaved persons was uncommon, which he called 'one of the most influential in its immoral and degrading effects,' but he also discussed the legal system and physical mistreatment.<sup>119</sup> He referenced Dundas' suggestion that children born after a specific date should automatically be free, rather than inheriting enslavement from the parents, and Burke's earlier plan for amelioration and gradual emancipation 'by education, and above all, by religious instruction.'<sup>120</sup> Although he did not outline what the 'preparatory measures' ought to be, both the criticisms of slavery and references to earlier plans are indicative of what he hoped would happen. This is supported by the similarity between the ideas espoused in the pamphlet and the instructions issued for Berbice in 1811.

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<sup>115</sup> Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery, *A Brief View of the Nature and Effects of Negro Slavery* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1823).

<sup>116</sup> Jones, 'Mobilisation', p.151.

<sup>117</sup> *London Society for Mitigating and Gradually Abolishing the State of Slavery throughout the British Dominions*, (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1823).

<sup>118</sup> William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire in behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1823), pp.1-2.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, pp.20, 11-25.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, pp.5-7.

In a private letter to Buxton in November 1822, he had written that ‘I have often thought that some Modifications of Burke’s plan would be adviseable,’ and that it being Burke’s plan might go some way to ‘abate Envy & silence the Clamor.’<sup>121</sup> Burke’s plan, a drafted bill from c.1780, often referred to as the ‘Negro code’, was for reforms to the slave trade and slavery ‘in essentials...similar to those being advocated by Granville Sharp, James Ramsay, or Beilby Porteus,’ with the addition of regulations on the coast of Africa.<sup>122</sup> Burke had proposed some legal protection of the enslaved, placing them ‘under the guardianship of agents of the British state,’ and linking their ability to purchase their own freedom to conditions such as marriage and religious instruction, reforms that Wilberforce introduced to Berbice in 1811 (albeit without an option for manumission) and championed on a national stage from 1822.<sup>123</sup> The proposed code was circulated privately; Canning sent a copy to Pitt and Grenville in 1802, and so it probable that Wilberforce saw it.<sup>124</sup>

The structure of his arguments followed the same pattern as his 1807 *Letter*; after the description of slavery, he responded to obstacles to and arguments against gradual emancipation, emphasizing the resistance of the colonial assemblies. He referenced the anti-slave trade campaigns several times, asserting that gradual emancipation ‘was our great and ultimate object.’<sup>125</sup> At the beginning and end of the pamphlet, Wilberforce mentioned the ‘generally prevailing ignorance of [slavery’s] real nature,’ and appealed to the justice, humanity, policy, and religious feeling of Britons, suggesting national guilt in his closing paragraphs.<sup>126</sup> This again mirrored the rhetoric of earlier abolitionist literature. As he had during the efforts to encourage other nations to abolish their slave trades, Wilberforce drew on his experience campaigning against the slave trade in his rhetoric.

Other pro-emancipation literature made similar references to the campaign against the slave trade and emphasised that their new direction was the result of a lack of change since 1807. This began with William Dickson’s *Mitigation of Slavery* in 1814,

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<sup>121</sup> Bodl., MS. Brit. Emp. s.558, ff.7-9, Wilberforce to Buxton, 29 November 1822 (emphasis Wilberforce’s own, also quoted in *Life*, V, p.157).

<sup>122</sup> P.J. Marshall, *Edmund Burke and the British Empire in the West Indies: wealth, power, and slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.200, see pp.177-201 for more on the proposed code.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, p.191.

<sup>124</sup> Marshall, *Burke and the British Empire*, p.181; BL., Add MS 69038, ff.53-6, Canning to Grenville, 15 March 1802.

<sup>125</sup> Wilberforce, *Appeal*, p.34.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, pp.1-2, 74-7.

which focused on political economy and practical considerations.<sup>127</sup> The first part of the work comprised a series of letters from Joshua Steele, a resident slave-owner in Barbados, in which he described changes made to the management of his slaves, and the resultant profits. Steele's experiment was to ban the use of the whip, introduce rewards for work, and eventually to give the enslaved land and wages, when they proved responsive to reward.<sup>128</sup> In contrast to the abolitionists' plans in Berbice, Steele did not introduce religious instruction, because (he claimed) 'bad laws and examples prevent the Negroes from embracing Christianity.'<sup>129</sup> This also contrasted with Sir John Gladstone's amelioration efforts in Demerara, in which he introduced religious instruction, and did not alter working conditions as much.<sup>130</sup> The two different perspectives on amelioration could be explained as the difference between initiatives based on day-to-day management in Steele's case, versus absentee directives in Gladstone's. The second part of Dickson's work detailed the comparative economic advantage of encouraging population growth through births rather than importation, a key argument throughout the abolition campaigns.<sup>131</sup>

In 1823-4, after Wilberforce's *Appeal*, Clarkson, Macaulay and Stephen all published on emancipation. Clarkson and Macaulay both described the conditions of slavery, in a similar manner to Wilberforce, but offered different models for change. Clarkson, in *Thoughts on the necessity of improving the condition of the slaves*, called for a new system of laws, and for the gradual education and eventual emancipation of the enslaved, citing Steele's example and Dundas' 1792 Resolutions as models.<sup>132</sup> Macaulay's pamphlet, *Negro Slavery*, was less specific about what ought to happen, but also discussed the lack of effective legislation.<sup>133</sup> Stephen's two-volume *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated* detailed the legal situation, and compared it to reality, concluding that urgent change was needed.<sup>134</sup> All the pamphlets criticised colonial assemblies for deliberately passing empty laws, and argued that this proved the

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<sup>127</sup> William Dickson, *Mitigation of Slavery, in two parts* (London: R & A Taylor, 1814).

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, pp.1-20.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, p.xii.

<sup>130</sup> Burnard and Candlin, 'Sir John Gladstone', pp.761-2.

<sup>131</sup> Dickson, *Mitigation of Slavery*, pp.193-514; Katherine Paugh, *The Politics of Reproduction: Race, Medicine, and Fertility in the Age of Abolition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.171.

<sup>132</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *Thoughts on the Necessity of Improving the Conditions of the Slaves in the British West Colonies, with a View to their Ultimate Emancipation* (London: Richard Taylor, 1823).

<sup>133</sup> Zachary Macaulay, *Negro Slavery; or A view of some of the more prominent features of that state of society* (London: Richard Taylor, 1823).

<sup>134</sup> James Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated, as it exists in Law and Practice* (London: Joseph Butterworth and Son, 1824).

necessity of intervention from the British government. They based their descriptions on accounts from the West India interest and colonial legislation and pointed to this as proof that they were not selecting evidence to suit their agenda; legislation was the most available source of impartial information about the colonies. Wilberforce did not discuss his evidence explicitly, but also made direct reference to colonial legislation, presumably for similar reasons.

While the *Appeal* contained many of the arguments that featured prominently in the emancipation campaign, it did not include discussion of free labour, which was covered in Dickson and Clarkson's works.<sup>135</sup> Other works, like Cropper's *Letters Addressed to William Wilberforce* made these arguments their focus, and used sugar cultivated in India as the basis of their arguments in favour of the benefits of free labour.<sup>136</sup> Thus it was also connected with arguments about preferential duties on sugar from the West Indian colonies, rather than being solely targeted on slavery. In 1821, when the question of sugar duties had first been raised in parliament, the West India interest painted the matter as a coalition between the East India interest and the 'Saints', and as an attack on the West India interest.<sup>137</sup> Granville Sharp had raised similar points in a letter to Wilberforce in 1796, but nothing had been pursued at that time.<sup>138</sup> Wilberforce supported Cropper's arguments in a debate on sugar duties in May 1823, and had pointed to the productivity of free blacks in Trinidad and Sierra Leone as evidence that Africans and those of African descent were willing to labour for wages, but did not rely on free trade ideology in his arguments for emancipation.<sup>139</sup> This may be tied

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<sup>135</sup> Dickson, *Mitigation*, pp.193-199; Clarkson, *Thoughts*, pp.48-54; for more on free labour and slavery, see Drescher, *Mighty Experiment*; Drescher, 'Abolitionist Expectations: Britain', *Slavery & Abolition*, 21, no.2 (2000), pp.41-66, pp.49-50.

<sup>136</sup> James Cropper, *Letters Addressed to William Wilberforce, MP, Recommending the Encouragement of the Cultivation of Sugar in our Dominions in the East Indies*, (London: Longman, Hurst, and Co., 1822); see also James Cropper and John Gladstone, *Correspondence between John Gladstone, Esq. MP and James Cropper, Esq. on the Present State of Slavery in the British West Indies...* (Liverpool: Thos. Kaye, 1824); James Cropper, *Relief for West Indian Distress shewing the Inefficiency of Protecting Duties on East India Sugar and pointing out other modes of certain relief* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1823); Zachary Macaulay, *East and West India sugar, or, A Refutation of the Claims of the West India Colonists to a Protecting Duty on East India Sugar* (London: Lupton Relfe, 1823); David Brion Davis, 'James Cropper and the British Anti-Slavery Movement, 1821-1823', *The Journal of Negro History*, 45, no.4 (1960), pp.241-258.

<sup>137</sup> HC Deb, 25 June 1821, series 2, 5, cc.1312-13.

<sup>138</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.3, f.22, Sharp to Wilberforce, 11 December 1796.

<sup>139</sup> HC Deb, 22 May 1823, series 2, 9, cc.461-63; Drescher, *Mighty Experiment*, pp.115-18; Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772-1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp.303-8; Richard Huzzey, 'Free Trade, Free Labour, and Slave Sugar in Victorian Britain', *The Historical Journal*, 53, no.2 (2010), pp.359-379; Andrea Major, 'The Slavery of East and West': Abolitionists and 'unfree' Labour in India, 1820-1833', *Slavery and Abolition*, 31, no. 4 (2010), pp.501-525; HC Deb, 25 July 1822, series 2, 7, cc.1784-95.

to his stance on other free trade matters – he had voted in favour of the Corn Laws in 1815.<sup>140</sup>

Comparisons between the labour systems in the West Indies and India were made throughout the emancipation campaign, as proof that free labour was superior to slave-labour. In 1822, during his motion on slavery at the Cape of Good Hope, Wilberforce said that in various areas under both East India Company (EIC) control (St. Helena and Bencoolen) and crown rule (Ceylon), the EIC and colonial officials had begun gradual emancipation through free-births.<sup>141</sup> Similarly, when he presented a Quaker petition for the abolition of slavery in 1823, discussed below, Wilberforce compared West Indian slavery with the Indian example.<sup>142</sup> Wilberforce did not claim that there was no slavery in India, but he pointed to the system of free-births as an example of emancipation which the West Indian colonies ought to follow.<sup>143</sup> The final emancipation bill was applicable ‘throughout the British Colonies’ in contrast to the Slave Trade Abolition Act, which specified that it applied to the trade to the West Indian colonies.<sup>144</sup> However, the EIC continued to rule India until 1858, despite greater governmental oversight, and the 1833 Act specified that it did not apply to the region (including Ceylon).<sup>145</sup>

Wilberforce’s main concern regarding the Indian Ocean world was not emancipation of the enslaved. Although the regions where the process of gradual emancipation had begun were far from the majority of EIC territory, he and other abolitionists were content to overlook continuing slavery, in favour of the rhetoric of free sugar and the examples of emancipation.<sup>146</sup> The Eclectic Society and the Church Missionary Society, in their early period, were focused on missionary activity in British colonies, which Wilberforce had first been made aware of by Charles Grant in the

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<sup>140</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, pp.320-1.

