

Review¹

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Amazing Grace. Directed by Michael Apted. Starring Ioan Gruffudd.
Bristol Bay Productions, 2007.



Amazing Grace is a hagiographic treatment of the life and career of William Wilberforce, the parliamentary opponent of the slave trade in Great Britain. (The film's title is derived from the hymn written by John Newton, a retired sea-captain and reformed slave-trader who became a minister and who is played by Albert Finney.) In the press notes, director Michael Apted states:

This is a great moment in British history, and I wanted to portray it as a generational battle — the young men taking on the older generation — like

¹ Editors' note: This review first appeared in Louis Proyect's blog, [The Unrepentant Marxist](#), and is reprinted here with the author's permission.

Kennedys and their Camelot court were to America in the early sixties.

Ironically, this was exactly the political role of William Wilberforce. Using the language and gestures of reform, his gradualism helped to maintain a cruel racist system that forces to his left were far more interested in abolishing.

In an article on JFK² that I wrote for *Revolution Magazine* in New Zealand a couple of years ago, I took note of the following:

Not only were the Kennedys hostile to the Civil Rights Commission; they appointed 5 segregationist judges to the federal bench, including Harold Cox, who had referred to blacks as “niggers” and “chimpanzees.” Robert F. Kennedy preferred Cox to Thurgood Marshall whom he described as “basically second-rate.” Kennedy frequently turned to Mississippi Senator James Eastland for advice on appointments. According to long-time activist Virginia Durr, Eastland would “invite people over for the weekend and tell them to ‘pick out a nigger girl and a horse!’ That was his way of showing hospitality.”

The film was meant to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the passing of the bill that banned the slave trade in the British Empire, an event that constitutes the climactic scene.

What it does not make clear is that the bill did not abolish slavery itself, which would persist in Jamaica and other British colonies for another 30 years. When younger and more militant abolitionists pressed Wilberforce to enter legislation to that effect, he replied that because of the effect “**which long continuance of abject slavery produces on the human mind . . . I look to the improvement of their minds, and to the diffusion among them of those domestic charities which will render them more fit, than I fear they now are, to bear emancipation.**” In other words, the slaves were not ready for their freedom. In the 1960s, the call was for “Freedom Now,” something the Kennedy brothers shrank from just as did William Wilberforce.

The above quote and those that follow demonstrate William Wilberforce’s true

² http://www.columbia.edu/~lnp3/mydocs/american_left/JFK.htm

attitudes toward slaves, something entirely missing from Apted's sanitized biopic. They originate in Jack Gratus's 1973 Monthly Review book *The Great White Lie: Slavery, Emancipation and Changing Racial Attitudes*, a necessary corrective to the one-sided portrait drawn by Apted.

In 1823, 16 years after the slave trade was abolished, Wilberforce felt compelled to address the persistence of the institution in his "Appeal in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies." Always the religious moralist (he was an evangelical), Wilberforce looked at the slaves in a most paternalistic fashion as if they were sinners while at the same time showing ample generosity toward the planters who whipped and exploited them. ("**We should treat with candour and tenderness the characters of the West India proprietors.**")

While slavery was certainly evil, this was not in his eyes the worst aspect of the system. Instead, it was "**the almost universal destitution of religious and moral instruction among the slaves**" that constituted "**the most serious of all the vices in the West Indian system.**" He realized that it was hard for the Europeans to feel anything but contempt, "**even disgust and aversion**" for the personal peculiarities of the Africans, "**but raise these poor creatures from their depressed condition, and if they are not yet fit for the enjoyment of British freedom, elevate them at least from the level of the brute creation into that of rational nature. . . . Taught by Christianity they will sustain with patience the sufferings of their actual lot, while the same instructors will rapidly prepare them for a better; and instead of being objects of contempt, and another of terror . . . they will be soon regarded as a grateful peasantry.**"

In Apted's film, Wilberforce is played by Ioan Gruffudd as a kind of ascetic wraith. Suffering from colitis that he treats with laudanum, he is always rising from his sick-bed to dash off to parliament to make some stirring speech. Every other abolitionist figure is subordinate to him, which is of course detrimental to the film since they are far more interesting than this bible-thumping prig.

First among them is Thomas Clarkson (Rufus Sewell), a member of the anti-slavery group that Wilberforce had joined and on whose behalf he spoke for in

parliament. From the press notes, we learn that Clarkson was a “fiery radical and a magnificent organizer” who took testimonies from sailors and captains involved in the slave trade. William Wordsworth, an abolitionist himself, wrote a sonnet to Clarkson on the occasion of the 1807 bill abolishing the slave-trade:

Clarkson! it was an obstinate Hill to climb;
 How toilsome — nay how dire — it was, by thee
 Is known; by none, perhaps, so feelingly:
 But thou, who, starting in thy fervent prime,
 Didst first lead forth that enterprise sublime,
 Hast heard the constant Voice its charge repeat,
 Which, out of thy young heart’s oracular seat,
 First roused thee. — O true yoke-fellow of Time
 Duty’s intrepid liegeman, see, the palm
 Is won, and by all Nations shall be worn!
 The blood-stained Writing is for ever torn,;
 And Thou henceforth wilt have a good man’s calm,
 A great man’s happiness; thy zeal shall find
 Repose at length, firm Friend of human kind!

