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Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

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THE

LIFE OF WILBERFORCE.

CHAPTER XVII.

JANUARY 1801 TO DECEMBER 1802.

Change of Ministers—Distress of the poor—King's recovery—Letter to Pitt—Peace made—Yoxall Lodge—Bath—Guarantee of Turkey prevented—Pitt's support of Addington—His own feelings—Contemplates a general convention for Abolition—Letter to Addington—Opposes settlement of Trinidad lands by newly imported negroes—Abolition motion delayed—Dissolution of parliament—Unanimously chosen a fourth time member for Yorkshire—Speech—Broomfield—Private reflections—Society—Parliament meets—Speech against foreign connexions.

THE opening of the nineteenth century was dark and threatening. "What tempests," says the *Journal* of January, 1801, "rage around, and how are we urged to seek for that peaceful haven, which alone can insure real security and happiness!"

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LIFE OF WILBERFORCE.

1801.

TO LORD MUNCASTER.

“ Near London, Feb. 7, 1801.

“ My dear Muncaster,

I have strange tidings to communicate. The King and his Cabinet have quarrelled concerning the emancipation (as it is called) of the Irish Roman Catholics,—and Pitt, Dundas, Lord Grenville, Windham, and probably Lord Spencer also, and Lord Camden, are to go out of office. I think you will guess who is to succeed—the Speaker, with Pitt’s friendly concurrence. Grant is to be Attorney-General¹—the main pillar, Hawkesbury, Secretary of State—Mitford, Speaker—and of the younger or inferior, as many continue as Mr. Pitt can prevail to stay in. He has acted most magnanimously and patriotically.

“ The Speaker, we know, is a man of talents and integrity, and of generous feelings, but not qualified for such rough and rude work as he may have to encounter, but if peace be made the government may last.

“ I am so pressed for time to-day, that I cannot write fully; but I could not leave you uninformed on a point of such importance. It is strange, and certainly argues great precipitancy and want of foresight, that this was not settled one way or other last year when the Union took place, or at least agreed on so far as to preclude all difference at St. James’s. These particulars are not yet known, so do not talk of them un-

¹ Sir Edward Law, afterwards Lord Ellenborough, was made Attorney-General; Sir William Grant continuing to be Solicitor-General.

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1801.

NEW MINISTRY.

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less they are come out otherwise. But I fear the deed is done. The King and Pitt part on affectionate terms. The King saying, that it is a struggle between duty and affection, in which duty carries it. I am vexed that some of the Cabinet whom I least *affect* are to continue. But it is so uncertain whether you will not have left Muncaster before this reaches you, that I am the rather disposed to break off.

Yours ever affectionately,

W. WILBERFORCE.”

It was well understood that more pacific counsels were to be expected from the new administration, and many of his friends hoped therefore that Mr. Wilberforce would be included in its number. He himself just felt the influence of the eddy which was sweeping by him. “I am too much for a Christian, yet not greatly, intruded on by earthly things, in consequence of these late political changes, and all the considerations which they call forth. I was for a little intoxicated, and had risings of ambition. Blessed be God for this day of rest and religious occupation, wherein earthly things assume their true size and comparative insignificance; ambition is stunted, and I hope my affections in some degree rise to things above.”² His views upon the Slave Trade differed too decidedly from those of the new Cabinet to allow him to take office with them, and he continued therefore with unbroken cheerfulness his independent labours. His

² Journal, Sunday, Feb. 8.

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1801.

great present object was to relieve that distress, which the failure of the harvest, and the continuance of the war, had produced in the manufacturing districts. "Indifferent health alone prevented" him "from going down into the West Riding, to ascertain facts" for himself;³ and his private aid was given so liberally, that he speaks of having "spent this year almost £3000 more than his income;"⁴ and as "thinking in consequence of giving up his villa for a few seasons."⁵ "I should thus save £400 or £500 per annum, which I could give to the poor. Yet to give up the means of receiving friends there, where by attending family prayers, and in other ways, an impression may be made upon them, seems a great concession. And with Broomfield I can by management give away at least one-fourth of my income. O Lord, guide me right. But there or wherever else I am, O Lord, do Thou grant me Thy Holy Spirit to fill me with every Christian grace; love, joy, peace, long-suffering."⁶

From Palace Yard, he writes in February to Mr. Hey.

"House of Commons, Feb. 25.

