

William Wilberforce, the Clapham Cabinet, and 'Liberating the Captives' in Australia

Public Lecture by Associate Professor Stuart Piggin
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hosted by Senator Guy Barnett

**To celebrate the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave
trade.**

My thanks to Senator Guy Barnett for inviting me to give this address. I take it as an honour, and hope it will not bring too much dishonour on the Senator.

200 years ago yesterday the Abolition of the Slave Trade in British ships became law, the achievement for which William Wilberforce is best known. This talk is on the impact of William Wilberforce on Australia. I here imagine myself speaking through his son-in-law James Stephen. As Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, Stephen was responsible for implementing colonial policy which often reflected Wilberforce's views. It seemed a good way of focussing on the impact of Wilberforce on Australia. So in what follows, it is not I who speaks, but James Stephen who speaketh through me.

Dear Citizens of the Colony of NSW, permit me, in this the year of our Lord, eighteen hundred and nine and forty, to introduce myself. My name is James Stephen. My father, also James, was one of Mr William Wilberforce's best friends. I say 'one', because it appears that Mr Wilberforce, who had a great gift for friendship, had three best friends, an admirable, if ungrammatical achievement. His first best friend was Mr Pitt, the Prime Minister.¹ Tête-à-tête, these two young men determined the affairs of England and its Empire, possibly inventing the working breakfast. His next best friend was Henry Thornton, MP for Southwark and a banker, reputed to be the second richest man in Europe. My father was the third 'best friend', a friendship forged when Mr Wilberforce rescued my father from the throes of suicidal melancholy, or what I understand you in the colonies call 'the black dog'. Indeed, my father married Mr Wilberforce's sister, Sally. But she is not my mother. She is my father's second wife. I am the son of his first wife, Anne Stent.

¹Mr Wilberforce has been called 'Pitt's moral lieutenant'. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968). 442.

1. The Clapham Cabinet

Mr Wilberforce, Mr Thornton and my father were members of that coterie of well-connected Christians of evangelical persuasion known as 'the Clapham Sect' or 'Clapham Cabinet'. The parliamentarians among them were known as 'The Saints'. They conspired together for time and eternity at Clapham Common just outside of London. Great Christian enterprise has often been the work of friends who share a passion for the Kingdom.

Other members of the Clapham Sect included those in holy orders: the Reverend Isaac Milner, President of Queen's College, Cambridge; the Reverend Charles Simeon, vicar of St. Mary's Church, Cambridge, and the Reverend John Venn, Rector of Clapham. I married his daughter Jane Catherine, in 1814 and I assure you that I have lived happily ever after. My Jane is possessed of 'a singular serenity, which indicate[s] a union of strong affection and sound judgment'² and which is a healing balm to my habitual anxiety and sensitivity.

But the group was made up mainly of prominent laymen. Apart from Wilberforce, Thornton and Stephen, there was John Shaw (Lord Teignmouth), Governor General of India; Charles Grant, Chairman of the Court of Directors of the East India Company, and Zachary Macaulay, Governor of the West Indies and father of the essayist. He knew everything. Mr Wilberforce used to say when asked for detail on any subject, 'Look it up in Macaulay', very handy when crusading for the abolition of slavery which required mountains of facts and figures, not just tidal waves of sentiment.

Most significant of all perhaps, the Clapham Sect numbered a woman in its ranks. Hannah Moore was a prolific author of tracts, the champion of Sunday schools and female education. Her *Thoughts on the Manners of the Great* anticipated Mr Wilberforce's more celebrated address to the ruling classes.³ Hannah Moore's Sunday schools and educational endeavours among the poorer classes were to have a direct impact on the Australian colonies⁴.

² The testimony of her son, Leslie, cited in Paul Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British Colonial System 1813-1847* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1953) 13

³ *Practical View of the Prevailing Religious Conceptions of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country contrasted with real Christianity* (1797)

⁴ Bernard Martin, *John Newton: A Biography* (London: Heinemann, 1950) 334.