<sup>141</sup> HC Deb, 25 July 1822, series 2, 7, cc.1784-95.

<sup>142</sup> HC Deb, 18 March 1823, series 2, 8, c.625.

<sup>143</sup> Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire*, pp.293-320; Howard Temperley, ‘The Delegalization of Slavery in British India’, *Slavery and Abolition*, 21, no.2 (2000), pp.169-87; Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>144</sup> Bill for Abolition of Slavery throughout British Colonies, for promoting Industry of Manumitted Slaves, and for compensating Owners (as amended by Committee), 31 July 1833, *PP*, 1833 IV [593], p.183; Bill, intituled, Act for Abolition of Slave Trade: (as amended by Committee, and with additional clauses), March 1807, *PP*, 1806-07 I [92], pp.45-56.

<sup>145</sup> Clause A, Bill for Abolition of Slavery throughout British Colonies, p.231.

<sup>146</sup> Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire*, pp.293-320.



1790s.<sup>147</sup> In 1813, he successfully led efforts to allow missionaries into EIC-controlled territory, although the EIC continued to oppose missionary activity.<sup>148</sup> When the emancipation campaign began, his concern regarding Mauritius, which the French had surrendered to the British in 1810, was the continuing illegal slave trade there, and the treatment of apprentices.<sup>149</sup> He lamented to John Harford that ‘the French Inhabitants of Mauritius are sadly addicted the slave trade,’ but believed that the appointment of Hart Davis, a mutual friend, as collector of customs would alleviate the problems regarding their treatment.<sup>150</sup> This is the closest that Wilberforce came to criticising the apprenticeship system. He did not refer to it in those terms, but said that ‘captured negroes...have been sadly treated in too many of our colonies.’<sup>151</sup> In correspondence, he suggested to Davis that ‘you, as the Guardian of the captured Negroes, are not only warranted but bound to suggest to the Treasury...the necessity of [religious and moral instruction] being provided.’<sup>152</sup>

Wilberforce was the first to raise the question of gradual emancipation in the House of Commons, in March 1823. He presented a Quaker petition, which ‘asserted, that it was the duty of parliament to put an end to slavery in the British dominions, and to restore those unhappy persons...to the moral dignity of the enjoyment of liberty.’<sup>153</sup> In his accompanying speech, he discussed the relationship between the campaigns against the slave trade and emancipation, and compared West Indian slavery to slavery in India. Wilberforce suggested that it would be impossible to entirely suppress the slave trade while slavery continued, and that amelioration in the meantime would prove to be in the interest of slave-owners as well as the enslaved. He pointed to the change among

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<sup>147</sup> Hilary M. Carey, *God’s Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World, c.1801-1908* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.152; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.43, f.20, autobiography.

<sup>148</sup> Ian Copland, ‘Christianity as an Arm of Empire: The Ambiguous Case of India under the Company, c.1813-1858’, *The Historical Journal*, 49, no.4 (2006), pp.1031-32; Penelope Carson, *The East India Company and Religion, 1698-1858* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), pp.130-150; Robert Eric Frykenberg, ‘Christian Missions and the Raj’, in Norman Etherington (ed.), *Missions and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.107-10.

<sup>149</sup> Richard B. Allen, ‘Licentious and Unbridled Proceedings: The Illegal Slave Trade to Mauritius and the Seychelles during the Early Nineteenth Century’, *The Journal of African History*, 42, no.1 (2001), pp.91-116.

<sup>150</sup> RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1819, 8, Wilberforce to Harford, 10 August 1819; ‘Hart Davis (1791-1854)’, *History of Parliament Online* <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/davis-hart-1791-1854>> [accessed 20 March 2020].

<sup>151</sup> RL., William Wilberforce Papers, Correspondence 1819, 8, Wilberforce to Harford, 10 August 1819.

<sup>152</sup> BRO., 41593/Co/11/47, Wilberforce to Davis, 18 October 1821.

<sup>153</sup> HC Deb, 18 March 1823, series 2, 8, c.625.

the black settlers at Sierra Leone, ‘the very rapid progress which they made in humanity, religion, and civilization,’ as proof that it was possible in a short time, although he suggested that it should be a slower process in the West Indian colonies.<sup>154</sup>

At the end of Wilberforce’s speech, Canning asked if he was planning a motion on the topic, at which point Buxton gave notice of his intention to do so.<sup>155</sup> Although by this time Wilberforce was not planning to lead the campaign, this speech in advance of the first motion connected it to the previous efforts against the slave trade both in terms of who was involved, and the content of the speech. According to Buxton’s memoir, they planned for Wilberforce’s motion to be the ‘opening of the parliamentary campaign,’ and it also worked as a public handover from Wilberforce to Buxton.<sup>156</sup>

Buxton’s motion for the abolition of slavery was delayed until May, and proposed gradual emancipation through free-births, and amelioration in the meantime. His speech focused on the danger of insurrection that the West India interest predicted, and on the gradual nature of his suggested path of action, pointing out places in the United States and in the British Empire where similar policies had been pursued. As well as freedom to new-borns, he proposed eleven ameliorative measures, including religious instruction and changes to the system of manumission and self-purchase, and moved for a resolution in favour of gradual emancipation. Canning’s response was to suggest three more general resolutions as an alternative. These were: that more effective ameliorative measures should be introduced, that the civil improvement of enslaved persons was looked forward to as result, and that these measures should be compatible with the safety of the enslaved, the security of the colonies, and the interests of slave-owners. Wilberforce, who Buxton had acknowledged at the beginning of his speech, then spoke in support of Buxton’s proposals, especially as regarded marriage among the enslaved.<sup>157</sup> He also responded to Canning’s suggestion, arguing that the colonial legislatures could not be relied on to follow through on the general resolutions. The debate continued, and in the end, Buxton withdrew his motion, and Canning’s resolutions were passed.<sup>158</sup>

After Buxton’s motion was defeated, the Anti-Slavery Society increased its efforts to draw public interest to the issue, and therefore increase the volume of petitions

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<sup>154</sup> HC Deb, 18 March 1823, series 2, 8, cc.624-9.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, c.629-30.

<sup>156</sup> Buxton, *Memoirs*, p.127.

<sup>157</sup> Paugh, *Politics of Reproduction*, pp.180-1.

<sup>158</sup> HC Deb, 15 May 1823, series 2, 9, cc.257-360.

sent to parliament. In June 1823, Thomas Clarkson, who had become increasingly involved in the campaign over the previous six months, set off on a tour similar to those he had made in the 1780s and in 1805, to rally support that had been missing that year.<sup>159</sup> Between February and June 1824, 527 petitions were sent to the House of Commons, almost twice as many as the previous year, divided between holding the government to the 1823 petitions, and criticising Canning's resolutions.<sup>160</sup>

Petitioning was not the only feature of the popular abolition movement to re-emerge at this stage. In 1824, Elizabeth Heyrick published a pamphlet calling for immediate rather than gradual emancipation.<sup>161</sup> Although this had no impact on the policy pursued by the Antislavery Society, it re-introduced a boycott of sugar grown in the West Indian colonies as a means of protest against slavery, which Heyrick argued would be more effective than petitioning.<sup>162</sup> Abstention had first been introduced at the height of the popular support for abolishing the slave trade in 1791 by William Fox, a radical bookseller and pamphleteer who published a widely-circulated pamphlet on the subject.<sup>163</sup> This became a key feature of women's emancipation agitation after the formation of separate antislavery societies in 1825.<sup>164</sup> Wilberforce had opposed the formation of these societies, objecting to the idea of women being involved in political matters, and openly campaigned against them.<sup>165</sup> He did, however, support abstention and the purchase of 'free Sugar', writing in 1824 that 'I own I rather like it,' despite having been opposed to it in the 1790s.<sup>166</sup> Although his opposition to women's societies was well known, they sent his wife, Barbara, and wives of other prominent abolitionists, a workbag containing information about the question in 1826.<sup>167</sup> Wilberforce does not mention this in his diary, but he does mention a discussion about women's antislavery societies he had with Macaulay and Babington in February 1826, where he notes that his

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<sup>159</sup> Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson*, pp.161-3; Jones, 'Mobilisation', p.155-6.

<sup>160</sup> Jones, 'Mobilisation', pp.170-2.

<sup>161</sup> Elizabeth Heyrick, *Immediate Not Gradual Abolition, or, An Inquiry into the Shortest, Safest, and Most Effectual Means of Getting Rid of West Indian Slavery*, (London: Hatchard and Son, 1824).

<sup>162</sup> Heyrick, *Immediate Not Gradual Abolition*, p.7.

<sup>163</sup> William Fox, *An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Utility of Refraining from the use of West Indian Sugar and Rum*, (London: J. Phillips, 1791, 4<sup>th</sup> ed); Timothy Whelan, 'William Fox, Martha Gurney, and Radical Discourse of the 1790s', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 42, no.3 (2009), pp.397-411.

<sup>164</sup> Midgley, *Women Against Slavery*, pp.60-2.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, p.48.

<sup>166</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce c.39, p.67, diary, 13 December 1824; Seymour Drescher, 'Public Opinion and Parliament in the Abolition of the British Slave Trade', *Parliamentary History* 26, (2007) pp.42-65, p.55.

<sup>167</sup> Midgley, *Women Against Slavery*, p.57.

objection was on the ‘grounds on St Paul.’<sup>168</sup> This was probably a reference to St Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians in which he says that women should not speak in church, or his First Letter to Timothy, in which he says that women cannot hold authority over men because man was created first.<sup>169</sup>

In March 1824, Canning presented a draft for an Order in Council ‘for improving the condition of the slaves in Trinidad,’ which he framed as an implementation of the three resolutions passed ten months earlier. The forty-three articles of the Order were intended to lead to the moral improvement of the enslaved population. Canning argued that free births would lead to increasing discontent among the enslaved, and that immediate emancipation would be ‘a fatal gift.’<sup>170</sup> Although the Order only applied to Trinidad at first, he suggested that it would be extended to other Crown colonies over time, and that colonial assemblies would follow suit when they saw it successfully introduced. He then moved on to discuss the better suppression of the slave trade, introducing the Slave Trade Piracy Act discussed in Chapter Four. Both Buxton and Wilberforce expressed a wish that the Order in Council would extend to all Crown colonies from the beginning, rather than only Trinidad.<sup>171</sup> The bulk of Wilberforce’s reply focused on criticising the response of the colonial assemblies to the 1823 Resolutions, and the faith that Canning and the government were putting in them, saying that ‘it would be absolute criminality in him – to deceive either himself or the House with any such idle expectations.’<sup>172</sup> He argued that parliament had the right to intervene in colonial legislation where necessary, and that the government was reneging on its promise to do so the previous year.<sup>173</sup>

The Orders in Council had originally been intended for Demerara, rather than Trinidad, despite the previous use of Trinidad as an early example of abolitionist measures, but this changed because of the rebellion in Demerara in August 1823.<sup>174</sup> As in Barbados in 1816, a rumour had spread that the white colonists were withholding liberty from the enslaved, this time related to the messages about amelioration sent by Lord Bathurst, the Minister for War and the Colonies, as a result of Canning’s

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<sup>168</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.39, p.81, diary, 03 February 1826.

