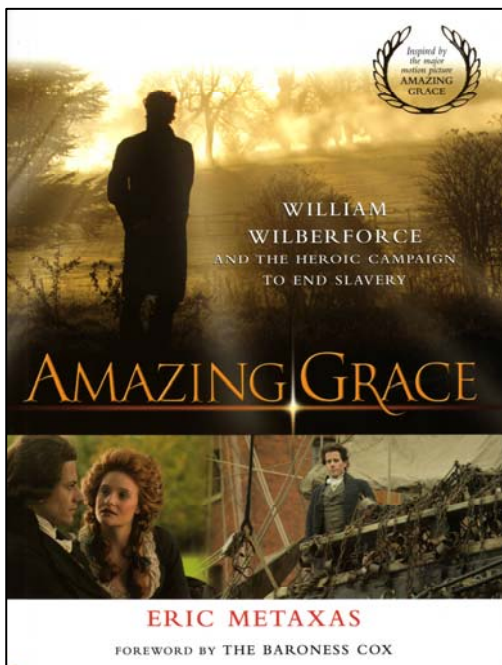


Book title: *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*
Author: Eric Metaxas
Publisher: Monarch Books (UK), 2007; 282pp.
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Reviewed by: Lesley Hicks
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There's hardly a soul alive today who isn't horrified and offended by the very idea of human slavery. We seethe with moral indignation at it, and we can't fathom how anyone or any culture ever countenanced it. But in the world into which Wilberforce was born the opposite was true. Slavery was as accepted as birth and marriage and death and so woven into the tapestry of human history that that you could barely see its threads, much less pull them out.

– from the introduction, pp. xiii, xiv.



Baroness Caroline Cox, who in her foreword calls this “an excellent, well-researched and highly readable biography”, calls on us to do more, much more, to eradicate the slavery that persists in our own day. It is estimated, she says, that there are around 27 million people today who suffer some form of enslavement. She instances chattel slavery, such as existed in Wilberforce’s own day and for centuries before and is still rife in places like the Sudan and Mauretania; debt bondage; forced labour; sex slavery; and human trafficking.

However William Wilberforce and his colleagues, almost all earnest evangelical Christians, succeeded in abolishing once and for all time the barbaric, infamous Atlantic slave trade. Human chattels, men women and children, mostly black Africans captured by Arab raiders and traders, were shipped to the Americas, especially the West Indies sugar plantations. There they were sold (if they had managed to survive the ghastly

voyage) as slave labour. It helps us put these events in historical context if we realise that Wilberforce led the battle for abolition in the period in which the Australian continent was first being settled by the English, and when the French Revolution was convulsing France. It was another revolution, an amazing for victory for good. It needed, of course, the more drastic further stage of emancipation, and in America that led, fifty years later, to an appalling civil war.

The book was handsomely produced to accompany the recent film; both mark last year’s 200th anniversary of the passing in the British parliament (1807) of Wilberforce’s Abolition Bill. It is lavishly illustrated with scenes from the film. Eric Metaxas is an American author of over 30 books, including some for children. As a journalist he contributes to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Christianity Today*. He apparently has a reputation for wit and as a writer of humorous verse. That wry wit and taste for irony shows up frequently in this book, appropriately enough as Wilberforce himself had a reputation for the brilliance of his witty conversation and debating repartee. It is also noticeable that, perhaps because of his immersion in reading 18th and 19th century books in research for this biography, including Wilberforce’s own works, Metaxas’s writing style has acquired a distinct yet attractively archaic flavour and rhythm. (However, not having read any others of his books, this reviewer cannot say whether it is only this book that has that style.)

Wilberforce's twenty-year parliamentary battle for abolition is comparatively well-known, and deservedly so. What is less known is the "second great object" of William and his Clapham circle – what they called "the reformation of manners." Eighteenth century life in Britain, far from being romantic, was

particularly brutal, decadent, violent and vulgar Slavery was only the worst [and, in Britain itself, the least visible] of a host of societal evils that included epidemic alcoholism, child prostitution, child labour, frequent public executions for petty crimes, public dissections and burnings of executed criminals, and unspeakable public cruelty to animals.

Wilberforce had even from childhood shown a capacity for kindness and a hatred of such evils, and he showed an early rejection of the slave trade. Despite being tiny in stature, and having poor eyesight and chronically poor health, his gifts of leadership and magnificent oratory led to his entry to Parliament at just 24. But it was not until his conversion to Christ (what he called The Great Change) occurred in the course of 1785 when he was 26, that he became active in the company of like-minded evangelical Christian friends in doing something about the evils he deplored. I enjoyed Metaxas's descriptions of his friendship with Isaac Milner, a weaver's son - a huge, uncouth man, a brilliant scholar and philosopher, with whom Wilberforce travelled across France in 1785 – "like something out of a fairytale ... a gnome and a giant on a journey to discover the Well at the World's End." As they travelled these two "incandescent minds" read, and endlessly debated, a book on Christian doctrine, and later read together the New Testament in Greek. Both became serious believers.

Wilberforce sought and became friends with various despised "Methodists", heirs of Whitefield and the Wesleys of the previous generation, and the ageing John Newton, whom he had first met as a child. As shown in the film, he wrestled with the conviction that to serve God, he needed to leave Parliament, but Newton and his close (but unconverted) friend, the prime minister William Pitt the Younger, helped persuade him that God had called and equipped him to serve Him there, in the public arena. Thank God for that!

According to Metaxas's introduction (pp. xvi, xviii), the obvious yet largely ignored or forgotten ethical truths at the heart of the Christian Gospel that Wilberforce saw once he trusted Christ included "the idea that all men and women are created equal by God, in his image, and are therefore sacred. He saw the idea that all men are brothers and that we are all our brothers' keepers. He saw the idea that one must love one's neighbour as oneself and that we must do unto others as we would have others do to us. ... We had suddenly entered a world in which we would never again question whether it was our responsibility as a society to help the poor and the suffering." In other words, the whole idea of a social conscience was born. "Wilberforce presided over a social earthquake that rearranged the continents and whose magnitude we are only now beginning to appreciate. ... As a result of the efforts of Wilberforce and Clapham, social 'improvement' was so fashionable by the Victorian era that do-gooders and do-goodism had become targets of derision, and they have been so ever since."

As I write, images of the massive disasters of Cyclone Nargis in Burma and the earthquake in Sichuan, China, are dominating our TV screens and newspapers, just as the Asian tsunami did a few years earlier. Many may be apathetic, but virtually no-one in Australia could publicly ignore the needs and argue that it was the "will of God" and that nobody had any obligation to help in any way they could. That Australians generally – not just the Christians – are rallying to donate to the needs is part of Wilberforce's legacy.

Lesley Hicks, May 2008