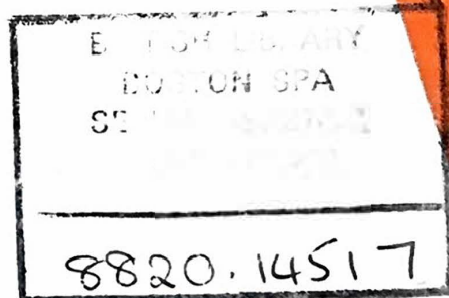


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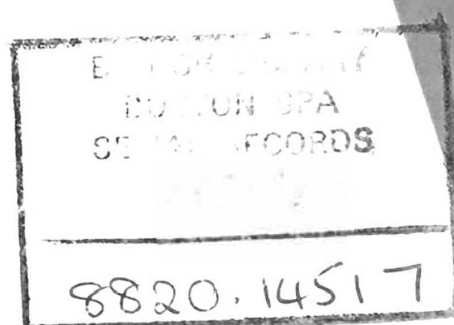
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**Third World Foundation
New Zealand House
80 Haymarket, London SW1Y 4TS
Telephone 01-930 8411
Telex 8814201 Trimed G
Cables Foundation**

‘Some in Light and Some in Darkness’: the long shadow of slavery

Shridath S Ramphal



A Public Lecture delivered by the Commonwealth Secretary-General on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery Act (1833) and the death of William Wilberforce

University of Hull
24 May 1983



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**EDITOR
Altaf Gauhar**

**EDITORIAL OFFICES
New Zealand House, 80 Haymarket, London SW1Y 4TS
Telephone: 01-930 8411 Cables: Foundation Telex: 8814201 Trimed G**

'SOME IN LIGHT AND SOME IN DARKNESS': THE LONG SHADOW OF SLAVERY

Shridath S Ramphal

1

The Critical Conjunctions

**'Justice, humanity and sound policy prescribe
our course, and will culminate our efforts'.**

Wilberforce

This series of lectures commemorates two events which an irony of fate conjoined in 1833: the abolition of slavery within British dominions overseas and the death of William Wilberforce, who, perhaps more than any single mortal, is associated in men's minds with the mighty struggle which led to that landmark in history. Hull gave Wilberforce to the world in 1759, and sent him to the nation's Parliament 21 years later in 1780, little knowing that it was initiating service to a wider world that would be universal in its beneficence and immemorial in its inspiration. Indeed, in relation to Wilberforce's service to humanity, what we might be marking in Hull is not 150 years of his passing but a little over 200 years of that first decision by the electors of Hull to send him to Westminster, where he was to begin a career destined to bring great and lasting distinction to this ancient City. The first tribute I wish to pay is to Hull itself.

A while after Wilberforce's death, Thomas Hill, in a little poem which he called 'The Grave of Wilberforce', composed at Chesterfield Vicarage, wrote these words:

Conspicuous on his native coast,
The storied obelisk shall boast
The first-fruits of his fame.¹

That was, of course, a reference to the resolve of the people of Hull to erect such an obelisk in commemoration of the public and private virtues of their townsman. The obelisk was duly erected at St John's Street and is now a Wilberforce shrine in its new location at the Queen's Gardens. But what attracts me so much to these lines of Thomas Hill is the perception that abolition of the slave trade and emancipation itself were but 'the first-fruits' of the struggle against human bondage. It is about that perception that I wish to speak—the perception that Wilberforce's contribution did not end with the enactment of the Abolition of Slavery Act 150 years ago, but continues to

¹ J. Montgomery, (ed) *The Bow in the Cloud, or The Negro's Memorial. A Collection of Original Contributions, in Prose and Verse, Illustrative of the Evils of Slavery, and Commemorative of its Abolition in the British Colonies*, London: Jackson and Walford, 1834, p 301.

inspire man's efforts to seek release from other servitudes and inequalities.

In the early 1830s, the Agency Committee in its formidable address for the 'Universal Abolition of Negro Slavery and the Slave Trade throughout the world' used words of import far beyond even their own perspectives when they wrote:

Slavery, wherever it exists, is the same moral deformity—the same crime before God, and ought to be viewed with detestation, and reprobated with boldness, by every man who professes to act on Christian principles.²

They were concerned that the slave trade, though abolished under British law, continued to be 'sustained by British capital and screened by British ingenuity';³ that slavery itself, though abolished by Act of the Westminster Parliament, continued in foreign lands with, for example, 'the mines of Chili and Peru . . . peopled with miserable, though guiltless, victims whose blood is drained by a system of unparalleled horror, to fill the pockets of English shareholders'.⁴ They were protesting that human bondage, though formally banished by legislative enactment from the British colonies, was still yielding inhuman gains.

Bondage still takes many forms; some directly as pernicious as slavery itself, others less direct; still screened by ingenuity; all a continuing testament of man's inhumanity to man. They constitute an unbroken line of human servitude stretching from slavery and summoning us, a century and a half after Wilberforce's life of service ended, to continue the work that he began and to match the zeal and resolution that he brought to it in his time.

Slavery did not begin with the British Empire and did not end with Emancipation in 1834. It is as old as man, casting its long shadow across centuries of human conflict between justice and degradation, need and aggrandisement, freedom and oppression. That is why the Memorial in Hull marks but the 'first-fruits' of Wilberforce's fame. It is a permanent reminder that such human conflicts will continue until man himself outgrows his baser instincts of greed and bigotry and lust for power. But remembrance of the life and work of Wilberforce is also a great renewal of faith in the capacity of each generation to record its own victories against servitude. Our generation needs that faith as much as any other; we need also, to record our own successes.

In our endeavours, how encouraging it is to recall that the campaign Wilberforce successfully led from his representation of this City and region had a human impact that was virtually worldwide. As far east as Mauritius, as far west as Jamaica, and, of course, throughout the vast continent of Africa, the impact of abolition was direct. But it would gradually, all too slowly, but inexorably, spread to the slave trade of other European powers, especially Portugal. Between 1810 and 1846 no less than 120,000 slaves were liberated from foreign slave ships;⁵ and, although slavery was also officially abolished

² *ibid.*, Preface p vii.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, Preface p viii.

⁵ Christopher Lloyd, *The Navy and the Slave Trade. The Suppression of the African Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century*, London: Cass, 1968, p 117.

in the United States in 1807 the thriving illicit trade with the Southern States was eventually ended only by the Civil War. Cuba, as late as 1859, received 30,000 African slaves;⁶ but there, too, the trade ended with victory for Lincoln on mainland America.⁷ Both the trade in slaves and the institution of slavery were tenacious in their resistance. But yield they had to. And when eventually they did, it was capitulation to the forces that Wilberforce and the Anti-Slavery Movement had begun to muster so very many years earlier. The ripples of freedom that went out from Hull touched many shores.

That human impact of Wilberforce's life and work thus confirms as well what we too often forget; namely, the power of the committed, dispassionate, resolute individual, righteous in humanity's cause, to change the world. It is both sobering and an encouragement that so many of the great individuals who now stand out as the true heroes of their generation were men who, like Wilberforce, took their stand on the side of a universal morality and in this very area of human bondage. Gandhi and Martin Luther King are of our own time but already of all time.

