

2018

# William Wilberforce and William Cobbett: Reformers in Conflict in Early 19th-Century Britain

Nicole Carroll  
*Chapman University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/vocesnovae>

---

### Recommended Citation

Carroll, Nicole (2018) "William Wilberforce and William Cobbett: Reformers in Conflict in Early 19th-Century Britain," *Voces Novae*: Vol. 2 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/vocesnovae/vol2/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Voces Novae by an authorized editor of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [laughtin@chapman.edu](mailto:laughtin@chapman.edu).

## Voces Novae: Chapman University Historical Review, Vol 2, No 1 (2010)

[HOME](#) [ABOUT](#) [USER HOME](#) [SEARCH](#) [CURRENT](#) [ARCHIVES](#) [PHI ALPHA THETA](#)[Home](#) > [Vol 2, No 1 \(2010\)](#) > **Carroll**

---

**William Wilberforce and William Cobbett: Reformers in Conflict in Early 19th-Century Britain****By Nicole Carroll**

William Wilberforce is best remembered for his tireless dedication to various humanitarian causes, particularly the anti-slavery movement. From 1787, when he first met with Thomas Clarkson,<sup>[1]</sup> Wilberforce had been supporting the abolition of this peculiar institution through pamphlets, letters, and speeches. This dedication was not in vain. Just two days before his death, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July, 1833, he learned that the House of Commons had passed an Abolition Bill. However, Wilberforce's reformist tendencies were complex. While radical in some respects, he was deeply conservative in others and, not surprisingly, he often had as many opponents on the "left" as on the "right." Among those radicals who did not recognize him as a "hero for humanity,"<sup>[2]</sup> as he was commonly noted throughout his life and by historians, was radical parliamentarian William Cobbett. Wilberforce and Cobbett were both political activists and reformers, but they certainly were far from colleagues. In fact, Cobbett argued that Wilberforce, while supporting the freeing of slaves abroad, was actually in support of keeping the British working classes enslaved at home. The two reformers, divided by their vastly different definitions of slavery, occasionally found themselves in open conflict. A close look at the structure and origins of this particular quarrel can shed some important light on reform as it manifested during the early years of the Industrial Revolution in Britain.

While Wilberforce and Cobbett have both had many biographers, little has been written about their conflict and their different interpretations of the term "slave." John Pollock, one of the leading modern Wilberforce biographers, briefly mentions Cobbett as Wilberforce's political opponent, but says little more on the subject. Cobbett biographers have delved only a bit deeper. Ian Dyck, a leading contemporary Cobbett historian and author of *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, mentions Cobbett's animosity towards Wilberforce, but does not otherwise go into much detail. While Wilberforce and Cobbett have been studied individually in detail, their conflict and more specifically their views of slavery have not been examined systematically and together to see how and why the British reform community was divided rather than unified.

Nicole Carroll

.....  
Though they were both reformers, the origins and early lives of Wilberforce and Cobbett were radically different. Wilberforce was born on August 24, 1759, in the port city of Hull. At the age of seven, he began attending Hull Grammar School and studied under Joseph and Isaac Milner[3]; the latter would come to play a great role in Wilberforce's spiritual awakening. Wilberforce's life changed drastically in 1768 when his father died and his mother, who was very sick, sent young Wilberforce to live with his aunt and uncle, William and Hannah Wilberforce. Though Wilberforce's parents had raised him as a member of the Church of England, William and Hannah were devout Methodists and took their nephew to hear the Methodist preacher John Newton, a reformed slave ship captain and the composer of many hymns including "Amazing Grace." Upon learning of young William's "conversion," Wilberforce's mother and grandfather demanded that he be returned to Hull. It was not until after his graduation from Cambridge and election as member of Parliament (MP) for Hull in 1780 that Wilberforce returned to this more vital religious experience of his youth, an experience which inspired his many later philanthropic endeavors.

While Wilberforce enjoyed a privileged childhood, Cobbett's youth was spent under vastly different circumstances. He was born on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March, 1763, in Farnham, Surrey. His father, George Cobbett, was a farmer and the landlord of the Jolly Farmer Inn. In his autobiography Cobbett described his childhood as having been filled with work.

I do not remember the time when I did not earn my living. My first occupation was driving the small birds from the turnip seed, and the rooks from the pease...my next employment was weeding wheat, and leading a single horse at harrowing barley. Hoeing pease followed, and hence I arrived at the honour of joining the reapers in harvest, driving the team, and holding plough. We were all of us strong and laborious, and my father used to boast, that he had four boys, the eldest of whom was but fifteen years old, who did as much work as any three men in the parish of Farnham.[4]

Cobbett grew up in a working class environment, and this experience would influence his decision to dedicate himself to improving the conditions of this particular group. As he spent his childhood working, Cobbett had no formal education, but rather his father taught him to read and write. While George Cobbett had a positive impact on his son's education, he was otherwise a strict and abusive parent, which drove William to leave home on multiple occasions.

In 1782 he visited relatives near Portsmouth and saw the sea for the first time. Cobbett also described this trip as having inspired him to become a sailor. "Almost all English boys feel the same inclination," he would later say. "It would seem that, like young ducks, instinct leads them to rush on the bosom of the water." [5] Cobbett spoke to a captain about enlisting, but the captain persuaded him not to join, insisting "that it was better to be led to church in a halter, to be tied to a girl that I did not like, than to be tyed to

the gangway, or, as the sailors call it, married to *Miss Roper*." [6] Upon returning to his home in Farnham, Cobbett could not readjust to the life of a farmer and when he had the opportunity to go to London in May of 1783, Cobbett left for the big city.

Upon arriving in London, Cobbett began working for a lawyer and developing his writing skills. However, finding himself working long hours and in poor conditions, in 1784 he left this job and joined the marines. As it was a time of peace, Cobbett spent the first year of his enlistment stationed in Chatham, where he spent much of his time reading and studying. About this time of his life, he said that "in the course of this year I learnt much more than I had ever done before. I subscribed to a circulating library at Brompton, the greatest part of the books in which I read more than once over." [7] Since his knowledge of grammar was poor he began studying Lowth's grammar book. Cobbett described, "I wrote the whole grammar out two or three times; I got it by heart; I repeated it every morning and every evening; and when on guard, I imposed on myself the task of saying it all over once every time I was posted sentinel." [8] Cobbett eventually wrote his own grammar book, *A Grammar of the English Language*, in 1818.

In December of 1791, Cobbett obtained his discharge from the marines. A year later, in February of 1792, he was married to Anne Reid, whom he called Nancy, and the two left for France. They planned on staying until the spring of 1793, but were forced to flee to America when war broke out. Upon arriving in America, Cobbett wrote to Thomas Jefferson seeking employment. Jefferson responded,

In acknowledging the receipt of your favor of the second instant, I wish it were in my power to announce to you any way in which I could be useful to you. Mr. Short's assurance of your merit would be sufficient inducement to me. Public Offices in our government are so few, and of so little value, as to offer no resource to talents. When you shall have been here some small time, you will be able to judge in what way you can set out with the best prospect of success, and if I can serve you in it, I shall be very ready to do it. [9]

Although Cobbett did not find employment through Jefferson, he began writing textbooks that taught English to French speakers. Additionally, he began writing pamphlets under the alias "Peter Porcupine." In 1794 he published *The Observations on the Emigration of Joseph Priestley* in which he famously wrote,

no man has a right to pry into his neighbour's private concerns and the opinions of everyman are his private concerns...but when he makes those opinions public...when he once comes forward as a candidate for public admiration, esteem or compassion, his opinions, his principles, his motives, every action of his life, public or private, become the fair subject of public discussion. [10]

Nicole Carroll

.....

