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### Keywords

slavery, slave trade, abolition, Granville Sharp

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# Abolition! Granville Sharp's Campaign to End Slavery

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## Abstract

*In 1765, Granville Sharp, a British armaments clerk, Biblical scholar and musician, found a brutally beaten teenage slave on a London street and helped him recover and find work. Deeply upset by the boy's cruel treatment, Sharp was inspired to launch the movement that led to the end of slavery! Several later campaigners against slavery are better known: In the 1780s, Thomas Clarkson publicized the horrors of the "middle passage," the transporting of slaves from Africa to the Americas. John Newton, the writer of Amazing Grace, became an anti-slavery crusader in the same decade. William Wilberforce persuaded the British Parliament to outlaw the slave trade in 1807. All of these, however, were inspired by Granville Sharp's earlier efforts. This article tells Sharp's story, what he did and how he started the movement that led eventually to the end of slavery.*

## Keywords

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## Granville Sharp meets Jonathan Strong

The Sharps were known across London for their Sunday musical concerts. William, both the King's surgeon and a caregiver to London's poor, played the organ and several horns. Granville, known as Greeny to family and friends, played the flute, sometimes two flutes simultaneously. James played a curved horned instrument called the serpent, while sisters Judith and Eliza added the lute and harpsichord. Another sister, Frances, sang sweetly with the group.

The family often gathered in the evenings to practice or just to play for themselves. So late one afternoon in 1765, Granville left his job at the Tower of London, where he was a British armaments clerk who kept the records of saltpeter purchases for gunpowder, and headed to William's house for some evening music.

But this time, as he arrived, he came upon a brutally beaten teenage black slave, Jonathan Strong, collapsing in the doorway. David Lisle, Strong's owner, had pistol whipped him, blinding him with blood, permanently damaging his vision, and making his face a gory mess. Lisle had beaten Strong's body just as mercilessly. When he had finished, he abandoned Strong on the street to die.

Floggings were common in 18th century England. Horses, servants, beggars, wives and children were often flogged until they bled. Still, Lisle's beating of Jonathan Strong was unusually brutal, even for the times.

Granville called William out to help. Strong had managed to stagger to William's, as William was known for his charity toward London's poor. The Sharps housed and cared for Strong for more than four months. When he was well enough to leave, they bought him clothes, paid for his lodging, and found him a job doing errands for a nearby apothecary.

## Slavery and the Slave Trade in England

The English took pride that England, unlike their American colonies, had no slavery. According to tradition, a Russian slave brought to England in 1569 was immediately freed by a British court on the grounds that "England was too pure an air for slaves to breathe in."<sup>1</sup> That phrase stuck and was repeated often with pride in later centuries. This policy did not extend to the British colonies, as these colonies imported more than two million slaves from Africa from 1680 until the end of slavery. Slaves were most numerous and their conditions the worst on the large Sugar plantations in the West Indies.

Still, slave owners from the West Indies and the American colonies often brought their personal slaves to England when they came, so an estimated 20,000 slaves were in England when Strong was beaten. Early in the century, Sir John Holt, the Chief Justice of the King's Bench, had issued opinions in three cases that threatened to free all slaves brought to England. He stated in one case that "there is no such thing as a slave by the law of England."<sup>2</sup> However, West Indies slave holders had persuaded a British Lord Chancellor to rule in 1729, and again in 1749, that slaves brought to England remained slaves, even if they were baptized Christians. Many slaves brought to England had themselves baptized because they had heard that if they became Christians while in England they would be freed. It didn't work.

Even though England had no slavery, by this time it had long led in the slave trade, due to its growth as a naval power and its expanding control over the Americas. About 1640, British ships began hauling large numbers of African

<sup>1</sup>Stephen M. Wise, *Though the Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trial that Led to the End of Human Slavery*, (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005), 27.