‘Action is the life of virtue,’ wrote Hannah Moore, ‘and the **world** is the theatre of action.’⁵ So Mr Wilberforce and the members of the Clapham Sect put paid to any suspicion that their Christianity would develop a world-denying theology and ensured that the movement would avoid becoming ‘a wilderness of pious negation’.⁶ The first form of Christianity to take root in Australia then was a very positive force, a tolerant coalition of gospel-centred practitioners of affective spirituality and engaged compassion.⁷

Though I never like to do this, I should talk about myself for just a moment. My chief claim to fame is that I drafted the bill for the Abolition of Slavery in the British Empire in 1833. This was some 26 years after Mr Wilberforce procured on 25 March 1807 the Abolition of the Slave Trade on British ships, the achievement which I understand you are celebrating today.

It was such a chore for me drafting that legislation that I actually, for the only time in my entire life, worked on the Sabbath to finish it off. My parents, along with all the other parents who were members of the Clapham Sect, taught me not only to observe the Sabbath, but to revere it. Indeed, Mr Wilberforce, as well as one day in seven, took off one hour every seven, and from the perspective he attained through this habit of withdrawal, he would then re-engage, bathing all he did with tranquillity. Now there is a secret for you, not only of the spiritual life; it helps to explain his success in public life as well.

When I drafted the antislavery legislation I was the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, a public servant responsible to the Secretary of State, who was a parliamentarian. I was a sort of Humphrey Appleby of the nineteenth century, but you will pardon my humble suggestion that my values were not those of Sir Humphrey. Sir Humphrey’s values predisposed him to change nothing, whereas mine motivated me to change everything. I inherited mine from my father and Mr Wilberforce.

2. Liberator of the Captives

You get the point, don’t you? Mr Wilberforce was sure society was not working in a way consistent with the Kingdom of God and desired to change everything to make it so. You will recall that when, after 21 years of struggle, he succeeded in abolishing

⁵ Hannah More, *An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World*, new edition, 1808, 68.

⁶ Martin, *John Newton*, 355.

⁷ Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2001) 314.

the slave trade, he asked, what can we abolish next? The gospel must result in the liberation of all, mustn't it?

So Mr Wilberforce committed himself not only to the liberation of slaves, but also to

- the liberation of prisoners from the gallows, which were all too frequently used at the beginning of the present century, and
- liberation from the worst of gaol conditions as he was committed to prison reform,
- the liberation of convicts from transportation,
- the liberation of indigenous peoples from exploitation,
- the liberation of children from ignorance through the provision of public education,
- and the liberation of settlers from repressive government, hence self-government⁸

Quite a social reform program. Mr Wilberforce gave his life to it, and I, who esteemed him above all men, followed suit, drafting the legislation on self-government for your colony which will be implemented in two years' time, and indeed I have even come up with a plan for the federation of your Australian colonies which, I would hazard a guess, you will implement in about half a century from now. You see, Mr Wilberforce's impact on your colony reaches deep.⁹

He knew how to work. He was at one time serving on 69 committees. All his companions knew how to work. Indeed, I and the others who were children at the time have just realised that our birthdays were never observed. We don't quite know

⁸ William Wilberforce was actually chronically suspicious of colonial governments which too easily served the self-interest of the governors rather than the general good. But James Stephen came to the conclusion that this demerit in self-government was compensated by the greater familiarity which colonial governments had with local issues.

⁹ He supported Bell and Lancaster, the Bible Society, Hibernian schools, prison reform, the multiplication of churches and clergy, visitation of the sick, the concerns of Quakers over transported convicts, savings banks, missionaries. 'He could not be a passive spectator of any undertaking, which had the welfare of mankind as its object.', The harsh reality of the misery and criminality of the poor and the corruption and venality of the wealthy was a plague, to stay the advance of which 'he addressed himself to the promotion of every scheme which ingenuity, his own or others, could devise for the religious, and intellectual, and social improvement either of the rich or of the poor.' James Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, 1849, 497f.

why. But we suspect it was because the abolitionists never had time to think of much except the slaves.¹⁰

