

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02508-9 - The Life of William Wilberforce, Volume 4

Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

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THE

## LIFE OF WILBERFORCE.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

JANUARY 1812 TO JULY 1812.

New-year's day—Charitable Donation Bill—Trinidad Registration—Mr. Stephen—American War—Christianity in India—Endeavours to keep back Dissenters—Bishop of Durham—Perceval—Ministry—Orders in Council—Sessional business—Religious Societies—Archdeacon Pott—Mr. Perceval's assassination—Formation of a ministry—Mr. Sheridan—Orders in Council withdrawn—Distress of the country—Mr. Canning—Wilberforce's domestic character.

THE new year opened with his usual song of praise. "Oh what mercies have I to acknowledge during the past year! Surely it is a solemn season, but I go to prayer; only let me put down my gratitude and humiliation. I must especially try to husband time more. O Lord, enable me to redeem it! I must try to keep an account of time and work, to take security against trifling."<sup>1</sup> "I have been detained long at church," he tells Dr. Coulthurst, "according to a

<sup>1</sup> Diary and Journal, Jan. 1, 1812.

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custom which I have observed for twenty-six or twenty-seven years, of devoting the new year to God by public worship in a sacrament on the 1st of January—but you shall hear from me to-morrow ; and at this season, when it is usual for friends to interchange good wishes, accept the assurance of my best remembrances and kindest wishes for yourself and all that are dear to you for time and for eternity.” A few days later he resumes his pen—“ I have not been negligent though I have been silent concerning Mr. Rose’s Bill. I have written to him once or twice for his proposed modifications. I shall receive them I dare say in a day or two, and will transmit them for your consideration, and that of our common friends the clergy in and about Halifax.

“ Mr. Lockhart is M. P. for Oxford, and his bill is much the same as that which I brought in two years ago, to render all donations public, in the hope of preventing thereby their being alienated or abused. You have no reason for apprehension in that quarter.” “ With regard to the Charitable Donation Bill,” he tells Mr. Roberts shortly afterwards, “ I should have a long story to tell, if I were to put you in possession of the past and present proceedings. I brought in the Bill two successive years, but was foiled by the lawyers. Mr. Lockhart tried it last year, but with no better success. This year he has put the draught into the hands of Sir Samuel Romilly, desiring him to modify and correct it. I will give your suggestions to Mr. Lockhart, desiring him to communicate them to Sir Samuel.”

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## 1812. REGISTRATION OF SLAVES. 3

West Indian matters occupied his first attention. On the 6th of January he held a consultation with "Stephen, Sir Samuel Romilly, and Brougham," and "settled to proceed with Registry Bill this year."<sup>2</sup> On this essential safeguard of the Abolition Bill he had long been intent; and after many private interviews, Mr. Perceval had consented to establish immediately a registration at Trinidad. This was a promising beginning; but just when it was to be gazetted, a "difficulty was suggested by the Attorney and Solicitor-General, who wished that some colonial persons should be consulted before the plan was adopted; forgetting that the whole was considered as already settled."<sup>3</sup> This fatal step was happily prevented. "The Trinidad Registration has been in great danger of striking on a rock when we thought ourselves in port, by being referred to Marryatt; the design defeated by urgent remonstrances of Stephen and myself to Perceval and Lord Liverpool."<sup>4</sup> But a change of ministry, of which there were many rumours current, might still have mocked their hopes, and until the measure was in actual operation he could not cease "to press it upon Perceval," who at length wrote him word—

"Downing Street.

"Dear Wilberforce,

I will endeavour to put the Privy Council in immediate action upon the Trinidad Registration. I

<sup>2</sup> Diary, Jan. 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ib.* Jan. 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ib.* Jan. 18.

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am sorry you continue still apprehensive of an increase of your hoarseness.

I am, dear Wilberforce, ever yours,

SP. PERCEVAL.”