But let me not simply imply that abolition of the slave trade and emancipation from slavery were the triumph of one man. They were the incremental results of a gruelling effort lasting more than half a century, conducted not only in Parliament but on the hustings and in churches and assembly-halls throughout the nation. It was moreover a campaign, a crusade, against which apathy, no less than open hostility, was always a countervailing force⁸. It is worth remembering that abolition might have come in 1796, not 1807, had not the Parliamentary motion for it been lost (by 74 votes to 70) when the floating voters on whom Wilberforce counted were tempted away to the performance of a new Italian opera, *I dui Gobi* or *The Two Hunchbacks*.⁹ An irony, at the very least a subliminal abstention, it is tempting to say, when we recall how substantially the ivory for Europe's piano keys was carried with the slave caravans from Africa's hinterland to the coast.¹⁰ That the anti-slavery campaign recovered from that setback of 1796 and, having achieved abolition of the slave trade in 1807, pressed on with renewed energy in the 1820s for full emancipation, is one of the great success stories of popular movements driving governments to noble endeavours beyond their own ambition.

Wilberforce personified the cause in Parliament and remained an inspiration even when he handed on the leadership to Thomas Buxton. But we

⁶ *ibid.*, p 167.

⁷ *ibid.*, pp 181–2.

⁸ R Coupland, *Wilberforce. A Narrative*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923, *passim*; I A Wilberforce and S Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce* (5 vols), London: John Murray, 1838, *passim*; M Craton, J Walvin and D Wright, *Slavery: Abolition and Emancipation. Black Slaves and the British Empire. A Thematic Documentary*, London: Longman, 1976, pp 231–5 ff, 279–82 ff; E Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, London: André Deutsch 1981, pp 179–83.

⁹ Roger T Anstey, 'Capitalism and Slavery: a critique', *The Economic History Review* (2nd Series) 21 (2) 1968, pp 315–6; Coupland, *op. cit.*, pp 181–2.

¹⁰ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972, pp 94–5.

cannot fail to remember also those who resembled Wilberforce in the strength of their humanitarian commitment based on religious principles and who motivated the whole campaign: the Quakers who founded the Abolition Committee, the Evangelical 'Saints' of the Clapham Sect, and John Wesley, with his great cry: 'Whether you are Christian or no, show yourself a man'; Granville Sharp, who pioneered the drive towards legal recognition of the slave's human rights, and who was also instrumental in founding Sierra Leone in 1787 as a colony for freed slaves.¹¹

Wilberforce was buried with much ceremony in Westminster Abbey. In 1834, James Montgomery of Sheffield published a small book, *The Bow in the Cloud or the Negro's Memorial*, intended to illustrate the evils of slavery and commemorate its abolition. In it is a funeral oration by John Ely 'supposed to be delivered at the grave of Wilberforce'.¹² It is a moving oration with a passage which represents to me a true synthesis of Wilberforce's life and work:

If on the tombs of victors are inscribed the dates of their victories, a simple date shall constitute the most splendid epitaph of Wilberforce's sepulchre—that of the day when he achieved his great triumph: write upon his memorial stone that one simple date,

THE 25th OF MARCH, 1807

and all shall comprehend its import and admire it as expressive and sublime. Yet may other victories be inscribed beneath that first and signal one—victories achieved partly by his aid, and partly consequent upon that grand preliminary triumph. When merchandise in the persons of men was denounced as a crime, the purchaser and the holder of slaves were denounced as criminal; and the advocates of the slave trade argued justly, that its abolition would lead to the emancipation of the slave. It was reserved for the author of the former, to witness the consummation of the latter: his last public act was the vindication of that martyred missionary's character, who had devoted his life to the instruction of the African in West Indian bondage; the last tidings that fell on his dying ear announced the final triumph of the cause, achieved cheaply, yet nobly, at the cost of twenty million sterling. Inscribe then the tomb of Wilberforce with this three-fold achievement:

THE SLAVE TRADE ABOLISHED—
THE MISSIONARY OF DEMERARA VINDICATED—
SLAVERY EXTINGUISHED.¹³

How can we hope to improve on that summation? But historians have raised issues which impugn so large a claim, which question, in particular, whether abolition was not influenced more by economic than humanitarian concerns. Some of these questionings have come from my part of the world, as in Eric William's *Capitalism and Slavery*.¹⁴ As Wilberforce's most recent biographer, Robin Furneaux, has himself acknowledged,¹⁵ some questionings were long

¹¹ Craton, Walvin and Wright, *op. cit.*, p 217, pp 195–275 *passim*.

¹² Montgomery, *op. cit.*, pp 282–99.

¹³ *ibid.*, pp 289–90.

¹⁴ Williams, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Robin Furneaux, *William Wilberforce*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974, p 257.

overdue if only to provide a rounded account of the forces contributing to abolition.

It is clear enough that by the early nineteenth century the slave trade, in the West Indian context in particular, was beginning to yield diminishing returns to the country. The sugar monopoly could not be squared with the regime of free trade which Britain's new industrial capitalism required. But it is equally clear that there were powerful forces within Britain itself, indeed within Parliament, and dominant forces in the colonies, and in many foreign lands, that sought to preserve the slave trade and slavery itself.¹⁶

Were it not for the Anti-Slavery Movement, with Wilberforce at its helm and with men like Thomas Clarkson, James Stephen, Zachary Macaulay, Thomas Buxton and the many others in whose name Wilberforce spoke in Parliament; were it not for the public outcry against slavery that their collective work generated; were it not for what virtually became a people's movement for abolition, these intransigent enclaves of economic and political power might well have held at bay over a much longer period the new but wider economic interests. It was the conjuncture of public indignation with the longer term economic argument for abolition that induced Britain to abolish first the trade and then slavery itself.

Such a conjuncture is often essential to radical change. Where morality and material interest, principle and prudence, thus combine to dictate reform, the change itself is not less worthy because morality alone has not wrought it. Where self-interest is served in doing what is right, that does not make the doing of it any less wholesome. When all elements have been assayed in the crucible of history, I have no doubt that the contributions of Wilberforce and his colleagues, and through them the contributions of hundreds and thousands of ordinary people for whom slavery sustained under their laws was no longer an acceptable face of civilisation, will be seen to have been profound in their impact upon events.

It is also important to recognise that the essential success of the Anti-Slavery Movement was in its effect on public opinion. Joseph Sturge described his fellow abolitionists in his memoirs as 'the excellent men who laboured so long and so successfully to put the traffic in men under the ban of law and opinion'.¹⁷ That juxtaposition of 'law' with 'opinion' is significant; and opinion was far from being the lesser of the two. Sturge spoke also of the need 'to engage the sympathy of the people', and 'to awaken the slumbering conscience of the nation', not forgetting 'the official class'.¹⁸ From the 1780s onwards, the fires of the abolitionists cause were fanned by religious revivalism in the industrialising cities of Britain, whose own toiling masses, assured of a soul and a future salvation, could not see them denied to the slaves across the seas. Anti-Slavery was to become a truly popular movement.

¹⁶ Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (eds), *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform: essays in memory of Roger Anstey*, Folkestone, England: Dawson, 1980, pp 22, 29–30, 339–40, 355–6.

¹⁷ *Memoirs of Joseph Sturge*, London, 1864 (quoted in Craton, Walvin and Wright, *op. cit.*, p 288).

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p 290.

Its parallel in our day can only be the world-wide peace movement, which has yet to run its course, and could have equally far-reaching results.