Even more interesting than Clarkson was Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave from Nigeria who served with Clarkson on the abolitionist’s committee and who wrote a best-selling memoir. He is played by famed Senegalese singer Youssou N’Dour. A website in his honor³ reports:

Kidnapped and sold into slavery in childhood, he was taken as a slave to the New World. As a slave to a captain in the Royal Navy, and later to a Quaker merchant, he eventually earned the price of his own freedom by careful trading and saving. As a seaman, he travelled the world, including the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, the Atlantic and the Arctic, the latter in an abortive attempt to reach the North Pole.

³ <http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/>

Throughout the film, Clarkson and Equiano play second fiddle to Wilberforce and do not emerge as interesting characters. Furthermore, the film seldom strays outside the parliament or from Wilberforce's country estate. (He was fabulously wealthy.) Inside the parliament, we hear speeches for and against slavery. Around Wilberforce's dining table, we hear him and his abolitionist guests trying to figure out what to do next to achieve their goals. Entirely missing is the ferment of the mass movement that existed all through Great Britain in this period. Ordinary working people, who were bitterly opposed to slavery, simply have no existence. This is very much a struggle between rival elites. In the conclusion of the film, there is a reference to their existence as Wilberforce unrolls a petition with more than 300,000 names on the parliament floor. It would have made for a more interesting and more historically accurate film if we saw how ordinary British citizens decided to take action against such an unspeakable evil.

This is not to speak of the slaves themselves who were moving to abolish slavery themselves through insurrection. The film makes clear that the Haitian revolution and the French Revolution (that Clarkson supported and Wilberforce opposed) caused a backlash against the abolitionists. It is too bad that Michael Apted's screenwriter Steven Knight found the parliament floor and Wilberforce's dining room more compelling arenas than the sugar fields of Haiti. I myself would have preferred to see a slave revolt than one more speech from Wilberforce.

Although my complaints might be written off as what might be expected from a chronically disgruntled Marxist, there is clear evidence that even his contemporaries found Wilberforce lacking. Thomas Clarkson wrote the poet Coleridge (like Wordsworth, an abolitionist) that Wilberforce "cared nothing about the slaves, nor if they were all damned provided he saved his own soul."

Essayist William Hazlitt, a colleague of Wordsworth and Coleridge who some regard as a proto-socialist, was scathing in his portrait of Wilberforce⁴ in *The Spirit of the Age*:

⁴ <http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Essays/Hazlitt/SpiritAge/Eldon.htm>

He goes hand and heart along with Government in all their notions of legitimacy and political aggrandizement, in the hope that they will leave him a sort of no-man's ground of humanity in the Great Desert, where his reputation for benevolence and public spirit may spring up and flourish, till its head touches the clouds, and it stretches out its branches to the farthest part of the earth. He has no mercy on those who claim a property in negro-slaves as so much live-stock on their estates; the country rings with the applause of his wit, his eloquence, and his indignant appeals to common sense and humanity on this subject. But not a word has he to say, not a whisper does he breathe, against the claim set up by the Despots of the Earth over their Continental subjects, but does everything in his power to confirm and sanction it! He must give no offence. Mr. Wilberforce's humanity will go all lengths that it can with safety and discretion; but it is not to be supposed that it should lose him his seat for Yorkshire, the smile of Majesty, or the countenance of the loyal and pious. He is anxious to do all the good he can without hurting himself or his fair fame.

Apparently, Michael Apter was not the only one to commemorate the British abolitionists. Adam Hochschild, the author of the very fine *King Leopold's Ghost*, wrote *Bury The Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* in 2005 — a work that has received plaudits wide and far.

In a February 14, 2007 *Nation Magazine* review of Hochschild's book,⁵ the always astute Daniel Lazare was quite positive but did raise some points worth considering. Lazare takes note of Hochschild's comparison of the abolitionist committee that looked to Wilberforce for leadership and the humanitarian, middle-class movements of today. In his introduction to *Bury the Chains*, Hochschild writes:

Think of what you're likely to find in your mailbox — or electronic mailbox — over a month or two. An invitation to join the local chapter of a national environmental group. If you say yes, a logo to put on your car bumper. A flier asking you to boycott California grapes or Guatemalan coffee. A poster to put in your window promoting this campaign. A notice that a prominent social activist will be reading from her new book at your local bookstore. A plea that you write

⁵ <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20050214/lazare>

your representative in Congress or Parliament, to vote for that Guatemalan coffee boycott bill. A “report card” on how your legislators have voted on these and similar issues. A newsletter from the group organizing support for the grape pickers or the coffee workers.

