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Edited by Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce

Excerpt

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THE

LIFE OF WILBERFORCE.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

OCTOBER 1818 TO JANUARY 1820.

Hayti—Aix la Chapelle—Lord Castlereagh—Mr. Clarkson—Christophe, and his Professors—Mr. Babington—The new parliament—Slave Trade, and slavery—Eulogium on Sir S. Romilly—Penal Law Reform—Diary—Sismondi—Religious anniversaries—Roman Catholic Question—Lottery—Busy life—Correspondence with his children—Lady Holland—Prince Leopold—General Boyd—Bishop of Gloucester—Slave Trade Address—Summer tour—Barham Court—Barley Wood—Blaize Castle—Wells—Malvern—Elmdon—Wood Hall—Disturbed state of the country—Manchester magistrates—Opening of session—Restrictive Bills—Diary—Opposes education not grounded on religion.

His summer rambles and the expedition to the Lakes had not withdrawn the thoughts of Mr. Wilberforce from his Haytian and West Indian clients. Before he left the neighbourhood of London he was preparing to make an effort in their favour at the approaching Congress at Aix la Chapelle; and urged Mr.

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Stephen¹ “to prepare something for Lord Castlereagh’s perusal while yet in this country, to which we may refer, and which may predispose him to the cause of Hayti. I cannot help hoping that the state of parliament is such, that he would not like to shock public opinion by not sympathizing with a Sovereign who is endeavouring to civilize and Christianize his people. It would be important to show that Christophe is not himself a rebel, and that the blacks were not Jacobinical revolutionists, but that they were forced into independence by the folly and wickedness of others; and by the way, Alexander’s situation in relation to Poland, may dispose him to admit that a period of fifty years is sufficiently long to justify by prescription the not restoring the old order of things.”

His chief hopes from the Congress rested upon Alexander’s conduct. “Castlereagh will tell you,” he writes again,² “and tell you truly, that the Congress will have nothing to do with Abolitionism in any form. But my idea is that the Emperor of Russia may be likely to come forward and befriend a proposal to make the Slave Trade piracy after the Abolition of it by Spain and Portugal; and oh that we could do something for the poor West Indian slaves through the same medium, or at least for Havti!

“You very much misconceive my sentiments if you suppose that I do not believe that bringing our government over to our Haytian views would be an excellent service. It was rather that I despaired of it, conceiving Castlereagh to be a fish of the cold-

¹ July 23.² To J. Stephen Esq. Aug. 19.

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AIX LA CHAPELLE.

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blooded kind. But you have hit on the bait for him, if he be to be caught at all, by the exhibition of political consideration affecting our own interests, rather than any prospects of general philanthropy—not that he would not recognise these. Now I fear he would dislike our having any agent at Aix la Chapelle. I should be rejoiced indeed if he would suffer some one to go as his travelling depository of tropical intelligence ; but I have no notion he would, and it could not be done without his consent. It would not be at all proper for you to go, which Macaulay suggested. I fear I could not do it without impropriety. But Clarkson seems formed by Providence for the purpose.” “ He is the only man that could go and carry our representations who may be suffered to go of his own impulse, and not deputed by us : an affair of great importance in relation to the effect to be produced upon Castlereagh. Then he will be more acceptable than most to the Emperor Alexander, and we may depend on his being in earnest.”³ “ He would be regarded as half Quaker, and may do eccentric things with less offence than you or I could. I can truly say I have no suspicion of Castlereagh. It would be most unjust to harbour any such notion after all his pains and efforts. But in his public character he might be unable without a violation of diplomatic propriety to do a thing which might be very usefully done by a nemo who should apply his lever to the great Alexander.”⁴

³ To Zachary Macaulay Esq. July 29.

⁴ To James Stephen Esq. Aug. 19.

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But the Emperor could not be moved by the lever of the “nemo.” The Congress would do nothing for the Abolitionists; and Mr. Clarkson only gained “from Alexander an audience of an hour and a half,” with an assurance “that he entirely enters into our views.”⁵ The refusal to acknowledge Christophe’s independence produced consequences most injurious to Hayti. There was no measure which was urged more constantly by Mr. Wilberforce in all his intercourse with Christophe, than that he should reduce his army. “I fear lest his own troops should leave him; and I long to wean him from his hankering after the conquest of the Haytian republic.”⁶ But until his independence was acknowledged, he must maintain his troops to guard against a French invasion; and though this necessity led, as Mr. Wilberforce too truly prophesied, to his ultimate destruction, “he defended his measures in so masterly a manner, that no crowned head in Europe could send forth a letter more creditable either to the understanding or principles of its author.”⁷

His own share meanwhile in these counsels was often full of perplexity. His correspondence with Christophe and his ministers was sufficiently laborious; and the general superintendence of the emigrants to Hayti, was sure to cause him disappointment and annoyance. Parties must be chosen from all ranks of life—professors for the royal college, physi-

⁵ Letter from Mr. Clarkson to W. Wilberforce Esq. Oct. 11, 1818.