Of course, not all Christians of evangelical persuasion are committed to changing everything and reforming public policy like Mr Wilberforce. There is a party of evangelicals here in England known as the Recordites, (because they produce the *Christian Record*,) who campaign against all social involvement by Christians. Worse, in the United States, where the slave plantations are such an extensive part of the economy, slave-owning evangelical Christians argue that conversion, not emancipation, is what the slaves need. They argue that slavery is approved by Scripture and that emancipation will lead to the undermining of the Bible's authority as well as to the destabilisation of society which is in itself ungodly. I do hope that you New South Welshmen will never use such arguments to resist the future liberation of New South Welshwomen. Anyway, there is a member of the House of Representatives in the American Congress, who predicts that the awful evil of slavey will only be eradicated by a terrible civil war. His name is Abraham Lincoln. Keep your eye on him. His public theology is on a par with that of Mr Wilberforce.

3. What Wilberforce did for Australia

But my task today is to address the question: What did Mr Wilberforce do for Australia? The waves created by his many societies for liberation, evangelisation and education washed over the Australian colonies. It will never do to think of your early population as made up of the great unwashed; for they were not unwashed by Wilberforce and his merry men and determined women. He unleashed a cleansing flood, not only through the large number of societies for human betterment which he supported in Britain which were reproduced in the Australian colonies, but also through the influence of the vast army of those who sought to emulate him: not only clergy and missionaries, but also settlers, governors and soldiers, merchants and farmers, and their wives and daughters. Indeed, to take but one example well-known I'm sure to this august audience, Mr Robert Campbell, of Duntroon, was strongly supported by Mr Wilberforce.¹¹ Once hailed as the 'only private pillar which supported the honest people of the Colony', his career of commercial enterprise, philanthropic generosity and enthusiasm for the church and missions, well illustrates the extent to which vital Christianity was an integral part of the

¹⁰ Christopher Tolley, *Domestic Biography: The Legacy of Evangelicalism in Four Nineteenth-Century Families* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 240.

¹¹ Letter from Wilberforce to Campbell, 13 August 1812, CUL Add 7674/I/H/6

social and economic fabric of the Colony, a fabric of which Mr Wilberforce was the master weaver.

3.1 Wilberforce laid the foundation of the Church in Australia

No-one did more than Mr Wilberforce to establish the church in your colonies. 'While others were regarding the Australian continent only as a vast receptacle for convicts, [Mr Wilberforce's] Parliamentary influence was used for laying the foundations of the Church which now [1849] occupies every inhabited district of New South Wales.'¹² Mr Wilberforce understood that a strong nation is built on a strong church. So he strove to strengthen both.

But let us go back some sixty years. It was in 1786, that is, just two years after the great change in his soul, which transformed him from a life of amiable frivolity to one of amiable service,¹³ that Mr Wilberforce solemnly committed his life, in a famous phrase, to 'the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners'.¹⁴ This expression, the reformation of manners, meant the social and moral reform of the nation. It meant morality with civility. It involved creating public and community life in which morality with civility could thrive.¹⁵

It was in that same year - 1786 - that the British government resolved on the settlement of New South Wales. On 18 August Treasury was sent the 'Heads of a Plan' for the settlement. This document¹⁶ included the provision of a chaplain,¹⁷ which came about through Mr Wilberforce's friendship with the Prime Minister as is suggested by a letter from Pitt to Wilberforce, dated 23 September:

¹² J. Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, 1849, 511.

¹³ Hannah More observed that after his conversion, Wilberforce continued to have 'as much wit as if he had no piety' (Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*, 245).

¹⁴ Journal, 28 October 1787; R.I. and S. Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, London, 1838, I, p. 149.

¹⁵ In 1786, too, the British government approved the creation of colonial bishoprics, the settlement of Sierra Leone as a base for freed slaves was approved, the Evangelicals formed the Eclectic Society, and Charles Grant planned the evangelisation of India. Strikingly, Wilberforce said that the evangelisation of India was 'that greatest of all causes, for I really place it before abolition'. R. and S. Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, 1838, 5 vols., IV, p.126

¹⁶ *HRNSW*, I. 2, pp.17-20.

