TWO HEROES OF CONSCIENCE WHO CHANGED THE WORLD

Lawrence W. Reed '75

ABSTRACT: *History is full of inspiring stories involving huge, positive changes made possible by people both illustrious and ordinary. One of the best examples comes from Great Britain between 1787 and 1833. Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce became deeply convicted Christians who saw human bondage as outrageous and indefensible. While few shared their perspective, the antislavery perspective would soon dominate society and reshape law and policy forever. Clarkson and Wilberforce teach that a worthy goal should inspire informed activism and that even the most entrenched laws and policies can be changed by people of courage, character, and conscience.*

---

* Lawrence W. (Larry) Reed '75 is the Foundation for Economic Education's President Emeritus, Humphreys Family Senior Fellow, and Ron Manners Global Ambassador for Liberty. Reed served as president of FEE after serving previously as chairman of its board of trustees. Prior to becoming FEE's president, he served for 21 years as president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. He holds a B.A. in economics from Grove City College, an M.A. degree in history from Slippery Rock University, and two honorary doctorates, one from Central Michigan and one from Northwood University. Reed has authored nearly 2,000 newspaper columns and articles and dozens of articles in magazines and journals in the United States and abroad. His numerous recognitions include the Champion of Freedom award from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy and the Distinguished Alumni award from Grove City College.

Must matters of law and public policy be dull, dry, and esoteric? Should they be the exclusive provinces of lawyers, legislators, lobbyists, economists, and statisticians? Or can they be animated by lofty and exciting moral principles put forward by eloquent crusaders from any walk of life?

If my answers to those three questions were *yes*, *yes*, and *no*, then readers could be forgiven for reading no further. But history is full of inspiring stories involving huge, positive changes made possible by people both illustrious and ordinary. One of the best examples comes from Great Britain between 1787 and 1833.

It is a story of long odds and daunting obstacles—tale of courage, perseverance, and moral vision. It is about much more than changing only laws and public policies. It is about transforming the conscience first of a nation and ultimately of the world. Perhaps we should think of it as the most significant

development in law and public policy of the last 500 years.

The development to which I refer is the abolition of slavery within the vast British Empire. Though many people—black and white, male and female, high-born and commoner—can lay claim to being players, the dynamic duo of the antislavery movement were Englishmen by the names of Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce.

Born within a year of each other (Wilberforce in 1759, Clarkson in 1760), these two men forged a life-long association in the late 1780s. By that time, both had become deeply convicted Christians who saw human bondage as outrageous and indefensible. It was a perspective shared by few in those days. A few decades later, however, the antislavery perspective would dominate society and re-shape law and policy forever.

Slavery was an institution with ancient roots in countless cultures on every inhabited continent. Viewed widely in the late 1700s as integral to naval and

commercial success, slavery was big business for British commercial interests. It enjoyed broad political support, as well as widespread (though essentially racist) intellectual justification.

The slave trade was lucrative for British slavers but savagely merciless for its victims—blacks that were captured in Africa. Mortality rates sometimes ran as high as 50 percent during the voyages across the Atlantic.Those who survived the journey faced excruciating toil, with death at an early age on Caribbean plantations.

As a student at the University of Cambridge, Clarkson entered the university's annual Latin essay contest in 1785. Contestants were required to write in Latin. The assigned topic that year was "Anne liceat invitos in servitutem dare?" —*Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?*[1]

Clarkson hoped to be a minister, and slavery was not a topic that had previously interested him. Still, he

1 *Papers of Thomas Clarkson, 1787–1996*, St. John's College Library (Jun. 1, 2017), https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb275-clarkson.

plunged into his research with the vigor, meticulous care, and mounting passion that would come to characterize nearly every day of his next 61 years. Drawing on the vivid testimony of those who had seen the unspeakable cruelty of the slave trade firsthand, Clarkson's essay won first prize.

What Clarkson learned from his research wrenched him to his core. Shortly after claiming the prize and while riding on horseback along a country road, his conscience gripped him. Slavery, he later wrote, "wholly engrossed" his thoughts.[2] He could not complete the ride without frequent stops to dismount and walk, tortured by the awful visions of the traffic in human lives. At one point, falling to the ground in anguish, he determined that if what he had written in his essay were indeed true, it led to only one conclusion: *"It was time*

2 Thomas Clarkson, The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament, (2017) (1808) (ebook), http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12428/pg12428-images.html.

some person should see these calamities to their end."[3]

The significance of those few minutes in time is summed up in a splendid book by Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves*:

> If there is a single moment at which the antislavery movement became inevitable, it was the day in 1785 when Thomas Clarkson sat down by the side of the road at Wades Mill.… For his Bible-conscious colleagues, it held echoes of Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. For us today, it is a landmark on the long, tortuous path to the modern conception of universal human rights.[4]

