

Amazing Grace

“Slippery distortions” is how *Amazing Grace* was summed up in the *New York Review of Books*. (14 June 2007).

The key to these lies and to the film is its portrayal of William Wilberforce. Let it be accepted that he was kindly to his inferiors. He kept more servants than he could use and lowered the rates of his tenants. He was faithful to his wife. These simple virtues made him a paragon compared with his class.

Like them, he believed that unionists should be imprisoned, that God had given the poor their lot in life, and that freed slaves should serve as a “grateful peasantry.” Far from supporting the sugar boycott, Wilberforce feared all mass action, the more so when led by female persons. He gave no support to extending the franchise beyond the 5% whom his kind thought of as “the people”.

The true hero of Wilberforce’s story is the Quaker, Thomas Clarkson, who did the organizing and had been doing so before Wilberforce appeared. Clarkson was a radical who treasured the stone he had souvenired from the Bastille in 1789. Wilberforce made Clarkson keep his pro-French views to himself. Most of the activities that the film attributes to Wilberforce were undertaken or initiated by Clarkson. The cynosure of his support was the Quaker abolition committee, not the Evangelical Wilberforce.

The scene where Wilberforce visits the erstwhile slaver turned parson is a tissue of lies. This man did not have a conversion but continued to draw profits from the slave-trade after he retired. He eventually, and briefly, spoke against slavery. He put his efforts into the suppression of blaspheming.

The film acknowledges the slave revolts that did infinitely more to convince the British ruling elite that the game was up. The 1831-32 rebellion in Jamaica tipped the balance against slavery itself. Wilberforce had supported only an end to the trade. He never countenanced depriving gentlemen of their property in persons. The film ignores the mass revolutionary movements in England. Wage-slaves joined the Abolition campaign behind banners reading “At home and abroad”.

Although the hairstyles and equipage are accurate recreations of a BBC version of *Mansfield Park*, the question is how did the director and scriptwriter get it so wrong? Those sophisticates who attribute every event to “cock-up” will favour an explanation which says “What do you expect from Hollywood?” The problem is that *Amazing Grace* is a denial of every insight in its director’s previous film, *Pretty Dirty Things*, set in the market for body-parts of contemporary London. So how did Michael Apted get lost in the voyage from the body-part trade to the slave trade?

As usual, the conspiracy is demonstrated to be more than a theory (ie hypothesis) by following the money trail. The film was financed by a US shonky entrepreneur, born-again Bushite and Republican Evangelical Philip Anschutz, whom *Fortune* named as the “greediest executive” for 2002. He is after a casino licence in London and has been courting the Deputy British PM, John Prescott, another Wilberforce devotee. Wilberforce thought gambling a shade less sinful than slave-trading, but let that pass. He also opposed the theatre, public bathing and any wage increase.

The Wilberforce Republicans claim William as an ally in their war on abortion. You can join the dots.

To understand Wilberforce's role in the Abolitionist movement we need to join the dots between chattel slavery and wage-slavery.

The free market of capitalism rose on the backs of slaves and bonded workers. Capitalists employed slaves to gather the critical mass of political and economic powers they needed to overwhelm the restrictions of feudalism. In a triangular trade for rum and sugar, merchants transported millions of Africans to the Americas. Every brick in Bristol was mortared with their blood. Barbarism on the plantations of the West Indies underwrote the sweetness and light pictured by Jane Austin; that secret is locked in the attic of English high culture, along with the mad Creole wife in *Jane Eyre*. When Britain abolished slavery in 1833, the government compensated the owners for the loss of their property in living tools. The slaves got nothing for the wealth that their labours had added.

Abraham Lincoln's reputation as a liberator is more soundly based than that of Wilberforce, but is based on a distortion of the historical record. Lincoln entered the Civil War in 1861 to maintain the United States as a single nation-market-state; one objective was to hold onto the Mississippi Valley as a trade route for the mid-western States; a parallel aim was for the mill-owners of New England to retain dominance over their suppliers in the cotton-growing South. Two years later, Lincoln freed the slaves to defeat the Confederacy's war for independence.

With the retreat from chattel slavery, the methods for exploiting human capacities turned to peonage and indentured labour. Many of the US slaves who got their liberty in the 1860s were forced into bonded labour, as the freed Russian serfs had been ten years earlier. Elsewhere, masters paid workers in goods at inflated prices so that these *peons* were forever in debt. Limited-term bondage replaced chattel slavery throughout the British Empire in the nineteenth century, for example, when Pacific Islanders were taken to the cane fields of Queensland. As a young lawyer, Gandhi went to South Africa to represent Indians working on Indenture better served certain needs of capital for a flexible and mobile supply of labour than did chattel slaves or free labour.

Beyond these matters of detail lies a question of historical interpretation. It has become fashionable to discount the insights of the Marxist, Eric Williams, who published *Capitalism and Slavery* in 1944, and was later Prime Minister of Jamaica. Needless to say, researchers have uncovered much information since then. What the apologists for capitalism cannot get around is that there was no movement to abolish slavery until it became in the financial interests of a powerful group to do so.

The Wilberforce/*Amazing Grace* version is part of the Christian fight-back. The "slippery distortions" are also another assertion that history is the actualisation of ideas in the world. A hero is possessed by an Idea and he persuades a tiny group of parliamentarians with aristocratic connections to vote with him. That is what bourgeois historiography has been boiled down to, and for the best of all possible reasons. The masses must never be allowed to see the masses making history.

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