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Movie Review

Amazing Grace. Dir. by Michael Apted. Bristol Bay Productions, Samuel Goldwyn Films, 2007. 111 mins.

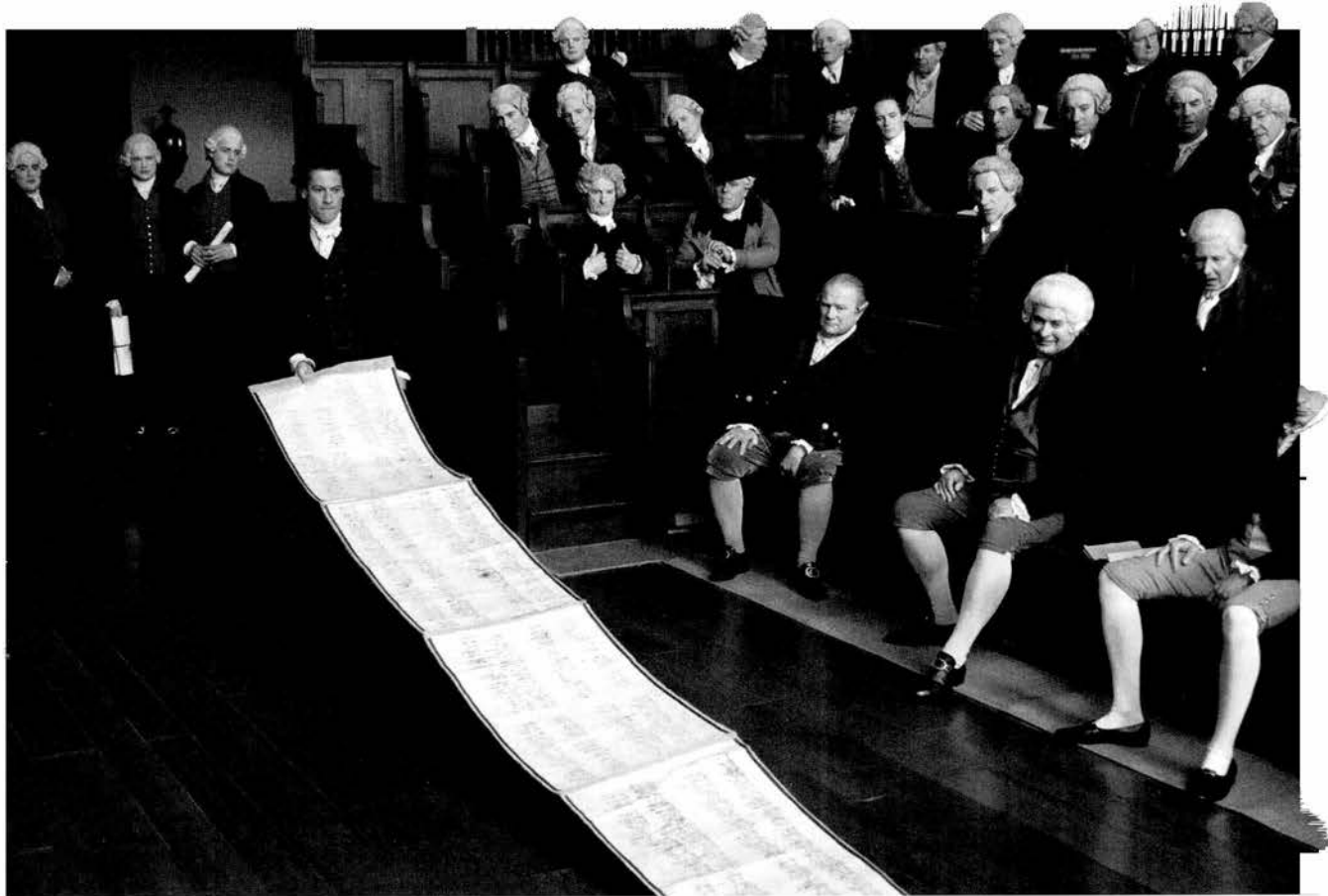
Christopher Densmore

*A*mazing Grace was released in the United States and Great Britain in 2007 on the occasion of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the British international slave trade by Parliament. The story focuses on William Wilberforce, who led the anti-slave trade campaign in the British Parliament from 1787 to 1807. The film's publicity material describes it as an "inspiring true story of how one man can change the world," and argues that "a nation was blind to injustice until one man made them see." With a noted director, Michael Apted, and a cast of seasoned actors, including Ioan Gruffudd in the title role, the film has been successful in its efforts to reach a mass audience. In an era when most historical films seem to feature wars and political intrigue, it is refreshing to see a film making drama from the politics of antislavery.

The two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the international slave trade in Britain has been marked by major museum exhibitions, books and symposium, and even as a series of postage stamps. In contrast, the anniversary of the U.S. Congress's 1807 ban of the international slave trade, which went into effect on January 1, 1808, has garnered little popular attention. Indeed, the movie focuses almost entirely on the internal British debate over the slave trade, with no reference to connections with the United States and scant note of events in the West Indies. The

impact of the slave trade on its victims is largely left to the character of Olaudah Equiano, who testifies to his own experiences of enslavement, and to a scene where Wilberforce visits a slave ship in port. A scene showing conditions of enslavement in the West Indies is horrific, but seems more dreamlike than real.