While this pamphlet addressed Joseph Priestley specifically, Cobbett's words defended the right to freedom of speech and to discuss their beliefs on public figures. He believed that by entering the public spotlight, public figures, including politicians, automatically gave up their private lives and were free to be discussed and critiqued. Cobbett often later exercised this "right" when discussing Wilberforce.

In 1800, Cobbett returned to England where he launched a daily newspaper, *The Porcupine*. After both his home and bookshop were attacked because of the controversial nature of his publication, Cobbett was forced to merge his newspaper with the government propaganda paper, *The True Briton*. Shortly after, in 1802, he began another paper, *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, which would later become the *Political Register*. From 1810-1812, Cobbett was imprisoned for treasonous libel for writing in the *Political Register* about his objection to the flogging of local militiamen by the government. While imprisoned, Cobbett continued writing letters, pamphlets, and newspaper articles that he had published with the aid of his coworker, John Wright. By 1816, the *Political Register* had a circulation of 40,000, making it the most read working class newspaper in Britain and giving Cobbett a wide forum for his activism.

Cobbett ran for election on three separate occasions but did not win a seat until 1832 when he stood for Oldham. Even prior to his victory in a parliamentary election, Cobbett had continuously participated in politics. He dedicated himself to raising awareness for the working classes and making known his objections to other politicians, including Wilberforce, known to the public. His vastly different childhood and lifestyle as an adult greatly contributed to his difference in political campaigns from Wilberforce. While Wilberforce's privileged circumstances allowed him a Cambridge education and the money needed for early election, Cobbett grew up lacking these connections and pedigree. In this sense, Cobbett was more connected to the working class than the parliamentary class.

Among those Cobbett attacked most vigorously was, surprisingly, Wilberforce. In 1819, Cobbett wrote an article in the *Political Register*, in which he expressed his disgust with the Combination Acts, which were designed to make it illegal for workers to unionize. Cobbett not only criticized the Acts themselves, but the men who passed and implemented them, questioning, "What set of men, chosen by the people, would ever have passed the Combination Law, which punishes journeymen with imprisonment and hard labor for combining to raise their wages, while it punishes masters with a fine for combining to lower wages."<sup>[11]</sup> Although he did not directly mention Wilberforce here, it was Wilberforce who had originally proposed this legislation. In 1799, the master millwrights had presented a petition to prevent their journeymen from forming a Trade Union. Wilberforce, instead, suggested that a general law preventing combinations of workmen unionizing be enacted because they were "a general disease in our society."<sup>[12]</sup> Countless petitions against the acts were debated until they were finally repealed in 1824. Despite his early suggestions, there is no record that Wilberforce participated in these debates.

.....

In 1821 Cobbett set out to document the rural communities in England. In October, he, along with his son James, started a tour that would take them from London, through Newbury, to Berghclere, Hurstbourn Tarrant, Marlborough, Cirencester and finally to Gloucester.<sup>[13]</sup> Cobbett recorded these travels in *Rural Rides*, published first in 1830 and then again in 1853 by his son. *Rural Rides* was vastly different from most of Cobbett's other writings that focused on political issues such as paper money and the national debt. This book instead focused on the country's agriculture and the lives of rural laborers. Cobbett gave a daily account of what he saw and people he encountered, often recording overheard conversations that described the plight of rural laborers. He also wrote that his banishment to America prepared him for this journey, as it had taught him to be more self-sufficient. Throughout the book Cobbett illustrated his love for England, particularly the countryside. Consistently, he described aspects of England as "beautiful."

Yet, even though the book revealed his love of the English countryside, Cobbett also voiced his negative opinion not only on working class conditions, but also on Wilberforce and the status of slaves in comparison to British laborers. Cobbett's expression of his love for his country explains why he was so dedicated to his own countrymen as opposed to the African slaves. His first mention of Wilberforce, although indirectly, was dated Saturday August 30, 1822 while he was in Tombridge Wells in Kent. He described Kent as having a "middle-kind"<sup>[14]</sup> of land, which provided average crops. He noted that the laboring classes fared best in woodland and forest areas. Cobbett recounted a conversation that he overheard between laboring men at the Ashurst alehouse. The men had been discussing how the parish roads had improved over the past seven years. Cobbett's reaction was that "it is odd enough, too, that the parish roads should become *better and better* as the farmers become *poorer and poorer*!"<sup>[15]</sup> While Cobbett himself often expressed his pride in his country, it did not stop from expressing his disgust at the government's expenditures on what were, in his opinion, frivolities instead of using it to improve the conditions of local farmers. Cobbett would have preferred to see the money spent on providing food, clothing, housing and medical aid to British working classes. The men seemed puzzled by Cobbett's questioning of the government and he attributed this to the fact that they had probably never thought to question it.<sup>[16]</sup> Cobbett viewed this situation as the government overlooking the needs of its own citizens, in a manner similar to Wilberforce overlooking his own countrymen in his choice to support African slaves before the British working classes.

It was in this same entry that Cobbett recalled an old saying that he used to explain the population increase among the working class, "that a great *nut* year is a great year for that class whom the lawyers, in their Latin phrase, call the 'sons and daughters of nobody.'"<sup>[17]</sup> Cobbett described an exchange with a man he met in Kent and their conversation on the truth behind this old saying. The man told Cobbett that he had in fact witnessed a year in which there were four times as many births in the working class and the only explanation for the high births had been the large crop of nuts that year. Cobbett mused that neither

Nicole Carroll

Wilberforce nor Malthus, whom he was also often in conflict with, would have approved the increased number of births. He wrote,

Now, if this be the case, ought not Parson Malthus, Lawyer Scarlett, and the rest of that tribe, to turn their attention to the nut-trees? The *Vice Society* too, with that holy man Wilberforce at its head, ought to look out sharp after these mischievous nut-trees. A law to cause them all to be grubbed up, and thrown into the fire, would, certainly, be far less unreasonable than many things, which we have seen and heard of.<sup>[18]</sup>

Cobbett's disdain for Wilberforce is certainly obvious. This section focused on another political divide between Wilberforce and Cobbett: Wilberforce's crusade for the reformation of manners. Although this issue was separate from the anti-slavery crusade, it shows how sharply these two reformers conflicted on a number of issues.

On Sunday, August 31<sup>st</sup>, Cobbett wrote his entry from Tenterden (Kent). In this entry he mentioned some of the great estates that were in the area, particularly that of the Marquis of Camden. Camden was an active politician who served as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1795 and Secretary of State for War and the Colonies in 1804. According to published accounts, Camden had received around a million pounds of public money. Cobbett questioned Camden's right to the money and asked Wilberforce, who had once called Camden a "bright star," what Camden had done to earn his fortune?<sup>[19]</sup> Camden had earned the title "bright star," by donating around three thousand pounds a year, but Cobbett criticized this stating that Camden only donated the money when it became necessary to improve his name.