I dwell on this matter awhile because I believe that it is to such conjunctures that we must look again as we face the continuing legacy of servitude: never abandoning morality, but never ignoring either the degree to which material interest might converge with it. If we really want progress, these are the conjunctures devoutly to be wished and assiduously to be pursued; never ceasing to exhort governments, but never forgetting that people move governments; that, indeed, sometimes, only people can.

This commemoration has been a comprehensive act of remembrance. Wilberforce and the Anti-Slavery Movement would have been proud of your treatment of their memory. And they would have been pleased that it has been in so many ways a West Indian occasion: with Honorary Degrees to C L R James, Clive Lloyd, Aston Preston, David Pitt and myself; a Lecture Series featuring, as well, Lloyd Best and Orlando Patterson, and a conference on Wilberforce and slavery that will include many scholars from and of the Caribbean. In a real sense we are all here because the anti-slavery cause survived and eventually overcame a myopic readiness to sacrifice principle at the altar of what its opponents conceived of as 'practicality'. And how supremely fitting and resonant of hope for our collective future that all this should have been done by a University of Hull whose Chancellor is another Wilberforce (Lord Wilberforce of Kingston-upon-Hull, formerly a Lord of Appeal in Ordinary)—a kinsman of that great son of Hull, and one who by the quality of his own work in the Law has added lustre to so shining a name as Wilberforce. And how doubly fitting that at the academic helm of the University should be Roy Marshall—a scholar of distinction risen out of the West Indian nation, a nation that ambition may yet mould from the archipelago that was once the 'sugar colonies'.

Let us in return acknowledge that a rather special obligation devolves upon us as children of slavery, of indenture, of colonialism. It is an obligation to ensure that no trace of servitude lingers or re-emerges in our societies under whatever guise. The legacy of servitude is a continuing one; one which only a vigilant humanity can eradicate. Wherever racism, oppression, intolerance, authoritarianism, dominion of whatever kind, encroaches on human freedom it stalks in the shadow of slavery. We must never allow ourselves the complacency of believing that the long shadow has been lifted for all time from our region. The 150th anniversary of Emancipation is a good time for the West Indies to reaffirm—West Indian people and their leaders alike—that the freedom won in 1833 shall never perish or again be sequestered. The inhuman gulf that once yawned between master and slave must never have a modern day equivalent in the West Indies of today or of tomorrow.

2

The Guyana Connection

In the end, Wilberforce's defeat at the hands of the Berbice planters was the signal that his final victory was at hand.

A vignette of Wilberforce's service to the anti-slavery cause which has escaped the studied attention of his biographers but has a rather special interest for me, illustrates well both the steadfastness with which the abolitionists laboured and the strength of the forces they were eventually to overcome.

Berbice is today a county of Guyana—the county of my birth. Initially a separate colony of the Dutch, it fell finally to Britain in 1803. Sugar estates in Berbice which were the property of the Dutch Government became the property of the British Crown—along with the slaves attached to them. Managed at first by the new colonial administration,¹⁹ the estates and the condition of the slaves appear to have 'sustained a progressive deterioration in all respects'.²⁰ A proposal to lease the estates to a private individual fell through when he refused to accept conditions affecting the welfare of the slaves attached to the lease by the abolitionist, James Stephen, acting on behalf of the Crown.²¹

Convinced of 'the impossibility of disposing of the Estates in any way so as to prevent the destruction of the Slaves, without retaining them in the possession of The Crown',²² the Chancellor of the Exchequer concurred in a plan for ensuring in relation to the estates 'such improvements as the Government itself . . . had recommended to the colonial assemblies to adopt and enforce upon private masters';²³ arrangements which 'could not, it was thought, be safely left to the colonial Government, or to individual agents on the spot, without the intimate superintendence and control of some authority in England'.²⁴

It should occasion no surprise that the 'authority in England' turned out to

¹⁹ A R F Webber, *Centenary History and Handbook of British Guiana*, British Guiana: The Argosy Company Ltd, 1931, pp 127, 141; James Rodway, *History of British Guiana* (3 vols), Georgetown: Thomson, 1891–4, Vol. 2 (1782–1833) pp 267–8, 274–5.

²⁰ *Report of the Commissioners appointed for the management of The Crown Estates in the Colony of Berbice* (London, 20 May 1816) p 1.

²¹ *ibid.*, p 2.

²² *ibid.*, p 3.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

he Wilberforce and five others (including James Stephen) duly appointed as Commissioners for the Management of the Crown's Estates in Berbice, 'and for the preservation, protection and improvement of the negro and other slaves belonging thereto'.²⁵

Wilberforce must have seen the 'Berbice Commission' as a heaven-sent opportunity to demonstrate the practicality of the humanitarian approach—to refute the constant argument that the ideas of the abolitionists spelt ruin for the estates, their owners and the trade in their produce. Certainly he welcomed the Commission and, with kindred spirits as fellow Commissioners, was well set to carry the campaign to the plantations, and to some of the worst plantations anywhere—as that pioneer of modern West Indian writing, Edgar Mittelholzer, a fellow Berbician, so well dramatised in his *Kaywana Trilogy*.²⁶

Wilberforce's zeal was in sharp contrast to the disfavour with which the intervention of the Commissioners was viewed in the colony. Even after the Commission had been appointed, the Governor was urging the Crown to lease or sell the estates 'on almost any terms'.²⁷ 'I see not the least prospect', he wrote (on 3 May 1811) 'of benefit to The Crown by holding these properties'.²⁸

The attitude of the planters was open hostility. Wilberforce and his friends, after all, had carried the Slave Trade Abolition Bill through the British Parliament only a few years earlier over the fierce objections of the West India lobby and the sugar planters in the West Indies in particular. What is more, the approaches to that Abolition Act of 1807 had been skilfully prepared by Wilberforce and his friends through the 'Guiana Order' of 1805 abolishing the slave trade to the captured Dutch colonies in Guyana by an executive order (authorised as a war measure) and then building on it the Foreign Slave Trade Act of 1806, confirming the Guiana Order, and deftly attaching to it all the prohibitions of previous and defeated Foreign Slave Bills.²⁹ The Guyana planters nurtured a special hatred for Wilberforce.

But abolition of the trade did not render slavery itself illegal. Despite the nuisance of exhortations from Whitehall, life could go on much as usual—for master and for slave. In Berbice, most of the planters were still Dutch, among the most brutal and tyrannical anywhere, and the prospect of Wilberforce and his band of 'saints' running the Crown's plantations in Berbice excited predictable consternation.

The confrontation was given a sharper edge by the circumstance that among the estates was Dageraad—a name that has passed into the history of Guyana and of slavery generally as a symbol of the bestiality of slavery and the courage

²⁵ *Commission appointing William Wilberforce Esquire, et al. to be Commissioners for the Management of The Crown's Estates in Berbice and on the Continent of South America* (London, 23 April 1811) p 1.

²⁶ Edgar Mittelholzer, *Children of Kaywana*, London: Peter Nevill, 1952; *Kaywana Blood*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1958; *Kaywana Stock*, London: Foursquare, 1962.

