

A portrait of William Wilberforce, a young man with light-colored hair, wearing a dark blue coat over a white cravat. He is holding a rolled-up document in his right hand. The background is dark with a reddish glow behind his head. A gold starburst graphic is in the top left corner.

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William Wilberforce
and the Heroic
Campaign to End
Slavery

AMAZING GRACE

ERIC METAXAS

Foreword by DR. FLOYD H. FLAKE, president of Wilberforce University

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Slavery

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 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

*To the Claphamites of the twenty-first century,
whose passion for God and their fellow man are inseparable*

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Foreword

History's landscape is littered with great people whose names have disappeared from the rolls of our collective memory. Such has been the unfortunate fate that befell the heroic William Wilberforce. Wilberforce—humanitarian, parliamentarian, and voice of the voiceless—fatefully receded somewhere into the far-off memory of Americans over the past century. Wilberforce and his name once stood as monuments to freedom, faith, and humanity. Were Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass to cite their sources of inspiration, Wilberforce would be high, if not first, on their lists. Today, that memory is resurrected in this magnificent book.

Eric Metaxas's work will stand as a living landmark not so much for its obviously beautiful prose and detailed narrative of the life of Wilberforce, but because it artfully captures the essence of a spiritual strength, moral clarity, human frailty, and divine purpose that dwelled among men at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth. Bold men and women, Wilberforce first among equals, challenged the prevailing currents of their time to eradicate the scourge of the slave trade. Ultimately, their strategies, defeats, and victories “mounted up with wings like eagles” to call attention to slavery as more than just a “peculiar institution.” In Wilberforce's mind, there was nothing peculiar about slavery. Peculiar to him was the ability of so many refined and seemingly polite members of society to stomach slavery's bile and to turn a deaf ear to the cries of millions. To Wilberforce, slavery and other civil ills were forces that destroyed life and its viability. As a result of his courage and efforts, freedom's bell was rung for millions and the thirst for liberty has continued to echo throughout history.

William Wilberforce's courage, zeal, and actions as recounted in this biography are a modern reminder of work unfinished. That he suffered from poor health likewise reminds that even in the context of human weakness, divine work can still attend. His situation begs the question, What can I do today?

Today, in every corner of the world (the United States and Great Britain

are not exempt), there remains great work to do. Slavery in Africa is still a reality. Today, the “filthy ships” of European slave traders are dry-docked in our distant memory, but human beings are still stripped of their essence and exported to far-off and hostile places. In too many corners of Asia, Eastern Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East, trafficking in women to serve the baser desires of men is thriving; work unfinished remains.

Scripture is bursting with admonitions to remember. There is power in remembrance, recalling, and memorial celebration. This biography allows us to place Wilberforce in two contexts and to witness the miracles that still occur.

First, Metaxas’s biography allows us to put into crystal-clear focus the life of a man born to comfort but discomforted by the dire conditions of suffering people. Wilberforce saw the chemistry of oppression as changing the oppressor as well as the oppressed. In his own available way, he acted boldly to change the world. This boldness, while temporarily forgotten in human history, is ultimately honored and rewarded by Heaven itself.

In a second way, Metaxas’s work on Wilberforce’s life allows us to witness that God has not finished His creative work. Like Wilberforce, we have the ability to create a better world, that “beloved” community of which Jesus Christ and the prophets spoke.

Wilberforce’s obsession with slavery’s end was a blessing to those he would never know. Blind acts of love are often redemptive—sometimes painful, but always redemptive. Wilberforce’s early defeats and setbacks early in his legislative life were all vindicated by his delayed victory in the House of Commons years after he introduced his first antislavery measure; love is indeed longsuffering, as we are reminded in Paul’s epistle to the nascent church in late ancient Corinth. His real redemption and justification were not accomplished during his lifetime nor in the House of Commons. The greatest benefits of his work and toiling are still being realized when oppression is confronted today, racism is challenged everywhere, and a better, more loving world is ultimately created.

The single greatest institutional memorial to Wilberforce is the university that bears his name. One hundred fifty-one years ago, men and women joined head and heart across the lines of race, class, and confessional statements to create America’s first private historically black college and university. Not in London, but in the states of the former British colony, stands an African-

American college as a memorial to a white British Member of Parliament. The irony is not lost.

At the time of the university's establishment, there was polite conversation in America's parlors and colleges about the basic humanity of African Americans. Even more unrealistic for many in that conversation was the ability of African Americans to learn, contribute to society, and exist beyond the pale of forced servitude.