<sup>169</sup> *Bible*, 1 Corinthians, 14:34-35; *Bible*, 1 Timothy, 2:12-14.

<sup>170</sup> HC Deb, 16 March 1824, series 2, 10, c.1103.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid*, cc.1113-14, 1144-56.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid*, c.1145.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, c.1145-52.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid*, c.1104.

resolutions. Enslaved persons had taken control of around sixty plantations, putting slave-owners and overseers in the stocks, and martial law was declared the next day. Martial law continued until the end of January 1825, when trials of all those suspected of being involved had taken place. Among those arrested and sentenced to death was Rev. John Smith, a missionary, at whose church the rebels had made their plans, although he was not involved. He died in prison before his pardon arrived at the colony in 1824, and his death, rather than the deaths of 250 enslaved persons, became a symbol of the cruelty of the West Indian system.<sup>175</sup>

The outcry over Smith's sentencing and death began with the London Missionary Society, who had sent Smith to Demerara, and petitions calling for an inquiry into the proceedings continued to arrive in parliament throughout April 1824. Wilberforce was not present for the early debates on this, due to illness, but his diary shows that he was keenly interested in the case. Before Brougham's first motion for an inquiry on 1 June, and later debates, he spent time with Stephen preparing for the debate.<sup>176</sup> In the delayed last debate, on 11 June 1824, he spoke to criticise the fact that Smith was tried by a court martial rather than the ordinary courts, and complained of the 'strong prejudices' against missionaries throughout the West Indian colonies.<sup>177</sup> As well as the imprisonment of missionaries in Demerara, he also pointed to the related destruction of a missionary chapel in Barbados in August 1823, expressing concern that the British government was being forced to support anti-conversion measures passed by the colonial assemblies.<sup>178</sup>

Before the close of the session, Wilberforce presented a petition for the abolition of slavery from Carlow. He used the petition to frame a speech in 'protest against a course of proceeding relative to the black population of the West-Indies, of the consequences of which I cannot but entertain the most serious apprehensions.'<sup>179</sup> He discussed the Trinidad Order in Council again, arguing that Trinidad was not the best place to make a positive example of amelioration. Wilberforce repeated his distrust in the colonial assemblies, pointing to their rejection of Canning's 1823 resolutions and the growing

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<sup>175</sup> Da Costa, *Crowns of Glory*; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, pp.267-90.

<sup>176</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.55, pp.279-280, diary, 01 June 1824 and 11 June 1824.

<sup>177</sup> HC Deb, 11 June 1824, series 2, 11, c.1270.

<sup>178</sup> HC Deb, 11 June 1824, series 2, 11, cc.1269-1277 – for more on the Barbados incident, see Alan Lester and David Lambert, 'Missionary Politics and the Captive Audience: William Shrewsbury in the Caribbean and the Cape Colony', in David Lambert and Alan Lester (eds) *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Career in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.88-112.

<sup>179</sup> HC Deb, 15 June 1824, series 2, 11, c.1406.

opposition to both reform and missionary activity. He also repeated the idea that it was the colonists, rather than the British parliament, who had incited rebellion by spreading a rumour of imminent emancipation among the enslaved.<sup>180</sup> However, Wilberforce did not introduce a motion, other than the printing of the petition, and the speech was more a reminder of the question than an attempt to further the campaign.

Although the responses to the speech were critical of its lack of intent, in the context, this statement seems like an attempt to reframe the debates to be more favourable to the abolitionists' aims. Wilberforce did not have direct links to Carlow, in south-east Ireland, and so the decision to present this petition supports this theory, as it may have been a question of a conveniently timed petition, towards the end of the flow of the petitions that year. Wilberforce felt that the newspapers did not report the debate well, diminishing the impact of his protest beyond the House of Commons.<sup>181</sup> In both *The Times* and the *Morning Post*, the reporting focused on his criticism of the colonial assemblies, in a much shorter report than that included in *Hansard*, with more space given to a petition presented from merchants about the recognition of the independence of formerly Spanish territories in South America.<sup>182</sup> Throughout the campaign against the slave trade, the newspaper coverage of the debates had kept the issue in the public consciousness, and Wilberforce apparently hoped to use parliamentary reporting to similar effect in the 1820s.

Wilberforce retired from the House of Commons in February 1825. He had not been active in the Commons since his speeches in June 1824, when he felt he had underperformed and began to consider whether he 'had not better give up takg part in Hou of Commons matters.'<sup>183</sup> His health was rapidly deteriorating, and his doctor recommended that he only go to the House of Commons when the weather was good, or risk a fatal illness.<sup>184</sup> Therefore, these two speeches, on the trial of Rev. Smith and the Carlow petition, were his final contributions to the parliamentary campaign against slavery. They were also his final speeches in the House of Commons, although he would not have known this when he made them. In 1820, he had written to James Stephen that

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<sup>180</sup> HC Deb, 15 June 1824, series 2, 11, cc.1406-16.

<sup>181</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.55, p.281, diary, 15 June 1824.

<sup>182</sup> 'House of Commons', *The Times*, 16 June 1824, p.2; 'House of Commons', *Morning Post*, 16 June 1824, p.2; HC Deb, 15 June 1824, series 2, 11, cc. 1406-1416.

<sup>183</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.55, p.280, diary, 11 June 1824.

<sup>184</sup> UCL, Brougham Papers, 10,965, Wilberforce to Brougham, 02 February 1825; Wilberforce House, KINCM 2006.3378, Wilberforce to Buxton, 03 February 1825; *Life*, V, pp.228-47.

he ‘should like to lay a foundation for some future measures for the emancipation of the poor slaves, and also to diminish the evil of oaths. These things being done, how gladly should I retire!’<sup>185</sup> Although the final decision to retire was made on the basis of his health, and his wish to spend more time with his family, he had also, through selecting Buxton as his successor and supporting the early motions on the subject, set the emancipation campaign in motion.

### **Retirement, 1825-1833**

After February 1825, Wilberforce was no longer involved in the parliamentary activity against slavery, but he did not withdraw from the wider campaign. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this period of Wilberforce’s life has received considerably less attention than his parliamentary career, except for mentions of his attendance at Anti-Slavery Society meetings. Wilberforce’s engagement with abolitionism between his retirement in 1825 and his death in 1833 was a continuation of his previous work, and so can offer further insight into his thoughts on slavery and emancipation. Although Macaulay, Clarkson and Stephen were more visibly active than Wilberforce, he engaged with most aspects of the campaign, and was aware of the developing parliamentary motions.

Despite his retirement, Wilberforce’s connections to government figures continued to be beneficial to the abolitionists. A month after he retired, in March 1825, Buxton asked him to speak to Bathurst about the treatment of enslaved persons in Demerara.<sup>186</sup> During the next few years, he continued to correspond with both Buxton and Brougham about both the emancipation campaign and the on-going efforts to better suppress the French and Portuguese slave trades.<sup>187</sup> This correspondence shows that he continued to follow a variety of issues relating to slavery. For example, Lushington’s motions about Escoffery and Lecesne, two free blacks who successfully petitioned the British government to repeal the decision of the Jamaican assembly to deport them to

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<sup>185</sup> Wilberforce to Stephen, 29 October 1820, *Life*, V, p.80.

<sup>186</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.55, p.286, diary, 10 March 1825.

<sup>187</sup> Wilberforce House, KINCM 2005.5811-15, Wilberforce to Buxton, c.1825; 2005.5820-21, Wilberforce to Buxton, 07 November 1827; 2006.3769, Wilberforce to Buxton, 10 May 1827; UCL, Brougham Papers, 10,969, Wilberforce to Brougham, 08 August 1830; 37,717, Wilberforce to Brougham, 23 December 1831.

Haiti, were mentioned in letters to both Brougham and Buxton.<sup>188</sup> Although this consultation reduced over time, in 1832, Macaulay sent Wilberforce an outline of what the abolitionists hoped would be in a proposed bill.<sup>189</sup>

Towards the end of 1825, he was invited to chair a meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society, but declined, writing to Thomas Babington that 'it seems like wishing to retain the reins, when I can no longer hold them,' referring to his retirement from parliament.<sup>190</sup> This suggests that Wilberforce was uncertain about his role outside of parliament, after 35 years as an MP. However, he must have been convinced to do so; he chaired a meeting on 21 December, and said that:

He felt that having been compelled by indisposition to retire from his more proper scene of labour in Parliament, - it did not become him to occupy so prominent a situation as that which he filled on the present occasion. But he also felt that he ought not for a moment to consider any motives of a personal nature when he was called upon to fulfil a great and important duty to God and man.<sup>191</sup>

After this, although Wilberforce was not as active as other abolitionists, there were no further signs of hesitancy when contributing to the campaign in any capacity.

The purpose of the December 1825 meeting was to resolve to petition parliament on the subject again. Wilberforce spoke in support of the motion, saying that public support for the abolition of the slave trade, specifically from the middle classes, had been key to the success of the campaign.<sup>192</sup> This was not the only occasion on which Wilberforce encouraged petitions and other demonstrations of public support. In Spring 1828, he seconded a motion by Brougham to adopt a report from a previous meeting which concluded that 'every effort should be made' to encourage the government to intervene in the treatment of enslaved persons.<sup>193</sup> He was more explicit in his support of petitioning in speeches to antislavery societies than he had been in parliament, saying

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<sup>188</sup> Gad Heuman, *Between Black and White: Race, Politics, and the Free Coloreds in Jamaica, 1792-1865* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), pp.33-43.

<sup>189</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.47, f.74, Macaulay to Wilberforce, 26 December 1832.

<sup>190</sup> Wilberforce to Babington, 01 December [1825], *Life*, V, p.263.

<sup>191</sup> No. 8, *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, I, p.73.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> No.35, *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, II, p.212.



that ‘Unless the people of this country come forward with a zeal and a unanimity worthy of themselves ... we shall in vain expect, within any time to which we can look forward, to see Slavery abolished in our Colonies.’<sup>194</sup> Popular petitioning on moral issues had become a more established feature of British politics since the 1780s, and Wilberforce had proposed and encouraged petitioning on other subjects he was involved in, like missionaries in India.<sup>195</sup> His increased support for petitions in the 1820s was part of a longer process that reflected the social and political changes initiated by the anti-slave trade petitions. It was also still not a total statement of support; although he said that expressions of popular support were necessary, he did so with reference to the social standing of the group gathered there, and the presence of the Duke of Gloucester, which is similar to his requests for a petition from Yorkshire forty years before, as discussed in Chapter One, and his comments in 1825.<sup>196</sup>

Other than his comments about petitioning, his speeches were similar to those he had made in the House of Commons. In 1828, he referenced Dundas’ 1792 Resolutions and the emancipatory measures included in them, the rejection of Bathurst and Canning’s more recent resolutions by the West Indian colonial assemblies, and hostility to missionary activity. He also reiterated the importance of encouraging marriage, to lead to population increase. He continued to emphasise the importance of parliamentary action; in 1825 he concluded the meeting by saying ‘Let us do our duty, and Parliament will do theirs, and universal satisfaction and happiness will be the result.’<sup>197</sup>

A decline in Wilberforce’s engagement with the antislavery campaign reflects the reduction in its activity between 1826 and 1830. In 1830, when it was reinvigorated by the shift towards immediate emancipation, Wilberforce’s engagement with it increased again. The lack of action towards amelioration since 1826 had increased support for immediate rather than gradual emancipation among individuals, and the Antislavery Society amended its aims accordingly in 1831. According to David Brion Davis, Stephen’s changing views of the situation, among others, was particularly influential in this shift, though Blackburn suggested that the widespread support for immediate

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<sup>194</sup> No.36, *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, II, p.214.