²⁷ *Report of the Commissioners appointed for the management of The Crown Estates in the Colony of Berbice*, p 6.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ John Pollock, *Wilberforce*, London: Constable, 1977, pp 189, 201–14; Bolt and Drescher, *op. cit.*, p 13, citing Roger T Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760–1810*, London: Macmillan, 1975.

of its victims in resisting it. Dageraad was part of the scene of one of the earliest slave uprisings, a rebellion starting at Magdalenenberg in Berbice in 1763, that came close to succeeding. Today, Cuffy, the rebellion's leader, is commemorated as Guyana's first national hero. But the rebellion failed; it was eventually put down at Dageraad with terrible vengeance.³⁰

The first act of the Commissioners was to draw up regulations for the management of the estates and slaves. They ran to seven closely printed pages³¹ and covered such matters as providing 'a copious and permanent supply of native provisions for the slaves'; guaranteeing 'their rest on the Sunday'; supplying them with 'abundant and comfortable clothing'; keeping their 'houses in proper repair'; making 'the preservation of their health, and their due medical treatment in sickness, the object of special care and attention'; never employing slave labour 'where cattle or machinery could be substituted'; accepting 'as a fundamental maxim' that making the estates more productive 'was not to be pursued by a culture more extensive or laborious than might be consistent with the most scrupulous regard to the health and comfort of the slaves'; directing 'that the cart-whip in the hands of the driver, as an instrument of compelling labour, should be laid aside'.³²

These instructions must have seemed to the planters of Berbice a model of subversion not to be endured or by example enlarged. Both the planters and the colonial government struck out against them and not only against the Commissioners but the slaves themselves. On 17 October 1815 the agent in Berbice wrote to the authorities in London:

You are aware . . . of the general prejudice which exists here against the wise and benevolent system of the Commissioners; and you also know that notwithstanding the seeming support of the Colonial Government, and all our own exertions, several instances have occurred in which individuals have not only attempted, but have actually succeeded in wreaking their vengeance upon the poor people, who have experienced the blessings of that system.³³

The agitation for the withdrawal of Wilberforce's hand was vigorously conducted and at levels of high influence. To withdraw the 'Berbice Commission' would have been unthinkable at so high a point in the campaign of the Anti-slavery Movement. Instead, what was sought by the planters was accomplished with all the semblance of propriety. By the Convention between Great Britain and the Netherlands relative to the Colonies of Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice in 1815, the British government agreed that the estates in Berbice would revert to their former owners—now identified not as the Dutch government but as the 'Berbice Association'.³⁴ Wilberforce was aghast, and he and his fellow Commissioners pleaded against this retrogression. They

³⁰ Rodway, *op. cit.*, Vol. I (1668–1781) pp 171–214; Webber *op. cit.*, pp 58–62.

³¹ *Report of the Commissioners appointed for the management of The Crown Estates in the Colony of Berbice*, pp 25–31.

³² *ibid.*, p 10.

³³ *ibid.*, p 20.

³⁴ *Convention Between Great Britain and The Netherlands, relative to the Colonies of Demerara, Essequibo, and Berbice* (London, 12 August 1815), *British State Papers, Vol. 3, 1815*, London: Ridgway, 1838, pp 394–5.

quoted the poignant report of The Revd. John Wray, their ardent representative in Berbice, who had written on 11 January 1816:

The Dutch here are very much prejudiced against everything the Commissioners have done or are doing; and I believe it is the general opinion of well-disposed people that the poor Negroes will suffer very much out of spite. Several of the Negroes came crying last Saturday evening, to know if it was true. They are well aware what must be their fate, if the Dutch become their masters.³⁵

Their principal agent had written earlier in outraged distress: 'Methinks I hear the whip sounding again without mercy'.³⁶ But the pleas were to no avail. The Convention with Holland was concluded and the plantocracy returned to the estates in the guise of the 'Berbice Association'. Reform by example was not to be. The planters and the colonial government could not be fought in the lands where slavery flourished. Only emancipation would suffice; and that was a goal for which the Anti-Slavery Movement had to struggle in London.

Berbice, Guyana, would not be fully rid of the blight of slavery for another twenty years, if we take account of the post-emancipation transition to true freedom. In those years the mantle of the Anti-Slavery Movement would pass to more sturdy shoulders than those of the aging and ailing Wilberforce but his connection with slavery and Guyana's connection with both would not end. The neanderthal myopia of the planter class was eventually to contribute directly and significantly through its own excesses to the ultimate victory which the Anti-Slavery Movement sought. In the end, Wilberforce's defeat at the hands of the Berbice planters was the signal that his final victory was at hand.

While the planters kept up their implacable opposition to emancipation and the British government temporised in the face of the growing militancy of the new abolitionists, the slaves themselves moved; and nowhere more effectively than in Demerara. On 18 August 1823, a revolt broke out on two plantations with the demand for immediate emancipation—which they genuinely believed the Crown had approved but was being denied them locally. They were in essence not so very far from the truth. Let Furneaux's account tell the story. Having attempted to negotiate,

The Governor returned to Georgetown with some loss of dignity and that night 13,000 slaves from 37 plantations joined the rebels. They were badly armed and easily subdued, but while they were in control of their plantations, their restraint was unusual. This clemency was not returned. Nearly 50 slaves were hanged and three were given the dreadful sentence of 1,000 lashes and condemned to be worked in chains, two for the remainder of their lives.³⁷

Wilberforce pamphlets calling for emancipation had been circulating on the estates. The local 'Gazette' did not conceal the planters' wrath:

Perhaps the intriguing saints at home had a hand in it—if so, they will hear with

³⁵ *Report of the Commissioners appointed for the management of The Crown Estates in the Colony of Berbice*, p 22.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p 21.

³⁷ Furneaux, *op. cit.*, p 416.

disappointment and pain that a Superintending and just Providence has frustrated their diabolical intentions.³⁸

But the very brutality of the planters in response to the revolt hastened emancipation; most pointedly in the death of The Revd. John Smith, a Non-conformist Minister on one of the estates where the revolt started. Smith was a consumptive and two months after the revolt, as he was about to return to England for health reasons, he was arrested and charged with complicity. He was vilified by the planters, tried by court-martial, convicted and sentenced to death, though with a recommendation for mercy. The Governor referred the case to England, but before a reply could be received Smith died in prison.³⁹ The revolt gave the abolitionists what they needed most—a dramatic event with which they could stir instincts of abhorrence, revulsion and shame against the system of slavery; and the Demerara planters had provided a martyr.

On 11 June 1824 the debate on Smith took place in the House of Commons. A feeble Wilberforce testified against the 'scandalous injustice' meted out to Smith, but there were many other champions: Brougham was formidable and Smith's trial was condemned by all save the West India lobby as a tragic parody of justice.⁴⁰ But more than the missionary's fate was being debated; in the end, the Demerara Revolt and the 'martyrdom' of John Smith dealt slavery a blow from which it never recovered. Hence John Ely's inclusion of the vindication of the 'Missionary of Demerara' among Wilberforce's triadic achievements.