Despite its focus on Wilberforce, the film does show the antislavery movement as the work of many distinct personalities. Apted shows that Wilberforce was influenced by, and acted with, fellow abolitionists Thomas Clarkson, Hannah Moore, James Stephenson, Charles Fox, Olaudah Equiano, and others. Likewise, he shows that Clarkson had a major influence in directing Wilberforce's attention to the issue of the slave trade. But the movie also suggests that Clarkson and Fox disagreed on some social issues. The interaction between Wilberforce and his friend, contemporary, and often ally, William Pitt the Younger, suggests the differences between Wilberforce's morally centered politics and Pitt's sense of what was politically possible. The filmmakers pay less attention to the opponents of abolition, represented by the Duke of Clarence, who later became King George IV, and Lord Tarleton, better known to Americans for his military exploits during the American Revolution. Though the movie places the anti-slave trade campaigners on the moral high ground, it also shows Wilberforce and his



Ioan Gruffudd as William Wilberforce in *Amazing Grace*. SAMUEL GOLDWYN FILMS

allies engaging in the practical politics of lobbying, mobilizing public opinion, and collecting data. The reformers were not averse to parliamentary maneuvering to win public attention. While specialists in the history of the abolition movement may find fault with aspects of the movie's interpretation, the film manages to compress substantial information into a single feature-length motion picture.

For the purposes of the film, opposition to the slave trade begins in Britain in 1787, thereby ignoring the influence of American commentators such as Anthony Benezet of Philadelphia and John Woolman of New Jersey, both Quakers, on Clarkson, Wilberforce, John Wesley, and other British abolitionists. Quakers are scarcely mentioned in the film, though they had been lobbying Parliament for the abolition of the slave trade for several years before Wilberforce took up the cause

and constituted a majority of the original 1787 membership of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Wilberforce was also a corresponding member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, founded in 1775, twelve years before its British counterpart.

The film's producers have also issued a "Study Guide" with a section directed toward educators. The educational material and a related "Faith Discussion Guide" are available on-line at www.amazinggracemovie.com. The language of the study guide clearly signals the intentions of the producers: "For the contemporary world, we commemorate Wilberforce's story as an inspiration and exhortation. It examines the supremely human virtue of conscience put into practice on other people's behalf." The film also has an accompanying book, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (New



Youssou N'Dour as Oludah Equiano and Ioan Gruffudd as William Wilberforce in *Amazing Grace*. SAMUEL GOLDWYN FILMS

York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), by Eric Metaxas. The book contains no index, no footnotes, and no formal bibliography, and relies primarily on the several previously published biographies of Wilberforce. The Christian identity and motivations of Wilberforce are perhaps more evident in the book than in the film.

The filmmakers of *Amazing Grace* are generally successful in treating as both entertainment and education a story that will be largely unknown to the audience. Still, no film intended to reach a mass audience could hope to include all of the complexities of the debate over the slave trade, either in its own times or among historians of the past sixty years. Perhaps the film's clearly defined point of view will work as a source of debate, inviting those who wish to use it in the classroom to present alternative interpretations. Certainly, the movie and the many exhibitions currently on view in Britain clearly speak to modern race relations. The story guide also contains an explicit call to join "The Amazing

Challenge Campaign" to address the persistence of slavery in the modern world (see www.TheAmazingChange.com).

This is also a movie about religious faith and the connection between faith and reform. John Newton, former slave-ship captain turned Anglican minister and author of the lyrics of the hymn "Amazing Grace," appears in the role of spiritual mentor to the much younger Wilberforce. Apted depicts Newton as haunted by his former role in the slave trade. Both Wilberforce and Newton, though they remained within the Anglican Church, were devout evangelicals, and Wilberforce was clearly motivated by religious conviction. "God Almighty," he wrote in 1787, "has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners." The movie appears to assume that Christianity, and specifically its evangelical version, leads to a concern for the reformation of the manners (that is, the morals) of society. However, the film also distinguishes evangelical reform from

radical reform. Wilberforce, for example, is dubious about Thomas Clarkson's interest in the French Revolution.

The choice of the film's title, *Amazing Grace*, reflects the evangelical conversion experience shared by Wilberforce, Newton, and others of their circle. The choice of title, however, may have reflected the practical reality that far more contemporary Americans and Britons know the hymn than will recognize the name of William Wilberforce. A poster for the movie reads, "Inspired by the True Story. Behind the Song You Love is a Story You Will Never Forget." The choice of title for the film and the repeated references to the hymn imply that it had an abolitionist meaning for its author, John Newton, and for Wilberforce. But this seems an extremely ahistorical interpretation. The text, written in 1772, concerns grace and salvation, not social reform, and contemporaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not understand it as anti-slavery. The lyrics appear in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but in a context that stresses the

Christian identity of Uncle Tom. The movie also uses the tune most people now associate with the hymn, sometimes called "New Britain," which first appeared in print in an American hymnal in 1829, and was first linked to Newton's lyrics in *The Southern Harmony* in 1835. Wilberforce died in 1834, making it highly unlikely that he ever heard the tune now associated with Newton's hymn.

The film, study guides, and the Metaxas biography are designed to engage the public rather than address the interpretative concerns of academics. Absent is scholarly discussion about the economic viability of slavery in the British Empire and the relationship between economic interest and public policy, consideration of the impact of revolts and revolutions in the West Indies, or the relationship between the abolition movements in Britain and the United States. The film would work well as part of a class or public program on the slave trade or its abolition, but educators and public historians will also need to frame the film within a discussion



Albert Finney as John Newton and Ioan Gruffudd as William Wilberforce in *Amazing Grace*. SAMUEL GOLDWYN FILMS

of alternative interpretations of slavery and abolitionism.

The film-makers have made an important decision to tell the story of Britain's abolition of the slave trade as a largely religious story and to use Wilberforce to explore the intersection of religiously motivated social concerns and public policy. Too much historical writing ignores or minimizes the role of religion. However,

the movie may leave viewers with the assumption that religious faith necessarily condemns slavery. Here the film-makers engage in another present-minded interpretation. People in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who considered themselves sincere Christians were very much divided on the implications of their religion on public policy in general and human bondage in particular.