Each of these tools, from the poster to the political book tour, from the consumer boycott to investigative reporting designed to stir people to action, is part of what we take for granted in a democracy. Two and a half centuries ago, few people assumed this. When we wield any of these tools today, we are using techniques devised or perfected by the campaign that held its first meeting at 2 George Yard in 1787. From their successful crusade we still have much to learn.⁶

Lazare asks whether the 12 members of the committee were responsible for abolition of the slave trade (a hollow victory in itself) or were there broader social forces at work. By concentrating on personalities like Wilberforce, Equiano and Clarkson, Hochschild implies that it is the former that were responsible. In contrast, Lazare stakes out a position much closer to Jack Gratus’s:

Although they [Wilberforce et al] made a big splash at first, they were quickly overwhelmed by momentous historical events that were constantly erupting offstage. They exercised about as much control as a twig does over the flood bearing it downstream.

Morally, moreover, their legacy was more ambiguous than we might like to think. Not only were abolitionists silent about new forms of slavery that were springing up in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, most notably child labor in coal mines and factories, but, in a particularly ironic twist, the movement they created segued all too smoothly into the movement to colonize Africa directly. In 1839 a leading abolitionist, Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, established a new organization whose title said it all: the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and the Civilization of Africa. The more Europeans inserted themselves into African affairs, the more Africa became a playground for their imperial ambitions. Shutting the door to one form of hypocrisy meant opening it to

⁶ <http://www.bordersstores.com/features/feature.jsp?file=burythechains>

another.

Lazare also has a pointed observation on Hochschild's apparent willingness to segment the struggles of the early 19th century — something that a radical like Clarkson never considered doing himself:

Hochschild concludes his study with a swipe at unnamed critics who complain, he says, that “all this fuss about the slaves in the West Indies helped distract the public from the oppression of labor at home.” The statement is not footnoted, and it's hard to imagine whom Hochschild has in mind, since it has long been a tenet of the left that the struggle against wage slavery and the struggle against chattel slavery are inseparable. As Marx put it, “Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.” Still, there's no doubt that British humanitarianism was selective in terms of whom to feel sorry for and whom not to. Abolition did not succeed in Britain until it transcended the narrow middle-class moralism that Hochschild celebrates. If reformers are so ineffectual in Bush's America, perhaps it is because they have not transcended it either.

Although I am obviously very disappointed in *Amazing Grace*, I would still urge you to see it since it is the very first film to my knowledge that deals with an obviously key historical moment. I hope that it will inspire others to delve into historical material that is more accurate and more meaningful, starting with Jack Gratus's excellent *The Great White Lie*.

An update on *Amazing Grace*:

I just discovered that the production company behind the film, Bristol Bay Productions, has launched something called the “Amazing Change Campaign”⁷ that intends to fund and promote Christian missionary work in troubled areas in Africa (Uganda, etc.) in the spirit of William Wilberforce.

⁷ http://www.amazinggracemovie.com/amazing_change.php

When I discovered the Christian connection, I did a little more investigation and learned that Bristol Bay is owned by Philip Anschutz, who also owns Walden Media, the production company responsible for the Christian film *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Philip Anschutz, rightwing billionaire responsible for *Amazing Grace*

Philip Anschutz is an evangelical Christian billionaire who has funded organizations that oppose abortion and gay rights. Last year Anschutz got into a bit of a scandal trying to launch a gambling casino [perfect — just perfect] in London's Millennium Dome, which inspired this report in the July 7, 2006 *Independent*:

*The Christian tycoon who wants to ban gay marriage;
Deputy PM Under Fire*

By Andrew Buncombe in Washington

John Prescott's genial host in Colorado is a billionaire conservative who has used his vast wealth and influence to promote his Christian viewpoint, to rally against gay marriage and fund an organisation that questions the theory of evolution. He has also donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to Republican candidates.

The Deputy Prime Minister claims he spent only two-and-half hours with Philip Anschutz over the entire July weekend he spent at his 35,000-acre ranch, Eagle's Nest, an hour from Denver. Mr Prescott said he went to satisfy an ambition to see a working cattle ranch — stirred by watching Westerns as a boy — and to talk with sugar-beet farmers about the state of their industry.

But if the MP for Hull East had time to dig a little he might have asked Mr Anschutz about Amendment 2, an ultimately failed ballot initiative

he funded to overturn state laws that protected gay rights. The measure was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1996.

He might also have asked Mr Anschutz about the Discovery Institute, a “think-tank” he funds in Seattle that criticises Darwin’s theory of evolution and argues for the involvement of a “supernatural” actor in the development of living things.

Critics accuse it of offering little more than a new spin on creationism and the institute was recently caught up in a notorious lawsuit about the teaching of creationism in schools. And over dinner at the ranch, complete with its own golf-course and formerly owned by the beer magnate Peter Coors, Mr Prescott could have raised the topic of the Media Research Council, a Washington-based group that attacks the liberal media and which, in 2003, was responsible for half of the complaints received by the Federal Communications Commission about alleged indecency on television.

The wealth of Mr Anschutz, 67, is huge and his interests are vast. Born in Kansas, he inherited his father’s land and oil businesses before expanding them.

His empire includes sports teams — he owns the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team, a cinema chain, a film production company that has produced such films as Ray and The Chronicles of Narnia, oil, railroads, telecommunications and newspapers.

*Forbes lists him as the 28th richest person in the US with a net worth of \$7.2bn (pounds 4bn) but, in 2002, Fortune called him **the “greediest executive.”***