<sup>195</sup> Amanda B. Moniz, ‘Reforming Expectations: Parliamentary Pressure and Moral Reform’, *Parliamentary History*, 37, S1 (2018), pp.114-118; BRO., 28048/C/1/4, Wilberforce to Harford and More, 25 March 1813.

<sup>196</sup> No.36, *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, II, p.215.

<sup>197</sup> No. 8, *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, I, p.80.

emancipation surprised abolitionist leaders.<sup>198</sup> The Baptist War, a slave revolt in Jamaica in December 1831 – January 1832 which involved around a fifth of the enslaved population of the island, is seen as an important influence on the increased calls for immediate emancipation, although Drescher pointed out that colonial security was not a major argument in the final parliamentary debates.<sup>199</sup> As had happened after the Demerara rebellion, the treatment of white missionaries became the centre of the conversation in Britain, although among abolitionists the rebellion in Jamaica was seen as proof that slavery itself, rather than specific abuses, was the motive for the revolt.<sup>200</sup> Wilberforce did not comment on the uprising; when news of it reached England in late February, he was preoccupied by his daughter Elizabeth's declining health and her death in early March.<sup>201</sup> His opinion on the shift to immediate rather than gradual emancipation is unclear – he did not speak against it, and supported motions in later Anti-Slavery Society meetings relating to immediate emancipation. However, he did not show any indication of support before 1831.

In April 1830, he made an unusually reflective entry in his diary, in response to a report about Sierra Leone in the *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*.<sup>202</sup> The report emphasised the morality of the liberated Africans settled there, and Wilberforce's diary reflects this, highlighting the higher moral status of the Africans in comparison to white settlers.<sup>203</sup> A month later, he reported that he had spent the day 'Busy on AntiSlavy Reporter being forced to be writg & dictatg Letters till almt 3 o clock.'<sup>204</sup> He then chaired the general meeting of the Antislavery Society in May 1830, during which he reflected on the delay after the early successes of the campaign against the slave trade, comparing it to the resistance then being faced from slave-owners. He urged the audience to act, saying that 'There was no longer, indeed, any time for delay, or for half measures.'<sup>205</sup> As on previous occasions, he referred to Dundas' 1792 Resolutions as a point of comparison

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<sup>198</sup> David Brion Davis, 'The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought', *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 49, no 2 (1962), pp.209-30, pp.219-222; Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, p.436.

<sup>199</sup> Craton, *Testing the Chains*, pp.291-321; Drescher, *Abolition*, p.263.

<sup>200</sup> Craton, *Testing the Chains*, pp.318-319; David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.38.

<sup>201</sup> Bodl. Library, MS. Wilberforce, c.38, pp.60-3, diary, February-March 1832; the Baptist War was first mentioned in the House of Commons on 20 February 1832, and was reported in newspapers over the next week, HC Deb, 20 February 1832, series 3, 10, cc.535-6.

<sup>202</sup> No. 59, *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, IV, pp.157-88.

<sup>203</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.38, p.11, diary, 03 April 1830.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, p.15, diary, 14 May 1830.

<sup>205</sup> No. 61, *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, III, pp.231-2.

to the current situation in which the West India interest had reversed their previous support for amelioration legislation, and asserted, as he had before, that the colonial assemblies could not be trusted to adopt appropriate measures themselves. In another mirroring of his parliamentary speeches, he ended with a warning about retribution from God for withholding 'the rights and liberties of those whom Providence had placed under her protection.'<sup>206</sup> The speech was unusual, because he did not discuss the conditions of slavery directly, nor did he mention the conversion or marriage of enslaved persons.

His next speech, at Bath in January 1831, also reflected what he had said in the House of Commons, emphasising that he and other abolitionists were not attacking individuals, but that 'it is the *system* that we wish to change.'<sup>207</sup> He reminded his audience that claims that abolishing the slave trade would lead to ruin had been proven to be unfounded, and that the colonial assemblies had rejected Canning's resolutions despite the West India interest in the House of Commons voting for them. However, on this occasion Wilberforce differed more from his parliamentary speeches than he had done previously. He referred directly to racial prejudice, saying that visible differences 'infallibly tend to lessen our fellow feeling for them.'<sup>208</sup> Although he had argued against the idea of the natural inferiority of Africans during the campaign against the slave trade, he had not otherwise discussed prejudice based on physical differences.<sup>209</sup> In contrast, he also said that the physical abuses of slavery were not as much of an issue as the damage done to the souls of the enslaved by not converting them to Christianity, and therefore denying them eternal liberty.<sup>210</sup> This emphasis on religion continued throughout the speech; his final comments focused on the need to convert as well as educate the enslaved. Although Wilberforce had always made religious instruction a priority, he had not previously discounted the physical suffering of the enslaved in this way.

The change in Wilberforce's rhetoric can be attributed to the change in audience. During his parliamentary career, his speeches were designed to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, to convince undecided MPs to support abolitionist measures. These speeches were made to attendees of Anti-Slavery Society Meetings, and then printed and circulated among subscribers to the *Reporter*. He was, therefore, addressing groups of

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<sup>206</sup> No. 61, *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, III, p.234.

<sup>207</sup> No. 74, *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, IV, pp.51-7.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> William Baker, 'William Wilberforce on the Idea of Negro Inferiority', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 31, no.3 (1970), pp.433-40.

<sup>210</sup> No. 74, *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, IV, pp.51-7.

people pre-disposed to support his views. Within the House of Commons, some of the statements he made may have had an adverse effect on the success of the bills, but within groups of abolitionists, the statements would have been more acceptable, and possibly even expected. This could explain both the different manner in which he talked about enslaved persons, and his increased support for petitioning. However, it does not explain his down-playing of the physical abuses of slavery, as noted above, especially in light of the emphasis that the broader campaign placed on the use of the whip.<sup>211</sup> As discussed in previous chapters, in parliament Wilberforce put less emphasis on religion than might be expected from him as an Evangelical. He was also less constrained by the negative connotations of Methodism after his retirement and could speak about religious arguments more openly.

As well as this continuing interest in abolitionism, Wilberforce remained involved in the Church Missionary Society and other organisations, and after his retirement they are more present in his diary than the antislavery campaign. He had papers relating to missionary activity or Irish/Catholic matters read to him more frequently than abolition papers, and although the wider range of societies and activities meant that more missionary papers were generated, it is telling that he had the full range read to him. This was increasingly true over time. Wilberforce also attended more meetings relating to the religious societies he was a member of than he did meetings of the Antislavery Society, although in comparison to before his retirement his attendance at both was lower. He continued to see Stephen, Macaulay, and William Smith regularly, without mentioning in his diaries what they talked about. It is likely that the antislavery campaign was discussed, but it is impossible to know how much, and how much Wilberforce contributed to it. He followed the debates about parliamentary reform in 1830-1832, a topic that he had spoken about in the House of Commons throughout his parliamentary career. Wilberforce's diary throughout his retirement also shows how much more time he spent with his family, at Highwood Hill and later at his sons' homes.<sup>212</sup>

Wilberforce's final recorded engagement with the emancipation campaign was in April 1833. Lord Barham took him to a meeting in Maidstone, where they adopted the

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<sup>211</sup> The use of the whip in the West Indian colonies was raised in the House of Commons by Wilberforce in 1816, Lushington in 1818, Buxton, Wilson, and Wilberforce in 1823, Brougham in 1825, and was included in Canning's 1824 Order in Council for Trinidad.

<sup>212</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, d.55, c.38, diary.

resolutions passed by the Antislavery Society in London, to petition parliament for total, immediate, emancipation.<sup>213</sup> He did not make any comment about the resolutions in his diary.<sup>214</sup> Three days before his death, on 26 July 1833, news about the passage of the Emancipation Act arrived at the house he was staying in. According to the traditional narrative, this was the news that the bill had successfully passed through the House of Commons.<sup>215</sup> However, Hague has shown that this is more likely to have been related to debates about apprenticeship and compensation that had happened in the preceding days, as the bill did not pass its third reading until the following week.<sup>216</sup>

This chapter has demonstrated that Wilberforce's interest in actively effecting change in the conditions of slavery began earlier than the traditional narrative of a parliamentary campaign for amelioration from 1818 onwards. When criticised for actions that he was directly involved in, as in Sierra Leone and Berbice, Wilberforce's concerns were more to do with the impact that they might have on the abolitionists' reputations and ongoing efforts than on the validity of the criticisms. After enslaved-led rebellions in Barbados and Demerara, he blamed the slave-owners for exaggerating the extent of the abolitionists' proposed reforms, and so indirectly inciting rebellion, while the slave-owners pointed to the abolitionists' plans as the cause.

The Berbice Commission, 1811-16, is little-known in the wider historiography on abolition or Wilberforce, but this chapter argues that it was key to the development of Wilberforce and his fellow abolitionists' plans for reforming slavery. The instructions given to their agents were repeated in the parliamentary debates about ameliorative legislation in 1823-4. While the instructions were not new ideas, the Berbice experiment was the only time that they had been put into practice, and they did not seem to draw on other attempts to reform slavery, like Steele's in Barbados. The fact that the Commission was not later mentioned by the abolitionists is likely explained by the criticism it received, and the perception (not their own) that it had been a failure.

Having handed leadership of the abolitionists to Buxton privately in 1821 and publicly in 1823, Wilberforce was hesitant about his ongoing role in emancipation

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<sup>213</sup> No. 108, *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, VI, pp.57-80.

<sup>214</sup> Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.38, p.92, diary, 12 April 1833.

<sup>215</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p.383; John Wolfe, 'Wilberforce, William (1759-1833)', *ODNB*, January 2008 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/4722>> [accessed 13 March 2020].

<sup>216</sup> Hague, *Wilberforce*, pp.502-3.

campaign. After his retirement, however, he began to engage more with the popular movement, making speeches at Antislavery Society meetings. Within these speeches, he approached the topic of emancipation from a narrower, religious perspective than he had in the House of Commons. This shift was probably the result of a change in audience, rather than a change in thought; he was no longer speaking to opponents of emancipation, but to its supporters.