What a bright star! And *when* did he give it up? When the *radicals* had made the country ring with it. When his name was, by their means, getting into every mouth in the kingdom; when every Radical speech and petition contained the name Camden. Then it was, and not till then, that this 'bright star', let fall part of its 'brilliancy'. So that Wilberforce ought to have thanked the *Radicals*, and not Camden.<sup>[20]</sup>

Cobbett believed that Camden donated money exclusively in a bid to redeem his name after he had been negatively mentioned in numerous speeches and pamphlets by the Radicals. In this statement Cobbett not only questioned Camden and his less-than-honest motives for providing aid; he also criticized Wilberforce for his support and praise of Camden. He expressed his wish to see Wilberforce thank the Radicals, as they were the ones who indirectly caused Camden to donate the money.

In this same entry Cobbett described his visit to the town's Methodist Meeting-house and the Parson's sermon on the distinction between the ungodly and the sinner. The sinner was described as one who had

done something morally wrong, while the ungodly was one who did nothing morally wrong but was not reborn.<sup>[21]</sup> The parson told Cobbett that both the sinner and the ungodly were to be damned.

One was just as bad as the other. Moral rectitude was to do nothing in saving the man. He was to be damned, unless he came to the regeneration-shop, and gave the fellows money? He distinctly told us, that a man perfectly moral, might be damned; and that'the vilest of the vile, and the basest of the base would be saved if they became regenerate...<sup>[22]</sup>

Cobbett was completely opposed to the concept, particularly as it stood for the ungodly. He expressed his desire to see the laboring classes pay to provide for themselves and their families instead of having to pay for their regeneration. While Cobbett did not specifically attack Wilberforce in this address of a Methodist meeting, he evidently scorned the Methodist church, which had proved a great influence for Wilberforce. Cobbett and Wilberforce were not only divided on political matters, but also in their religious beliefs. Wilberforce was much more dedicated to and influenced by his religion, while Cobbett remained more driven by his dedication to the British working classes.

Cobbett's entry on November 6, 1822 was from Burgclere, where, he described, heavy rain had caused his travel a week's delay, which gave him a chance to catch up on his newspaper reading. Cobbett focused on the issues involved in the production of cotton, which he had seen earlier in New York and now saw in England. He voiced his familiar belief here that British laborers suffered worse conditions than Negro slaves.

I pity none but the poor English creatures, who are compelled to work on the wool of this accursed week, which has done so much mischief to England. The slaves who cultivate and gather the cotton, are well fed. They do not suffer. The sufferers are those who spin it and weave it and colour it, and the wretched beings who cover it with it those bodies, which, as in the time of old Fortescue, ought to be 'clothed throughout in good woolens.'<sup>[23]</sup>

As he expressed in many of his other works, Cobbett felt that Negro slaves, whose owners considered their ability to work a financial investment, often enjoyed better conditions than British laborers, who were often unable to provide for themselves and their families. Although *Rural Rides* is not known specifically for Cobbett's references to Wilberforce or the conditions of British Laborers in comparison to slaves, it does provide a unique look at his opinions on the subject. Usually these are the focal points of his pamphlets and speeches, but here they are mentioned in passing and much more informally. Due to the book's unique look, *Rural Rides* remained popular in pre-industrial England.



Nicole Carroll

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of August, 1823, William Cobbett published a letter to Wilberforce in his newspaper, the *Political Register*. In this letter, Cobbett addressed Wilberforce's pamphlet, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies*. While Cobbett did not attack the abolitionist movement itself, he did express his disapproval of Wilberforce's seeming lack of support for the British working classes. He was especially critical of Wilberforce's attempt to compare the conditions of slaves to those of British laborers:

There is a great deal of canting trash; a great deal of lying; a great deal of that cool impudent falsehood for which the Quakers are famed; a monstrous quantity of hypocrisy is there evident in these seventy-seven pages of yours but this would appear to be what you want; namely, to make the West India Negro slaves *as well off as the labourers in this kingdom*.<sup>[24]</sup>

From Cobbett's perspective, Wilberforce cared more about Negro slaves than free British laborers. He argued, "To put your meaning into plain English, it comes to this, that you want the inhabitants of this country and of Scotland and Ireland, to do something that shall make the West India Blacks *as well off as* the working parts of the Whites in these countries."<sup>[25]</sup> In fact, Cobbett believed that Wilberforce was, and always had been, an inveterate enemy of the British working classes. He accused Wilberforce, "Never have you done one single act, in favor of those labourers, but many and many an act you have done against them."<sup>[26]</sup>

What was the true state of the British working classes according to Cobbett? He began by describing the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester on the August 16, 1819, during which eighteen free British laborers were killed and approximately five hundred were injured without any punishment carried out on those responsible. Cobbett pointed out that Wilberforce did not speak out on behalf of those killed in Manchester even though in one of his pamphlets Wilberforce expressed his horror that those responsible for the mistreatment of slaves often went unpunished. Wilberforce wrote, "If any Negro or other slave, while under punishment by his master, or master's order, for running away, or any other crimes or misdemeanors towards his master, unfortunately *shall suffer in life or member*, which seldom happens, no person whatever shall be liable to any fine therefore."<sup>[27]</sup> According to Cobbett, while both Negro slaves and British laborers "suffer in life or member," Wilberforce was only willing to speak on behalf of the slaves. Cobbett offered another example of Wilberforce's neglect of his fellow countrymen in the previous year, 1822, when a member of the British army was flogged to death. Wilberforce, who was at the same time appealing to the "religion, justice, and humanity" of the British on behalf of the slaves, said nothing about this incident.<sup>[28]</sup>

.....

While Wilberforce did not discuss or show support for the working class in his pamphlet, nor did he compare the conditions of slaves to the conditions of British laborers as systematically as Cobbett argued. Wilberforce focused more on the moral reasons for the abolition of slavery. One of his main concerns for African slaves in the West Indies was that marriage between slaves was illegal, a law that condemned many slaves to living in sin. Wilberforce argued that the introduction of the Christian religion was well received by many Africans, explaining that "these recent savages, having become subjects of religious and moral culture, have manifested the greatest willingness to receive instruction, and made a practical proficiency in Christianity, such as might put some Europeans to the blush."[\[29\]](#) His only statement that could be viewed as linking slaves to free British laborers came at the end of his pamphlet: "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..."[\[30\]](#) Even in this statement, Wilberforce was not specifically comparing slaves to the freedom of British workers, only the freedom enjoyed by the British population in general.

The only time Wilberforce specifically compared slaves to British workers was when he attacked those who claimed that slaves had better lives than the British peasantry. Yet, even in this case he did not spend much time on the issue, quickly deeming it a "monstrous" assertion. He stated that it was utterly perverse to compare the state of a West Indian slave to that of a free Englishman.[\[31\]](#) Not only were the two unequal in matters such as food, clothing and medical attention, but they were also unequal in terms of independence.[\[32\]](#) This single mention of the British working class seems to have been the sole basis for Cobbett's entire article. Though seemingly unjustified and clearly over the top, Cobbett's pamphlet does suggest strongly the political chasm that separated these two reformers. It is certainly true that while Wilberforce was a radical with regard to the abolition of slavery, he was much more conservative on other issues. He certainly did not believe that the British working classes were generally oppressed or degraded.