<sup>2</sup>Wise, *Though the Heavens May Fall*, 29.

slaves to the Caribbean for sugar production. From then until 1807, British ships are believed to have carried three million Africans to the Americas. About a quarter of the ships leaving Liverpool, England's busiest port, traded in slaves. Many were headed to Africa to pick up slaves for the dreadful "middle passage" carrying slaves to the Americas. Many enslaved Blacks died on the horrible voyage, crowded into the holds of ships. Because poor records were kept, we cannot know how many, but some ship captains regarded the voyage as successful if no more than a quarter of the slaves died. Although Englishmen may not have owned slaves, the British economy profited enormously from this barbaric trade in them.

### The Hearing to Save Jonathan Strong

Strong worked for the apothecary for two years until, by accident, he was spotted by Lisle, his former owner. Seeing that his slave had not only survived but was partly recovered, Lisle wanted to reclaim him as his property. He sold him to a Jamaican planter, expecting that Strong would be grabbed by slave catchers -- there were many in London at the time -- and shipped off for whatever labor could be forced from him on a sugar plantation in the West Indies. Strong was soon caught by two hired men and taken to a local jail to be held for the next ship.

Strong, unlike most slaves, could read and write a bit, so managed to smuggle out a note on his situation. The note was passed to Granville, who rushed to the prison and insisted to the jailers that Strong had committed no crime and should be freed. He threatened the jailers that if they turned him over to be deported before there was a hearing by London's Lord Mayor, they could be charged with a crime.

Granville got his hearing, which became a virtual shouting match between Granville, who was not a lawyer, and the lawyer representing Strong's new owner. During the hearing, Granville placed his hand on ship captain's shoulder and proclaimed, "I charge you, in the name of the king, with an assault upon the person of Jonathan Strong, and all these are my witnesses."<sup>3</sup> Strong cried and shook, terrified that the ruling would go against him. But the Lord Mayor quickly ruled, as Granville recorded, "The lad had not stolen anything and was not guilty of any offence and was therefore at liberty to go away." Strong was freed, and as Granville wrote, he "departed also, in the sight of all, in full liberty, nobody daring afterwards to touch him."<sup>4</sup> Following the trial, Lisle challenged Granville to a duel,

which he declined. Sadly, Jonathan Strong died three years later of complications from his beating.

Granville, however, had found his calling. He was transformed, and became, as historian Christopher Brown has called him, Britain's "first abolitionist."<sup>5</sup> He was just thirty-two. From that day, he worked to prevent other slaves in Britain from being forced to return to the West Indies or America, and he started the long campaign that ended the slave trade and, eventually, slavery itself.

Granville Sharp was a devout Anglican and an intense student of the Bible. He knew both Biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek, as well as several modern languages. His collection of Bibles in many languages, including Mohawk, was thought to be Europe's largest. His treatise on the use of the definite article in New Testament Greek, which he published in a 1778 paper, became known as "The Granville Sharp Rule" and is still used. His importance in history, however, is that he became, following Jonathan Strong's release, the first resolute campaigner against the institution of slavery.

### A Brief on Human Slavery

Slavery is about as old and universal as human history. It has been practiced by almost every culture that ever won a war, and for almost all time. The origins of slavery are unclear, but it may have started when humans began to grow crops and formed stable communities, creating a need for mass labor. Most early slaves were war captives, debtors, criminals, or sex slaves. Differences in language, culture, religion, and race, were often used to justify slavery.

In most ancient societies, from China and India around the world to the Aztec empire, slaves could be maimed or killed at will. The Aztecs staged ritual torture and killing of slaves. Slaves in ancient Greece had some rights; in Athens, they could save to purchase their freedom. In early ancient Rome, slaves had virtually no rights, and they were often forced to become gladiators or castrated to become eunuchs. This castration of slaves, which killed many, continued in some places into the twentieth century. Because both Stoics and early Christians opposed treating slaves cruelly, Roman slaves gradually gained some legal protections between the first and fourth centuries.

The fact that a tribe or nation had been enslaved did not stop it from becoming slave owning. According to the Old Testament, the Israelites fled from slavery in Egypt, but as soon as they entered Canaan, they took slaves of their own. When they defeated the Midianites, they killed everyone, including children, except virgin girls, whom they kept for

<sup>3</sup>Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 44.