## Conclusion

On 14 May 1833, Mr Stanley stood up at an Anti-Slavery Society meeting to propose support for the government resolutions that became the Act for the Abolition of Slavery. He paid tribute to one of the patriarchs of the cause:

It is not, however, without feelings of the deepest and most heartfelt satisfaction that I recall to your recollection that one man, the most religiously inspired, the most conscientiously influenced of all who laboured in the dawn and the rising of this great and glorious cause, - Wilberforce (*great cheering*) still remains to witness, I trust, the final consummation of that important triumph to which his early energies were devoted, and to exclaim, like the last of the prophets to whom I have before alluded "Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace." (*great cheering*)<sup>1</sup>

This is how William Wilberforce has been remembered in popular memory: religiously motivated, dedicated to abolition. On his epitaph in Westminster Abbey, he is described in a similar way, and a plaque installed in 1940, after his descendants donated to the restoration of Islip Chapel, calls him 'William the Emancipator.'<sup>2</sup> His death, a little over two months after Stanley's speech, as the Emancipation Act was passing through the House of Commons, cemented this association.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I challenged the view of Wilberforce as 'the most religiously inspired,' investigating the origins of his involvement in the abolition campaigns and showing how it had roots in the period prior to his religious re-awakening in 1785-86. That is not to discount the influence of religion on his plans for abolition: from the beginning of the abolition campaign, Wilberforce's interests in the West Indian colonies were directed towards reforming slavery, which included efforts to convert the enslaved populations to Christianity. After the success of 1807, when he played a role in managing enslaved persons in Berbice, he prioritised religious instruction, and included it as a central part of his proposed plans for reforming enslavement up to, and beyond,

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<sup>1</sup> No. 109, *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, VI, p.114.

<sup>2</sup> Epitaph, North Transept, Westminster Abbey; Plaque, Islip Chapel, Westminster Abbey.

his retirement in 1825. The limited use of religious arguments in his speeches in the House of Commons does not detract from the role of his faith in how he viewed abolition but reinforces the need to view him as a political figure, not solely a religious one.

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As set out in the Introduction, my overall research goal was to use the under-used manuscript sources to revisit Wilberforce's abolitionism and consider whether doing so challenges our perception of Wilberforce. Stanley's comments, and the positive light in which they show Wilberforce, are indicative of the typical representation of Wilberforce in popular history. In the historiography, Wilberforce is not presented on the same pedestal, but his religious faith continues to be the focus of writing on Wilberforce more generally, and on his abolitionism. In addition to this, he is portrayed as dogged in his determination for abolition, both positively and negatively, to the point of unwillingness to compromise.<sup>3</sup> This thesis has focused on Wilberforce as a politician, looking at his direct engagement in the abolition campaigns over the full period of his parliamentary career and beyond, rather than focusing on the pre-1807 period that dominates both biographies and the historiography. Beyond a reassessment of Wilberforce's abolitionist activity, this thesis aimed to bridge the gap between biographies of Wilberforce and the wider historiography on British abolitionism.

This thesis has shown trends within Wilberforce's abolitionism throughout his career. Networks were key to his entry into the campaign in 1786-1787, in contrast to the 'one man' focus of Stanley's speech; similarly, they were key to how he engaged with the range of anti-slave trade activities after 1807. Within parliament, his relationships with government ministers gained him support and access to information; his relationship with William Pitt was seen as a boon at the beginning of the campaign, and with the success of the campaign in 1807, his influence in the House of Commons continued to benefit the abolitionists. Over time the overlap between the Cabinet and membership of the African Institution all but disappeared, and so Wilberforce's access to Lords

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (New Jersey, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975), p.412; Fiona Spiers, 'William Wilberforce: 150 Years On', in Jack Hayward (ed), *Out of Slavery: Abolition and After* (London: Frank Cass, 1985), p.54.



Castlereagh, Liverpool, and Bathurst became a key component of the abolitionists' lobbying power, even after he retired. As well as these political networks, Wilberforce acted as the connection between parliamentary and abolitionist networks. At the beginning of Wilberforce's abolitionist career, he acted on behalf of the London Committee; over time, he took an increasingly decisive role, especially after 1793. This cooperative role was repeated with the creation of the African Institution in 1807, exemplified by his pursuing the Registry Bill in 1815 despite his own reservations about it.

Wilberforce has typically been seen as ambivalent towards large-scale expressions of popular support, but this thesis has shown how he interacted with the popular aspects of the campaign in different ways at various stages of his career.<sup>4</sup> His request that petitions be sent prior to his motion in 1792 show him grappling with how to use popular support to the advantage of the cause, and his re-orientation of the London Committee in 1804 away from popular agitation demonstrates his continuing uncertainty about it. Prior to the formation of the Antislavery Society, he did not speak about abolition at public meetings outside of the House of Commons. His efforts to manipulate popular opinion in Europe, intended to have a similar affect to that of the popular support in Britain, throughout the 1810s and early 1820s, and his requests for petitions in favour of opening India to missionaries in 1813, show that he became less wary of it over time. However, he continued to prioritise perceived quality over quantity in popular support: in 1789-1792, he pushed for petitions with 'respectable' signatories from Yorkshire; in the 1810s he hoped that support from the French literati would translate into popular support; in the 1820s he similarly pointed to the respectability of the gathered members of the Antislavery Society.<sup>5</sup>

His rhetoric, which closely resembled that of abolitionist literature, continued in a similar manner throughout the anti-slave trade campaign, despite changes in what his colleagues were publishing outside of the House of Commons. This similarity persisted into Wilberforce's own publications – all three of his works on the slave trade, *Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1807), *Letter to Prince Talleyrand-Perigord* (1814), and *Lettre sur l'Empereur Alexandre* (1822), followed the same pattern into the 1820s.

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<sup>4</sup> David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.52.

<sup>5</sup> NYRO., ZFW/7.2.59, f.16, Wilberforce to Wyvill, 25 February 1788; Bodl., MS. Wilberforce, c.46, ff.111-112, Wilberforce to Humboldt, 16 September 1814; No.36, *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, II, p.215.

The ways he spoke about the conditions of enslavement from the mid-1810s onwards were also similar to the ways in which he had spoken about them (albeit briefly) during the campaign against the slave trade. His *Appeal in Behalf of the Negro Slaves* (1823) followed a similar structure to anti-slave trade literature. After his retirement his rhetoric changed, with less focus on the conditions of enslavement and more on the religious instruction of the enslaved in his speeches to the Anti-Slavery Society, supporting arguments that he altered his own view of abolition to suit the House of Commons.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of criticisms of Wilberforce as an abolitionist were made during the campaign against the slave trade, 1787-1807. Thereafter, despite West Indians reportedly using it as a pejorative term, he was less openly criticised in association with abolitionism in the House of Commons.<sup>7</sup> During this first twenty years, Wilberforce often built on criticisms made of him in the Commons, as shown in Chapter Two, adjusting his approach in response to criticisms about, for example, the length of his speeches, or the motions he was introducing. The major criticisms made after 1807 – by Thomas Perronet Thompson and Robert Thorpe that the Sierra Leone Company were complicit in the slave trade, and by Joseph Marryat that the Berbice Commission had been a failure – were made less of Wilberforce and more of the abolitionists as a bloc. His private response to these was focused on the abolitionists' reputations, rather than on publicly refuting the statements made by his opponents, which was left to Zachary Macaulay and James Stephen in turn.

Recent scholarship on the abolition campaigns has focused more on the West Indian colonies and the experience of enslavement. While Wilberforce's involvement in Sierra Leone is well-known, his involvement in the Berbice Commission is not. In many ways, as shown in Chapter Five, Wilberforce was more concerned with how these initiatives reflected on the abolitionists than with how they impacted on free and enslaved persons resident in the two colonies. Despite the accusations made about apprenticeship in Sierra Leone, Wilberforce continued to promote the colony as a destination for poor black people living in England, although he later expressed misgivings about the implementation of the system in Mauritius. Similarly, his concerns around slave rebellions was to ensure that abolitionists and missionaries were not blamed. He emphasised the role of the slaveowners in mis-informing the enslaved, which was a

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<sup>6</sup> *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* I-III, 1825-1831.

<sup>7</sup> HC Deb, 06 June 1821, series 2, 5, cc.1119, 1123.

means of defending abolitionists' reputations. The reforms he pursued, and then encouraged elsewhere, continued to be based on the perspective from Britain, rather than from the West Indies, as illustrated by the difference between the abolitionists' plans and Joshua Steele's experiment in Barbados.

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How does this thesis revise our perception of Wilberforce? In the Introduction I noted that I had not narrowed my field of study to exclude either half of his career as an abolitionist, divided in 1807, because his actions after the abolition of the slave trade were in many ways dictated by his experience before it. Wilberforce's actions after the passage of the Slave Trade Abolition Act – his efforts to encourage popular support for abolition in Europe, to secure multi-national agreements for the suppression of the trade, his involvement in colonial management in Berbice, and the founding of the Anti-Slavery Society – mirrored his actions before it. His European efforts were a repeat of his and Pitt's efforts to convince foreign governments to abolish the Atlantic slave trade in 1787-1788. His role in the Berbice Commission matched his role in the Sierra Leone Company. The Anti-Slavery Society was more the successor of the London Committee than of the African Institution, with its focus on popular expressions of support and new legislation. His plans for ameliorating the conditions of enslavement reflect his initial interest the West Indian colonies, rather than in the slave trade. In selecting Thomas Fowell Buxton as his successor, Wilberforce was appointing someone similar to himself religiously and politically, albeit with stronger ties to Quakers and Whigs, to continue the campaigns. The history of Wilberforce's abolitionism is thus cyclical, not linear.

Wilberforce's direct involvement in managing enslavement through the Berbice Commission, in contrast to his efforts at influencing free black societies in Sierra Leone and Haiti, is little-known, and re-inserting this in the narrative provides a key link in explaining the shift in the abolitionists' aims from enforcing abolition to reforming enslavement. The failed attempts at compromise in the mid-1790s, before reverting to annual motions for an abolition bill, show that Wilberforce was not always unwilling to compromise, but he focused thereafter on the whole of the slave trade because any degree of abolition was resisted. After 1807, Wilberforce often responded to the matter that he

saw as most urgent, rather than being involved in the full scope of abolitionist activity. His relativization of the physical suffering of the enslaved in 1831, focusing instead on their spiritual life, stood out as a stark contrast to his long-term efforts to reform enslavement. While these features of Wilberforce's abolitionist career do not fundamentally change the perception of him; they show he was more willing to compromise, and work with the system, than his portrayal as a single-issue politician, repeating the same bill with the same results until other people got involved, suggests.

What, then, can a reassessment of Wilberforce tell us about the abolition campaigns? In considering Wilberforce in light of the broader scholarship on abolition, this thesis is part of a re-evaluation of the leadership of the campaign which acknowledges the contemporary importance of the central figures like Wilberforce, Zachary Macaulay and Granville Sharp.<sup>8</sup> While the abolitionist ideology he espoused was largely in line with mainstream abolitionism, with a caveat about his limited support for popular petitioning, his activities are more illuminating. The Berbice Commission, 1811-16, forms a link between the end of the anti-slave trade campaign and the beginning of the amelioration and emancipation campaigns in Britain, but has faded from the historical record, possibly because it was overshadowed by diplomatic efforts to extend the ban on the slave trade. It also did not form a part of the abolitionists' subsequent campaigns, because of the reaction to the report from the West India interest.