But, most decisive of all, the slaves themselves were no longer prepared to wait. The tension was mounting and spreading. A slave revolt had taken place in Barbados in 1816. The year after the Demerara Revolt in 1824 came the turn of Jamaica. In 1831 an insurrectionary movement developed in Antigua. But the climax came with the revolt in Jamaica during Christmas of that year.⁴¹ Eric Williams sums up well the situation that had been reached on the eve of Emancipation:

In 1833, therefore, the alternatives were clear: emancipation from above, or emancipation from below. But EMANCIPATION. Economic change, the decline of the monopolists, the development of capitalism, the humanitarian agitation in British churches, contending perorations in the halls of Parliament, had now reached their completion in the determination of the slaves themselves to be free. The Negroes had been stimulated to freedom by the development of the very wealth which their labour had created.⁴²

On 29 August 1833, as Wilberforce (and Zachary Macaulay) lay dying, the Abolition of Slavery Bill passed its Second Reading in the House of Commons. The 'first-fruits' of their labour were at hand.

³⁸ Rodway, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p 240.

³⁹ Furneaux, *op. cit.*, p 417.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, pp 418–9.

⁴¹ Williams, *op. cit.*, pp 205–6.

⁴² *ibid.*, p 208.

TO BE SOLD & LET

BY PUBLIC AUCTION,

On **MONDAY** the 18th of **MAY**, 1829,

UNDER THE TREES.

FOR SALE,

THE THREE FOLLOWING

SLAVES,

VIZ.

MANIBAL, about 30 Years old, an excellent House Servant, of Good Character.

WILLIAM, about 35 Years old, a Labourer.

NANCY, an excellent House Servant and Nurse.

The **MEN** belonging to "LEECH'S" Estate, and the **WOMAN** to Mrs. D. SMYTH

TO BE LET,

On the usual conditions of the ~~Order~~ finding them in Food, Cloth & Medical

THE FOLLOWING

MALE and FEMALE

SLAVES,

OF GOOD CHARACTER.

ROBERT BAGLEY, about 20 Years old, a good House Servant.

WILLIAM BAGLEY, about 18 Years old, a Labourer.

JOHN ARMS, about 18 Years old.

JACK ANTONIA, about 40 Years old, a Labourer.

PHILIP, an Excellent Fisherman.

HARRY, about 27 Years old, a good House Servant.

LUCY, a Young Woman of good Character, used to House Work and the Nursery.

ELIZA, an Excellent Washerwoman.

CLARA, an Excellent Washerwoman.

FANNY, about 14 Years old, House Servant.

SARAH, about 14 Years old, House Servant.

Also for Sale, at Eleven o'Clock,

Fine Rice, Gram, Paddy, Books, Muslins,
Needles, Pins, Ribbons &c. &c.

AT ONE O'CLOCK, THAT CELEBRATED ENGLISH HORSE

BLUCHER,

3

Indenture: another slavery

'More than anything else, it was the regimented social and industrial control which caused indenture to approximate so closely to slavery'.

Walter Rodney

But I have run ahead of myself in speaking as I did awhile ago of Berbice as the county of my birth; for it could not be until emancipation had released the slaves from forced labour on the plantations. Only then would my forebears be brought to take their places on those same sugar estates under another kind of slavery. Through a strange twist of fate I speak to you tonight in Hull 150 years after slavery's abolition as a descendant of those who endured this other kind of slavery that emancipation spawned. There is a sense in which my identity as a West Indian might be thought to begin with the abolition of slavery. In truth, it arises from a continuum with slavery itself. Indeed, the links with Guyana were to have an uncanny persistence.

Within three years of emancipation, indeed before the brutal apprenticeship system which followed had itself been aborted, planters of Demerara had started the search for alternative labour. One of the plantations on which the Demerara revolt had started (indeed, the plantation on which The Revd. John Smith had his chapel), was owned by Sir John Gladstone, the father of Britain's future Liberal Prime Minister. In fact, as Eric Williams relates, the future Prime Minister was to make his maiden speech as MP for Newark in May 1833, speaking in defence of slavery on the family estates in Demerara; testimony, let it be allowed, more to filial feelings than Liberal principles.⁴³

By January 1836, John Gladstone was writing to an English firm in Calcutta asking them to provide 100 Coolies for five to seven years. A new traffic was beginning. It had, in fact, been foreshadowed some years earlier with the transport of Indian labourers to the Indian Ocean territories of Réunion and Mauritius. The reply, written in what their ablest chronicler, Hugh Tinker, describes as a 'curiously proto-Darwinian tone', reveals well that though much had changed with abolition, very much remained the same:

We are not aware that any greater difficulty would present itself in sending men to the West Indies (than to Mauritius), the natives being perfectly ignorant of the place they go to or the length of voyage they are undertaking . . . The Dhangurs

⁴³ *ibid.*, p 93.

are always spoken of as more akin to the monkey than the man. They have no religion, no education, and in their present state no want beyond eating, drinking and sleeping: and to procure which they are willing to labour.⁴⁴

Satisfied, John Gladstone arranged for the transportation of his Coolies, who were duly allocated to two of his other estates. The continuum could hardly be more pointed. But in truth, it was too pointed for comfort. While the planters were keen for a general scheme of immigration the Authorities in India was uneasy and the newly formed British and Foreign Anti-slavery Society began to be vigilant. In 1839 the Government of India prohibited 'overseas emigration for manual labour'⁴⁵ and the following year, despite pressure from the planters, Lord John Russell informed Parliament that he was not prepared to relax the prohibition of 'Coolie emigration' to the West Indies:

'I should be unwilling', he said, 'to adopt any measure to favour the transfer of labourers from British India to Guiana . . . I am not prepared to encounter the responsibility of a measure which may lead to a dreadful loss of life on the one hand, or, on the other, to a new system of slavery.'⁴⁶

But Russell's was not to be the last word. The measure, Indenture, was to come, and with it both the dreadful loss of life and the new system of slavery from which he had recoiled.

It came about because, wherever possible, the freed slaves fled from the land, or if not from the land, the master. The planters therefore needed labour, and from this need grew the successor form of slavery. In 1842, a House of Commons Committee blamed declining production in the West Indies on lack of labour, and declared 'that one obvious and most desirable mode of endeavouring to compensate for this diminished supply of labour, is to promote the immigration of a fresh labouring population, to such an extent as to create competition for employment'.⁴⁷ This blatant proposal to force the freed slaves back on to the land and bring down wages signposted the way to the massive use of Indian immigrant indentured labour on colonial plantations.

In 1844, only four years after Russell's rejection of it, the decision was taken to support and theoretically to control Indian emigration to the West Indies, condoning what was indeed to endure as 'a new system of slavery' for hundreds of thousands of Indians right up to World War I.

Between 1830 and 1870, possibly as many as two million Indians were transported overseas under the indenture system to labour on tropical plantations: of these, some half million went to the French and British sugar colonies⁴⁸—among them my widowed great-grandmother and her young son. The bulk of the earliest immigrants was provided by the hill tribesmen, the

⁴⁴ Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery. The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920*, London: Oxford University Press for the Institute of Race Relations, 1974, p 63.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p 69.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp v, 71.

⁴⁷ Craton, Walvin and Wright, *op. cit.*, p 344.

⁴⁸ Tinker *op. cit.*, pp 113-4.