Wilberforce was not so much anti-working class as he was conservative in what he thought was the best way to help workers. In their biography of their father, Wilberforce's sons reported that in the fall of 1800, Wilberforce worked both privately and in the House of Commons to provide some relief for the British working classes, though they did not go into specific details. They wrote,

I have been using my utmost endeavours to impress the minds of ministers, and of my brother members, with a sense of the necessity of taking effectual steps for the relief of the lower orders: and though thinking their measures too weak, I am by far the most urgent in pressing forward those very weak measures, to the execution of which they proceed languidly and lukewarmly.[\[33\]](#)

Nicole Carroll

While seemingly conservative in his view of the working class, Wilberforce was very devoted to many other humanitarian causes. He worked diligently to reform the manners of British society, feeling that the people had lost their deep religious convictions and, as a result, were easily corrupted.<sup>[34]</sup> He also spent much time working with British sailors and merchant marines and advocated for the further education, not only of sailors, but also of their sons. Wilberforce described his hope for an educational institution to be established for the children of sailors in a letter to a naval captain. He noted that, with the establishment of schools for the children of foot soldiers, it would be "impossible for government to refuse to befriend a similar plan for our naval defenders also."<sup>[35]</sup> Furthermore, he often donated books to naval ships and in return asked the captain to try to minimize the swearing among the men on board. In 1803, Wilberforce wrote a letter to a naval captain expressing his belief that an improvement of the navy would increase the contentment of the sailors, which, in turn, would continue to improve the progress of the navy, stating that "...an improvement of our naval system as shall gain the affections of our seamen, and, perhaps, permanently improve their character and increase their happiness by rendering them more domestic, you will render a service far greater, and in its consequences more durable."<sup>[36]</sup>

In addition to aiding the navy, Wilberforce worked to improve the conditions of British merchant marines. At the time, merchant sailors contributed greatly to the country's economy, yet they did not receive benefits such as proper health care. Wilberforce expressed that many of the destitute merchant marines had once been sailors in the Royal Navy, some of whom had served in the campaign to defeat Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>[37]</sup> Using public sympathy for the men who had fought against Napoleon, Wilberforce and other reformers, including Zachary Macaulay, organized the Committee of the Relief of the Distressed Seamen in 1818. This committee offered only temporary relief, but it was later reorganized into a more permanent organization, the Seamen's Hospital Society in 1821. Wilberforce was also able to use his influence with government officials to help obtain the *Grampus*, which it used as a hospital ship. Ten years later, it was replaced by a larger ship, the *Dreadnought*.<sup>[38]</sup> Eventually, in 1870, the name *Dreadnought* also came to be used for the Seamen's Hospital Society's onshore facilities located in Greenwich.<sup>[39]</sup>

Wilberforce's humanitarian efforts extended beyond aiding people to the treatment of animals. In 1824, he and twenty-two other reformers, led by MP Richard Martin, helped organize the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the world's first animal welfare organization. Their aid extended to all species, but focused particularly on the treatment of cattle. The organization had a volunteer inspection committee that inspected the various markets, slaughterhouses, and the conduct of city coachmen towards their horses. One of Wilberforce's great grandsons recounted a story of Wilberforce coming across a carthorse being whipped by a carter. Wilberforce pleaded with the carter to cease beating the animal.<sup>[40]</sup> Upon recognizing Wilberforce, the carter exclaimed, "Are you Mr. Wilberforce? Then I shall never beat my horse again!"<sup>[41]</sup>

.....

The cruelty towards animals against which Wilberforce fought was similar to the condition and treatment of slaves that he struggled to improve. Both animals and slaves were bought and sold as property, considered dispensable, non-human, and easily replaceable, and were thus mistreated by their owners. Even the transportation of slaves was inhuman and often under scrutiny by Parliament. Wilberforce wrote that

When Parliament entered into the investigation of the situation and treatment of the Slaves, during the middle passage; notwithstanding the decisive proofs, adduced, and fatally confirmed by the dreadful mortality, of the miseries which the Slaves endured on shipboard, the Slave Traders themselves gave a directly opposite account; maintained that the Slaves were even luxuriously accommodated, and, above all, that they had abundant room, even when there was not near space sufficient for them to lie on their backs.<sup>[42]</sup>

Not only were Negro slaves treated like livestock during transportation, they were also treated inhumanely during auctions. Wilberforce described an account of Negro sales told to him by a Mr. Edwards. He recalled, "there is something extremely shocking to a humane and cultivated mind, in the idea of beholding a numerous body of our unfortunate fellow creatures in captivity and exile, exposed naked to public view, and sold like a herd of cattle."<sup>[43]</sup> While the treatment of Negro slaves can often be compared to the treatment of animals, the conditions facing the British working classes, at least in Wilberforce's opinion, were far from comparable.

Throughout Wilberforce's aid to various causes, Cobbett continued to support British workers through his newspaper and by delivering speeches. His *The Poor Man's Friend or Essays on the Rights and Duties of the Poor* was published in a series of five letters between August 1826 and October 1827. He advertised the series in the *Political Register*, where he described his intent for the pamphlet to be "the *Companion of the Working Classes*, giving them useful information and advice, adapted to their present difficult situation; and especially I intend it as a means of teaching them how to AVOID SUFFERING FROM HUNGER!"<sup>[44]</sup> Each letter cost two pence, but Cobbett promised that a copy would be delivered to the dwelling of every working family in Preston "as a gift from me, and as a mark of my gratitude for their great kindness towards me."<sup>[45]</sup> In 1826, Cobbett ran for the Parliamentary seat for Preston and distributed copies of *The Poor Man's Friend* to every family as a part of his campaign. He used these pamphlets to encourage members of the Preston working class to vote in the election. Despite Cobbett's efforts during the campaign, he was unsuccessful. He would not be elected into parliament until 1832, when he was elected as Member of Parliament for Oldham, Lincolnshire at the age of sixty-nine. Each letter in *The Poor Man's Friend* focused on a different topic regarding the "present state of things,"<sup>[46]</sup> as

Nicole Carroll

Cobbett often described the situation facing the working classes. These letters not only served as an aid to the working class, they also highlighted the various difficulties they faced, and were probably written with the intention of raising awareness among influential citizens and politicians who might have previously been unaware of the working classes' plight.