Though his continued indisposition kept him still away from public business . . . “I wished heartily that I had been in the House *with my voice* the other night, when I read next morning the account of Creevey’s speech,”<sup>66</sup> . . . he spared no exertions compatible with chamber practice. “I thought it right to go to attend Privy Purse Committee—Perceval, Ryder, Canning, Adams. No real business; but to settle about the King’s charity engagements.”<sup>5</sup> He writes at night to Mr. Stephen.

“Jan. 18, 1812.

“My dear Stephen,

I went this morning to the secret committee, conceiving it would be no more than sitting by a good fire in a private room; but having been detained, I have not been able to look through my papers.

\* \* \* I wrote to Lord Liverpool as well as to Perceval about Trinidad. I hope you will be able to keep your two Sir Williams<sup>6</sup> from any dangerous alteration, and I trust they will at least be fair critics.

“I must break off, my dear fellow; it is late, and I must say good night, otherwise I should be tempted

<sup>5</sup> Diary, Jan. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Probably Sir William Scott and Sir William Grant.

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AMERICAN WAR.

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to scribble on and pour forth out of the fulness of my heart. “In what a bustle do we live! You however are attending to the great objects. I am grieved to think how little ones often swallow up my days. Oh said Grotius, *vitam perdidit strenue nihil agendo*. Well, let us try to amend where we are wrong; and for our comfort under a sense of unworthiness, while however we are striving to mend, we serve a kind and merciful Master. But good night once more. I am ever affectionately, and never so affectionately as when my mind is in its best state,

Yours most sincerely,

W. WILBERFORCE.”

Other subjects were crowding on to increase this bustle. The approaching crisis with America filled him with uneasiness. “There seems real reason to fear a war with America, yet honest Butterworth’s correspondents say that we need not heed the war cry, as being only meant to intimidate. It may be so; but nine times out of ten it is a game at brag, wherein each party depends upon the giving way of the other, or would not himself push on so warmly. Alas, alas!”<sup>7</sup> Feb. 3rd. Bankes thinks with me that there is no chance of the Prince’s changing the ministry, or consequently of a speedy dissolution, but we both fear an American war. I am wanting my voice much, that I may plead the cause of Christianity in India, and soften the asperity of hostile tempers between Great

<sup>7</sup> Diary, Jan. 29.

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Britain and America.” “I am so much affected,” he tells Mr. Babington, “by the probability of a war with America, that I am strongly disposed to go to the House if Whitbread brings on his motion,<sup>8</sup> that I may declare the grief and pain with which the very thought of a war with America fills my heart. I have often thought that we have not enough borne in mind that the people of America have a great influence over their government, and that their thinking that a great number of people in this country feel for them might tend to allay irritation, even if a war should break out.”<sup>9</sup> Mr. Whitbread’s motion came on upon the 12th of February, and after “thinking a little about American question in the morning—he went down to the House for the first time this session. People kindly welcomed me—I spoke for about twenty minutes without suffering in voice, and very well heard. Whitbread angry at me for voting and speaking against him, and very rough and rude. He seemed himself to think so, for he came up next day and talked with me some time, saying how much he had been disappointed by my going against him. Yet all our set voted with me—much misrepresented in the Morning Chronicle next day. I went against my wife’s remonstrance, to soften and prevent irritation.”<sup>10</sup>

To his friends in the country he thus explains the motives of his conduct.

<sup>8</sup> For the correspondence between the two governments.

<sup>9</sup> Feb. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Diary.

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TO S. ROBERTS ESQ.

“Near London, Feb. 15, 1812.

“ My dear Sir,

My complaint has been much more serious, and has hung on me far longer, than I expected. I thank God, I am convalescent I hope, though not well. But on Thursday last, the great anxiety I felt, and indeed continue to feel, on the American question, carried me to the House of Commons much sooner than perhaps was prudent; and really I have been as usual so misrepresented and traduced in the newspaper reports of the debates, that I almost regret my not having staid away. It is a satisfaction to me however to reflect, that I went for the purpose of soothing any irritation which might arise, and of preventing any mischievous discussions. I have not time to be at all particular, but I can assure you, had Whitbread's motion been complied with, and the various particulars mentioned in the correspondence between the British and American ministers come into discussion, the most acrimonious debates and the strongest charges (and I must say, well-founded charges in some instances) against the American government, and its representative, General Armstrong, must have come forward.