The second part of the thesis showed how the abolition campaign fragmented during the 1810s, and Wilberforce treated the different parts of it as separate efforts, with the exceptions of the European Congresses. The tensions among abolitionists as Wilberforce postponed, or did not introduce, some motions, usually in response to parliamentary pressure or accidents of timing, exemplify the multitude of goals after 1807. The Registry Bill, for example, was not pursued in 1814 because there seemed to be an opportunity to make progress on the question of other countries abolishing their slave trades. The public handing over of the abolition campaign in the House of Commons in 1823 created a sense of continuity, but Wilberforce's retirement two years later means that fewer conclusions can be drawn about the emancipation campaign from reassessing Wilberforce. His continuing importance as the previous lead abolitionist in

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<sup>8</sup> Iain Whyte, *Zachary Macaulay 1768-1838: The Steadfast Scot in the British Anti-Slavery Movement* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011); Catherine Hall, *Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); Michelle Faubert, *Granville Sharp's Uncovered Letter and the Zong Massacre* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

parliament gave him a voice in the Anti-Slavery Society, and Buxton and other abolitionists invoked his name as an authority with their speeches, in the same way that Wilberforce had invoked Pitt, Charles James Fox, and Edmund Burke.

Throughout this thesis, I have integrated an analysis of Wilberforce's other interests, both in and out of parliament, so as not to isolate his abolitionism from his other activities. Looking back at these, a couple of trends emerge that enable us to begin re-framing Wilberforce's contributions. As I have discussed throughout, Wilberforce played down his religious convictions in his speeches on matters relating to enslavement. Although a lot of his more religious activism happened outside of the House of Commons, he frequently contributed to debates about missionaries and church matters, as well as supporting Dissenters, presenting petitions on their behalf. When he contemplated leaving the House of Commons in 1811, one of the reasons he listed for resigning Yorkshire was the responsibility he felt to attend the House, but because of his recent breach with Addington about his support for Methodists, Wilberforce felt that he was not able to pursue religious matters in Parliament as successfully.

During his years as MP for Hull, 1780-4, almost all of his contributions in the House of Commons related to constituency business, and he continued to be a conscientious representative for Yorkshire throughout his tenure as one of its MPs, 1784-1811, and for Bramber, 1811-25. He also spoke on matters relating to the British Empire, often connected to his support for missionary activity, as in the case of New South Wales and India, or other moral crusades, such as his private conversations about the sale of alcohol to Indigenous persons in Canada. These in turn linked back to his work to suppress vice, which he took a leading role in at the same time that he became involved in the abolition campaign in 1787-9. In his religious journal, he famously wrote that 'God Almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners' – this statement covers many of the initiatives that Wilberforce took an active, self-motivated role in, with the exception of his missionary and proselytising interests. It also excludes his contributions on matters such as military affairs, commerce and agriculture, and his commitment to his constituents, of which his commercial and agricultural interventions were often a part.

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In writing this thesis, I have identified several areas in which there is a potential for further scholarship. As discussed in the Introduction, the historiography on the abolition of the slave trade expanded enormously with the bicentennial in 2007. A similar resumption of interest in the campaign to abolish enslavement has not happened, but this is likely to change as we approach the bicentennials in 2023 and 2033. Within this, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* is an under-used resource, and both would be a useful resource for further study of the antislavery campaigns and is deserving more attention in and of itself.

This thesis has focused on William Wilberforce. However, his colleague in abolition, and brother-in-law, James Stephen has loomed large throughout. Despite acknowledgement of his key role in the abolition of the slave trade, as in Pollock's biography and David Brion Davis' work, little has been written about Stephen.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Wilberforce, Clarkson and Macaulay, there is not a biography of Stephen (other than entries in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and the History of Parliament). As has been seen throughout this thesis, Stephen was involved in all aspects of the abolition campaign from his return to England from the West Indian colonies in 1794, having met Wilberforce on a visit five years before. Research into James Stephen could then, be as enlightening, if not more so, than this reassessment of Wilberforce.

A final subject that stands out as worthy of further scholarly attention is the Berbice Commission. As discussed in Chapter Five, this has received little attention, and within the research for this thesis I uncovered additional sources relating to it. James Stephen was the driving force behind the Commission, and so in-depth discussion of this could not be included here. There is, therefore more about the Commission that I did not include in this thesis, because it did not pertain to Wilberforce's involvement.

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<sup>9</sup> John Pollock, *Wilberforce*, bicentenary edition (Eastbourne: Kingsway Communications, 2007), pp.122, 254; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* second edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.418-19, 444-5, 451, 464-6.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Timeline of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in Parliament, 1788-1807**

#### **1788**

[?] February: Wilberforce planned motion.

09 May: Pitt motion ‘That this House will, early in the next session of Parliament, proceed to take into consideration the circumstances of the slave trade complained of in the said petitions, and what may be fit to be done thereupon.’

21 May: Dolben motion ‘that the Chairman do ask leave of the House to bring in a bill, to regulate the transportation of the natives of Africa from their own coasts to the British colonies’, amended to ‘a bill containing temporary regulations.’

28 May: further debate on bill.

30 May: second reading of bill.

18 June: third reading of bill (passed, no vote recorded).

11 July: Royal Assent given to Act.

#### **1789**

12 May: \*Wilberforce motion for 12 Propositions (see Appendix Two for full list).

21 May: Wilberforce motion ‘for going into a Committee of the Whole House on the Report of the Privy Council, and the several matters of evidence already upon the table, relative to the slave trade.’

23 June: Alderman Newnham motion ‘that the order of the day for the Committee on the farther consideration of the petitions against the abolition of the slave trade be discharged.’

#### **1790**

25 January: Wilberforce motion ‘that this House will, on Wednesday next, resolve itself into a Committee of the whole House, to consider the circumstances of the Slave Trade complained of in several petitions which have been presented to this House, relative to the state of the African Slave Trade’ – beginning of House of Commons inquiry into slave trade.

## **1791**

18-19 April: \*Wilberforce motion ‘for leave to bring in a Bill to prevent the farther importation of slaves into the British colonies in the West Indies,’ debate continued the following day (rejected: ayes 88/noes 163).

## **1792**

02 April: \*Wilberforce motion a) ‘that it is the opinion of this Committee that the trade carried on by British subjects, for the purpose of obtaining slaves on the coast of Africa, ought to be abolished’; b) ‘that the Chairman be directed to move the House for leave to bring in a bill for the abolition of the slave trade’; Dundas amendment to insert ‘gradually’ into resolution; Jenkinson two propositions: ‘That an address be presented to His Majesty, that he would be pleased to recommend to the Colonial Assemblies, to grant premiums to such planters and overseers as should distinguish themselves by promoting the annual increase of slave by birth. And likewise to grant freedom to every female negro who had borne and reared up five children to the age of seven years. That a bounty of 5l. per head be given to the master of every vessel employed in the trade from the coast of Africa, who should import, in any cargo, a greater number of female than male negroes, not exceeding the age of twenty-five years’ (Jenkinson propositions rejected: ayes 87/noes 234; Dundas amendment passed: ayes 193/noes 125; amended resolution passed: ayes 230/noes 85).

04 April: Wilberforce transfer responsibility for any gradual abolition bill to Dundas.

23 April: Dundas 12 Propositions introduced (see Appendix Two for full list).

25 April: Dundas motion for 1<sup>st</sup> Resolution; amendment for shorter period by Wellesley/Mornington (rejected: ayes 109/noes 158).

27 April: further debate on 1<sup>st</sup> Resolution; amendment for shorter period by Mornington/Addington (passed: ayes 151/noes 132).

01 May: Dundas suspend efforts; Pitt motion for five of Dundas’ Resolutions (no.2, 3, 6, 8, second half of 9 – see Appendix 2) (passed: no vote recorded).

03 May: House of Lords debate on Resolutions, decision to hear evidence.

## **1793**

26 February: \*Wilberforce motion for debate on slave trade Thursday the following week ‘a preliminary to the renewal of the resolutions [of 1792]’ (6 March) – (defeated: ayes 53/noes 61).



14 May: \*Wilberforce motion a) ‘that leave be given to bring in a bill for abolishing the trade, carried on by English merchants for supplying foreign territories with slaves’ (passed: ayes 41/noes 34); b) ‘that leave be given to bring in a bill for limiting and regulating the importation of slaves to the British colonies in the West Indies, for a time to be limited’ (rejected: ayes 25/noes 35).

22 May: \*Wilberforce motion ‘that leave be given to bring in a bill to prevent the supplying of foreign nations with slaves’ (passed: ayes 51/noes 24).

24 May: second reading of bill.

12 June: further consideration deferred a month (having been delayed repeatedly since 24 May).

### **1794**

07 February: \*Wilberforce motion ‘that leave be given to bring in a bill for preventing the supply of foreign territories with slaves from the Coast of Africa’ (passed: ayes 63/noes 40).

25 February: second reading of bill.

07 March: third reading of bill; to be recommitted with amendments.

17 March: third reading of bill (passed: ayes 74/noes 33).

18 March: first reading of bill in House of Lords.

02 May: second reading of bill postponed three months.

### **1795**

26 February: \*Wilberforce motion ‘That leave be given to bring in a Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade’ (postponed six months).

### **1796**

18 February: \*Wilberforce motion ‘for leave to bring in a bill for the abolition of the slave trade, at a limited time’ (passed: ayes 93/noes 67).

07 March: first reading of abolition bill; added clauses include: abolition agreed for 1 March 1797; punishable by transportation to Botany Bay for 14 years; others not recorded in debate.

15 March: second reading of bill (postponed four months).

11 April: Philip Francis motion ‘for leave to bring in a bill to improve the conditions of negroes and other slaves in the British colonies’ (rejected ‘without division’).

26 April: Slave-Carrying Bill (Dolben's Act) renewed; Wilberforce proposes 'some alteration in the number of slaves that were carried, in order to prepare the islands for abolition' (no formal amendment moved).

### 1797

06 April: Ellis motion 'That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, requesting that His Majesty will be graciously pleased to give Directions to the Governors of his Majesty's Plantations in the West Indies, to recommend to the respective Councils and Assemblies of the said Plantations, to adopt such measures as shall appear to them best calculated to obviate the Causes which have hitherto impeded the natural Increase of the Negroes already in the Islands, gradually to diminish the Necessity of the Slave Trade, and ultimately lead to its complete Termination; and particularly, with a View to the same Effect, to employ such Means as may conduce to the Moral and Religious Improvement of the Negroes, and secure to them, throughout all the British West India Islands, the certain, immediate, and active Protection of the Law' (passed: ayes 99/noes 63).

15 May: \*Wilberforce motion 'that leave be given to bring in bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, at a time to be limited' (rejected: ayes 74/noes 82).

### 1798

03 April: \*Wilberforce motion 'that leave be given to bring in bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, at a time to be limited' (rejected: ayes 83/noes 87).

### 1799

01 March: \*Wilberforce motion 'for leave to bring in a bill to abolish the Slave Trade' (rejected: ayes 54/noes 84).

05 March: Thornton motion 'to bring forward a bill to prohibit the Slave Trade on the Northern coasts of Africa' (passed: not vote recorded).