In his first letter, published on August 1, 1826, Cobbett introduced the pamphlets and established their goal of providing aid to the poor. His first major point in the letter was that the working men and women needed to know their rights to food and raiment, which were guaranteed by the laws.<sup>[47]</sup> Cobbett spent the rest of his first letter describing his attempt at gaining a parliamentary seat in Preston. He wanted the working people of Britain to know how corrupt elections can be and to not promise their votes to any one candidate. He wrote, "You cannot know what will happen before the election takes place; and therefore it will be best to promise nobody, and then nobody can complain of breach of promise..."<sup>[48]</sup> At the end of the first letter Cobbett called for a reform of Parliament because he believed that nothing would improve for the working class without parliamentary reform. Cobbett believed that, in the absence of reform, the sufferings of the laborers would continue to increase daily and even hourly. In the meantime the people must not starve.<sup>[49]</sup> "It is *not theft* to TAKE food," he proclaimed, "if it be necessary to preserve life, whether of a man's self, his wife, or his children."<sup>[50]</sup> He defended this position by claiming that, while the positive law established private property, in natural law "men possess things in common."<sup>[51]</sup>

Less than a month later, on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, Cobbett published his second letter. He began this letter by expressing his disgust at the common use of the word "poor." He defined the poor as "the persons who, from age, infirmity, helplessness, or from want of the means of gaining any thing by labour, become destitute of a sufficiency of food, or raiment, and are in danger of perishing if they be not relieved."<sup>[52]</sup> Cobbett was disgusted that this word was used so casually, in newspapers and elsewhere. He wrote, "It is related of them, that they eat horse-flesh, grains, and have been detected eating out of pig-troughs. In short, they are represented as being far worse fed and worse lodged, than the greater part of the pigs."<sup>[53]</sup> While this description of the poor may have had some truth, people did not choose to live in such conditions. They were left with no other choice and were forced to find a way for themselves and their families to survive. Instead of just writing negatively about the poor, Cobbett wanted the people of Britain to take action to help improve their conditions. Cobbett explained that many British men, women and children had already died and thousands more were on the brink of starvation. In order to see a change in the conditions the working class, landowners and magistrates needed to better understand the problems involved.

Cobbett's third letter, published on September 22, 1826, focused on the Vagrant Act and crimes committed out of necessity. The Vagrant Act, according to Cobbett, punished men for begging and trying to provide for their families.

---

They [the laws] are founded upon this; the first, that begging is disgraceful to the country; that it is degrading to the character of man, and, of course, to the character of an Englishman; and, that there is no necessity for begging, because the laws has made ample provision for every person in distress.[\[54\]](#)

Cobbett would probably agree that instead of creating more laws to protect property, the government should create more laws to aid the working class. Cobbett went on to point out that laws such as those requiring every man to carry arms and defend the country were unfair. Cobbett asked why a man with no land or property beyond his body and clothes should risk his life in defense of the nation. He ended this letter in the same way he had ended the last one, by calling for a reform of Parliament.

On October 13, 1826 Cobbett published his most outspoken letter. He began by stating that the people of Britain used to be well fed and clothed and that it was the government's responsibility to return the nation to that state. While he never openly claimed that the British working class was worse off than slaves, he begins, nevertheless, by comparing the working class to slaves. "Poverty, however, is, after all, the great badge, the never-failing badge of slavery. Bare bones and rags are the true marks of a real slave."[\[55\]](#) The statement expresses Cobbett's belief that African slaves were not the only slaves that needed to be liberated. He suggested that the British working classes were as enslaved as well. He argued that wages were insufficient to sustain many working class families by comparing them systematically with the prices of shoes, clothing, and other provisions. A woman hay-making or weeding corn for the day earned a single penny while a fat goose cost two pennies to purchase.[\[56\]](#) As provisions cost so much more than workers earned, Britain saw an increase in crime. Cobbett explained these crimes, stating that "the working convicted felon is allowed meat and broth every day in the year, while the working honest man is allowed nothing but dry bread, and of that not half a belly full!"[\[57\]](#)

In Cobbett's final letter, published on October 18, 1827, he announced that in the spring of 1828 he would once again run for a seat in Parliament. He used this letter to describe all that he had done for the working class and why he should be elected. He stated that this would be the last letter in the series and reminded the readers that he provided the pamphlets for free in Preston: "Of the other numbers I have sent you, and paid for carrying to your houses, upwards of three thousand copies, making in all twelve thousand little books."[\[58\]](#) Cobbett stated that in the previous issues he had focused on the people's rights and now wished to conclude the series by discussing their duties, chiefly their duty to vote.

Cobbett's letters were aimed in particular at the working classes. He addressed each letter to "My Excellent Friends" and concluded each with, "I am, Your faithful friend and most obedient servant."[\[59\]](#) This informal opening and closing to each letter was very different from the typical formalities found in other writings of the time. This was Cobbett's attempt to establish himself as not only a friend of the

Nicole Carroll

working class, but one of their peers. *The Poor Man's Friend* shows that he was deeply invested in his cause and this may have caused him to be less understanding toward people like Wilberforce who did not feel the same with regard to the working classes. Accordingly, Cobbett's letters can be seen as his attempt to refute Wilberforce's view that the British working classes were doing just fine and instead showed that they were essentially slaves themselves.

Cobbett continued his discussion of the plight of the British working classes in his pamphlet *Advice to Young Men And (Incidentally) to Young Women in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life* in 1829. This pamphlet was published as a series of six letters: Advice addressed to a Youth, Advice addressed to a Bachelor, Advice addressed to a Lover, To a Husband, To a Father and To a citizen or Subject. Throughout the pamphlet Cobbett openly criticized Reverend Thomas Malthus' *Principle of Population*. He used his own experiences to give advice on the various subjects addressed and used the pamphlet to paint a glowing portrait of himself and his family.

Cobbett felt that it was his duty as an experienced adult to give advice to those younger than himself. He described this duty as similar to that of a sailor who alerts others of dangerous rocks or breakers with buoys or lights. To him, it was also a sort of neighborly duty: "What man of common humanity, having, by good luck, missed being engulfed in a quagmire or quicksand, will withhold from his neighbors a knowledge of the peril without which the dangerous spots are not to be approached."<sup>[60]</sup> After explaining this obligation in giving advice to the working classes, he described his own sojourn among them to show that he understood their struggles.

Thrown (by my own will, indeed) on the wide world at a very early age, not more than eleven or twelve years, without money to support, without friends to advise, and without book-learning to assist me; passing a few years dependent solely on my own labour for my subsistence; then becoming a common soldier and leading a military life, chiefly in foreign parts, for eight years; quitting that life after really, for me, high promotion, and with for me, a large some of money; marrying at an early age, going at one to France to acquire the French language, thence to America; passing eight years there, becoming a bookseller and author, and taking a prominent part in all the important discussions of the interesting period from 1793-1799, during which there was, in that country, a continued struggle carried on between the English and the French parties...<sup>[61]</sup>

With this statement, Cobbett established himself as a member of the working class.

Although Cobbett and Wilberforce's upbringing and political causes were vastly different, they did share some similar beliefs about the proper way to conduct one's life. While explaining how to be a successful

laborer, Cobbett stated the image that laborer must portray. His peers would have to comment, "What wise conduct must there have been in the employing of the time of this man! How sober, how sparing in diet, how early a riser, how little expensive he must have been!"<sup>[62]</sup> Ironically, this minimalist lifestyle described by Cobbett is very similar to the lifestyle led by Wilberforce after his "Great Awakening," when he gave up drinking and gambling and instead began to rise early, pray and lead a generally healthy life.

