

at least until the nineteenth century, gender remained a stronger influence than race on those always volatile relationships.

Tracy Neal Leavelle
Creighton University

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William Wilberforce: A Biography. By **Stephen Tomkins.** Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007. 238 pp. \$18.00 paper.

The 2007 bicentennial celebrating Britain's anti-slave trade act witnessed a spate of biographies of William Wilberforce (1759–1833), the British politician and philanthropist at the center of the antislavery campaign. Many of these studies have a filiopietistic flavor, as Wilberforce is held up as a model of evangelical spirituality (his *True Christianity* became a bestseller), social activism, and political engagement. And of course, the recent film, *Amazing Grace* (2006), did nothing but cast Wilberforce in that light. Unquestionably, there is something heroic about Wilberforce: he was born to a prosperous family and inherited great wealth, yet he gave himself untiringly to public service and also gave away one-fourth of his annual income to the poor. He wanted, in the word of his day, to live a life of “usefulness.” Despite chronic health problems, he served as a member of parliament for forty-five years and engaged in a life-long crusade to reform English “manners” by outlawing hanging, dueling, and bull-bating, and by promoting factory and prison reform, education, home and foreign missionary work, Bible societies, and the prevention of cruelty to animals. Above all, his greatest contribution and the central organizing theme of Stephen Tomkins's biography was his two-decade campaign to end the British slave trade, the culmination of which, after eleven bills from Wilberforce (and more from others), was the passage of the anti-slave trade act in 1807. Shortly before his death in 1833, as a fitting coda to Wilberforce's crusade, parliament abolished the practice of slavery itself.

Tomkins duly recognizes Wilberforce's role in these many causes, but the real value of this biography is situating Wilberforce in the context of his day. The result is that we are treated to a very human figure, a man of great courage and perseverance but also a man with weaknesses and blind spots. Indeed, Wilberforce embodied the conflicting forces of his day. William Hazlitt, a contemporary of Wilberforce's, characterized him as “altogether a *double-entendre*” (219). Thus while he championed the cause of enslaved Africans abroad, Wilberforce supported repressive measures against rebellious workers

at home. While he wanted to spread the freedom of new life found in Christ, his Society for the Suppression of Vice vigorously and successfully prosecuted blasphemous booksellers who sold the skeptical works of Tom Paine and other “indecent” authors. While he opposed war (he disagreed with his friend and prime minister William Pitt the Younger over going to war with France, and he called the War of 1812 “perfectly horrible”), he supported suspending the writ of habeas corpus in times of social unrest. How to make sense of Wilberforce’s incongruous support for both progressive causes and repressive measures?

According to Tomkins, “the real key to understanding the complexity of Wilberforce is his overriding sense of duty to God” (221). Following his “great change” in embracing evangelical Christianity at age twenty-six, Wilberforce’s life took a new turn: he would do all in his power to Christianize English society and, by extension, the world. As he put it, “God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners” (59). “Amazing grace” drove him to persevere against the Atlantic flow of African human cargo and exploitation of the poor. Yet fear of the irreligion and violence of the French Revolution drove him to take the strongest of measures against those he perceived as attacking Christian values—and that often meant opposing those supporting democratic reforms. Wilberforce and his aristocratic evangelical colleagues (for example, Henry Thornton, Granville Sharp, John Venn, Hannah More, and Zachary Macaulay), dubbed as “Saints” (123) by their contemporaries and later known as the Clapham Sect, were infused with a combined Christian sense of noblesse oblige and paternalism. Christian values should transform society, but on the terms defined by the Saints. And those terms typically applied to the lower classes, not the middle and upper (though Wilberforce was not averse to condemning the sins of the rich and powerful). As one critic suggested, the appropriate title of Wilberforce’s Society for the Suppression of Vice would include the addendum “Among Those With Less Than £500 a Year” (55).

Wilberforce’s aristocratic proclivities aside, his crowning achievement in abolishing the slave trade stands as a turning point in human history. He was not alone in this endeavor. Tomkins notes the conflicting accounts of whether Wilberforce (so said his sons) or Thomas Clarkson (so said he) initiated the abolition movement among parliamentary sympathizers. Nor was Wilberforce the first to oppose slavery. In the early 1770s the American Quaker Anthony Benezet, Granville Sharp, and others did so. Not until 1786 would Wilberforce take up the cause after abolitionist friends asked him to use his position in parliament to that end. Nor was he the key political playmaker on the day MPs voted to outlaw the slave trade. That was more the doing of Lord Grenville’s administration. But it was Wilberforce whose rhetorical gifts, sheer doggedness, and longevity in parliament kept the abolition issue alive, resuscitating it again and again when it was viewed by

members of both houses as an inconvenient truth, or opposed adamantly by slave interests, or met with indifference and delaying tactics.

As a popular biography, Tomkins's study adds little to Wilberforce scholarship. At times, the writing suffers from abrupt transitions as the author's chronological account of Wilberforce's life mixes with his circling back to the slavery issue. All in all, however, this is a satisfying account, constant in its historical attentiveness and sensitive in its judgments.

David W. Kling
University of Miami

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Beyond Religious Discourse: Sermons, Preaching and Evangelical Protestants in Nineteenth-Century Irish Society. By **J. N. Ian Dickson**. Studies in Evangelical History and Thought. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007. xx + 306 pp. £19.99 paper.

Part of an impressive series which, over the course of the past decade, has been both stimulating and has disseminated detailed research into various aspects of evangelical history and thought, the subject matter of *Beyond Religious Discourse* would seem at first glance unlikely to appeal to more than a narrow and specialized readership. However, in his opening paragraph, Ian Dickson argues that “sermons and their method of delivery, in an age and climate fascinated by both, have a story to tell us about the past” (1), and this publication confirms his hypothesis, shedding light on the aspirations, anxieties, and perceptions of Protestant preachers as they attempted to influence their congregations in nineteenth-century Ulster (to which the study is largely confined) and revealing the sermon as not just a vehicle for theological ideas, but also as a social event heavily influenced by the contemporary cultural and political context.

The book is logically and quite tightly structured; following an explanation of the author's historical approach, chapter 2 considers the role of denominational training in influencing the style of preachers and the content of their sermons. The third chapter focuses more directly on the construction and delivery of this “earnest discourse of pious men” (96), while chapter 4 utilizes an impressive database of over six hundred manuscript and printed sermons for its discussion of the most prominent texts, themes, and patterns. The following chapters broaden the perspective, exploring the worldview of Ulster's evangelical Protestants, which is firmly situated in the local context, before introducing “other voices, influences and turning points” (183–211) and, finally, pondering