⁶ To James Stephen Esq. Sept. 17.

⁷ To Z. Macaulay Esq. July 18.

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HAYTIAN PROFESSORS.

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cians and divines, governesses for the royal daughters, tutors for his sons, down to ordinary teachers of a common school, and “two ploughmen and their ploughs and families.” They went into a land where the whole tone of society was utterly demoralized, and vice in no degree disgraceful; and though he inquired most cautiously, scrutinized most closely, and chose at last the best who offered, numbers of these could not stand the trial. The professors quarrelled with each other; some by open vices disgraced the cause they were designed to further; some were carried off by dissoluteness and disease; whilst the few who laboured faithfully found their hands weakened in their single striving against the multitude of evil-doers, and added often, by their desponding letters, to the common burthen of this most oppressive correspondence. Still he went on with his labours cheerfully and never fainted in them, so long as the opportunity of service lasted.

Those who saw him only when he could properly allow the overflowing kindness of his heart to take its natural course, can form no idea of his firmness, when his great objects required a certain measure of severity. “Depend upon it,” he says to Mr. Stephen,⁸ “— is a man of such inexhaustible and uncontrollable absurdity, that it would be highly inexpedient to connect our cause with him more than is unavoidable. I fear you will think it somewhat hard, yet considering the great interests at stake, I cannot suffer his necessities to have any weight; but

⁸ July 20.

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if he is in need I will gladly allow him a little sum annually, and we might send it to him anonymously every year." Of another he says, "We must declare that his use of our name is utterly unwarrantable—he is like some vermin which will infest the most unwilling subject. It is the nature of things that the fairest trees and the finest fruits should be the prey of reptiles and grubs."⁹

When his family party had broken up at Rydale, he had been compelled to travel in a different direction from the rest; and on the 24th of October he wrote to Mrs. Wilberforce from Cambridge—"I thank God I am arrived at this place in safety, making up near 350 miles which I have travelled, full 100 of them at night, without a single accident. How grateful ought I to be for this protecting providence of a gracious God! And I just now recollect in a most natural connexion, that to-morrow, the 25th of October, is the anniversary of the day on which I experienced that notable escape from being drowned in the Avon,¹⁰ when we lodged at Bath Easton. Praise the Lord, O my soul. I forget the year; do tell it me if you remember, by a mother's calendar. I have received your welcome letter, telling me of your being to leave Rydale yesterday, and go to Yoxall Lodge. The time stole upon me, and I find that I must now direct to you at the haunt of so many of my happy days in my bachelor's state.

"Sunday. Lest I should not be able to write in the evening, I take up my pen now, (three-quarters past

⁹ To Z. Macaulay-Esq. Sept. 7.

¹⁰ Vol. iii. p. 132.

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JOURNEY FROM RYDALE.

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two,) though I shall to-day write but little, having had very little time to myself this morning before church. My heart would be very sad, but for the blessed prospects that are opened to the eye of faith—even the faith of an unworthy sinner. I hope it will be the effect of these earthly sufferings to wean me from this world, and fix my affections and desires more on that better state, where sorrow and sighing will have fled away. However I will not open any chapter of grievances this day, and I am ready to burn what I have written, on account of its being in any other strain than that of thankfulness. Oh what cause for gratitude have I: no man surely so great, at least very few! My spirits are not in themselves so cheerful as they used to be, but it is one of my many mercies that they are so good as they are. I suppose the mental sky of every one has its ‘dim passing cloud that just tempers the ray.’ Stephen comes here to-day. Dear fellow; his kindness, like that of the Dean, is as lively as if it were ever so short an effort, and as persevering as if it were ever so parsimoniously exerted. No man could ever have more cause for thankfulness to the Giver of all good for the many kind friends He has vouchsafed me. Farewell. Commending you to the best blessings of God,

I am ever yours,

W. WILBERFORCE.

“P. S. I am vexed at having forgotten to make a little present¹¹ to our landlady. Do think of something and send it in my name.”