Dhangurs, described in the reply to John Gladstone which I quoted in the cynical, dehumanised language of slavery. Later, the main recruiting was in the heavily populated regions of Benares and North Bihar, and later still among the landless Tamil labourers of South India, many of them Untouchables already crushed into semi-slavery by high-caste landlords. Many Indians exchanged a familiar servitude at the base of the Indian caste system for an even more alienated inequality as indentured plantation labourers.⁴⁹

But first they had to endure their own passage across the Kala Pani—‘The Black Waters’⁵⁰—their own diaspora, not so unlike that earlier pernicious traffic in human cargo. A Guyanese poet, Arthur Seymour, has described the Middle Passage in these terms:

A ferry of infamy from the heart of Africa
Roots torn and bleeding from their native soil
A stain of race spreading across the ocean.⁵¹

And so indeed it was. It remains an apt description of the ferry that was to succeed it, crossing from the heart of India, spreading another stain of race across the ocean.

For three-quarters of a century, in what amounted for the great majority to an ‘exile in bondage’,⁵² the plantations imposed their servitude on the Indian labourers, who were but mute pieces on the chequer-board of worldwide colonialism. Although nominally free, they were little more than slaves. Often their emigration was as a result of fraud and outright force. They endured cruel and degrading conditions of work, frequently under the former slave masters or their descendants. Perhaps the truest symbol of the unbroken chain between slavery and indenture was the tenement range or logie of the inherited ‘nigger yard’—the squalid, foul, degenerate, huddled pens that passed for housing for slave and indentured labourer alike. ‘Nigger yard’, ‘coolie yard’, ‘bound yard’, were all one; only the labels changed to match the changing style of servitude. Like the slaves, the Indian migrants were subject to the coercion of the whip, and to the new coercion of the criminal law applied for labour offences such as absenteeism and lack of identity documents which were not crimes under the general law.⁵³ The minimal wages, which were the inducement for the whole vast dislocation, were subject to arbitrary stoppages. Pay was sometimes withheld for years. The ‘double cut’ was often applied—two day’s pay docked for one day’s absence; and throughout the 80 years of indentured labour another type of ‘double cut’ remained the rule: one day’s pay fined for every day absent, but with an extra day added to the period of indenture.⁵⁴

A Royal Commission in 1870 described the indentured Indian as trapped by the law, ‘in the hands of a system which elaborately twists and turns him

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, pp 52–60.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp 46, 97.

⁵¹ Arthur Seymour, ‘First of August’ in *Selected Poems of A J Seymour*, (Georgetown, 1983) p 12.

⁵² Tinker, *op. cit.*, p 60.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p 105.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, pp 186, 188–9.

about, but always leaves him face to face with an impossibility'.⁵⁵ In his foreword to Walter Rodney's brilliant work, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*, the celebrated West Indian author, George Lamming, sums up the cruel realities of indenture thus:

Indentured labour was bound labour. It was deprived of all mobility and was therefore condemned to provide that reliability of service a crop like sugar demanded. The planter class, with the full permission of the metropolitan power, had given itself the legal right to deploy this labour as it pleased. As Rodney emphasises, here, with great relevance to many a contemporary situation, what the ruling class could not acquire by the normal play of the market forces had now been appropriated through legal sanctions. Indentured Indian labour was enslaved by the tyranny of the law that decided their relations to the land where they walked, and worked and slept.⁵⁶

Rodney himself emphasised the link between indenture and slavery with characteristic penetration:

. . . indentured labour has as its ultimate function the guaranteeing of planter control over the entire labour process . . . this alone justified the continuation of indentureship, irrespective of the cost to the individual proprietor and to the general taxpayer . . . More than anything else, it was the regimented social and industrial control which caused indenture to approximate so closely to slavery.⁵⁷

It is ironic that the death-knell of the virtually worldwide indenture system was sounded in South Africa, where labour conditions today are among the closest to organised slavery. In 1895 the young Gandhi began his lifelong struggle for freedom and decolonisation by opposing the conditions of Indian indenture.⁵⁸ As the cause gathered public support in India, Viceroy's such as Curzon and Hardinge added their considerable weight in favour of just treatment of Indians overseas. Gandhi's protest was part of the turning of the tide. Indentured emigration to Mauritius was stopped in 1910 and to Natal in 1911', in 1909 free emigration to Malaya now replaced indenture, which was ended in Assam in 1913.⁵⁹ By 1915, when Gandhi returned to India, indenture had become the central issue.⁶⁰

The last bastions were in the West Indies and Fiji. The revelations of Gandhi's friend, The Revd. C F Andrews and others about the conditions of Indians in Fiji, and particularly the moral degradation of Indian women, aroused Indian public opinion to such an extent that in 1917 the whole tottering system of indenture was declared at an end.⁶¹ For the generations that came after, as with the Africans after emancipation, there would be a struggle of a different kind; but the process of recovery could begin. The Revd. C F Andrews, I am told, held me as a tearful infant in his arms when he visited Guyana in 1929. Later, in the 1930s, at the end of a sentimental visit to Fiji, he

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p 244.

⁵⁶ G Lamming in Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*, London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982, p xxii.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p 39.

⁵⁸ Tinker, *op. cit.*, p 283 *et seq.*

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, pp 314-8.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, pp 335 *et seq.*

⁶¹ *ibid.*, pp 346-57.

placed his faith in the powers of recovery of the indentured Indians⁶²—a quality which the children of indenture shared with those of African descent who are the children of slavery in its cruellest form. Both can say, in the words of Guyana's contemporary poet, Martin Carter, and say with truth and with hope:

From the nigger yard of yesterday I come with my burden.
To the world of tomorrow I turn with my strength.⁶³

The poverty-belts of India were not, of course, the only sources of unequal labour for the nineteenth century plantations. The chronically poor anywhere were easily persuaded and exploited. Poor Europeans and especially Portuguese from Madeira had been employed earlier, but they were not enough and, unlike the Indians, could not be induced to re-indenture. China was a potential source, but of the first shipload of Chinese to British Guiana in 1852 no less than 48 per cent were dead on arrival, many of them from the fumes of poisoned rice. Moreover, Chinese women could not be recruited at all except, as the Emigration Agent in Hong Kong pointed out, by outright purchase; this direct form of slavery did not appeal to the Colonial Office.⁶⁴ However, it was possible to obtain some Chinese labourers from the barracoons of Portuguese Macao, Amoy and Canton, by purchase of prisoners or large-scale kidnapping. Over 125,000 were imported into Cuba between 1852 and 1874 in what was eventually condemned as a cruel return to slavery. From the 1860s some Chinese families emigrated from Southern China to British Guiana and to Trinidad.⁶⁵ Chinese labourers from the Straits Settlements also indentured for Mauritius. Later, the idea of cheap Chinese labour occurred to South Africa where 47,000 Chinese were admitted in 1905. The trade stopped after Chinese labour on the Rand was roundly condemned as slavery by British public opinion, including labour leaders, the following year.⁶⁶

It seemed that wherever sugar flourished, so grew the bitterness of servitude. Even in the sugar plantations of Queensland, in tropical Australia, there was an attempt to solve labour problems by the practice of 'blackbirding'—the kidnapping from the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), the Solomon and the Gilbert Islands (now Kiribati) of labourers who were supposed to sign contracts they could not read. This traffic was paralleled by a similar French trade in African engagés to the French Indian Ocean Islands, which was eventually replaced by indentured Indian labour.⁶⁷ The 'ferry of infamy' continued to ply; and across many oceans.

⁶² *ibid.*, p 381.