Thus began Clarkson's all-consuming focus on a moral ideal: No man can rightfully lay claim, moral or otherwise, to owning another. Casting aside his plans for a career as a man of the cloth, he mounted the bully pulpit and risked everything for the single cause of ending the evil of slavery. The poet Samuel

3 *Id.*

4 Adam Hochschild, Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves 89 (Houghton Mifflin Co. 2005).

Taylor Coleridge would later call Thomas Clarkson a "moral steam engine" and "the Giant with one idea."[5]

At first, he sought out and befriended the one group which had already embraced the issue, the Quakers. They were few in number and written off by British society as an odd,fringe element. Quaker men even refused to remove their hats for any man, including the king, because they believed it offended an even higher authority. Clarkson knew that antislavery would have to become a mainstream educational effort if it were to have any hope of success.

On May 22, 1787, Clarkson brought together 12 men, including a few of the leading Quakers, at a London print shop to plot the course. Alexis de Tocqueville would later describe the results of that meeting as "extraordinary" and "absolutely without precedent" in the history of the world.[6] This tiny group,

5 Earl Leslie Griggs, Thomas Clarkson: Friend of Slaves 26 (Negro Universities Press, 1970).

6 Hochschild, *supra* note 4, at 1.

which named itself the Society for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade, was about to take on a firmly established institution in which a great deal of money was made and on which considerable political power depended.

Powered by an evangelical zeal, Clarkson's committee would become what might be described as the world's first think tank. Noble ideas and unassailable facts would be its weapons.

"Looking back today," writes Hochschild, "what is more astonishing than the pervasiveness of slavery in the late 1700s is how swiftly it died. By the end of the following century, slavery was, at least on paper, outlawed almost everywhere."[7]

Thomas Clarkson was the prime architect of "the first, pioneering wave of that campaign"—the antislavery movement in Britain, which Hochschild properly describes

7 HOCHSCHILD, *supra* note 4, at 3.

as "one of the most ambitious and brilliantly organized citizens' movements of all time."[8]

When Clarkson and his group approached a young member of Parliament, William Wilberforce, to join the cause, their persuasiveness fell on receptive ears. Wilberforce's boyhood pastor had been John Newton, the former slave trader who converted to Christianity, renounced slavery, and wrote the autobiographical hymn, *Amazing Grace*.

Beginning in 1789, Wilberforce introduced a bill to abolish the trade in slaves every year until it finally passed in 1807. Though history gives him the lion's share of credit for abolitionism's success, it was the information Clarkson gathered while crisscrossing the British countryside—logging 35,000 miles on horseback that Wilberforce often used in parliamentary debate. Clarkson was the mobilizer, the

8 HOCHSCHILD, *supra* note 4, at 3.

energizer, the factfinder, and the very conscience of the movement.

When Wilberforce rose in the House of Commons to give his first abolition speech in 1789, he did not know that it would take another 18 years before British law would end the slave trade. He addressed his fellow parliamentarians with these stirring words:

> When we think of eternity, and of the future consequences of all human conduct, what is there in this life that should make any man contradict the dictates of his conscience, the principles of justice, the laws of religion, and of God? Sir, the nature and all the circumstances of this trade are now laid open to us; we can no longer plead ignorance, we cannot evade it; it is now an object placed before us, we cannot pass it; we may spurn it, we may kick it out of our way, but we cannot turn aside so as to avoid seeing it; for it is brought now so directly before our eyes that this House must decide, and must justify to all the world, and to their own consciences, the rectitude of the grounds and principles of their decision.[9]

His was a call to conscience, to truth, and to the

9 Kevin Belmonte, Hero for Humanity: A Biography of William Wilberforce 112 (NavPress 2002).

highest standards of character. It is one thing to be indifferent to the cruelties of slavery for lack of knowledge; it is quite another to look askance once one is aware. At the close of another moving discourse in the House of Commons in 1791, he famously raised his voice and declared, "You may choose to look the other way, *but you can never again say you did not know*."[10]

Wilberforce labored relentlessly for the cause in Parliament. In his spare time, he assisted organizations to spread the word about the inhumanity of one man's owning another. Working closely with Clarkson's group, he endured and overcame just about every obstacle imaginable, including ill health, derision from his colleagues, and defeats almost too numerous to count.[11]

Every year he introduced an abolition measure, and

10 Kay Marshall Strom, Once Blind: The Life of John Newton 225 (IVP Books 2008).

11 Belmonte, *supra* note 9.

every time for 18 long years, it went nowhere. At least once, some of his own allies deserted him because the opposition gave them free tickets to attend the theater during a crucial vote. (They were the so-called "moderates" on the issue.)

