

**PREFACE TO THE TRANSLATION OF A WORK BY  
MR. WILBERFORCE ON THE SLAVE TRADE**

**(1814)**

**GERMAINE DE STAEL**

Mr. Wilberforce is the author of the following essay on the slave trade.

This distinguished orator in the House of Commons, remarkably well-versed in everything pertaining to literature and that lofty philosophy based on religion, has devoted thirty years of his life to making Europe ashamed of a great moral outrage and to liberating Africa from a horrible misfortune. When he had amassed all the evidence of the cruelties which worsened the horror of an act of tyranny; when he thought he had the means to convince both great and small, in 1787 he made a motion in Parliament that the slave trade be abolished.

Mr. Pitt, Mr. Fox, Mr. Burke supported him. No truly superior man in England, no matter what his political opinions, would want to lend his support to opinions that would stain his reputation as a thinker and friend of humanity. Mr. Pitt may be suspected of having for some time allowed his followers to support the slave trade, but he held his glory too dear not to separate from his party in this instance. Still, the protests of all those who divide the human species into two groups, one of which, in their opinion, must be sacrificed to the other--these protests prevented Mr. Wilberforce's motion from being carried. The colonists claimed that the abolition of the slave trade would bankrupt them; the English trading cities declared that their prosperity depended on that of the colonists; last, there arose on every side that resistance which is always heard when decent people decide to defend the oppressed against the oppressors.

The excesses of the French revolution, which caused a certain order of ideas to be viewed with great disfavor, harmed the cause of the poor Negroes. Those who objected to the provocation of war among the peoples of Africa so that their prisoners might be enslaved were called anarchists; those whose actions had no other motives than religion and humanity were called Jacobins. But in a country like England enlightenment is so widespread, and the circulation of ideas so free, that one can calculate with certainty the very short time required for a truth to become established in public opinion.

Every year Mr. Wilberforce renewed the same motion, which had been defeated the first time, and through this perseverance Reason won new ground each time. The most religious men in England seconded Mr. Wilberforce's efforts; Mr. Clarkson, Mr. Macaulay, and several others must be mentioned in this honorable struggle. A subscription was taken up to establish, in Sierra Leone, all the means proper to civilize the Negroes, and this honorable enterprise cost the individuals who supported it over 200,000 pounds sterling. One can scarcely see how that mercantile spirit for which we reproach the English can explain such sacrifices. The motives which impelled the abolition of the slave trade are every bit as disinterested.

It was in 1807 that this great humanitarian act was realized. Its advantages and its disadvantages had been debated for twenty years. Mr. Fox and his friends were ministers then, but the cabinet changed during the period between the act and its passage into law. Nevertheless, the successors adopted the same principles in this regard, for among the new ministers, Mr. Perceval, Mr. Canning, and Lord Harrowby--all three of them friends of Mr. Pitt's--proved to be ardent champions of this admirable cause. As he died, Mr. Fox had committed it to his nephew, Lord Holland, and this noble heir, along with his friends, was allowed to carry the king's sanction to the House of Lords, even though he was no longer minister. "A ray of sunlight," said Clarkson, "broke through the clouds the moment the decree ending the slave trade was proclaimed." Indeed, this act deserved Heaven's favor, and at what moment did it take place? At a time when all the colonies were in the hands of the English, and when their self-interest, crudely considered, should have led them to maintain the degrading commerce which they were renouncing.

Today it is widely maintained that the English fear the reestablishment of the colony of Santo Domingo, to the advantage of the French; but in 1807 what chance was there for France to regain mastery of that colony, if indeed that chance exists even today? The party which impelled the abolition of the slave trade in England is that of those zealous Christians commonly called Methodists. In the interests of humanity they display energy, industry, and party spirit; and as they are numerous, they affect public opinion, and public opinion affects the government. Politicians and speculators likely to envy the prosperity of France were by no means neutral parties in the abolition of the trade--they mounted arguments against it similar to those that we see invoked in France today among the colonists and the merchants; they predict the same dire consequences. Yet, in the seven years since England has prohibited the slave trade, the experience has amply proven that all the fears that were manifested in this regard were illusory, that the maritime cities are presently in agreement with the rest of the nation on this subject. We have seen in this instance the same moral phenomenon one always observes under circumstances of a like nature. When it is proposed that some abuse of power be eliminated, those who benefit from that abuse are certain to declare that all the benefits of the social order are attached to it. "This is the keystone," they say, while it is only the keystone to their own advantages; and when at last the progress of enlightenment brings about the long-desired reform, they are astonished at the improvements which result from it. Good sends out its roots everywhere; equilibrium is effortlessly restored; and truth heals the ills of the human species, as does nature, without anyone's intervention.

Some Frenchmen were annoyed that the English ministers had made the abolition of the slave trade one of the conditions of peace, but in this regard the English ministers were nothing more than the interpreters of their nation's will. But the time when nations required humanitarian acts of each other would be a grand age indeed in history. These generous negotiations will meet no obstacle in the heart of a monarch as enlightened by religion as is the king of France, but the prejudices of nations can sometimes act against the very enlightenment of their kings.

Thus, it is the great good fortune of France, of England, and of distant Africa that glory like that of the Duke of Wellington should strengthen the cause he defends. The Marquis of Wellesley, his elder brother, had already suppressed the trade in black slaves in India, where he was governor, even before the decree which abolished it was proclaimed by the Parliament of England. The opinions of this illustrious family are well known. Let us hope, then, that Lord Wellington will triumph through reason in the Negroes' cause, just as he powerfully served the cause of the Spanish with his sword; for it is to this valiant hero that these famous words of Bossuet's should be applied: "His was a name which never appeared except in actions whose justice was unquestionable."