¹⁷ 'As many of the marines as possible should be artificers, such as carpenters, sawyers, smiths, potters (if possible), and some husbandmen. To have a chaplain on board, with a surgeon, and one mate at least; the former to remain at the settlement.' *HRNSW*, I. 2, p.18.

The colony for Botany Bay will be much indebted to you for your assistance in providing a chaplain. . . Seriously speaking, if you can find such a clergyman as you mention we shall be very glad of it; but it must be soon.¹⁸

Politicians always want things to be done soon. Maybe this is because they don't normally have to do them themselves. We know that within a month it was all sewn up, because on 17th October 1786, Henry Thornton's father, John, presented Richard Johnson with a copy of Cruden's *Complete Concordance to the Holy Scriptures*, which will find its way into the Library of Moore Theological College in Sydney town once it is opened in 7 years' time.¹⁹

On 15 November 1786, John Newton wrote to Wilberforce:

To you, as the instrument, we owe the pleasing prospect of an opening for the propagation of the Gospel in the Southern Hemisphere. Who can tell what important consequences may depend on Mr Johnson's going to New Holland? It may seem but a small event at present: so a foundation-stone, when laid, is small compared with the building to be erected upon it; but it is the beginning and the earnest of the whole.²⁰

The evangelical Christian presence with the first fleet then was a first fruit of Mr Wilberforce's conversion to vital Christianity. You will have learned in your schooling that your British forbears who organised the settlement of New South Wales, were motivated first by a desire to find an alternative remote destination for the dumping of their criminal refuse now that the American colonies were lost to them, second by a desire to outflank other European nations in the quest for empire, and third by the need to discover new supplies of valuable raw resources such as flax. But beside those commercial, military and social reasons, a fourth motive was prominent in the settlement of the great South land, namely the large, even grand Christian vision of a reclaimed criminal class, a converted aboriginal race, and the islands of the South Seas evangelised from an Australian base. How to reproduce vital religious experience and cover the southern world with Christian nations

¹⁸ A.M. Wilberforce (ed.), *Private Papers of William Wilberforce*, London, 1897, Vol. I, p.15; cited in Neil K. Macintosh, *Richard Johnson, Chaplain to the Colony of New South Wales: His Life and Times 1755-1827* (Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1978) 25.

¹⁹ It was placed on the Communion Table at St Andrew's Anglican Cathedral on the occasion of the bicentenary of the first Christian service in Australia.

²⁰ R.I. and S. Wilberforce, *Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, London, 1840, I, p.15.

were the high aspirations of Wilberforce and his friends. So do not be too cynical about your humble origins: we are speaking here of a truly noble experiment in social reform, the nobility of which has been obscured by the harsh realities of ruling class culture and convict counter culture.²¹

From Van Diemen's Land to the Swan River Colony, many other colonial chaplains and ministers owed their appointments and even their training to Wilberforce and his supporters. The best known of them, the Revd Samuel Marsden, was financed in his education at Cambridge University by the Elland Society, a fund supported by Wilberforce 'for the purpose of educating poor pious young men for the ministry'²².

Mr Marsden preached at the opening of the female orphanage in August 1801, thus initiating the charitable welfare work which so truly reflects the spirit of the Gospel in the colonies. Of the first evening spent with the girls in hymn singing and prayers, he exalted, 'New South Wales while I was performing this duty appeared more like a Christian Country than it had ever done since I first entered it'.²³ He reported to Mr Wilberforce:

I have the happiness to inform you, that after much painful anxiety and many difficulties, the Orphan School at Sydney is at length opened for the receipt of sixty girls. I cannot but view this instance as the foundation of religion and morality in this colony:- without an estab't of this nature to rescue the rising generation from ruin, it would never prosper. The unfortunate children who are now taken under the patronage and protection of the committee for orphans must otherwise have been lost to society.²⁴