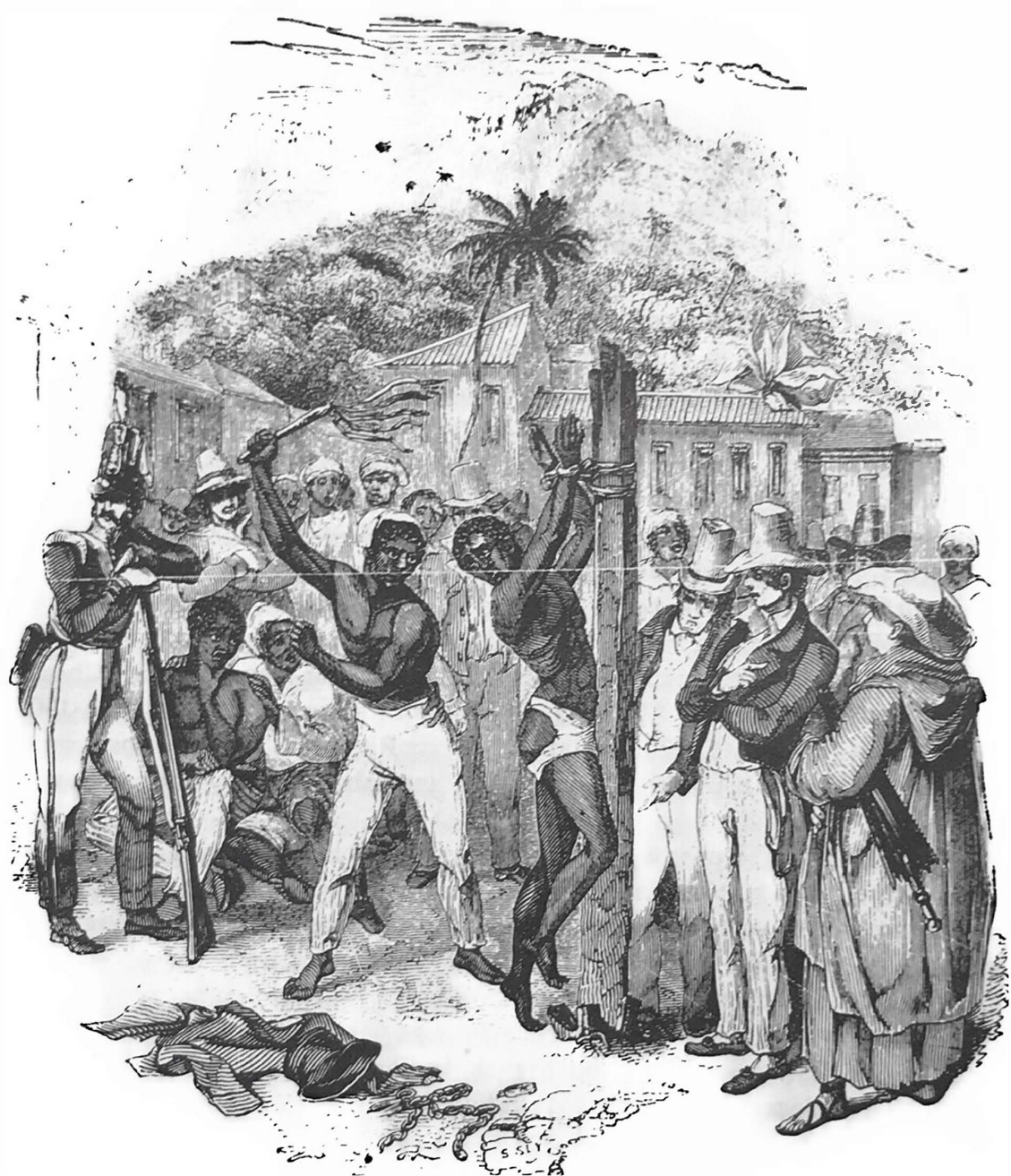
⁶³ Martin Carter, 'I come from the nigger yard' in *Poems of Resistance from Guyana*, Georgetown: Guyana Printers, 1979; first published London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1954, p 38.

⁶⁴ Tinker, *op. cit.*, pp 94–5.

⁶⁵ F R Augier, S C Gordon, D G Hall and M Reckord, *The Making of the West Indies*, London: Longman, 1960, p 202.

⁶⁶ Tinker, *op. cit.*, pp 299–300.

⁶⁷ Lloyd, *op. cit.*, Appendix G, 'Blackbirding in the Pacific', pp 291–2.



4

Apartheid: slavery's modern face

Apartheid is the most cruel legacy of slavery—
carrying the stain of race into the end years
of the twentieth century.

Slavery is more than a system; indeed, for slavery to be formalised by law and institutionalised into a system, a measure of bigotry is essential—often gross, sometimes subtle. In this sense, slavery begins in the human mind, in the distorted manner in which one man looks upon another and makes a perverted judgement enabling him to deny that those enslaved are equal members of one human race. Slavery rests on an assumption of superiority by the enslaver. And it is always 'the other', perceived as consciously different, who is enslaved. In this difference lies the beginning of the denial of common humanity.

The basis of 'otherness' may be religion: European Christians and Circassians were for centuries enslaved as 'infidels' by the Islamic Turks and Moors. The difference may be one of class: the West Indian and American plantations were worked in their earliest decades by indentured poor whites or by white criminals. The ruling groups within some African tribes sold their own serf class into the plantation slave trade. The simple distinction between one nation and another, or between one tribe and another, has often been the basis for slavery; which explains why warfare has historically been the most frequent source of slaves.

Race has been a primal reason for 'otherness', with the white race mainly as slave owners and the black race mainly as slaves. But, as we have seen, slavers are nothing if not eclectic; after Emancipation, brown men and yellow, Indians and Chinese, made acceptable substitutes. Academics dispute whether the motivation behind the beginnings of plantation slavery in the New World was purely economic, or whether it was from the start racial, as it certainly became. What is clear is that perceived differences of race and colour allowed awareness of 'otherness' to be placed readily at the service of the economic system of slavery. It was dangerously easy, if appallingly unjust, to proceed from the observed reality that most slaves were black men and women to the irrational belief that black men and women were, and should be, slaves.

The history of our own time affords the most complete example of 'otherness' as a reason for enslavement. Nazi Germany used pseudo-scientific

theories based on perverted Darwinism to justify the persecution and enslavement of the Jews; for what were the concentration camps but the ghettos of a vast slave labour force? Even the motto on the entrance gates of one camp, Sachsenhausen, cynically underlined the point: *Arbeit Macht Frei*—‘Work Makes Free’.⁶⁸ But the camps were not reserved only for the Jews, their most numerous victims; within them were to be found any who had opposed themselves by their otherness to the Nazis: political dissenters, members of religious minorities, gypsies, homosexuals, Slavs, prisoners-of-war, even (another irony in that supremely sick system) the mentally ill. Indeed, the category of ‘the other’ was on the verge of encompassing anyone who was not an Aryan German Nazi, and in the end the psychosis was becoming self-destructive, with the masters forced to look among themselves for their slaves.

That brings us dangerously close to the present; close enough to put us on notice for our own times. Frantz Fanon recognised the totalitarian impulse as springing from the assumption of superiority when he wrote: ‘It is the racist who creates his inferior’, and asked the question: ‘Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?’⁶⁹ No question is more pertinent amid the anomy and anonymity of our multiracial modern cities where it is all too easy to become alienated from one’s fellows, to perceive them as strangers, transforming them into the ‘others’ from whom we can justify withholding what Wilberforce so well described as ‘that equitable consideration and that fellow-feeling which are due from man to man’.⁷⁰ But who better to explore these contemporary challenges within this series than Lord Scarman who will be speaking on them later.

