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978-1-108-02505-8 - The Life of William Wilberforce, Volume 1

Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

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### The Life of William Wilberforce

William Wilberforce (1759–1833) was a politician, philanthropist and evangelical Christian, now best known for his work to end the slave trade. Elected to Parliament in 1780, he campaigned unsuccessfully for penal and electoral reform. In 1787, at the encouragement of his friend William Pitt, he took up the cause of abolition at Westminster and lobbied influential people tirelessly, but humanitarian and ethical arguments were slow to overcome the economic interests of those who had made fortunes from the slave trade or the use of slave labour. It was not until 1807 that the Abolition Bill (which applied only to British practitioners of the slave trade) was finally passed. Wilberforce continued his work for the emancipation of slaves (not achieved until 1833, just days before his death), and also campaigned for religious liberty until ill-health led to his withdrawal from public life. This biography, based on his own writings, was published by two of his sons in 1838, but sheds more light on religious than on political aspects of his life. Their version of the campaign for abolition was contested by Thomas Clarkson, who believed they had diminished his involvement to increase their father's identification with the cause. Volume 1 covers the period from his birth until 1792.

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# The Life of William Wilberforce

VOLUME 1

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ROBERT ISAAC WILBERFORCE  
AND SAMUEL WILBERFORCE



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108025058](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108025058)

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2010

This edition first published 1838

This digitally printed version 2010

ISBN 978-1-108-02505-8 Paperback

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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WILLIAM WILBERFORCE.

ÆT. 29.

*From an Original by Riving, in the possession of the Family*

London, Published by John Murray Albemarle Street 1838.

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THE  
L I F E  
OF  
WILLIAM WILBERFORCE.

BY HIS SONS,  
ROBERT ISAAC WILBERFORCE, M. A.  
VICAR OF EAST FARLEIGH, LATE FELLOW OF ORIEL COLLEGE  
AND  
SAMUEL WILBERFORCE, M. A.  
RECTOR OF BRIGHSTONE.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

Happy is the state  
In which ye, father, here do dwell at ease,  
Leading a life so free and fortunate  
From all the tempests of these worldly seas.  
SPENCER.

LONDON :  
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET.

MDCCCXXXVIII.

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JOHN CHILDS AND SON, BUNGAY.

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## PREFACE.

THE materials of the following Work are drawn principally from five sources :

1. Manuscript books, or detached sheets ; the earliest bearing date 1783, the latest 1833, in which Mr. Wilberforce was accustomed to note down daily occurrences. These will be found referred to under the head of “ Diary.”

2. A similar set, begun in 1785, and ended in 1818, devoted exclusively to religious reflections, and intended merely as a register of his internal state. These, the work principally of Sundays



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and other intervals of leisure, are here designated  
“ Journal.”

In these records he seems to have had no object except to give greater regularity and fixedness to his own mind. Those of earlier date bear upon them an order for their destruction, which it was only within the last years of his life that he so far recalled as to desire them to be submitted with his other papers to the judgment of his nearest relatives. Perhaps he was himself scarcely aware of the value of the documents which he was thus laying open, for though he had upon succeeding birth-days, and other times of more especial self-examination, referred to his Journal, yet the Diary seems in general never again to have met his eye; and much of it, dispersed indiscriminately and without date among his numerous papers, was wholly inaccessible.

When, on Mr. Wilberforce's decease, these stores were unexpectedly committed to the

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writers, their first feeling was an unwillingness to expose to the public gaze what was so plainly of a confidential character. “A life which is worth reading,” was the pointed saying of Mackintosh, “ought never to have been written.” But there are some characters fitted to exert so permanent an influence, and so clearly marked as examples to mankind, that in their case private delicacy yields to public good. Whether the present is one of these excepted instances, the readers of the following work must decide.

3. In noticing the private Correspondence which makes part of these volumes, the writers feel pleasure in warmly expressing their thanks to the many friends who have kindly supplied them with materials of the utmost value. Their first impression was to express here their obligation to the several contributors of letters nominatim; but the list swelled under their hands to such an inconvenient bulk that they reluctantly resorted to this briefer, but far less expressive, declaration of their thanks.

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4. The MS. Memoranda referred to in the following pages were notes dictated late in life by Mr. Wilberforce. He was often urged by his family and friends to draw up for their instruction some record of his "Life and Times." From this task he was withheld in great measure by his unwillingness to express those censures which he could not have properly withheld. "When I assume the office of a biographer, I virtually contract an engagement to give a fair account as far as I am able of the character of the individual in question, and this has more than once prevented me from writing the lives of persons whom I have highly respected and loved, but in whose instances there were reasons why a fair statement of the whole of their characters could not be made without probable violence to the feelings of survivors."\* From this rule he so far swerved, as in intervals of occasional leisure, chiefly when travelling, to record the incidents of his childhood, and a few

\* Con. Mem.

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interesting passages of his riper age. Specimens of these detached papers, with some other unfinished pieces, form an Appendix to the two first volumes.

5. Mr. Wilberforce's conversation would have afforded abundant materials to any one who had made it his object to provide for the public amusement. An infinite fund of anecdote, an unvarying fertility of wit, a constant readiness to be pleased and give pleasure, were its most familiar characteristics. But no such thoughts tainted the domestic intercourse which gladdened his family. "He was a burning and a shining light, and they were willing for a season to rejoice in that light." Occasionally some thought or anecdote which dropped from him was recorded for its own sake, and with no conception of its present employment; while many sayings, deeply impressed on the memory of those who heard them, have been brought out by the perusal of his papers. These various recollections, increased by some valuable contributions from

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two friends especially, are here referred to as  
“ Conversational Memoranda.”

Some further matter of the same sort it is intended to publish in a separate form ; and for this purpose, as well as for the completion of a volume of Correspondence, which is already in preparation and will be found to be occasionally referred to in the following pages, the assistance of those who have original materials in their hands is invited.