²¹As early as 1789, Wilberforce had remarked to Hannah More on the wretched state of Somerset mining villages. In October 1795 Hannah More established Blagdon Sunday School in Somerset. Of the student body she wrote to Wilberforce: 'Several of the grown-up youths had been tried at the last assize; 3 were the children of a person lately condemned to be hanged; - many thieves! all ignorant, profane and vicious beyond belief.' It was, she concluded, 'a sort of Botany Bay'. Roberts, *Making English Morals: Voluntary Association and Moral Reform in England, 1787-1886*. 64. Mark Smith and Stephen Taylor (editors), *Evangelicalism in the Church of England C.1790-C.1890: A Miscellany* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2004). 10,11

²² *Elland Society Rules*. Writing from New South Wales in 1796, Marsden paid tribute to the Society: "If the gentlemen of the Elland Society had done no more than been the means of planting the Gospel in this distant part of the known world, this noble action must redound to them with eternal honour." (J.R. Elder, *The Letters and Journals of Samuel Marsden, 1765-1838* (1932) 31

²³ Quoted in A.T. Yarwood, *Samuel Marsden: The Great Survivor* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1977) 87.

²⁴ S. Marsden to W. Wilberforce, August 1800, Ms copy in the Hassall Correspondence, A 1677 - 2, Mitchell Library.

The first matron of the orphanage and indeed the first woman to hold any government position in NSW was Eliza More Kennedy, who came to NSW as a free settler in 1795. She married Andrew Hamilton Hume and raised Hamilton Hume, the explorer. Her father was the Rev. John Kennedy from Kent, who was part of the anti-slavery movement. From him she acquired, and passed on, that sensitivity to aboriginal people for which Hamilton Hume was well-known.

The next organised response to destitution in the colony, the Benevolent Society of New South Wales, was likewise replete with young evangelical colts from Mr Wilberforce's stable.²⁵ They included Edward Smith Hall, a recently-arrived free settler, who presented letters of commendation from Mr Wilberforce and Mr Henry Thornton, and, along with your Mr Robert Campbell, was to be a founder of the Bank of NSW.

Mr Wilberforce supported all evangelical Protestant ministers, not only those of the Church of England, thus ensuring that you colonists have been well supplied with messengers of grace.²⁶ One of the more interesting of these is the Revd. William Binnington Boyce. He has just been appointed (1844) General Superintendent of Wesleyan missions in the District of Australia, Van Diemen's Land, the Friendly Islands and Fiji. A great leader of men, I have every confidence that he will lead the Methodists into independence from the home church, the first of the colonial churches to do so. Mr Boyce worked for about a decade in the Smith and Thompson Bank in Hull, a subsidiary of Wilberforce and Smith, merchants. His first daughter, born in 1835, was called Marian Clapham Boyce.

3.2 The Governors

3.2.1 Macquarie and moral transformation

Colonial governors commonly shared Mr Wilberforce's convictions, or had a wife who did. Even where governors or officers of the crown were not vital Christians, evangelical ideals of private life and public service provided the modes of discourse in which public institutions and roles were expressed in colonial life.

²⁵ Noel Gash, *A History of the Benevolent Society of New South Wales*, M.A. Thesis, University of Sydney, 1967.

²⁶ Thomas Gisborne, an evangelical in the Established Church and friend of William Wilberforce, described the evangelicals who united to abolish slavery and propagate the gospel as 'parallel columns of a combined army, marching onward, side by side, for the subjugation of a common foe'. Quoted in J. Owen, *History of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (3 vols., London, 1816-20) vol. 2, p.310.