<sup>4</sup>Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 27.

<sup>5</sup>Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 172.

themselves. Slaves could be beaten, but not killed, without the slaveholder being punished. Fellow Israelites could be held as debt slaves for up to six years, but could not be treated harshly. Foreign slaves could be bought and sold and willed to one's children. An Israelite man could sell his daughter into slavery.<sup>6</sup>

Slavery in the Bible was often used in America to justify slavery in more modern times. Jefferson Davis, who became President of the Confederacy, said in defense of slavery:

[Slavery] was established by decree of Almighty God, is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation. It has existed in all ages, has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts.<sup>7</sup>

As long as slavery has existed, slaves have tried to free themselves by escape, revolt and insurrection. During the Peloponnesian War, 20,000 Athenian slaves escaped at one time (431 BC). Slave revolts, such as Roman slaves under Spartacus (73 to 71 BC) and Virginia slaves under Nat Turner (1831), were common. Full-scale insurrections also occurred, as when the slaves in Saint-Domingue overthrew their French owners and created the country of Haiti (1791).

For most of human history, however, societies have accepted slavery as normal and natural. There is virtually no record of anyone in ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, China, or any other ancient culture opposing slavery as immoral. No brave prophets cried out against the evil of slavery, and there were no organized movements against slavery. Virtually no one in the ancient or medieval worlds, it seems, believed it morally wrong for one human being to own another. Throughout the Middle Ages, Christian popes and major theologians regarded slavery as a part of God's natural order. In the thirteenth century, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas defended slavery as instituted by God as punishment for sin, and justified it as being part of the 'right of nations' and natural law. Children of a slave mother are rightly slaves, Aquinas said, even though they have not committed any personal sin.

## The Beginnings of Abolitionism

Humanity's guilty conscience about slavery arose very slowly. While many had called for treating slaves kindly, the morality of slavery itself was rarely questioned until late in the eighteenth century. During the seventeenth century, particularly toward its end, a number of tracts began to

criticize the British slave holders, particularly those on the West Indies sugar plantations, for their cruelties and for their failure to convert their slaves to Christianity. The Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," was used often, and pamphlet writers listed the cruel abuses of the slave holders who violated it. But British society at the time was rigidly hierarchical. Applying the Golden Rule to masters and slaves did not mean ending slavery any more than applying it to the way parents treat their children meant ending the parents' authority.

Most moral objections to slavery before the 1770s tried to make slavery more humane rather than to end it. Although a few had condemned slavery as a violation of natural rights, slave holders were more often criticized for their cruelty and for not tending to their slaves' spiritual needs -- that is, not converting them to Christianity. But prior to the 1770s, these critics were isolated moralists; no one mounted a campaign to end slavery or the slave trade.

During the last part of the 18th century, a few brave individuals began to see the horrible truth of the middle passage and became willing to risk their social standing to speak against the slave trade. It was an insight that arose slowly, even among sincere Christians of the time. John Newton, famous for writing the hymn *Amazing Grace*, had become a devout Christian after a storm at sea in 1748. But even after becoming a Christian, he traded in slaves during the 1750s. On his first voyage, six slaves died. When twenty slaves tried to free themselves, he punished their leaders with thumbscrews. Newton wrote *Amazing Grace* about 1772, but it wasn't until 1780 that Newton first expressed regret for taking part in the slave trade. He only joined the fight against it in 1785, after which he remained an outspoken opponent of the trade until his death in 1807.

## Granville's Campaign

In 1769, before the Revolutionary War, Granville published his first major tract against slavery, *A Representation of the injustice and dangerous tendency of admitting the least claim of private property in the persons of men, in England*. His aim was to refute the 1729 and 1749 rulings by judges that slaves remain the property of their owners in England as well as in the colonies. The aim of *Representation* was to try to change the minds of British judges and lawyers who believed that it was legal to bring and keep slaves in England because of these earlier rulings. English Common Law, Granville argued, could not permit slavery, and English Common Law was more basic than the judges' rulings.