While *Advice to Young Men* did not directly address the subjects of slavery or the British working class, Cobbett's feelings regarding these subjects were subtly touched upon throughout the text. In his first letter, To a Youth, Cobbett stated that true happiness could only be earned through one's own work and that the youth should not depend on others to do their labor. Not only would doing one's own labor add to one's sense of happiness, but it also would prevent the danger that may come from "outsourcing". "He who lives upon anything except his own labour," Cobbett wrote, "is incessantly surrounded by rivals: his grand resource is that servility in which he is always liable to be surpassed. He is in daily danger of being out-bidden; his very bread depends upon caprice; and he lives in a state of uncertainty and never-ceasing fear."<sup>[63]</sup> With this statement, Cobbett not only made the point that self-labor leads to increased happiness by eliminating the stress of uncertainty, but also indirectly spoke out against slavery. He explained to the youth that the best way to live is to just depend on ones own labor for sustenance and, thus, to be independent. He used the French expression *Vivre de peu* (To live upon little), to describe this desired lifestyle and stated that it was "the great security against slavery."<sup>[64]</sup>

In his third letter, Addressed to a Lover, Cobbett expressed his dislike for Reverend Malthus' attitude towards the lower classes. Cobbett's dispute with Malthus stemmed from Malthus' support of programs to "prevent *premature* and *improvident* marriages' amongst the labouring classes..."<sup>[65]</sup> He described the conversation he had with a young couple that already had borne six children.

'How many children do you reckon to have at last?' 'I do not care how many,' said the man: 'God never sends mouths without sending meat.' 'Did you ever hear of one Parson Malthus?' 'No sir.' 'Why, if he were to hear of your works, he would be outrageous; for he wants an act of parliament to prevent poor people from marrying young, and from having such lots of children.'<sup>[66]</sup>

Both the young man and woman thought Cobbett was joking. The concept of parliament preventing the lower classes from marriage and having children was inconceivable to them. Cobbett then asked the husband whether the couple had ever received any relief from the parish. Upon hearing that they had not received aid from the parish, he gave them some money. This exchange illustrated Cobbett's close personal relationship with the working classes.



Nicole Carroll

Letter VI was addressed to a Citizen or Subject and focused on the cause of improving the rights of British working classes. While in *The Poor Man's Friend*, Cobbett stated that citizen's had the right to know and understand their rights, in Letter VI he claimed that they had the right to "[take] part in the making of the laws by which they are governed."<sup>[67]</sup> He believed that all citizens were equal by nature and should take part in law-making . He tied this idea to serving in the armed forces.

The poor man has a body and a soul as well as the rich man; like the latter, he has parents, wife and children; a bullet or a sword is as deadly to him as to the rich man; there are hearts to ache and tears to flow for him as well as for the squire or the lord or the loan-monger: yet, notwithstanding this equality, he is to risk all, if he escape, he is to be denied an equality of rights! If, in such a state of things, the artisan or labourer, when called out to fight in defense of his country, were to answer: 'Why should I risk my life?'<sup>[68]</sup>

Why should a man who is denied basic rights serve and possibly lose his life for a country that had denied him his rights? Cobbett continued his dispute with Malthus when he defined "a *very poor* man; as a man who is, from some cause or other, unable to supply himself with food and raiment without aid from the parish-rates."<sup>[69]</sup> Cobbett took issue with the fact that Malthus, a man of the church, recommended to parliament a law that eliminated parish relief to the poor.<sup>[70]</sup> Malthus argued that the people should be left to the law of Nature, but if this were the case, then men were equal according to the law of Nature and should therefore receive equal treatment before the law.

Cobbett concluded this letter by asking "what is a slave?" He answered this by calling a slave "a man who has no property; and property means something he has, and that nobody can take it from him without his leave, or consent."<sup>[71]</sup> To this, Cobbett added the requirement that that a free man must also have property in his labor.<sup>[72]</sup> African slaves received no property as a result of their labor, but neither did British workers who were often directly or indirectly forced to give up the "fruits of their labor" to others.<sup>[73]</sup> Thus, as in many of Cobbett's pamphlets and other writings his description of a slave was not limited to that of a Negro slave, but included those British workers who could not supply food, clothing, and homes for themselves and their families. Cobbett went further in this letter and stated that it was often better to be a private slave, such as African slave, than to be a member of the British working classes. This was because the owners of negro slaves had "a clear and powerful *interest* in the preservation of his life, health and strength."<sup>[74]</sup> British working class "slaves," were not looked after in matters of life and health and were simply replaced when they became less productive. Cobbett described this belief as being commonly accepted: "Every one knows, that public property is never so well taken care of as private property..."<sup>[75]</sup> Cobbett also argued that British working class slaves are transferred in a way that was similar to that of African slaves, sold from one master to another. The labor

of the British working classes was given a value and was bought and sold by industrialists. Additionally, he believed that African slaves and the British working classes were similar in the way that they were punished and restrained. Both could be beaten, imprisoned and separated from their families, and that it was these punishments and restraints that prevented British workers from being *freemen*.

And as to *punishments* and *restraints*, what difference is there, whether these be inflicted and imposed by a private owner, or his overseer, or by the agents and overseers of a body of proprietors? In short, if you can cause a man to be imprisoned or whipped if he do not work enough to please you; if you can sell him by auction for a time limited; if you can forcibly separate him from his wife to prevent their having children; if you can shut him up in his dwelling place when you please, and for as long a time as you please; if you can force him to draw a cart or wagon like a beast of draught; if you can, when the humor seizes you, and at the suggestion of your mere fears, or whim, cause him to be shut up in a dungeon during your pleasure: if you can, at your pleasure, do these things to him, is it not to be impudently hypocritical to affect to call him a *free man*?[76]

This description of both slaves and British laborers was extremely powerful in that it described their treatment in a manner so harsh and inhumane, it sounds as if Cobbett could be describing the treatment of cattle. He appeared to be indirectly confronting Wilberforce, who at the time was campaigning for better treatment of Negro slaves and animals. While he never specifically attacked Wilberforce or the abolitionist movement in these letters, he clearly used the idea of slavery in a different way than Wilberforce.

Though Wilberforce and Cobbett had many differences their greatest divide was in their definitions of slavery. Cobbett's broad definition of slavery encompassed the British working classes as well as those forced into servitude and held against their will, such as African slaves. Wilberforce, on the other hand, had a much more limited and traditional definition, but one that must be teased out of his many speeches and writings on the subject. In his pamphlet, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Wilberforce described African slaves as having many unique characteristics that categorized them as slaves, including moral and racial differences from their "socially superior" owners.

For the various moral defects of the negro system appear to me often to be almost entirely caused, and always to be extremely augmented, by the Negroes, as a race, being sunk into the lowest state of degradation. That this was to be naturally expected, will be obvious to every reflecting mind, which considers, that, for many successive generation, the Negroes have not only been an inferior cast, a race of slaves, the slave too of men enjoying, themselves, political freedom, and therefore elevated above them

Nicole Carroll

to a still higher point; but that there is a variety of circumstances, not forgetting that most important particular or colour, all tending powerfully to designate, and stamp them, as a peculiar, and that a base and degraded order of beings.<sup>[77]</sup>

According to Wilberforce it was Negro slaves' racial difference that largely contributed to them being considered a lower and degraded order of beings. This is also seen as the main cause for their various moral defects.

