

William Wilberforce's 1789 Abolition Speech

This page contrasts extracts from two accounts of William Wilberforce's famous abolition speech, delivered in the House of Commons on Tuesday 12 May 1789. In the eighteenth century, unlike today, there was no Official Record of speeches made to Parliament. Instead, newspapers recorded their own versions of speeches - and in many cases altered what they had heard to serve their own political agenda. The extracts here show just how different those accounts could be, but also show that the reporters were clearly listening to the same speech. They also give us some idea - an imperfect idea perhaps - but some idea of the power of Wilberforce's rhetoric.

These extracts are discussed at length in “William Wilberforce's Sentimental Rhetoric: Parliamentary Reportage and the Abolition Speech of 1789,” *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, 14 (2003), 281-305, [[Click here to read this article](#)] and in *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[William Wilberforce: Biography and Bibliography](#)

1. From ‘Debate on Mr. Wilberforce’s Resolutions respecting the Slave Trade’ in William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England. From the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the year 1803*, 36 vols (London: T. Curson Hansard, 1806-1820), 28 (1789-91), cols 42-68.

[Cols 41-42]

Mr. Wilberforce now rose and said:—When I consider the magnitude of the subject which I am to bring before the House—a subject, in which the interests, not of this country, nor of Europe alone, but of the whole world, and of posterity, are involved: and when I think, at the same time, on the weakness of the advocate who has undertaken this great cause—when these reflections press upon my mind, it is impossible for me not to feel both terrified and concerned at my own inadequacy to such a task. But when I reflect, however, on the encouragement which I have had, through the whole course of a long and laborious examination of this question, and how much candour I have experienced, and how conviction has increased within my own mind, in proportion as I have advanced in my labours;—when I reflect, especially, that however averse any gentleman may now be, yet we shall all be of one opinion in the end;—when I turn myself to these thoughts, I take courage—I determine to forget all my other fears, and I march forward with a firmer step in the full assurance that my cause will bear me out, and that I shall be able to justify upon the clearest principles, every resolution in my hand, the avowed end of which is, the total abolition of the slave trade. I wish exceedingly, in the outset, to guard both myself and the House from entering into the subject with any sort of passion. It is not their passions I shall appeal to—I ask only for their cool and impartial reason; and I wish not to take them by surprise, but to deliberate, point by point, upon every part of this question. I mean not to accuse any one, but to take the shame upon myself, in common, indeed, with the whole parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty—we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others; and I therefore deprecate every kind of reflection against the various descriptions of people who are more immediately involved in this wretched business.

[Cols 45-48]