As a devout member of the Church of England, Granville hoped to persuade the Church to unite against

<sup>6</sup>Old Testament, Exodus 21, Leviticus 25, and Numbers 31.

<sup>7</sup>Speech by Jefferson Davis in US Senate, February 14, 1850. In Dunbar Rowland, *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist: His Letters, Papers and Speeches* (New York: J. J. Little & Ives Company, 1923), 286.

slavery. Given its standing and authority, he believed the Church's forceful voice could turn public opinion against slavery, if only he could explain the moral issues to the church leaders! He wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury to urge him to campaign for the repeal of the Plantation Laws that inflicted so much suffering upon slaves in the colonies. These laws, Granville wrote, stained Britain with "the blackest guilt."<sup>8</sup> He visited many bishops in person, urging them to call for a bill abolishing slavery. In 1776, he wrote *The Law of Retribution; or, a serious warning to Great Britain and her colonies, founded on unquestionable examples of God's temporal vengeance against tyrants, slave-holders and oppressors*, warning that God would punish England if it did not renounce slavery and the slave trade. *Our country's Ruin* must rest on the heads of those who withhold their Testimony against the CRYING SIN OF TOLERATED SLAVERY!," he warned.<sup>9</sup> To try to drive home his message, Granville italicized and capitalized phrases in almost every sentence. He personally gave several copies to every Anglican bishop. While he found some to be sympathetic, he was never able to get the Church to take the united stance he believed it should. The Church was very dependent upon moneyed interests and public support, which is perhaps the reason the bishops as a group continued to support the slave trade until it was abolished.

### Defending More Slaves in Court

While writing tracts and letters and lobbying church leaders, Granville helped defend several other cases. Each case created more rights for slaves in England, but in each one the presiding judge failed to clearly outlaw this slavery. In 1768, he sued the owners of Mary Hylas, a female slave who was married to a free black in England, but was caught and shipped back to the West Indies. He managed to win a ruling that, because husband and wife are one under English Common Law, Mrs. Hylas had been wrongly taken and must be returned to England at no cost to herself.

In 1770, Thomas Lewis, a servant of a Mrs. Banks, was seized by Robert Stapylton, his former owner who still claimed him, and placed on ship headed for the West Indies. Granville quickly got a writ of habeas corpus from the Lord Mayor of London and had it delivered to the captain while the ship was still in sight of land. Lewis was found

chained to the mast, sobbing in tears as England receded on the horizon. The captain had to turn him over, and Lewis was ferried back to shore. Sharp charged Stapylton with assaulting Lewis. He wanted to use Stapylton's trial to establish his argument in *Representation* that there could be no property of persons under English Common Law, that everyone, regardless of race, was entitled to the protection of the law. Stapylton was convicted, but the judge, Lord Mansfield, sidestepped the main legal issue by ruling simply that Stapylton could not prove by a bill of sale that Lewis was his property.

### Somerset v. Stewart

The most important case began late in 1771. James Somerset, an escaped slave who clearly had been the property of Charles Stewart, was captured by Stewart and chained below deck of the ship *Ann and Mary* to be shipped to Jamaica. A witness to Somerset's capture obtained a writ of habeas corpus and Somerset was held for a hearing. Stewart charged that Somerset was guilty of larceny, that he had robbed Stewart of his property, Somerset himself.

Granville Sharp got involved immediately. He was determined to press for a ruling on the critical issue of whether slaves brought to England remained slaves or became free. He assembled a team of five lawyers, all of whom agreed to represent Somerset and argue the vital issue without pay. Lord Mansfield was again the judge.

England's major newspapers followed the case eagerly. From the first day of the trial, they gave detailed summaries of court arguments and published many letters from readers both criticizing and defending slavery.

