

Wilberforce, A Peaceful Freedom Fighter?

There is no established definition of a “freedom fighter” but, it is not unreasonable to conclude that at its simplest, the term refers to someone who engages in activities, the objective of which, is to liberate people from some form of oppression. There could of course then be a number of debatable refinements and caveats. For example, the importance of motive. For instance, the extent to which a person who struggles to free slaves, with the ulterior motive of saving a republic, should be regarded a freedom fighter. Similarly the means employed could also be considered, such as the extent to which it matters whether dialogue or armed resistance is used. We should be able to agree though, that a freedom fighter in the context of slavery is one who acts to bring about the end of this physical and legal bondage. There is general consensus that William Wilberforce was an abolitionist. The question arises however, whether his interest lay in abolishing the institution of slavery and could therefore be regarded as a freedom fighter, as opposed to merely abolishing the trade in slaves.

Wilberforce needs to be understood in the context of his circumstances, motives and beliefs. Had he been a Black man who had experienced the horrors of capture in Africa, the Atlantic passage or slavery on a plantation, his outlook at the start is likely to have been quite different. But he was the son of a wealthy merchant. He had a vested interest in the establishment. He was deeply religious and conservative. He abhorred violence. In his world change is best brought about by discussion, diplomacy and strategy. His determination to take an interest in the plight of Africans arose not from an affection for them per se, but because he felt that slavery was an affront to the religious and moral principles that he so highly cherished.

Early in his life he committed to Evangelical Christianity and to social reform. The focus of his work was through Parliament and pressure groups most notably the Clapham Sect. Through the Clapham Sect he became actively involved in the struggle against slavery. After some initial soundings and failed attempts to bring about change, Wilberforce, supported by many of his colleagues, felt that more preparation and a pragmatic strategy were needed. The consensus at the time was that the best approach was to press for the “Gradual” elimination of slavery. In this vein ending the trade in slaves came to be considered the best step forward and the focus of action.

It was a strategy that was based on two major assumptions. The first was that in Parliament there was unlikely to be any progress, if the proposition was the immediate abolition of slavery. Parliament rarely, if ever, moves so radically on any issue not just on a matter such as slavery. This is because of the difficulty of reaching consensus between the competing vested interests on these weighty matters. This was coupled with the fact that the planters and slave owners controlled much of Parliament. For example, in 1766 there were 40 Members of Parliament who were either planters themselves or had interests in the West Indies. With their wealth, political influence and the motive of self-preservation, they would mount formidable opposition to any attempt to end slavery. They argued that apart from the disastrous effects that ending slavery would have on their “property” and British commerce generally, the void would be taken up by competing countries such as France and Spain. Wilberforce felt the abolition movement was more likely to succeed in stages.

The second assumption was that a period of "adjustment" would create a better environment for complete abolition. If the supply of slaves were curtailed, slave owners Wilberforce felt, would be obliged to treat those that were available more humanely. Slaves on the other hand, he believed needed a period of education, in particular religious education, in order to prepare them for full freedom. As he would come to recognise late in his career, in this he was very naive. Following the 1807 act, trade in illegal slave mushroomed. Various means were used to circumvent the law. In addition, far from improving the circumstances of slaves, slave owners would treat slaves sometimes far worse.

To say that the 1807 act did not free a single slave would be to miss the wider context of the struggle for freedom. Abolition did not come about as a result of any single act, event, or individual. Rather it was a process, sometime peaceful but often bloody, which took place over hundreds of years beginning with the resistance of Africans in Africa to enslavement. The struggle went on to include resistance on slave ships, resistance on plantations, resistance leading to the 1807 Act, resistance leading to the 1833 Act. To use an analogy most slave uprisings did not free many slaves. In fact many were maimed or killed. But this does not mean the uprisings were pointless. They contributed to the continued pressure for change. All of these efforts, including the 1807 Act, were essential steps in the long march to freedom.

It should also be noted that the British Navy attempted to enforce the 1807 Act with various patrols and military actions against slave ships. Over 200,000 slaves were freed as a result of these efforts. This is of course a fraction of the millions of Africans who were enslaved, but it has to be seen as an advance, at the very least in terms of a shift in attitude by Britain to slavery. These efforts could have been even more effective had there been more support and cooperation from other countries. But this was not readily forthcoming and as a result, the law was flouted in particular by moving slaves between countries and colonies and by using ships flying non British flags. The records and accounts of these operations did however provide a wealth of further details on the scale and brutality of slavery, as well as the lengths to which the barbaric slaving interests were prepared to go to continue it. All of this information would be instrumental in making the case for emancipation.

The interests of Black people have always been pawn to political circumstances. To this day the cause of Black people are often furthered or impeded by the degree which doing so would advance the aims of the prevailing super powers. Among other things France declared war on Britain in 1793 following the French revolution. At that time St Domingue (Later Haiti) was a French possession. From Britain's point of view seizing the island was of utmost strategic importance. The island could serve as a focal point to link British territories scattered throughout the Caribbean, as well as a base to protect British interests from attack from France and America.