Having now disposed of the first part of this subject, I must speak of the transit of the slaves in the West Indies. This I confess, in my own opinion, is the most wretched part of the whole subject. So much misery condensed in so little room, is more than the human imagination had ever before conceived. I will not accuse the Liverpool merchants: I will allow them, nay, I will believe them to be men of humanity; and I will therefore believe, if it were not for the enormous magnitude and extent of the evil which distracts their attention from individual cases, and makes them think generally, and therefore less feelingly on the subject, they would never have persisted in the trade. I verily believe therefore, if the wretchedness of any one of the many hundred Negroes stowed in each ship could be brought before their view, and remain within the sight of the African Merchant, that there is no one among them whose heart would bear it. Let any one imagine to himself 6 or 700 of these wretches chained two and two, surrounded with every object that is nauseous and disgusting, diseased, and struggling under every kind of wretchedness! How can we bear to think of such a scene as this? One would think it had been determined to heap upon them all the varieties of bodily pain, for the purpose of blunting the feelings of the mind; and yet, in this very point (to show the power of human prejudice) the situation of the slaves has been described by Mr. Norris, one of the Liverpool delegates, in a manner which, I am sure will convince the House how interest can draw a film across the eyes, so thick, that total blindness could do no more; and how it is our duty therefore to trust not to the reasonings of interested men, or to their way of colouring a transaction. "Their apartments," says Mr. Norris, "are fitted up as much for their advantage as circumstances will admit. The right angle of one, indeed is connected with the left angle of another by a small iron fetter, and if they are turbulent, by another on their wrists. They have several meals a day; some of their own country provisions, with the best sauces of African cookery; and by way of variety, another meal of pulse, &c. according to European taste. After breakfast they have water to wash themselves, while their apartments are perfumed with frankincense and lime-juice. Before dinner, they are amused after the manner of their country. The song and dance are promoted," and, as if the whole was really a scene of pleasure and dissipation it is added, that games of chance are furnished. "The men play and sing, while the women and girls make fanciful ornaments with beads, which they are plentifully supplied with." Such is the sort of strain in which the Liverpool delegates, and particularly Mr. Norris, gave evidence before the privy council. What will the House think when, by the concurring testimony of other witnesses, the true history is laid open. The slaves who are sometimes described as rejoicing at their captivity, are so wrung with misery at leaving their country, that it is the constant practice to set sail at night, lest they should be sensible of their departure. The pulse which Mr. Norris talks of are horse beans; and the scantiness, both of water and provision, was suggested by the very legislature of Jamaica in the report of their committee, to be a subject that called for the interference of parliament. Mr. Norris talks of frankincense and lime juice; when surgeons tell you the slaves are stowed so close, that there is not room to tread among them: and when you have it in evidence from sir George Yonge, that even in a ship which wanted 200 of her complement, the stench was intolerable. The song and the dance, says Mr. Norris, are promoted. It had been more fair, perhaps, if he had explained that word promoted. The truth is, that for the sake of exercise, these miserable wretches, loaded with chains, oppressed with disease and wretchedness, are forced to dance by the terror of the lash, and sometimes by the actual use of it. "I," says one of the other evidences, "was employed to dance the men, while another person danced the women." Such, then is the meaning of the word promoted; and it may be observed too, with respect to food, that an instrument is sometimes carried out, in order to force them to eat which is the same sort of proof how much they enjoy themselves in that instance also. As to their singing, what shall we say when we are told that their songs are songs of lamentation upon their departure which, while they sing, are always in tears, insomuch that one captain (more humane as I should conceive him, therefore, than the rest) threatened one of the women with a flogging, because the mournfulness

of her song was too painful for his feelings. In order, however, not to trust too much to any sort of description, I will call the attention of the House to one species of evidence which is absolutely infallible. Death, at least, is a sure ground of evidence, and the proportion of deaths will not only confirm, but if possible will even aggravate our suspicion of their misery in the transit. It will be found, upon an average of all the ships of which evidence has been given at the privy council, that exclusive of those who perish before they sail, not less than 12½ per cent. perish in the passage. Besides these, the Jamaica report tells you, that not less than 4½ per cent. die on shore before the day of sale, which is only a week or two from the time of landing. One third more die in the seasoning, and this in a country exactly like their own, where they are healthy and happy as some of the evidences would pretend. The diseases, however, which they contract on shipboard, the astringent washes which are to hide their wounds, and the mischievous tricks used to make them up for sale, are, as the Jamaica report says, (a most precious and valuable report, which I shall often have to advert to) one principle cause of this mortality. Upon the whole, however, here is a mortality of about 50 per cent. and this among negroes who are not bought unless (as the phrase is with cattle) they are sound in wind and limb. How then can the House refuse its belief to the multiplied testimonies before the privy council, of the savage treatment of the negroes in the middle passage? Nay, indeed, what need is there of any evidence? The number of deaths speaks for itself, and makes all such enquiry superfluous. As soon as ever I had arrived thus far in my investigation of the slave trade, I confess to you sir, so enormous so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition. A trade founded in iniquity, and carried on as this was, must be abolished, let the policy be what it might,—let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest till I had effected its abolition.