Those defending Somerset used every appeal they thought would work. They appealed to the racist fear that if slavery were not outlawed in England, slave owners would overrun England with more Negroes. They used sympathy for Somerset as a slave. They emphasized England's great tradition of freedom. With the American Revolution looming, this emphasis was understood by all as a boastful contrast to American slavery. They also argued that slavery could not exist in England without a positive law by Parliament authorizing it, but Parliament had passed no such law. Stewart's lawyers argued that the rights of property were supreme and that it would be dangerous, both economically and socially, to free all slaves in England.

The case was settled in 1772, when Lord Mansfield ruled that "no master was ever allowed here to take a slave by force to be sold abroad because he deserted from his service, or for any other reason whatever."<sup>10</sup> Somerset was

<sup>8</sup>Schema, *Rough Crossings*, 38.

<sup>9</sup>Granville Sharp, *The Law of Retribution or, a serious warning to Great Britain and her colonies, founded on unquestionable examples of God's temporal vengeance against tyrants, slave-holders and oppressors* (London: printed by W. Richardson, for B. White; and E. and C. Dilly, 1776), 340. Italics and capitalization in original. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004891919.0001.000/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

<sup>10</sup>Schema, *Rough Crossings*, 54.

freed. His supporters interpreted the ruling as outlawing slavery in England, but that was not quite Lord Mansfield's ruling. While he called slavery "odious," slaves in England were not immediately freed. However, their owners were now forbidden force them to return to the American colonies or to the Indies.

## Effects of the Somerset Ruling

The far-reaching effects of the Somerset trial can hardly be overstated. Steven Wise called it, in the subtitle of his book on the trial, "The Landmark Trial That Led to the End of Slavery."

In America, word of the ruling spread quickly from plantation to plantation, and American slaves began to look to "British freedom" for their liberation. When the Revolutionary War started, the British governor of Virginia promised freedom to all slaves who escaped to fight for the British. At least 30,000 Virginia slaves fled to the British. George Washington's slave, Henry Washington, fled to the British while camped with General Washington at Cambridge, Massachusetts. Thomas Jefferson lost thirty slaves. About two-thirds of the slaves in South Carolina are believed to have fled.

In England, the Somerset case seemed "to mark the moment when an international movement against slavery took definitive shape."<sup>11</sup> Although Granville Sharp still struggled almost alone for the next few years, anti-slavery sentiment was no longer a matter of private morals. It was now on its way to becoming a public campaign to outlaw the slave trade and to end slavery.

During the war for American independence in the late 1770s, the British, like the Americans, believed that their nation was committed to liberty. They were proud of the liberty and relative self-government they gave their colonies compared to the Spanish. However, it took this war for many British to consider the morality of slavery.

For the most part, slavery was a propaganda weapon during Revolutionary War. Because there were no slaves in England, Samuel Johnson wrote about the Americans, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?"<sup>12</sup> On the American side, Benjamin Franklin lashed out against the English hypocrisy of condemning American slavery while its merchants "continue a commerce where so many *hundreds of thousands*" were "dragged into a slavery."<sup>13</sup> But in time, wiser souls in both countries began to see their own hypocrisy.

## More Writings

The same year that the Somerset case was settled, Granville wrote to the British Prime Minister, Lord North, that his inaction against the slave trade endangered his immortal soul, for "*To be in power and to neglect (as life is very uncertain) even a day the endeavouring to put a stop to such monstrous injustice and abandoned wickedness, must necessarily endanger a man's eternal welfare, be he ever so great in temporal dignity and office.*"<sup>14</sup> He enclosed *Reflections*, and underlined for Lord North passages on the inhumane laws of Barbados that set a fine of just 15 shillings for "wantonly or bloody-mindedly" killing one's own slave. Granville wrote in 1776 that it wasn't enough to outlaw slavery in England, and yet to let this "abominable wickedness" persist in the American colonies.

Nevertheless, Granville supported American independence as he opposed slavery, both in the name of justice. In 1775, to protest the British war to keep its American colonies, Granville first took an unpaid leave and then resigned from his position as a British armaments clerk. When urged to return to work, he wrote that he could not "return to my ordnance duty whilst a bloody war is carried on unjustly, as I conceive, against my fellow subjects."<sup>15</sup> Granville was never employed again. He lived with his family members who honored his protest.