20 March: second reading of bill.

02 May: third reading of bill (passed: ayes 59/noes 23).

03 May: first reading of bill in House of Lords.

05 July: second reading of bill (defeated).

11 July: Pitt motion that 'an address be presented to His Majesty, praying him to give directions to the Governors of the West-India islands and plantations to transmit

accounts of the number of negroes on such islands and plantations, with the number of deaths within the last three years, and also the amount of births within the last three years'; 'that he would be pleased to direct such accounts to be laid before Parliament early next session'; (passed: no vote recorded) notice that 'he should early the next session submit a motion, the object of which should be – not the total abolition of the trade, but – to prevent the multiplication of negroes from Africa, and by that means gradually to decrease the evils arising from the trade'.

### **1800**

08 May: Pitt explains delay to motion given notice of – no further action.

### **1801**

### **1802**

02 April: Canning motion 'that a humble Address be presented to His Majesty, that he will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House copies or abstracts of any information transmitted by the Governor or Commander in Chief of the Island of Trinidad since the capture of the said island, and to the amount of its population, distinguishing the different classes of inhabitants; likewise of any plans or descriptions of any proposed allotment or distribution of lands for the improvement of said island; - and also, copies of any instructions which have been sent to the Governor or Commander in Chief of the island of Trinidad, since the capture of the same...' (carried).

18 June: Wilberforce withdrawing planned motion on the abolition of the slave trade 'from the apparent indisposition of the House to entertain it at this late period'.

### **1803**

### **1804**

30 May: \*Wilberforce motion 'that the House do resolve into a committee, to consider of the propriety of the introduction of a bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade within a time to be limited' (carried); 'Ordered, that leave be given to bring in a Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, at a time to be limited'.

01 June: first reading of bill.

07 June: second reading of bill.  
13 June: bill amended in Committee.  
25 June: bill amended in Committee.  
27 June: third reading of bill (passed ayes 69/noes 33).  
28 June: first reading in House of Lords.  
03 July: second reading proposed and postponed three months.

## **1805**

15 February: Wilberforce motion ‘that leave be given to bring in a bill to abolish the Slave Trade at a time to be limited’ (passed: no vote recorded).  
19 February: first reading of bill.  
28 February: second reading of bill proposed and postponed six months.

## **1806**

31 March: Attorney-General motion ‘for leave to bring in a bill, to carry into effect his Majesty’s proclamation of the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, 1804 [actually 1805], for preventing the importation of African negroes by British subjects or British shipping into the colonies conquered by, or ceded to us in the course of the war’ (copy of proclamation requested).  
01 April: Vansittart presented proclamation; Attorney-General motion for ‘leave to bring in a bill for preventing the Importation of Slaves by British subjects, or in British bottoms, into foreign islands, &c. and for rendering more effectual the order of his majesty in council on this subject, dated 15<sup>th</sup> August last.’ (passed: no vote recorded).  
18 April: second reading of bill.  
01 May: attempt to postpone reading for three months (rejected); third reading of bill (passed: vote on bill not recorded).  
02 May: first reading in House of Lords.  
07 May: second reading in House of Lords.  
16 May: third reading in House of Lords (passed).  
23 May: Royal Assent given to Act.  
10 June: Fox motion ‘that this House, conceiving the African Slave Trade to be contrary to the principles of justice, humanity, and sound policy, will, with all practical expedition, proceed to take effectual measures for abolishing the said trade, in such manner, and at such period, as may be deemed advisable’ (passed: ayes 114/noes 15);

Wilberforce motion ‘that a humble Address be presented to his Majesty to take such measures as in his wisdom he shall judge proper, for establishing by negotiation with foreign powers, a concert and agreement for abolishing the African Slave Trade; and for affording assistance mutually towards carrying into execution any regulations which may be adopted by any or all of the contracting parties for accomplishing their common purpose’ (carried in the affirmative).

13 June: Fox ‘brought in a bill to prevent ships from clearing out for the African Slave trade, that had not hitherto been employed in the trade’ (passed).

## **1807**

02 January: Grenville introduce bill to House of Lords, first reading.

29 January: Wilberforce speech to say that abolition measure in progress in House of Lords.

05 February: second reading of bill in House of Lords.

10 February: third reading of bill in House of Lords (passed); ‘A message was sent to the house [of Commons] by the House of Lords, announcing that their Lordships had passed a bill, entitled, An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and to which they desired the concurrence of the house’; Lord Howick motion for first reading of bill.

20 February: second reading of bill; resolved to commit bill.

23 February: bill committed (passed: ayes 283/noes 16).

27 February: bill passed pro forma, to be recommitted with additional clauses.

06 March: bill recommitted, vote on immediate abolition (passed: ayes 175/noes 17).

16 March: third reading of bill (passed without vote).

23 March: amendments made in Commons read in Lords (passed).

25 March: Royal Assent given to Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade.

Entries marked with \* indicate dates on which Wilberforce made speeches included in the main analysis in Chapter Three.

## **Appendix 2**

### **Wilberforce and Dundas' Propositions, 1789 and 1792**

#### **Wilberforce's Propositions, 12 May 1789**

I: That the number of slaves annually carried from the coast of Africa, in British vessels, is supposed to be about 38,000; That the number annually carried to the British West India islands, has, on an average of four years, to the year 1787 inclusive, amounted to about 22,500

II: That the much greater number of the negroes, carried away by European vessels, are brought from the interior parts of the continent of Africa, and many of them from a very great distance; That no precise information appears to have been obtained of the manner in which these persons have been made slaves; But that from the accounts, as far as any have been procured on this subject, with respect to the slaves brought from the interior parts of Africa, and from the information which has been received respecting the countries nearer to the coast, the slaves may in general be classed under some of the following descriptions:

1<sup>st</sup> Prisoners taken in war

2<sup>nd</sup> Free persons sold for debt, or on account of real or imputed crimes, particularly adultery and witchcraft; in which cases they are frequently sold with their whole families, and sometimes for the profit of those by whom they are condemned

3<sup>rd</sup> Domestic slaves sold for the profit for their masters; in some places at the will of the masters, and in some places on being condemned for real or imputed crimes

4<sup>th</sup> Persons made slaves by various acts of oppression, violence, or fraud, committed either by the Princes and Chiefs of those countries on their subjects, or by private individuals on each other; or lastly, by Europeans engaged in this traffic

III: That the trade carried on by European nations on the coast of Africa, for the purchase of slaves, has necessarily a tendency to occasion frequent and cruel wars among the natives, to produce unjust convictions and punishments for pretended or aggravated crimes, to encourage acts of oppression, violence, and fraud, and to obstruct the natural course of civilization and improvements in those countries.

IV: That the continent of Africa, in its present state, furnishes several valuable articles of commerce highly important to the trade and manufactures of this kingdom, and which are in a great measure peculiar to this kingdom, and which are in a great

measure peculiar to that quarter of the globe; and that the soil and climate have been found, by experience, well adapted to the production of other articles, with which we are now either wholly, or in great part, supplied by foreign nations. That an extensive commerce with Africa in these commodities, might probably be substituted in the place of that which is now carried on in slaves, so as at least to afford a return for the same quantity of goods as has annually been carried thither in British vessels. And lastly, That such a commerce might reasonably be expected to increase in proportion to the progress of civilization and improvement on that continent.

V: That the slave trade has been found, by experience, to be peculiarly injurious and destructive to the British seamen who have been employed therein; and that the mortality among them has been much greater than in His Majesty's ships stationed on the coast of Africa, or than has been usual in British vessels employed in any other trade.

VI: That the mode of transporting the slaves from Africa to the West Indies necessarily exposes them to many and grievous sufferings, for which no regulation can provide an adequate remedy; and that, in consequence thereof, a large proportion of them has annually perished during the voyage.

VII: That a large proportion of the slaves so transported, has also perished in the harbours in the West Indies, previous to their being sold. That this loss is stated by the assembly of the island of Jamaica at about four and a half per cent of the number imported; and is, by medical persons of experience in that island, ascribed, in great measure, to diseases contracted during the voyage, and to the mode of treatment on board the ships, by which those diseases have been suppressed for a time, in order to render the slaves fit for immediate sale.

VIII: That the loss of newly imported negroes, within the first three years after their importation, bears a large proportion to the whole number imported

IX: That the natural increase of population among the slaves in the islands, appear to have been impeded principally by the following causes:

1<sup>st</sup> The equality of the number of the sexes in the importation from Africa.

2<sup>nd</sup> The general dissoluteness of manners among the slaves, and the want of proper regulations for the encouragement of marriages, and of rearing children.

3<sup>rd</sup> Particular diseases which are prevalent among them, and which are in some instances attributed to too severe labour or rigorous treatment, and in others to insufficient or improper food.

4<sup>th</sup> Those diseases which affect a large proportion of negro children in their infancy, and those to which the negroes newly imported from Africa have been found to be particularly liable.

X: That the whole number of slaves in the island of Jamaica, in 1768, was about 167,000; That the number in 1774, was stated by Governor Keith about 193,000; And, that number in December 1787, as stated by Lieut. Governor Clarke, was about 256,000

That, by comparing these numbers with the numbers imported into and retained in the island, in the several years from 1768 to 1774 inclusive, as appearing from the accounts delivered to the Committee of Trade by Mr. Fuller; and in the several years from 1775 inclusive, to 1787 also inclusive, as appearing by the accounts delivered in by the Inspector General; and allowing for a loss of about one twenty-second part by deaths on ship board after entry, as stated in the Report of the Assembly of the said island in Jamaica, it appears,

That the annual excess of deaths above births in the island in the whole period of nineteen years, has been in the proportion of about seven eighths per cent, computing on the medium number of slaves in the island during that period.

That in the first six years of the said nineteenth, the excess of deaths was in the proportion of rather more than one on every hundred on the medium number.

That in the last thirteen years of the said nineteenth, the excess of deaths was in the proportion of about three-fifths on every hundred on the medium number; and that a number of slaves, amounting to 15,000, is stated by the Report of the island of Jamaica to have perished, during the latter period, in consequence of repeated hurricanes, and of the want of foreign supplies of provisions.

XI: That the whole number of slaves in the island of Barbadoes was, in the year 1764, according to the account given in to the Committee of Trade by Mr. Braithwaite 70,706; That in 1774, the number was, by the same account 74,874; In 1780, by ditto 68,270; In 1781, after the hurricane, according to the same account 63,248; In 1786, by ditto 62,115

That by comparing these numbers with the number imported into this island, according to the same account, (not allowing for any re-exportation) the annual excess of deaths above births, in the ten years from 1764 to 1774, was in the proportion of about five on every hundred, computing on the medium number of slaves in the island during that period.



That in the seven years from 1774 to 1780, both inclusive, the excess of deaths was in the proportion of about one and one-third on every hundred, on the medium number.

That between the year 1780-1781, there appears to have been a decrease in the number of slaves of about five thousand.

That in the six years from 1781 to 1786, both inclusive, the excess of deaths was in the proportion of rather less than seven-eighths in every hundred on the medium number.

And that in the four years from 1783 to 1786, both inclusive, the excess of deaths was in the proportion of rather less than one-third in every hundred on the medium number.

And that during the whole period there is no doubt that some were exported from the island, but considerably more in the first part of this period than in the last.