2. From *The Morning Star*, 78 (Wednesday 13 May 1789)

Mr. WILBERFORCE then called the attention of the House to what he was about to propose. He said that he rose with a confession of what operated in his mind relative to the abolition of the Slave Trade. When I consider, says he, how long this has been suggested by many, and of what importance it is to a race of men, possessing qualities equally commendable with our own—how many millions are at present involved in the decision of the question—it is impossible for me to object in being instrumental to the business. He then remarked, that he was convinced, whatever should be the decision, that in bringing forward the discussion, he performed nothing more than his duty; and he was so fully persuaded of the rectitude of his conduct, that no consideration whatever would make him swerve from his honour so far, as to dissuade him from marching boldly forward on the occasion. It was no party question, and he flattered himself that the voice of reason and truth would be heard. He was resolved to be regulated by temper and coolness, and challenged a fair discussion.—It was not a proposition grounded upon particular motives of policy, but founded in principles of philanthropy. It was no idle expedient or speculation of the moment, but derived from the most mature deliberation. He came not to accuse the Merchants, but to appeal to their feelings and humanity. He confessed, that in the weak state of health in which he now appeared, and precarious as it might seem to many, he would stand against every personal idea, and bear the burthen destined for a person who stood in his situation. The subject had already undergone many discussions, and he apprehended that previous to a final decision, it would undergo many more. What must make every man of feeling shudder was, that, after examining the annals of Africa, numbers had been carried every year from their native country, in order to satiate the avarice of a certain description of men whose whole thoughts were bent upon tyranny and oppression.

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Mr. Wilberforce then noticed that he had carefully examined the histories of the West Indies, and had attended to the times, when forgetting every idea of humanity, they were torn from the protection of their friends. To delude them particularly from their native country, they generally set sail from Africa in the night time, and thus evaded reflections, which might be roused concerning their friends and relations ashore. This was a dreadful expedient; and till now, he could not believe that so much *misery* could be *condensed* in so *little room*. He could wish to rouse the feelings of every man on the occasion, and convince the people that their intention and aid were the result of consideration, which did awaken him. With regard to the gentlemen of Liverpool, he could do them the justice to believe, that they would not seriously interrupt the abolition of the Slave Trade, especially when they understood that the characters of the people of this country were sullied by the outrages alluded to. Nothing, certainly, could excite them sooner to an acquiescence, than the sight of 600 linked two and two; consequently to hear the gentlemen of Liverpool affirm, that the situation of these of these poor unhappy mortals, was comfortable, rather appeared strange and ridiculous. He then adverted to what had been adduced by Mr. Norris, in his evidence, who had made a comparison between an African Monarch, and an European, and declared that was called a Palace, was nothing more than a *house of mud*, where, however, every attention was made for that tenor of tranquillity which was so very desirable.—The manner of treating negroes, during a long voyage, was to the following effect:—the space between the decks is appointed entirely for their lodging; every attention is paid to keep that as clean as possible; the negroes are kept on deck all day, if the weather be fine; they are fed with two meals of comfortable victuals; they are supplied with the luxuries of pipe and tobacco, and a dram occasionally, when the coldness of the weather requires it; they are supplied with the musical instruments of their country; they are encouraged to be cheerful, to sing and to dance, and they do both; the women are supplied with beads to ornament themselves; they are kept clean shaved; and every attention paid to their heads that there be no vermin lodged there; they are secured with fetters on their legs, two and two together; and if a turbulent disposition appears, with another on the wrist; their apartments are clean washed, and fumigated with the fumes of tar and frankincense, and sprinkled with vinegar, &c. As an extenuation of the crimes laid to the charge of the Agents for the Merchants, who are accustomed to this traffic, it has been mentioned with some degree of triumph, that they were treated on board with all manner of luxurious indulgence. The *luxury* alluded to was this—the *song* and the *dance* were promoted; the women were employed in weaving ornaments for the hair, and the utmost attention was observed to *keep up* their *spirits*. The truth of this observation was evidently the very reverse, and if it were possible to cast a *film* over the *eyes* of *mankind*, so as to deprive them of sight by a *total blindness*, the prevaricating mode of mentioning the transactions, could not be depicted in a more absurd point of view. The poor wretches were in such a deplorable state and unparalleled torment, and suffering such torture, that the surgeon who visited them, when bound two and two, could not pass without having his legs bitten by the slaves. Sir George Yonge affirms, that the stench was so intolerable as to be past all sufferance; and that in the article of water there was a miserable allowance. It was extremely worthy of observation to explain how the *songs* and *dances* were promoted. It was not a scene of freedom or spontaneous joy; for one man was employed to dance the *men*, and another to dance the *women*. If they found themselves inclined not to undergo the fatigue, certain persons were ordered to *whip* them into a compliance. To hear a recital of these facts would make people shudder; and the tear of sympathy would communicate from one man to another with congenial celerity. There was one Captain who declared that his feelings revolted at such measures. He applauded highly the sensations of this man, who had made such a concession in defiance of the barbarous practises already described. But DEATH, which on every occasion levels all distinctions, gave the unhappy victims that freedom from persecution and torture which other wise they could not have received. When first I heard, Sir, of these iniquities, I considered