“ Again, I fear there is too much cause for apprehending, that the American government, finding its threatening language produce the effect of making our parliament take the negociation into its own hands, would conceive that it need only go on threatening

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with increased warmth, to insure our conceding all it should require; whereas, I know it would thereby call forth a spirit of a directly opposite kind in many of our country gentlemen, as well as in government, and would consequently produce the rupture which I so greatly deprecate. But I must say farewell; and believe me, with esteem and regard, my dear sir,

Yours sincerely,

W. WILBERFORCE.

“Samuel Roberts Esq.”

TO LORD MUNCASTER.

“Near London, Feb. 17, 1812.

“My dear Muncaster,

Your inference was but too well founded. It was by medical prohibition that I was kept from the House; and it was in defiance of conjugal entreaties that I made my appearance there on Thursday last. In truth, I was afraid of some acrimonious disputation, and I went to the House for the purpose of dropping a few healing and balsamic expressions which might tend to prevent the rankling of that wound, which however fatal to America if it were actually to break forth into a war, would be in a thousand ways pernicious to this country. Neither will you wonder when I declare, that I cannot look forward to the idea of victory in any war between Great Britain and America, as in a contest with our ancient enemies. You will not however be surprised, that I thought it safer not to vote with Whitbread the other



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night ; for if the American government, after their threatening language, had found us for the first time giving way, it would probably infer that it had only to bully us in still coarser terms to dispose us to still further concessions. Thus it commonly happens that nations get involved in war ; each of them hoping by putting on a bold face, and using terrific language, to deter the other, and intimidate him into acquiescence.

“ When, my dear Muncaster, will you again come among us ? I see that you have had enough of London ; and I cannot wonder that you come to it most reluctantly when I compare your Jermyn Street, or any street quarters, with the varied comforts and interests of your venerable castle. “ You would be amused just now if you were here to witness the expedients with which certain classes of politicians are laying in to meet whatever face of parties they find presented to their view. But the whole mystery must be cleared up in two or three days, if it be not already so. I dare say you know more at 300 miles from London, than I do at one. Farewell.

My dear Muncaster, ever yours,

W. WILBERFORCE.”

The other great cause which he “ wanted voice to plead,” and which eighteen years before he had pressed so earnestly on parliament, was brought on at this time by the approaching expiration of the East India Company’s charter.<sup>11</sup> Liverpool and Greenock had

<sup>11</sup> Its charter was to expire in May, 1814.

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already petitioned parliament against its renewal ; and from the coming contest Mr. Wilberforce hoped “ to obtain some spiritual advantages for Hindostan.”<sup>12</sup> “ We have now approaching,” he tells Mr. Roberts, “ three or four of the most important subjects which ever engaged the attention of parliament. Above all, the East India Company’s charter, on which I am busily engaged in reading, thinking, consulting, and persuading.” Upon the 14th he “ wrote to Gisborne about East India religious instruction, urging his writing a short pamphlet, and making if possible a stir amongst the clergy.” He was most anxious that the Church should assume her proper station in this noble undertaking, and was therefore “ trying to keep back the Dissenters and Methodists, until the Church fairly come forward, from fear that if the sectaries begin the Church will not follow. I wish them therefore to delay applying to the legislature, for instructing the East Indians, or for the repeal of the Conventicle Act, which they are about to attempt in consequence of the judgment of the King’s Bench that a man must be a teacher of a separate congregation.”<sup>13</sup> This view he endeavoured to impress on Mr. Butterworth.

“ Feb. 15, 1812.

“ My dear Sir,

I have long been looking forward to the period of the renewal of the East India Company’s charter, as to a great era when I hoped that it would please

<sup>12</sup> Diary.<sup>13</sup> Ib. Feb. 14.