Across the next several years, Granville wrote many additional tracts opposing slavery. Their lengthy titles, common for the time, convey his passion. All his tracts relied upon his staunch Anglican belief that God's wrath would fall upon all evildoers. In 1776, he published four, including, *The Just Limitation of Slavery in the laws of God, compared with the unbounded claims of the African Traders and British American Slaveholders*. He used this tract to oppose a Reverend Thompson's arguments that Africans were the sons of Ham (one of the three sons of Noah) that God had condemned to slavery (Geneses 10:20), and that their slavery was therefore condoned by God. Sharp, like Reverend Thompson, believed in taking the Bible literally. He argued, however, that there was no proof that Africans were descended from Ham. Sharp also argued that the Bible, particularly through the parable of the Good Samaritan, now teaches that "*all mankind, even our professed enemies, must necessarily be esteemed our neighbors . . . the same benevolence which was due from the Jew to his brethren of the house of Israel is indispensably due under the Gospel, TO OUR BRETHREN OF THE UNIVERSE . . . this is the apparent intention of the*

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 100.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Taxation no Tyranny. An answer to the resolution and address of the American Congress*.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 135.

<sup>14</sup> Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 90.

parable.”<sup>16</sup> To Granville, the slave trade clearly violated Jesus’ teaching in this parable.

That same year Granville published *The Law of Liberty, or, Royal Law, by which all mankind will certainly be judged! Earnestly recommended to the serious consideration of all slave-holders and slave-dealers*, as well as *The Law of Retribution*, cited earlier. Following the Revolutionary war, in 1793, he wrote, *Extract of a Letter to a Gentleman in Maryland; wherein is demonstrated the extreme wickedness of tolerating the Slave Trade, etc.*

### Clarkson and Wilberforce

For all his successes, Granville Sharp was better at writing tracts and letters and at creating court cases than he was at organizing social movements. His appeals to the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Anglican Bishops, Lord North, and others did not move them to try to abolish slavery or the slave trade. But Granville became an inspiration for others to take up the cause. The most important of these were Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, the two younger men most credited with ending the British slave trade and inspiring the end of legal slavery. Both acknowledged Granville Sharp as an inspiration.

In 1785, Thomas Clarkson, a student at Cambridge, wrote a Latin essay on *Is it lawful to enslave the unconsenting?* Upon finishing his essay, he immediately became a fervent abolitionist. He published his essay in English a year later as *An essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species, particularly the African, translated from a Latin Dissertation*. Clarkson appealed to both the human sympathy and the practical self-interests of his readers. Appealing to human sympathy for the slaves, he published *Evidence on the Subject of the Slave Trade*, in which he described the suffocating crowding and high death rates on slave ships, and offered a drawing of slaves tightly packed below deck on the slave ship *Brookes*. This important and influential drawing has been reproduced in many later publications.<sup>17</sup> His *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* ignored moral arguments and appeals to sympathy and sought to convince his readers that abolishing the slave trade would benefit England politically and economically.

James Phillips, a Quaker and the publisher of Clarkson’s first work, introduced the 25-year-old Clarkson to both fellow Quakers and to Granville Sharp, who was by then 50 years old. Sharp and Clarkson, along

with one other Anglican and nine Quaker leaders including Phillips, formed the *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* in 1787, the first organized anti-slavery society. As the group’s oldest member, Granville became its de facto chair and was something of a father figure to the younger members. However, he strongly urged the Society to call for the emancipation of all slaves, but the younger members did not believe that achievable, at least not in the near future. Still, they hoped that ending the slave trade was achievable, and they hoped that ending the slave trade, which would cut off the supply of new slaves, would lead to the better treatment of slaves and to their eventual emancipation.