Lachlan Macquarie, governor from 1810 to 1821, transformed Sydney town through the implementation of Mr Wilberforce's principles. In his first year in office, Macquarie named a new township on the north bank of the Hawkesbury, Wilberforce, 'in honour of and out of respect to the good and virtuous Wm. Wilberforce, Esq., MP – a true Patriot and the Real Friend of Mankind'.²⁷ The Governor, together with Elizabeth, his wife, acted with determination on Wilberforce's expressed opinion²⁸ that 'attention to ye religious and moral state of ye Colony would in a few years produce improvements which men could scarcely anticipate'²⁹ and that 'the Governor's encouragement of marriage and the domestic virtues would be of unspeakable benefit to everyone in the rising settlements'.³⁰ Well, the rising settlements rose in moral terms far more rapidly than anyone anticipated. And if it is true that the almost miraculously fast transformation of a convict colony into a healthy, respectable community is a fruit of the Christian gospel, as some historians have alleged,³¹ then Mr Wilberforce should receive much of the credit for unleashing the gospel power in that domain.

3.2.2 Darling and the Abolition of Transportation

One might almost pick governors at random and detect in their administrations the influence of Mr Wilberforce. This is not surprising in a colony where most people drank too much and still do, but even in their drunken revelry, they commonly drank to the health of Mr Wilberforce and to 'religion and virtue'.

Sir Ralph Darling, for example, was not ardent in his religious convictions, but he married into a household strong in Welsh evangelicalism, exemplified in his wife Eliza, and he came to New South Wales almost directly from Mauritius, where he faced the key issue which the evangelicals were using as a spoon to trouble the imperial waters, namely slavery. There, he and

²⁷ M. H. Ellis, *Lachlan Macquarie* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1952), 203.

²⁸ In 1810 Governor Macquarie made two emancipated convicts magistrates and invited them to dine at his table. Mr Marsden was scandalised at the Governor's policy of full acceptance into society of emancipated convicts. Interestingly, Mr Wilberforce sided with the Governor. They both felt that the doctrine of justification by the atoning blood of Christ meant that everyone was redeemable and should be given a second chance. Back home in England Lord Liverpool and Wilberforce approved of the governor's stand, though politician that he was, Wilberforce wrote soothingly to Mr Marsden that steps might be taken to prevent the abuse of this forgiving policy.

²⁹ Wilberforce to Macquarie, 3 December 1810, Ellis, *Lachlan Macquarie*, 207.

³⁰ Ellis, *Lachlan Macquarie*, 207.

³¹ Ian Breward, *Australia: 'The Most Godless Place under Heaven'?* (Melbourne: Beacon Hill Books, 1988) 9; Bruce Mansfield, 'Thinking about Australian Religious History,' in Robert S.M. Withycombe, *Australian and New Zealand Religious History, 1788-1988* (Canberra: ANZSTS/ATS, 1988) 4

Eliza had contended with the 'private vice' which the settlers considered so 'essential to their property', namely the smuggling of slaves.³²

The Darling's advent in the Australian colonies swept them up in a different, though analogous, concern. Elizabeth Fry, the Quaker prisons activist who had become something of 'a Wilberforce in the social reform movement in Great Britain',³³ provided both a model and a direct influence on Eliza Darling. Her persistent visitation of the Female Factory and her encouragement for other high ranking women to do the same, and her belief that female convicts were 'better supervised by women than by men', both have their source in Elizabeth Fry's practice in Britain.

Through such friendships a direct link was established between the anti-slavery campaigns in Britain and the anti-transportation campaigns which were to rock the colonies in the present decade. Many campaigners for the abolition of transportation acquired their zeal for reform and their knowledge of pressure tactics in the anti-slavery movement, a measure of the ongoing impact of Mr Wilberforce's policies after his death.

3.2.3 La Trobe and the care of Aboriginal people

Mr Wilberforce died in 1833, but his influence continued to spread in ever widening circles. In that very year the British House of Commons began an inquiry into the condition of native peoples in British settlements. Henceforth indigenous peoples were to be accorded justice, rights, civilisation, and Christianity, accepted voluntarily.³⁴ This resolution of the House of Commons came from a motion from Mr Thomas Fowell Buxton, who assumed leadership of the anti-slavery movement from Mr Wilberforce. Mr Buxton, having secured the abolition of the slave trade the previous year, and ensuring that the dispossessed owners were compensated £20 million,³⁵ now turned to relieve the plight of the indigenous people of the empire who were often victims, if not technically slaves.³⁶