Toussaint L'Ouverture on the other hand, wanted to secure freedom for Black people and would fight for or against any power that would further this end. He initially fought with the Spanish against the French but following the abolition of slavery in France in 1794 (The first European country to do so, though slavery was later reinstated by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802 and again abolished in 1848), he fought for the French. Securing the island was vastly of more concern to the British Prime Minister Pitt and Parliament, than abolition. Troops were not sent in to put down Toussaint per se but to secure a key military and political objective. Toussaint just happened to be fighting for the French at

the time. Indeed he was so effective that the British eventually agreed to make an armistice with him. It was after this that Toussaint turned on the French and coloureds on the island continuing the movement to independence, which became a reality in 1804.

Another important point ancillary to these developments should be noted. Wilberforce supported Pitt at the beginning of the war with France including in principle actions such as in St Domingue . This is understandable from national strategic point of view. But as the war wore on and it became clear to Wilberforce that there was a real possibility of a peaceful settlement, he was moved to make one of most painful and difficult decisions of his life and political career. He opposed his close friend and political ally in continuing the war. Wilberforce was roundly chastised from all sides for the action and this was a major blow for Pitt. However, Wilberforce's conviction on the matter ran deeply and he persisted. He was eventually vindicated when many of his critics and even Pitt came round to his view.

After the 1807 Act some abolitionists left the movement because they did not support the move toward emancipation. Those that remained including Wilberforce felt that amelioration should be the next step. This was consistent with their conservative approach to change as well as based on their experience in ending the slave trade. In 1823, "The Society for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery" was formed with the objective of making amelioration law followed by "Abolition at an early date". However, by this time Wilberforce's health was seriously failing and he was approaching the end of his career in Parliament. He had therefore sought out a younger protégé to lead this part of the campaign. This was Thomas Buxton.

Elizabeth Heyrick was one of the newer abolitionists who was sharply critical of the gradual approach (Some established abolitionists were also critical, most notably Grandville Sharpe). Heyrick was part of an influential movement of women abolitionists and did excellent work in helping to galvanise public opinion for "Immediate" abolition. This included her pamphlet "Immediate not Gradual Abolition" in 1824. By the 1820s the public mood was for reform. This was not only in respect of slavery but political reform generally such as, giving more people the right to vote and increasing Parliamentary representation. This coupled with the problems caused by slave revolts and the fact that the brutality of the planters was public knowledge more than ever before, created an environment that was more sympathetic to the notion of "Immediate" abolition.

However, Wilberforce and much of the Clapham Sect felt that pursuing immediate abolition in Parliament was doomed to failure because of the very strong vested interests. In their view immediate abolition movement undermined the gradual abolition strategy and should be discouraged. In the end, the more radical views of women and younger abolitionists prevailed and the movement took a more aggressive stance reflected ultimately in the Emancipation Act 1833.

By the time Buxton presented the Emancipation bill in 1833, the abolitionists had the weight of public opinion on their side. They also had strong support in Parliament because reforms had resulted in a number of new Members of Parliament who did not have strong allegiance to the Planter class. Yet despite this, it should be noted that the abolitionists still had to compromise with a delay in the form an 6 year "Apprentice Period", during which slaves and slave owners were meant to adjust to the new social order. This was in addition to £20 Million in compensation paid to the planters as well as

other concessions. So somewhat ironically then, the final bill was in effect of a gradual rather than immediate nature.

Wilberforce did not lead the final Parliamentary campaign that led to the passing of the 1833 Emancipation Act. By the time the abolition movement had gained momentum around 1823, Wilberforce was in very poor health. Further he retired from Parliament in 1825. However, this does not mean that he had no interest or influence in the movement at this stage. In 1823 he was a founding member of the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery, which was at the forefront of the parliamentary campaign to abolish slavery. Also in 1823 he introduced one of the earliest bills in support full abolition. This he did on behalf of the Quakers during which he affirmed his regret at not previously taking a more aggressive stance not just to end the slave trade but slavery as an institution. In that year he also published his manifesto "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", in which he outlined the scourge of slavery and made a case for complete abolition. Wilberforce continued his support for the campaign inside and outside Parliament for as long as he was physically able. He died in July 1833 shortly before the bill was passed.

Social change can be brought about by peaceful or violent means. There are celebrated proponents and opponents of each. In some situations both are necessary. This was very much the case with the struggle to end slavery. Many different people, of various backgrounds fought in their own way. However, once he committed to the cause, Wilberforce dedicated his life to ending slavery as an institution not just the slave trade, in the way he thought best. However misguided we may feel he was and though some would argue that it is a debatable point, ending the slave trade was for him a crucial interim step.

It is likely that slavery would have come to an end whether or not the likes of Wilberforce were involved. The slaves would have continued to revolt with increasing regularity and severity until they were freed. However, without the efforts of all the abolitionists, the travesty would have continued for much longer. This author shares the view that more prominence should be given to the other figures who struggled for freedom not least Africans themselves. Wilberforce of course was by no means without flaw. It could be said for example that in some respects he was naive and ultra conservative. Further, liberty is a sacred right of every individual, not to be conferred or denied at the whim of another. On this basis the slaves should have been freed immediately regardless of the consequences. That Wilberforce did not support this view it could be argued, was as a result of a misplaced paternalism, however well intentioned. But to undervalue or dismiss Wilberforce's personal contribution to the total abolition movement would be a disservice and he should be recognised as a freedom fighter.

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