On the May 13, 1789, Wilberforce delivered a speech before the House of Commons in which he brought up the question of abolishing the slave trade, an issue he spoke on many times over the course of his political career. Though he did not give a specific definition of slavery, he did describe the particular institution that he was campaigning against. First, slaves were usually African. Wilberforce's slaves were of foreign descent and often violently removed from their native countries. "Tegria, which mean, we are told, plundering or stealing, and which appears to be no other than the practice of predatory expeditions, is that to which the slave market is indebted for its chief supplies."<sup>[78]</sup> In addition, some slaves were bound because they were unable to pay their debts, while others were condemned to this fate by corrupt judges.

The most trifling offenses are punished by the fine of one or more slaves, which if the culprit be unable to pay, he himself is to be sold into slavery, often for the benefit of the very judges by whom he is condemned. When the necessity for obtaining more slaves becomes pressing, new crimes are fabricated, accusations and convictions are multiplied, the unwary are artfully seduced into the commission of crimes.<sup>[79]</sup>

Although African slaves faced degradation throughout their experience, Wilberforce viewed the spectacle of a African auction as particularly inhumane. In his pamphlet, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Wilberforce retold the account of a traveler's experience at one such auction:

The poor Africans, says he, who were to be sold, were exposed naked, in a large empty building like an open barn. Those who came with intention to purchase, minutely inspected them; handled them, made them jump, and stamp with their feet, and throw out their arms and their legs; turned them about; looked into their mouths; and, according to the usual rules of traffic with respect to cattle, examined them, and made them show themselves in a variety of ways to try if they were sound and healthy.<sup>[80]</sup>

Similar to Cobbett's description of how British workers were treated, Wilberforce's description of the sale of Africans brings to mind the sale of cattle. Wilberforce's account of this horrific event continued with its

detailing of families being torn apart. Often, families were forced into slavery as a unit and transported together. But upon arriving at their destined country, they were sold to separate masters.

In one part of the building was seen a wife clinging to her husband. Here was a sister hanging upon the neck of her brother. There stood two brothers enfolded in each others arms, mutually bewailing their threatened separation. In other parts were friends, relatives, and companions praying to be sold to the same master, using signs to signify that they would be content with slavery, might they but toil together.<sup>[81]</sup>

Despite their desperate pleas to stay together, family and friends were often separated from one another.

In addition to being captured and forced into slavery, Africans were, in some cases, forced to sell themselves or their children into slavery to support the rest of their family. Wilberforce argued, "To this long catalogue are to be added two others sources [of slavery ], famine, and insolvency. In times of extreme scarcity, persons sometimes sell themselves for subsistence; and still more frequently, it is said, children are sold by their parents to procure more provisions for the rest of the family."<sup>[82]</sup> No such legal option was even open to the British working classes, nor did British law allow judges to impose a hereditary penal servitude as the punishment for a crime. Wilberforce described obtaining provisions as a constant struggle for Negro slaves. Even after a slave was purchased and under the control of a master, they often faced insufficient resources. Provisions allotted for slaves, particularly in the West Indies, was extremely low. He compared the food distributed to West Indian and American slaves and described the quantity of food allotted to the American slaves as, "vastly greater than the largest West Indian allowance."<sup>[83]</sup> Because slaves had such low rations, many resorted to thievery to support themselves and their families. Wilberforce described an instance in which a African slave turned to stealing and, upon being caught, was "severely whipped and chained, and confined; but as neither chains nor stripes, nor confinement, can extinguish hunger, he returns..."<sup>[84]</sup> Left with no other choice slaves were forced to continue stealing, regardless of their punishment, to ensure the survival of themselves and their families.

In addition, according to Wilberforce, slaves were habitually viewed as fundamentally different, uncivilized, and even inhuman. This was often illustrated in their treatment by their captors, transporters, and finally their masters.

I do not accuse even the manager of any native cruelty, he is a person made like ourselves (for nature is much the same in all persons) but it a *habit* that generates cruelty: - This man looking down upon his Slaves as a set of Beings of another nature from himself, can have no sympathy for them, and it is sympathy, and nothing else than sympathy, which according to the best writers and judges of the subject, is the true spring of humanity.<sup>[85]</sup>

.....

Those who owned slaves did not view them as people, but rather as property, similar to livestock. While the British working classes were looked down upon by their social superiors, they were still thought of as humans and had certain defined rights in law. Wilberforce believed that African slaves were viewed differently because of their physical characteristics. Thus, he compared the treatment of Negro slaves to that of Ancient slaves. He found that Ancient slaves were often people who fell upon hard times and, as a result, were typically given more sympathy because they looked and spoke like their masters.

But to the West Indian Slave, on the contrary, his colour, his features, his form, his language, his employment, all tend on the one hand to extinguish sympathy, and on the other to shut him up as it were close and bound in his dreary dungeon, without a ray of light, without a chance of escape, the victim at once of degradation and despair. [86]

Due to their color and language African slaves were separated from those around them and their masters. Because of this they were viewed as habitually different and inferior to their white counterparts.

Most important to Wilberforce was the moral status of African slaves. He felt that they often lived under immoral circumstances and this may have contributed to their being viewed as inhuman. The two areas Wilberforce was most concerned with were the practice of polygamy among Negro slaves and their lack of religious instruction. West Indian gentlemen with the intention of increasing childbirth and, thus, the number of slaves, encouraged polygamy. To this practice Wilberforce responded, "And yet, strange as it may seem, no attempts whatever appear to be made excepting by three or four enlightened and liberal proprietors, to reform these abuses." [87] Wilberforce also expressed his concern that "no efforts had been made for the religious instruction and moral improvement of the Negroes..." [88] He believed that both the African and the master would benefit from the former's conversion because "a slave, by becoming one of their converts, was worth half as much more than his former value, on account of his superior morality, sobriety, industry, subordination, and general good conduct." [89] In receiving moral instruction, Wilberforce believed that Africans would be generally happier and therefore increasing their cooperation and production. While he was opposed to slavery, Wilberforce felt that everyone needed religious instruction, even if it meant encouraging masters to convert their slaves by saying it would improve their morale and lead to better work ethics.

In his speech to Parliament on May 13<sup>th</sup>, Wilberforce addressed the conditions of the British working classes in comparison to the conditions of African slaves. He said,

In this country the work is fairly paid for, and distributed among our labourers, according to the reasonableness of things; if a trader or manufacturer finds his profits

decrease, he retrenches his own expenses, he lessens the number of hands, and every branch of trade finds its proper level. In the West Indies the whole number of slaves remains with the same master, - is the master pinched in his profits?[\[90\]](#)

With this statement Wilberforce implied that even if British laborers did not have jobs and could not pay for food and accommodation, they were still subject to the free market and should therefore be considered free. Cobbett would argue the opposite that because they were unable to afford basic necessities, they were in a similar situation to African slaves. Their varying ideas of slavery would divide these two reformers throughout their political careers. Neither could accept the other's definition, and instead believed that they were overlooking an important cause. Cobbett's public attack on Wilberforce was, for the most part, one-sided, as there was no public response from the latter. Whether Wilberforce responded in private is unknown. Wilberforce seems to have avoided any public or private confrontation with Cobbett, and instead chose to focus on his attention on his own causes. Wilberforce's deep religious convictions may have also influenced his decision not to combat Cobbett's attacks. In the same way that their lifestyles influenced their choice of humanitarian causes, they may have also influenced their different styles of interacting. Cobbett was much more forward and boisterous with his attacks on Wilberforce, whereas the latter only mentioned later in life that maybe he should have responded to Cobbett and defended himself.