them as exaggerations, and could not believe it possible, that men had determined to live by exerting themselves for the torture and misery of their fellow-creatures. I have taken great pains to make myself master of the subject, and can declare, that such scenes of barbarity are enough to rouse the indignation and horror of the most callous of mankind. Upon making an average of the loss sustained in the cargo of the *Guinea ships*, it appears, that one-eighth of the whole generally suffered. Upon examining the *Jamaica Report*, another essential loss was discovered, numbers died by the attempt of *seasoning* the slaves, that is, changing them from one climate to another—sometimes the loss appeared by death to be 4 1-half per cent.—at other times 17 per cent. the last of which calculation is generally admitted by the best writers. In every common cargo, it has been observed, that about 50 or 60 perish. From the windward coast about Sierra Leona, the general average of mortality was not found more than three per cent. From Bonny, the number of slaves was not recollected that died on the voyage. From Benin, nine were buried out of 300 in the course of three months. But the general average of mortality from Benin, Bonny, New Calabar, Old Calabar, Cameroon, and Gaboon, was much greater. That the slaves are subject to the following disorders: the small pox, measles, dysentery, fluxes, and fevers. They are rendered more sickly by laying up in land rivers. They generally lie longer on the coast than a slave ship does. An epidemical disorder on the coast prevails sometimes to a very great degree.—Mr. Jones had a ship, in which a fever broke out before she had purchased twenty slaves. This distemper carried off a great number of the crew in the course of a month. From every consideration I shall deal frankly with the House, by declaring, that no act of policy whatever will make me swerve from my duty and oblige me to abandon a measure which I think will be an honour to humanity. Mr. Wilberforce then mentioned, that he intended to submit to the consideration of the House, several resolutions, upon which a General Motion should be found for the TOTAL ABOLITION of the SLAVE TRADE. When, says he, I was persuaded of the frequent commission of the crimes mentioned, I found myself impelled to go boldly forward; and had before I had time to reflect, proceeded so far that I could not recede; but had I deserted the great and important undertaking, I should have considered myself wanting in that necessary portion of duty which I owed to my constituents and to my country. There is no accusation made against the gentlemen of the West India trade; but, by bringing forward the consideration of such a mighty object, we unite with the person of sensibility, that the measure is necessary, as founded in rectitude and universal benevolence. The great cause, it has been stated, of mortality in the West Indies is, that the slaves are very profligate and dissolute in their manners; but the principal cause, however, is their ill treatment; for the agents *squeeze* as much as possible from their exertions. Here the Divine Doctrine is contradicted by the reverse action—That *sympathy is the great source of humanity*.