³² H Dumaresq, in Brian Fletcher, *Ralph Darling*, p.47

³³ Ken Fry, *Beyond the Barrier: Class Formation in A Pastoral Society, Bathurst 1818-1848* (Bathurst: Crawford House, 1993).20

³⁴ Despatch to Bourke dated 1 August 1834 from Spring Rice, Secretary of State for Colonies. See Report of the Select Committee on Aborigines, July 1837, p.4, *BPP*, Anthropology, II

³⁵ About £6 billion in today's money.

³⁶ Roger Milliss, *Waterloo Creek: The Australia Day Massacre of 1838, George Gipps and the British Conquest of New South Wales* (Sydney: UNSW, 1994).117

In 1835 Baron Glenelg, son of Mr Charles Grant of the Clapham Sect, was appointed Secretary of State for the Colonies, and, in 1836, I, James Stephen, became Permanent Undersecretary. I can tell you that, when it came to native affairs, we meant business. On the advice of Governor George Arthur of Van Diemen's Land, who also owed much to Mr Wilberforce, Glenelg in 1837 created the Aboriginal Protectorate. Granted it lasted only until 1849. But I tell you, this is the Age of Improvement, and it is intolerable for a Christian civilisation to admit defeat on the Aboriginal question. And so, even when we had to terminate the Protectorate, Lord Stanley, Secretary of State for the Colonies and yet another of evangelical convictions, wrote to Governor Gipps in NSW about your aboriginal brothers and sisters:

I should not, without the most extreme reluctance, admit that nothing can be done — that with respect to them alone the doctrines of Christianity must be inoperative, and the advantages of civilisation incommunicable. I cannot acquiesce in the theory that they are incapable of improvement, and that their extinction . . . is a necessity which it is impossible to control.³⁷

One on whom Wilberforce exercised a powerful influence beyond the grave was Mr Charles Joseph La Trobe, commandant of the colony of Victoria from 1839. His father, Christian Ignatius La Trobe, reputedly one of the finest preachers in Britain, was from the outset closely associated with Mr Wilberforce in his opposition to slavery.³⁸ La Trobe himself had trained for the Moravian ministry, and I understand that he has just invited Moravian missionaries to work among the aboriginal people. I hope that they might succeed where, so far, all others have failed. I concede that I have often dwelt on the hopelessness of the prospects of your aboriginal people. But the spirit of Mr Wilberforce will not allow us to be deterred by failure. We will continue to fail, not until we stop, but until we succeed, whether that takes another decade or another century or two.

4. Conclusion

4.1 *Wilberforce's influence on Australia summarised*

I hope I have provided you with enough evidence to grasp how extensive and pervasive Mr Wilberforce's influence has been on the Australian colonies. He and his friends at Clapham have

³⁷ Stanley to Gipps, 20 December 1842, *Historical Records of Australia*, I.xxii, p.437.

³⁸ Dianne Reilly Drury, *La Trobe: The Making of a Governor* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2006) 20.

influenced an army of ministers, missionaries and teachers, as well as lawyers, farmers, and businessmen to make the colonies the base for their own labours. This godly army abolished transportation, elevated a convict population, and transfused gospel values into your commercial institutions, your banks and newspapers, and your legal system.

4.2 A Time like ours

My deeper reflections on the significance of Mr Wilberforce's influence has led me to the conclusion that one age can be more moral than another, and more open to the Christian leaven. You must not think that the world is forever in moral decline or that your age is irreversibly secular. One age can be blessed with moral, visionary leaders who transform their age, whilst others can be characterised by a dearth of forces nourishing idealism and hope.