XII: That the accounts from the Leeward Islands and from Dominica, Grenada, and St. Vincent's, do not furnish sufficient grounds for comparing the state of population in the said islands at different periods, with the number of slaves which have been, from time to time, imported into the said islands, and exported therefrom. But that from the evidence which has been received respecting the present state of these islands, as well as of Jamaica and Barbadoes, and from a consideration of the means of obviating the causes which have hitherto operated to impeded the natural increase of the slaves, and of lessening the demand of manual labour, without diminishing the profit of the planter, it appears that no considerable or permanent inconvenience would result from discontinuing the farther importation of African slaves.

### **Dundas' Propositions, 23 April 1792**

1: That it shall not be lawful to import any African negroes into any British colonies, or plantations, in ships owned, or navigated, by British subjects, at any time after the 1<sup>st</sup> day of January, 1800.

2: That from and after the first day of May 1793, it shall not be lawful to carry any African negro from the coast of Africa, or any African, or Creole negro, from any of His Majesty's islands or plantations in the West Indies, to any of the dominions of any foreign Power, in any ship owned or navigated by British subjects; or in any foreign ship or vessel that may depart from the ports of Kingston, Montego Bay, St. Lucia, and Savannah la Mar, in the island of Jamaica; or from the ports of St. George,

in the island of Grenada, Nassau in the island of Dominica, and Nassau in the islands of New Providence, in the Bahamas.

3: That from and after the first day of May, in the present year, it shall not be lawful for any ships to clear out from any port of Great Britain, for the coast of Africa, for the purpose of taking on board negroes, unless such ships shall have been previously employed in the African trade, or contracted for, for that purpose, previous to the said first day of May.

And farther, it shall not be lawful for any ship to clear out from any British colony or plantation in America, for the coast of Africa, for the purpose of taking on board negroes, unless such ship shall have been previously employed in the African trade, or contracted for, for that purpose, before the tenth day of October of the present year.

4: That from and after the first day of May 1793, it shall not be lawful for any British subject to carry from the coast of Africa, in any ship or vessel owned and navigated by British subjects, a greater proportion of male negroes than of female negroes.

5: That from and after the [blank] day of [blank] it shall not be lawful for any British subject to purchase, or take on board, or carry from the coast of Africa, in any ship owned to navigated by British subjects, any male African negroes who shall be above the age of 20 years, or any female African negro above the age of 16 years.

6: That from and after the first day of May in the present year, the owner or owners, or master of every British vessel, which shall be entered outwards in any port or place in this kingdom, or in His Majesty's islands or plantations in America, shall declare to the principal Officers of His Majesty's customs of the port or place from whence the vessel is about to depart, for the purposes of taking on board negroes on the coast of Africa, the general destination of the voyage, and the particular island or islands, in His Majesty's plantations, to which he or they propose to carry the negroes so purchased; and that one or more of the owners, together with the master or person having the command of such ship or vessel, shall, with two sufficient sureties, enter into bond to His Majesty, in the sum of one thousand pounds for every hundred tons burden of such ship or vessel, and in a similar proportion where the tonnage shall fall short or exceed the above burden, to comply with the conditions of the third and fourth resolutions. And that the master or person having the command of such ship or vessel shall proceed directly from the coast of Africa to some one of His Majesty's plantations

in the West Indies, or to the island of New Providence in the Bahamas, and there land in the negroes taken on board the coast of Africa, unless the master of such vessel shall, by stress of weather, or other unavoidable accident, be obliged, for the safety of the vessel and the crew, to carry such ship or vessel into the nearest port of safety.

7: That a duty shall be levied or collected by the collector or other principal officers of His Majesty's customs in the plantations, of 5l. upon every male negro exceeding 4 feet 4 inches in height, that shall be imported in any ship or vessel into His Majesty's plantations, from and after the 10<sup>th</sup> day of October 1797; and for every male negro whose height shall not exceed 4 feet 4 inches, the sum of 3l; and for every female negro whose height shall not exceed 4 feet 4 inches in height, the sum of 2l; and for every male negro exceeding 4 feet 4 inches in height, which shall be imported as above, from and after the 10<sup>th</sup> day of October 1798, the sum of 10l; and for every male negro whose height shall not exceed 4 feet 4 inches, the sum of 8l. and for every female negro exceeding 4 feet 4 inches in height, the sum of 8l. and for every female negro whose height shall not exceed 4 feet 4 inches, the sum of 6l.

And for every male or female negro exceeding 4 feet 4 inches in height, which shall be imported as above, from and after the 10<sup>th</sup> day of October 1799, the sum of 15l. and for every male or female negro not exceeding 4 feet 4 inches in height, the sum of 12l. Which duties shall, within one month after collection, be accounted for, and paid over, by the collector or other principal Officer of His Majesty's Customs, to the Receiver General of the island or plantation in which such duties shall have been levied or collected, to be applicable to the use of the said island or plantation, and to be under the direction and at the disposal of the Legislature of the same.

8: That from and after the 10<sup>th</sup> day of October, in the present year, it shall not be lawful to import into any island or colony in America, under His Majesty, any African negro, or any Creole negro, or Mulatto slave, from any foreign island, colony, territory or dominion in America.

9: That from and after the first day of May 1793, the tonnage of shipping annually cleared out from the different ports of this kingdom to the coast of Africa, for the purpose of purchasing negroes, shall not exceed [blank] tons, and that the ports of London, Bristol, and Liverpool, shall be allowed such proportion thereof, as the respective trade in each port to the coast of Africa bore to the whole, upon an average of three years, preceding the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 1792.

And further, that from and after the [blank] day of [blank] the tonnage of shipping annually cleared out from the different ports of His Majesty's colonies and plantations in America to the coast of Africa, for the purpose of purchasing negroes, shall not exceed [blank] tons.

10: That Commissioners should be appointed to examine into the losses which merchants, or others concerned in the African slave trade, may sustain in consequence of the preceding resolutions, and that these commissioners shall, from time to time, report to Parliament the amount of the indemnification to which the sufferers are, in their opinion, entitled.

11: That farther provision ought to be made for the exemplary punishment of any British subjects, who shall be guilty of any outrage, violence, or malpractice, against any native of Africa, either in that country or on the coasts thereof, or on board any ship or vessel owned or navigated by British subjects.

12: That an humble address be presented to His Majesty, beseeching His Majesty to take such measures as, in his wisdom, he shall judge proper, for establishing, by negotiation with foreign powers, a general concert and agreement for the final and complete abolition of the trade carried on for the purpose of importing slaves from the coast of Africa, into any of the dominions of the said powers; assuring His Majesty, that while, on our part, we feel ourselves indispensably obliged, by the principles of justice, humanity, and sound policy, to take the most effectual measures which circumstances will admit, for accomplishing this important object, we shall enter on the pursuit of those measures with additional satisfaction, from the hope and persuasion, that His Majesty will be enabled, by the prudence and wisdom of the respective colonial legislatures, to adopt such regulations, within the several islands in the West Indies, as, by promoting their internal population, and gradually improving the condition of the negroes, may provide, in the most advantageous manner, an adequate supply for their cultivation, and contribute to the security, tranquillity, and permanent prosperity of those valuable possession. That, considering the particular regulations which may be necessary for this purpose, to be the proper province of the colonial Legislatures, we have not thought it proper to make them the subject of our deliberations; but that, if any circumstances should arise, in which our co-operation and assistance shall be wanting for this purpose, we shall, at all times, be ready to afford it, with a zeal and alacrity proportioned to the importance of the end, and to our constant

solicitude for the general welfare and happiness of every part of His Majesty's dominions.

## Appendix 3

### Timeline of International Abolition Campaign, 1806-1826

Year	Wilberforce	Britain	Portugal	France	Spain	Other European	USA
1806	Address to King for foreign negotiations (June)	Foreign Slave Trade Act (June)					
1807	<i>Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade</i> (Jan)	Slave Trade Abolition Act (March); African Institution founded (March)	Foreign Minister rejects suggested abolition				Abolition legislation passed (March), to take effect 01 January 1808
1808	Letter to Jefferson (Sept)						
1809							
1810			<u>Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, with abolition clauses</u> (Feb)				
1811		Slave Trade Felony Act (March); <u>Berbice Commission founded</u> (April)			Abolition debate in <i>Cortes</i> (April)		
1812		Order in Council for slave register in Trinidad (March)					War of 1812
1813						Anglo-Dutch treaty with abolition clauses; Swedish slave trade abolished via treaty (March)	
1814	Letters to Prince Talleyrand and Tsar Alexandre (June), <i>Letter to Talleyrand</i> (Oct)	<u>Petitions to parliament protesting Peace of Paris slave trade agreement</u>		Peace of Paris – French slave trade could be resumed for five years (June)	Treaty limiting Spanish slave trade to own colonies (July)	Danish abolition (Jan); Dutch Abolition decree by Prince of Orange (June); letter from Pope Pius VII to Louis XVIII of France (n.d.)	Treaty of Ghent, with agreement to suppress trade (Dec)

Year	Wilberforce	Britain	Portugal	France	Spain	Other European	USA
1815		<u>Congress of Vienna</u> (Nov 1814-June); Foreign Slave Trade (capital) Act (May); <u>Act to Prevent Illicit Importation of Slaves</u> (July)	Treaty inc. abolition north of the Equator (Jan); <u>Congress of Vienna</u>	<u>Congress of Vienna</u> ; treaty inc. immediate abolition after Napoleon's escape (March, renewed July)	<u>Congress of Vienna</u>		
1816		<u>Slave Register Bill</u> (failed); slave trade summit (Aug)					Treaty negotiations (failed)
1817			Treaty with abolition clauses, dual court of admiralty (July)	Louis XVIII declaration against the slave trade (Jan)	<u>Treaty with abolition clauses, dual court of admiralty</u> (Sept)	<u>Letter from Pope Pius VII to Portuguese court</u> (n.d.)	
1818		<u>Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle</u> (Oct-Nov)	<u>Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle</u>	<u>Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle</u>	<u>Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle</u>	Dutch treaty with abolition clauses, dual court of admiralty (May)	Further legislation (April)
1819		Slave Register Act (June)					U.S. Navy to seize suspected slave ships (no agreement with Britain) (March)
1820			No sign of agreed abolition	Promises made to Britain to abolish			
1821					No sign of agreed abolition	Dutch anti-slave trade laws extended to Surinam (April)	
1822	<i>Letter to Tsar Alexandre</i> (Feb)	<u>Congress of Verona</u> (Oct)	<u>Congress of Verona</u>	Abolition committee formed by <i>Société de la Morale Chrétienne</i> (April); <u>Congress of Verona</u>	Abolition legislation (Jan); <u>Congress of Verona</u>	Extended seizure rights agreed with Dutch (Dec)	

Year	Wilberforce	Britain	Portugal	France	Spain	Other European	USA
1823	<i>Appeal on behalf of negroes</i> (March)	<u>Anti-Slavery Society founded (Jan)</u> ; Resolutions for amelioration (May)					Negotiations re: slave trade piracy
1824		Slave Trade Piracy Act (March)				Further Dutch legislation (Dec)	
1825	Retirement (Feb)					Further Dutch legislation (March)	

Entries underlined indicate those Wilberforce directly involved himself in, as described in Chapter Four.



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