William Wilberforce, who had been elected to Parliament in 1780 at the young age of 21, was soon recruited to join the Society, and he became the abolitionists’ political voice. Wilberforce made the first speech against the slave trade in the House of Commons in 1789, relying heavily upon Clarkson’s descriptions of the horrid conditions aboard slave ships. He introduced the first Bill to abolish the trade in 1791, although the Bill was defeated by almost two-to-one. Despite this failure, he moved to abolish the slave trade at every session of the House of Commons that followed. The 2007 film, *Amazing Grace*, tells the story of Wilberforce’s efforts.

### The End of the Slave Trade and of Slavery

Undoubtedly, Granville Sharp and the other early abolitionists often despaired at their failures. Still, their movement slowly gained force, and in 1807, the British Parliament finally voted to abolish the slave trade and to use its navy to enforce this abolition. When the bill passed, Granville is said to have fallen on his knees, most likely in thanksgiving. The United States also abolished the slave trade that same year, the first year the American Constitution permitted it to do so.

Forty-two years had passed since Jonathan Strong’s beating and Granville had started his campaign. But by 1807, the abolitionists had won the moral argument. At the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815, delegates signed a declaration that the international slave trade was “repugnant to the principles of humanity and universal morality.”<sup>18</sup> Across the nineteenth century, slavery as a legal institution was virtually eliminated from the earth. England ended slavery in its colonies in 1833; France did so in 1848. Serfdom was ended in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1848, and Czar Alexander II freed Russian serfs in 1861. President Lincoln issued the Emancipation

<sup>16</sup>Granville Sharp, *The Just Limitation of Slavery in the laws of God, compared with the unbounded claims of the African Traders and British American Slaveholders* (London: Printed for B. White and E. & C. Dilly, 1776), 40. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004891913.0001.000?view=toc>

<sup>17</sup>At the time of this writing, Clarkson’s drawing may be seen at <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/drawing-of-the-slave-ship-brookes>.

<sup>18</sup>Paul G. Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 40-41.

Proclamation in 1863, and the thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery in the United States in 1865. Cuba and Brazil brought an end to legal slavery in the Western hemisphere when they both abolished it in the 1880s. Across the nineteenth century, treaties grew to enforce the end of the slave trade; in 1890, the European powers, the United States and other nations signed the *General Act for the Repression of the African Slave Trade*, with the intention of suppressing slave trade everywhere.

## Slavery in the Twentieth Century

By the twentieth century, slavery was almost universally condemned. When the League of Nations was created after the World War I, it established the *Slavery Convention* (1926) to outlaw “slavery in all its forms,” including chattel slavery, serfdom, forced marriage, child marriage, the purchase of children, and forced labor. World War II brought an end to the League, but led to the creation of the United Nations and writing of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). Article 4 of the *Declaration* reads: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.” This prohibition is reinforced by the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, a treaty that by 2018 has been ratified by 171 nations. Slavery had finally become illegal everywhere in the world in 1981, when Mauritania (formally, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania) finally outlawed it by a presidential decree. Nevertheless, modern day slavery still exists, although most governments, the United Nations, and several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are making at least some efforts to end it.

Granville continued his abolitionist work. He rescued more slaves, with some, like Thomas Lewis, just before their ships sailed. After the slave trade was ended, Granville expanded his opposition to slavery to include writing tracts on the untouchables, the lowest caste in the Hindu caste system, and on child laborers in the salt pits and coal mines in Scotland. Granville said that these children were “involved in an *unjust Slavery* almost equally wretched” to that of slaves in the West Indies.<sup>19</sup>

Granville died in 1813 at age seventy-seven. Preceded in death by all members of his musical family, he became disoriented one day on a London street while carrying a donation of books to a library, had to be helped home, and died within a few weeks.

As much as any other person, Granville Sharp is responsible for starting our long progress against human

slavery. His monument inscription in Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abby reads:

He took his post among the foremost of the  
honourable band  
Associated to deliver Africa from the rapacity of  
Europe,  
By the abolition of the Slave Trade.  
Nor was death permitted to interrupt his career  
of usefulness,  
Till he had witnessed that Act of the British  
Parliament  
By which the abolition was decreed.

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<sup>19</sup>Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 149.