Mr Wilberforce was the recognised general of a remarkably extensive army of Christian soldiers. Committed Christians had become a force to be reckoned with, after a long winter of spiritual death. In 1803, Castlereagh's private secretary, Alexander Knox, advised:

For a hundred years, at least, there has not been so much attention given to religious matters as is at this time by numbers in the middle ranks of society in England. . . Of this extended class the political importance is much greater than any one slightly informed respecting them can conceive an idea of. In the first place, they have a common sentiment, which, if engaged on the side of government, would be an impregnable mass of strength; but, if unhappily revolted, alienated, or even chilled, the negative injury would be immense.³⁹

Many in government were aware of the 'political importance' of this 'extended class', and the evangelicals had numerous friends at Westminster. In the period 1784 to 1832, it has been calculated that there were at least 112 evangelical MPs at Westminster, of whom about 30 were 'Saints', that is, those clearly identified with the Clapham Sect. They did not always champion the same causes or agree on everything – in fact, they were often in conflict with each other – but they did have an agreed discourse which enabled them to foster a public life in which morality with civility thrived.

³⁹ *Memoirs and Correspondence of Viscount Castlereagh*, ed. by his brother (4 vols, London, 1840), 4, 290.

It helped that at the head of both the Conservatives and the Whigs, in Mr Pitt and Mr Fox, were leaders strongly committed to the abolition of slavery and the reformation of manners. When your colonies are united in the federation which I have foreshadowed, then maybe I see the day when you too will enjoy a political life where the heads of both your political parties embrace Christian values and seek to unleash into social and economic life the transformative power of the gospel, and when there is a depth of commitment among your parliamentarians, both numerically and philosophically, which will allow a wave of morality with civility to sweep over your land. The critical factor will be whether or not your parliamentarians know how to channel religious enthusiasm. It must not be ignored or it will become more insistent, and it should not be alienated or its creative energy will be lost to your nation and its purifying power to your people.

We are all responsible for the condition of our own generation. God has no other plans. Whether your age is one of hope and progress or corruption and decay depends on whom you elect to Parliament. You are responsible for whom you elect. So make sure that you elect those on whose shoulders the mantle of Mr Wilberforce has fallen.

4.3 Wilberforce's guiding principles as a politician

1. The good seed of the gospel must be planted and allowed to grow not only in the human heart, but within the structures of society. Christian faith is personal and individualistic, but it is also social and communal. The cross is God's answer to the sin of the human heart and the evil of human society. Thanks to Mr Wilberforce, the age of atonement has also been the age of improvement and reform. The most religious age has been the most progressive. Mr Wilberforce was always keen to talk with individuals about their personal need for faith in Christ, but he was also committed to reforming systems: the system of the penal code, the prison system, the transportation system, the education system, and the economic system based on slavery. The good news, then, is not only for the salvation of the individual, but it is also for the preservation and transformation of society.
2. Public policy should be not only consistent with Christian values, but should be energised by spiritually-vital, gospel-centred Christianity. It is only real Christianity which makes a real difference. It is only by 'an illuminated and lived faith' that God is rendered credible in the world, and it is only through vital faith that our

public and social life can be built on the foundation of the public good and not the self-interest of the powerful. That is to say, Mr Wilberforce believed that the best of public values need religious faith and spiritual energy to vitalise them. You are clearly a people with a strong instinct for democracy, and democratic values look set to be esteemed by the colonists as among the values most to be prized. Well, Mr Wilberforce would insist that such values depend for their 'vitality upon citizens with a sense of moral purpose and attachment to ultimate truths that democracy itself cannot supply'.⁴⁰ Every nation needs a community life characterised by morality with civility. It cannot happen without vital religious faith.

3. These two principles – that Christianity must be allowed to shape our social systems and national structures as well as our individual morality, and that vital religious faith is required if our cherished national values are to produce morality with civility – these two principles lead to this simple, practical conclusion. Shaping society is greatly facilitated when the initiative of parliamentarians is combined with the work of voluntary Christian associations, for that allows communal values to be energised by the vitality of lived faith. So, if you in the colonies come to esteem the separation of Church and State, make sure that you do not inoculate the political and public domains against the infection of faith.

⁴⁰ John L Allen, *The Rise of Benedict XVI* (Camberwell: Penguin, 2005), 172f.