"My dear Sir,

I have been sending a supply of money to a few friends, in different parts of the manufacturing

³ To William Hey Esq. Jan. 21.

⁴ "Of the above large sum," is his remark at the close of the year's account-book, "much not recurring expenses, and charity much increased by the distress of the times." The sum of £3173 is accounted for as bestowed during this year in charity.

⁵ Diary, Jan. 21, 1802.

⁶ Journal, Sunday, Feb. 28, 1802.

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1801.

DISTRESS IN YORKSHIRE.

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districts of the West Riding, conceiving that in these times of extreme pressure, though an individual purse could do but little, yet that it might effect something; and that it was well to enable the clergy to be active and assiduous in the relief of the general distress. I have sent to Mr. Powley and Mr. Kilvington; they, I think, will relieve their own country poor. I sent a trifle to Mr. Miles Atkinson, but I have thought that Leeds would be likely to fare better than almost any country place, from the number of affluent residents, and therefore that I had better direct my little stream towards a different spot. I have heard however that Pudsey and its neighbourhood are in extreme distress, and that scarcely any merchants or gentlemen live in that parish. I have therefore resolved to beg you to apply any sum not exceeding £50 for their relief. I cannot get any bill to-day, but I will send you one shortly.

“What is to be done? I own I think that government should relieve, privately, some of the most distressed of the poor districts, afterwards alleging that they did not do so publicly for fear of producing a mischievous effect abroad. I must break off.

Yours very sincerely,

W. WILBERFORCE.”

Some such measure he continued earnestly to press, deeming it “hard to call on the land alone to pay for the subsistence of the manufacturers, if they should be thrown out of employment for some months by the

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continuance of hostilities.”⁷ “Much busied about the manufacturers in the West Riding. The committee about the poor makes no progress. People hard-hearted in general.”⁸ “Addington wavering about plan, and not for giving public money.”⁹ “Our dear and benevolent friend,” writes Dr. Milner¹⁰ from Palace Yard, “absolutely exhausts his strength on this subject. He is the most feeling soul I ever knew; and also the most patient and indefatigable in endeavouring to lessen the miseries of the people: and how he does get misrepresented and abused! But you may kick him as long and as much as you please; if he could but fill the bellies of the poor, he would willingly submit to it all.” “I find more persons approving my idea about the poor. I am nearly resolved to move for a million for their relief.”¹¹ “Poor relief put off most shabbily till after Easter—sad work—whilst we hear of increasing distress, and even tumult and insurrection. Much hurt by the coldness and dilatoriness of government.”¹² “At last, got measure through of allowing parishes to borrow on their rates.”¹³ “Doubtful what course to pursue, for want of support, except to the plan of lending to the parishes, which I abhor.”¹⁴

Throughout this spring his Diary contains many interesting notices of passing events. “Feb. 23rd. Heard in the House of the King’s being ill in the old

⁷ To William Hey Esq. April 7.⁸ Diary, March 19.⁹ Diary, March 10.¹⁰ To William Hey Esq. March 18.¹¹ Diary, March 31.¹² *Ib.* April 1.¹³ *Ib.* March 20.¹⁴ *Ib.* April 20.

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1801.

DIARY.

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way from Thursday evening ; yet next evening so well as to attend council." The King's agitation at being urged to grant power to the Romanists, was not unlikely to expose him to such an attack. "At the Levee, on Wednesday the 28th of January, the King said to Dundas, 'What is this that this young Lord has brought over, which they are going to throw at my head?' . . . Lord C. came over with the plan in September . . . 'I shall reckon any man my personal enemy who proposes any such measure. The most Jacobinical thing I ever heard of.' 'You'll find,' said Dundas, among those who are friendly to that measure, some you never supposed your enemies."¹⁵

"Colour of tidings from Prussia unpromising. Feb. 24th. Pitt's—reading the correspondence. 27th. House suddenly up from Nichols's absurdity and Pitt's extreme eloquence—too much partaking of stage effect ; but Pitt sincerely affected. 28th. To Buckingham House, to inquire after the King, who better. To Addington's for an hour, about the mode of relieving the poor, and the King's state: highly pleasing account.

"Saturday, March 7th. To Speaker's Levee—changed to Saturday night. Shows the good of all such attempts—carried only half way at first. Much talk there, and home late. The King gradually getting better—very calm and resigned, on religious grounds. King of Prussia requiring us to resign Danish and Swedish ships, and resolved to assert by force armed neutrality. Lord St. Vincent talks openly that we must have

¹⁵ Diary.

