

Remembering an Abolitionist

by James G. Basker

February 23rd is the 200th anniversary of the British Parliament's vote to abolish the transatlantic slave trade. It is also the release date of a film (*Amazing Grace*) about the man who led the British Abolition movement, William Wilberforce. While the film does not have much to do with abolition in the United States, Wilberforce certainly did.

Abolitionism had widely diffused origins and its advocates lived on both sides of the Atlantic. The movement's leaders wrote and visited, financed and supported each other from the late 1780s through the 1850s. In the United States, major figures including Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and William Wells Brown publicly praised Wilberforce and were moved by his example. In 1815, one African American minister called him "the immortal Wilberforce," and upon his death in 1833, the principal of a school for free black children in New York City wrote a sixteen-page eulogy as a tribute to the British leader.

The abolition movement was always far more than one man's story. It begins and ends with the millions of black people who endured, resisted, rebelled, and ultimately overcame. But Wilberforce's is a story that inspires us with a sense of the difference one person can make, and then what can happen when thousands or millions make a similar commitment and rally to a worthy idea whose time is at hand.

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