In the meantime, Clarkson translated his prize-winning essay from Latin into English and supervised its distribution by the tens of thousands. He helped organize boycotts of the West Indian rum and sugar produced with slave labor. He gave lectures and sermons. He wrote many articles and at least two books. He helped British seamen escape from the slave-carrying ships they were pressed into against their will. He filed murder charges in courts to draw attention to the actions of fiendish slave ship captains. He convinced witnesses to speak. He gathered testimony, rustled up petition signatures by the thousands, and smuggled evidence from under the very noses of his adversaries. His life was threatened many times, and once,

surrounded by an angry mob, he very nearly lost it.

The long hours, the often thankless and seemingly fruitless forays to uncover evidence, the risks and the costs that came in every form, the many low points when it looked like the world was against him—all of that went on and on, year after year. No setback ever deterred the iron wills of these two great men.

When Britain went to war with France in 1793, Clarkson and his committee saw their early progress in winning converts evaporate. The opposition in Parliament argued that abandoning the slave trade would only hand a lucrative business to a formidable enemy. And the public saw winning the war as more important than freeing people of another color and another continent. In the House of Commons, Wilberforce was denigrated as a traitor in cahoots with Clarkson the troublemaker.

At Clarkson's instigation, a diagram of a slave ship became a tool in the debate. Depicting hundreds of slaves

crammed like sardines in horrible conditions, it proved to be pivotal in winning over the public.[12]

Clarkson's organization also enlisted the help of famed pottery maker Josiah Wedgwood in producing a famous medallion. It bore the image of a kneeling, chained black man, uttering the words, "Am I not a man and a brother?"

The effort finally paid off. The tide of public opinion swung firmly to the abolitionists in the early 1800s. The trade in slaves was outlawed by act of Parliament when it approved one of Wilberforce's bills in 1807, some 20 years after Clarkson formed his committee. 26 more years of laborious effort were required before Britain passed legislation in 1833 to free all slaves within its realm.

The abolition of slavery within the British Empire took effect in 1834, 49 years after Clarkson's epiphany on a country road. It became a model for

12 Hochschild, *supra* note 4, at 308.

peaceful emancipation everywhere. Wilberforce died shortly afterward, but his friend devoted much of the next 13 years to the movement to end the scourge of slavery and improve the lot of former slaves worldwide.

Clarkson died at the age of 86 in 1846. He had been the last living member of the committee that gathered at that London print shop back in 1787. Hochschild tells us that the throngs of mourners "included many Quakers, and the men among them made an almost unprecedented departure from sacred custom" by removing their hats.

In *Thomas Clarkson: A Biography*, Ellen Gibson Wilson summed up her subject well when she wrote of this man from the little village of Wisbech: "Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846) was almost too good to be true—courageous, visionary, disciplined, self-sacrificing—a man who gave a long life almost entirely to the service of people he never met in lands he never saw."[13]

13 Ellen Gibson White, Thomas Clarkson: A Biography (St. Martin's Press 1990).

The Parliament that once scorned Wilberforce resolved when he died that he should be buried near his friend and ally, Prime Minister William Pitt, in the north transept of London's Westminster Abbey. Beneath a statue of Wilberforce seated in a chair reads this lengthy inscription:

> To the memory of William Wilberforce (born in Hull, August 24th, 1759, died in London July 29th, 1833). For nearly half a century a member of the House of Commons and, for six parliaments during that period, one of the two representatives for Yorkshire. In an age and country fertile in great and good men, he was among the foremost of those who fixed the character of their times; because to high and various talents, to warm benevolence, and to universal candor, he added the abiding eloquence of a Christian life. Eminent as he was in every department of public labor, and a leader in every work of charity, whether to relieve the temporal or the spiritual wants of his fellow-men, his name will ever be specially identified with those exertions which, by the blessing of God, removed from England the guilt of the African slave trade, and prepared the way for the abolition of slavery in every colony of the Empire: In the prosecution of these objects he relied, not in vain, on God. But in the progress he was called to endure great obloquy and great opposition. He outlived, however, all enmity; and in the evening of his days, withdrew from public life and public observation to the bosom of his family. Yet he died not unnoticed or forgotten by his country. The peers and commons of England, with the Lord Chancellor and the Speaker at their head, in solemn procession from their respective houses, carried him to his fitting place among the mighty dead around, here to repose: Till, through the merits of Jesus Christ, his only redeemer and savior (whom, in his life and in his writings he had desired to glorify), he shall rise in the resurrection of the just.[14]

The lessons of the lives of Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce reduce to this: a worthy goal should inspire informed activism. Do not let any setback slow you up. Maintain an optimism worthy of the goal itself and do all within your character and power to rally others to the cause. Clarkson and Wilberforce, to their eternal credit, proved that even the most entrenched of laws and policies can be changed by people of courage, character, and conscience.

14 *Memorial to William Wilberforce (Westminster Abbey, London),* The Nat'l Archives https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/journeys/virtual_tour_html/transcripts/wilberforce.htm (last visited Mar. 30, 2021).