While the conflict between Wilberforce and Cobbett was sharp and can, to some extent, be traced to their different life histories, it can be better attributed to their divide on what constituted "a slave." Wilberforce defined the term as those forced into labor by or for a master and, thus, continually faced degradation and received little or no moral instruction. They were typically of African descent and faced the horrors of the Middle Passage, forceful separation from their friends and family, and sale under inhumane conditions. In contrast, Cobbett held a broader definition of slavery, one that included any man who was denied basic rights and was forced to work under harsh conditions without just payment. Though both men were reformers who worked diligently for their causes, their differences were too significant for them to be considered colleagues. His divide furthermore prevented them from leading a united movement to abolish slavery or to improve the conditions of the British working classes. This dispute between Wilberforce and Cobbett can truly be seen as a microcosm of the more general reform movement as it developed in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. During the 1800s, Britain underwent vast transformations, beginning with the Industrial Revolution. With this change came the increasing demand for reform. However, this demand was not unified as the country was continuously divided upon a variety of issues such as parliamentary reform, industrial reform, housing reform and, of course, upon the issue of slavery.

- 
- [1] Thomas Clarkson, born in March of 1760, was one of the key figures in the abolitionist movement. He helped found the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and recruited many, including Wilberforce, to support this cause.
- [2] Kevin Belmonte, *William Wilberforce A Hero For Humanity* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids 2007), 1.
- [3] Isaac Milner, born in 1750, was a mathematician, inventor and the president of Queens' College, Cambridge. He was a devout Anglican, but embraced many evangelical doctrines and thus aided in Wilberforce's religious conversion. Although he taught Wilberforce as a child, the two would meet again during a trip to France, where they discussed religion and brought about Wilberforce's "spiritual awakening," as he often referred to his conversion.
- [4] William Cobbett, "William Cobbett," vol. 41, in *The Living Age*, Eliakin Littell and Robert S. Littell, 61-78 (Boston: Littell, Son and Co., 1854), 61.
- [5] *Ibid.*, 63.
- [6] *Ibid.*, 63.
- [7] Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1992), 22-23.
- [8] Cobbett, "William Cobbett," in *The Living Age*, 65.
- [9] Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, 34-35.
- [10] Cobbett, *The Observations on the Emigration of Joseph Priestly*, 4th ed (T. Bradford, 1795).
- [11] *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 1 May 1819, 14.
- [12] Robin Fureaux, *William Wilberforce* (Regent College Publishing: Vancouver, 2005), 193.
- [13] Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (1830), 1.
- [14] *Ibid.*, 283.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 283-284.
- [16] *Ibid.*, 284.
- [17] *Ibid.*, 284.
- [18] *Ibid.*, 284.
- [19] *Ibid.*, 287.
- [20] *Ibid.*, 287.

- 
- [21] *Ibid.*, 300.
- [22] *Ibid.*, 300.
- [23] *Ibid.*, 400.
- [24] *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 30 August 1823, 1-2.
- [25] *Ibid.*, 2.
- [26] *Ibid.*, 2-3.
- [27] William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1823), 55.
- [28] *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 30 August 1823, 3.
- [29] Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion*, 66.
- [30] *Ibid.*, 75.
- [31] *Ibid.*, 45.
- [32] *Ibid.*, 46.
- [33] Robert I. Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce* (Philadelphia: Perkins, 1839), 225.
- [34] See Wilberforce's *A Practical View of Christianity* for a detailed account of his opinions on the corruption of Christianity and how the British could once again become good Christians.
- [35] William Wilberforce to Naval Captain, Broomfield, 30 July 1804, in *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, Robert and Samuel Wilberforce, eds. (Henry Perkins, 1846), 238.
- [36] William Wilberforce to Naval Captain, Sandleford, 31 August 1803, in *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*. 213.
- [37] G C Cook, "Committee for the Relief of Distressed Seamen: correspondence from the Admiralty in 1818-19" *Postgraduate Medical Journal* 83 (2007): 54-58.
- [38] Kevin Belmonte, *William Wilberforce: A Hero For Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 170.
- [39] *Ibid.*, 170.
- [40] *Ibid.*, 272-273.
- [41] *Ibid.*, 272-273.
- [42] William Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade; Addressed to the Freeholders and Other Inhabitants of Yorkshire* (London: Luke Hansard & Sons, 1807), 102.
- [43] *Ibid.*, 133-134.
- [44] *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 19 August 1826, 502.
- [45] Cobbett, *The Poor Man's Friend; or Essays on the Rights and Duties of the Poor*, vol. 1 (London: W. Cobbett, 1826), 3.
- [46] *Ibid.*, 1.



Nicole Carroll

- 
- [47] *Ibid.*, 2.
- [48] *Ibid.*, 21.
- [49] *Ibid.*, 22.
- [50] *Ibid.*, 21.
- [51] *Ibid.*, 22.
- [52] Cobbett, *The Poor Man's Friend; or Essays on the Rights and Duties of the Poor*, vol. 2 (London: W. Cobbett, 1826), 1.
- [53] *Ibid.*, 2.
- [54] Cobbett, *The Poor Man's Friend; or Essays on the Rights and Duties of the Poor* vol. 3 (London: W. Cobbett, 1826), 18.
- [55] Cobbett, *The Poor Man's Friend; or Essays on the Rights and Duties of the Poor* vol. 4 (London: W. Cobbett, 1826), 3.
- [56] *Ibid.*, 7.
- [57] *Ibid.*, 16.
- [58] Cobbett, *The Poor Man's Friend; or Essays on the Rights and Duties of the Poor* vol. 5 (London: W. Cobbett, 1826), 2.
- [59] Cobbett, *The Poor Man's Friend; or Essays on the Rights and Duties of the Poor* vol. 1-5 (London: W. Cobbett, 1829).
- [60] Cobbett, *Advice to Young Men*. August 25, 1830, 4.
- [61] *Ibid.*, 4.
- [62] *Ibid.*, 6.
- [63] *Ibid.*, 8.
- [64] *Ibid.*, 9.
- [65] *Ibid.*, 45.
- [66] *Ibid.*, 53.
- [67] *Ibid.*, 146.
- [68] *Ibid.*, 147.
- [69] *Ibid.*
- [70] *Ibid.*, 148.
- [71] *Ibid.*, 149.
- [72] *Ibid.*
- [73] *Ibid.*
- [74] *Ibid.*, 150.
- [75] *Ibid.*

---

[76] *Ibid.*

[77] William Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade; Addressed to the Freeholders and Other Inhabitants of Yorkshire* (London: Luke Hansard & Sons, 1807), 128.

[78] *Ibid.*, 20.

[79] *Ibid.*, 27.

[80] *Ibid.*, 134.

[81] *Ibid.*, 135.

[82] *Ibid.*, 29.

[83] *Ibid.*, 121-122.

[84] *Ibid.*, 122.

[85] *Parliamentary Speech*, Commons, (1789), 21-22.

[86] Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 131.

[87] *Ibid.*, 124.

[88] *Ibid.*

[89] *Ibid.*, 125.

[90] *Parliamentary Speech*, Commons, (1789), 23.

Nicole Carroll

---