¹¹ “The day he left Rydale,” says a friend who was one of his party,

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A week later he rejoined his family at Yoxall Lodge, and soon set off homewards. His next halt was Rothley Temple, whence he writes word to Mr. Hey, "I am very soon returning to the House of Commons, but in low spirits from having lost the support of several like-minded coadjutors, and more especially of the dear friend under whose roof I am now writing. The Almighty, however, can carry on his purposes by His own instruments; and when I see in every part of this country new proofs presenting themselves of the diffusion of true religion, and of its blessed effects in promoting a spirit of active beneficence and warm sympathy for the instruction of ignorance, and above all the promotion of Christian knowledge, my spirits rise again, and I am ready to hope that new and unknown public men will come forward to occupy the place of those whom we have lost. May our successors be tenfold more assiduous and more successful than we have been."

On the 24th of December he was again at Kensington, surrounded by his scattered family; and the new year opens with some striking resolutions of devoted service, in his usual tone of deep humility. "It is with a heavy heart that I look forward to the meeting; so many friends absent, and so many objects of pursuit, and I so unequal to them; yet had I duly used my powers I could do much. O Lord, do Thou quicken and guide me. I have resolved to dine out scarcely at all during this season. Health is a

"his love to every one, and his desire to do them good, was shown in his allotting some little present to each, as 'little tokens of my affection to speak for me whilst I am away.' His affection for his children and his parting blessing after family prayers were peculiarly touching."

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fair plea, and justly so at my period of constitution and life, and I shall get more time at command; my memory is certainly become very bad, but by expedients, (Feinagle's, &c.) I doubt not, I could in a great degree supply the deficiency. I must make sure of what is really important. But above all, may I grow in love, and serve and glorify more my God and Saviour."

"Jan. 15th. What is it to have our views spiritual when we are in our closets, unless we also retain and carry about with us the sense of invisible things, and the desire to please our unseen, but present Saviour, looking up to Him for grace and strength! O Lord, enable me thus to live, and may I practise self-examination more constantly, that I may watch myself in this important particular."¹²

The state of the Slave Trade question claimed his first attention; and he was on the 11th of January "with Lord Castlereagh for an hour, when he told me all that had passed between him and the other powers."¹³ It was not a gratifying audience. Lord Castlereagh indeed had done his utmost, but he had met with the most determined opposition. The allied sovereigns agreed upon a letter to the King of Portugal, urging him to fix a definite and speedy time for the Abolition of the Trade; but they declined to make it piracy, or concede a mutual right of search;¹⁴ and soon after, "both the French and Americans refused to come into the plan of conveying the right of trying slave ships to commissioners from each nation, want-

¹² Diary.¹³ Diary, Jan. 11.¹⁴ Report of African Institution.

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ing to draw from us some concession of our maritime rights.”¹⁵

What steps to take in this great cause was now a most perplexing question. An indignant sense of the wrongs and miseries which were wearing out the West Indian negroes burned within him, and he “longed to proclaim the grievances of” his “poor black clients;” and was “strongly disposed to bring their case forward;”¹⁶ yet to do so at this moment would be to give up all chance of the general suppression of the Trade, and that without any reasonable hope of a prosperous campaign at home. He well knew that he must rouse the moral feeling of this country before he could enforce the demands he longed to make in behalf of the slave population. The time for this was not come. He sounded the Wesleyan Methodists, and they, who would be something in advance of others, were still for leaving to their masters all improvements in the condition of the slaves. He tried the opposition, whom he had unwillingly been forced to think his readiest supporters,¹⁷ and even they hung back.¹⁸ The colonial assemblies

¹⁵ Diary, Jan. 15, 1819.

¹⁶ Letter to Z. Macaulay Esq. Dec. 15, 1818.

¹⁷ “I think with you,” he told Mr. Banks, Sept. 23, “that — has acted and is acting very unwarrantably in his opposition; but that is no business of mine. He supports my African cause in all its extent, and I would not make him my enemy; the less so because government will not treat us fairly in West Indian questions. Had they done so, I should have taken a more forward part against opposition. For another important interest may fairly make you keep back, though it ought not to regulate the side you take upon a question.”

¹⁸ Even in May, 1820, the Edinburgh Review declared, No. LXXVI., “Without slaves those islands could not be maintained.”