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1801.

peace. 12th. House—martial law in Ireland. Irish members spoke well — Lee — French — Fitzgerald. 13th. House—Poor Bill. Addington's, who has been ill of rheumatic fever. Fleet sailed for North Seas yesterday. Alas, the pride of man! how boastful we are! 17th. Dundas well deserves his pension, though at first honestly refused it. The King recommended a nobleman for office—Dundas refused, saying, 'none but who fit could be placed in those offices;' and now trying hard to persuade Charles Grant to go to India. Highly disinterested. 20th. Heard from Leeds of intended insurrection, and went to Addington. The King complaining that government not spirited enough. Forced by suspension of Habeas Corpus Act expiring, to let out some dangerous men. Debate on Lord Darnley's motion for a committee on the state of the nation—Lord Westmoreland coarse but able—Auckland ruining himself by over-refinement. How strikingly cunning men defeat themselves! Marquis of Buckingham in opposition. The new government fairly and honestly bent on peace. 22nd. With Addington by his desire for an hour or more—long talk—poor, and other subjects. 25th. Grey's motion on state of nation—Pitt and Fox—former excellent. Addington's first appearance as minister—took his seat, Monday. A set of dinners for Pitt—declined them all. Heard of swearing in against the constitution in West Riding—conferred with Yorke and Mulgrave—received a copy of the oath. The clouds blacken around—no thoughts of God.

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1801.

KING'S RECOVERY.

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“April 15th. We hear of the Emperor of Russia’s death by apoplexy—supposed violence; and of the astonishing success of our attack on the lines of defence off Copenhagen. 19th. Nelson’s generosity and humanity justly praised. Dined early, refusing Russia company, because of its being wrong to exult on victory—rather humble rejoicing. 17th. Saw Lord Eldon, and long talk with him on the best mode of study and discipline—for the young Grants—to be lawyers.” The Chancellor’s reply was not encouraging—“I know no rule to give them, but that they must make up their minds to live like a hermit and work like a horse.” “Eldon had just received the great seal, and I expressed my fears that they were bringing the King into public too soon after his late indisposition. ‘You shall judge for yourself,’ he answered, ‘from what passed between us when I kissed hands on my appointment. The King had been conversing with me, and when I was about to retire, he said, ‘Give my remembrances to Lady Eldon.’ I acknowledged his condescension, and intimated that I was ignorant of Lady Eldon’s claim to such a notice. ‘Yes, yes,’ he answered, ‘I know how much I owe to Lady Eldon; I know that you would have made yourself a country curate, and that she has made you my Lord Chancellor.’”¹⁶

20th. “No public news. Emperor Paul’s death does not seem so decisive for us as was hoped. 28th. Heard to-day of our troops bravely landing in Egypt.

¹⁶ Con. Mem.

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1801.

May 15th. Heard accounts from Egypt, of the action of the 21st of March. Abercrombie dead of wounds : 240 killed, 924 wounded. All fought most bravely.

“ June 12th. Sad foolish work about the motion concerning clergy sitting in parliament. More stir at Cambridge than on any former occasion, about clergy’s ineligibility to parliament. First time St. John’s and Trinity agreed. The dispute with the northern nations likely to go off well. Friends uneasy about my health—say I am worn and thin ; they think too much of this. Alas, I do nothing : it is my grief and burthen that I am so unprofitable. 18th. (14)¹⁷ not giving so much satisfaction in the House of Commons as were to be wished. Awkwardness about Abbot. French official paper speaks with great civility of Addington, as if meaning to gain on him by courtesy, or as meaning to smooth the way to peace.

“ July 4th. Our ministers I fear trifling about peace. King going to George Rose at Cuffnell’s. Duke of Portland at last out : Addington forced to compel him. 13th. Northern affair made up by Lord St. Helen’s, who made a British Peer. Invasion apprehended by government—strange folly not to be better prepared against it. Grain still very high, though falling much. Dundas gone to Scotland. I fear negotiation with France gone off, though all kept profoundly secret.”
 “ This persuasion gives me great pain on many accounts. I really see not what benefit we can derive from the war, unless some unexpected turn of affairs

¹⁷ Mr. Pitt.