Today, Wilberforce University welcomes many of America's poorest and most underserved populations and transforms their educational dreams into realities. The average household income of Wilberforce students hovers just above the nation's poverty line, but its students have not surrendered their hunger for excellence and thirst for achievement in the midst of economic and social challenge.

In one small town named Wilberforce, Ohio, Wilberforce's legacy was never forgotten. At every commencement, the "Wilberforce Bible" is read, and in the margins are the unmistakable musings and notes of none other than William Wilberforce. Thousands of African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and Africans have presented their minds, bodies, and spirits at an altar of educational improvement. As a result, countless physicians, educators, lawyers, presidents of liberated African nations, members of Congress, and church leaders have graduated from Wilberforce University and now make the world a better place. It is more than ironic that in one of the few places where his name is remembered that miracles continue to happen every single day.

"Lest we forget" seems a fitting admonition in present times, in the midst of change's whirlwind. As the world recognizes Wilberforce, his work, and his Savior, let us not fall into former pits of forgetfulness.

Floyd Flake

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and author of Practical Virtues and The Way of the Bootstrapper*

Introduction

We often hear about people who “need no introduction,” but if ever someone did need one, at least in our day and age, it’s William Wilberforce. The strange irony is that we are talking about a man who changed the world, so if ever someone should *not* need an introduction—whose name and accomplishments should be on the lips of all humanity—it’s Wilberforce.

What happened is surprisingly simple: William Wilberforce was the happy victim of his own success. He was like someone who against all odds finds the cure for a horrible disease that’s ravaging the world, and the cure is so overwhelmingly successful that it vanquishes the disease completely. No one suffers from it again—and within a generation or two no one remembers it ever existed.

The roots of the thing Wilberforce was trying to uproot had been growing since humans first walked on the planet, and if they had been real roots, they would have reached to the molten core of the earth itself. They ran so deep and so wide that most people thought that they held the planet together.

The opposition that he and his small band faced was incomparable to anything we can think of in modern affairs. It was certainly unprecedented that anyone should endeavor, as if by their own strength and a bit of leverage, to tip over something about as large and substantial and deeply rooted as a mountain range. From where we stand today—and because of Wilberforce—the end of slavery seems inevitable, and it’s impossible for us not to take it largely for granted. But that’s the wild miracle of his achievement, that what to the people of his day seemed impossible and unthinkable seems to us, in our day, inevitable.

There’s hardly a soul alive today who isn’t horrified and offended by the very idea of human slavery. We seethe with moral indignation at it, and we can’t fathom how anyone or any culture ever countenanced it. But in the world into which Wilberforce was born, the opposite was true. Slavery was as accepted as birth and marriage and death, was so woven into the tapestry of human history that you could barely see its threads, much less pull them

out. Everywhere on the globe, for five thousand years, the idea of human civilization without slavery was unimaginable.

The idea of ending slavery was so completely out of the question at that time that Wilberforce and the abolitionists couldn't even mention it publicly. They focused on the lesser idea of abolishing the slave trade—on the buying and selling of human beings—but never dared speak of emancipation, of ending slavery itself. Their secret and cherished hope was that once the slave trade had been abolished, it would then become possible to begin to move toward emancipation. But first they must fight for the abolition of the slave trade; and that battle—brutal and heartbreaking—would take twenty years.

Of course, finally winning that battle in 1807 is the single towering accomplishment for which we should remember Wilberforce today, whose bicentennial we celebrate, and whose celebration occasions a movie, documentaries, and the book you now hold. If anything can stand as a single marker of Wilberforce's accomplishments, it is that 1807 victory. It paved the way for all that followed, inspiring the other nations of the world to follow suit and opening the door to emancipation, which, amazingly, was achieved three days before Wilberforce died in 1833. He received the glorious news of his lifelong goal on his deathbed.

Wilberforce was one of the brightest, wittiest, best connected, and generally talented men of his day, someone who might well have become prime minister of Great Britain if he had, in the words of one historian, "preferred party to mankind." But his accomplishments far transcend any mere political victory. Wilberforce can be pictured as standing as a kind of hinge in the middle of history: he pulled the world around a corner, and we can't even look back to see where we've come from.

Wilberforce saw much of what the rest of the world could not, including the grotesque injustice of one man treating another as property. He seems to rise up out of nowhere and with the voice of unborn billions—with your voice and mine—shriek to his contemporaries that they are sleepwalking through hell, that they must wake up and must see what he saw and know what he knew—and what you and I know today—that the widespread and institutionalized and unthinkably cruel mistreatment of millions of human beings is evil and must be stopped as soon as conceivably possible—no matter the cost.

But how is it possible that humanity for so long tolerated what to us is so