The Martinique poet, Aimé Césaire, correctly perceived that Nazism was the importation into Europe of a system with which black people were all too familiar, the seeds of which had already been sown by the Europeans themselves. ‘Before they became its victims’, he wrote, ‘they were its accomplices; that Nazism they tolerated before they succumbed to it, they exonerated it, they closed their eyes to it, they legitimised it because until then it had been employed only against non-European peoples’.⁷¹

It is one of the least pardonable crimes against contemporary humanity that under the label of ‘*apartheid*’, false doctrines of racial superiority continue to be employed against the non-European peoples of South Africa, and most viciously against its black people. And *apartheid* is not without its accomplices beyond South Africa; those who, failing to identify with its victims as fellow humans, would tolerate, exonerate, close their eyes to, and legitimate it. Yet,

⁶⁸ F V Grunfeld, *The Hitler File*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974, p 318.

⁶⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, London: Granada/Paladin, 1972, pp 65, 165.

⁷⁰ William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire on behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies*, London: Hatchards, 1823, p 43.

⁷¹ Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956, pp 14–15, quoted in Fanon, *op. cit.*, p 64.

apartheid is the most cruel legacy of slavery—carrying the stain of race into the end years of the twentieth century.

One hundred and fifty years after Wilberforce, consider the reality of South Africa: 87 per cent of the land reserved for 4.5 million whites, 20-22 million blacks, 70 per cent of the population, relegated to the remaining 13 per cent of scrub land—denied even the right to belong; legislated out of their own country; deemed to be migrant workers from fantasy 'black homelands'. As with the slavery of the plantation colonies, the laws of *apartheid* discriminate overtly between one class and another; in South Africa, between the whites and all others, with the totally disenfranchised black Africans the most oppressed of all. As with slavery, *apartheid* is rooted in 'otherness', the otherness of 'separate development'. As with slavery, it is the 'otherness' of race that sustains *apartheid*'s evil creed.

Apartheid resembles slavery also in its economic rationale. Its basic motive is to provide a permanent subject labour force kept rigidly separate from the ruling class. The Bantustans to which every black South African must by law belong, and the townships where the great majority actually live, are nothing other than segregated pools of cheap labour. The mines and farms of South Africa could not function without that labour. And the means of ensuring control and domination of the labour supply is the rigidly-enforced 'pass laws', regulating movement, entrenching insecurity, denying civil liberties, even dividing husbands from wives and children. Pass laws, let us remember, were also a feature of the system of plantation slavery. It was wide protest against *apartheid*'s pass laws which led to the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960: shades of the West Indian slave rebellions of the 1820s and the last-ditch intransigence of the West Indian planters.

Apartheid is another slavery; yet, it is possible to descend through the *apartheid* system, as through the circles of Dante's hell, to a condition of ultimate repression indistinguishable from slavery at its worst. South Africa rejects every exposé as propaganda—as do its apologists. So let us look to the British Press. On 30 March this year *The Guardian* reported on the protests of black leaders in Namibia at the token six-year prison sentence passed on a white farmer found guilty of battering to death a 20 year-old black parole prisoner sent to work on his farm.⁷² A photograph produced at the trial showed the farmer holding a chain securing his badly beaten victim. Even the shackles of slavery have been bequeathed to *apartheid*. The manacles in the Wilberforce Museum are not mere relics to remind us of past evils; they are grim testimony of *apartheid*'s present inhumanities. What we are dealing with here is an imprisoned labour force being worked and beaten to death with impunity.

In 1980 the number of black prisoners working for white farmers was at least 90,000, about one-eighth of the total agricultural work force.⁷³ After arrest for minor pass laws infringements, many of these forced labourers are

⁷² *The Guardian* (London and Manchester) 30 March 1983.

⁷³ Allen Cook, *Akin to Slavery: Prison Labour in South Africa*, London: International Defence and Aid Fund, 1983, *passim* for this and subsequent paragraph.

directed straight to the farms without trial, under the 'parole' scheme. Others who cannot find employment accept placement on farms by the 'aid centres' as an alternative to deportation to the Bantustans. Another mechanism to achieve the same effect is the 'youth service camp'. The 'aid centres' are administered by the euphemistically-named Department of Cooperation and Development—a new name for the Department of Native Affairs. Even private enterprise mental hospitals have provided contract labour under conditions of brutal compulsion for major national and international companies and for the gold mines, with the patients often paid only in sweets or cigarettes; 11,000 are believed to have been thus abused in 1975; since then an Act of Parliament has prevented the publication of further information.

The true depth of the system is reached in the farm prisons. These are built at farmers' cost and long-term prisoners allocated to each farmer in proportion to his investment; thereafter the prisoners effectively become the farmers' property. A 1971 advertisement for the sale of grain, wine and sheep mentioned 'winery shed and ten convicts' as among the assets. Here, still, is the dehumanisation, the reification, of true slavery. It is a monstrous system, with atrocities (such as the recent example from Namibia), floggings, torture and extremes of sadism a frequent occurrence. Court sentences on anyone charged are often minimal or not even implemented, and the police sometimes aid farmers in their brutality.

Since this lecture was delivered, *The Times* (London) of 6 June 1983 carried a report from its 'Own Correspondent' in Johannesburg on the 'white man who celebrated his nineteenth birthday by going out and beating a black man to death with karate sticks'.⁷⁴ He was found guilty of culpable homicide by the Pretoria Regional Court and sentenced to 'serve only 2000 hours "periodic punishment" at the weekends, of which 800 hours have been suspended conditionally for five years . . . He will be free to continue his job on the railways during the week'.

History will record as a twentieth century aberration our failure to show resolution in the completion of this unfinished business of slavery's abolition. How can the future judge the power-brokers of our age save in terms of hypocrisy and double-standards when they justify their acquiescence in *apartheid* in terms of solicitude for 'allies' in the contest between East and West, or simply in terms of national interest in relation to 'trade and investment'? The former is wholly misguided and contradictory and antithetical to the true interests of any who seek the goodwill of Africa. The latter is the modern-day equivalent of what a nineteenth century Parliamentary critic of those who wished to ban slave-grown goods while not attacking the system at source called 'lucrative humanity'.⁷⁵ A moral choice is incumbent on all who would trade with *apartheid*, and there can only be one decision: morality and expediency, humanitarianism and 'policy' demand that South Africa be made to dismantle *apartheid*.

⁷⁴ *The Times* (London) 6 June 1983.

⁷⁵ Williams, *op. cit.*, p 170.

But I go further. I invite each and every one of you, citizens of Hull and other friends, to question whether any can take pride in the work and achievements of Wilberforce and the Anti-Slavery Movement if, as individuals, as a nation, as a world community, we fail to take a righteous and uncompromising stand against *apartheid*. By what quirk of logic, what twist of values can we celebrate emancipation and tolerate *apartheid*? We tarnish and depreciate the memory of Wilberforce so long as slavery South Africa style flaunts its evil and defies our will to curb it, sensing our resolve to be a fragile thing.

Even now South Africa defies that will as in yesterday's (23 May) acts of aggression against Mozambique, compounding illegality with untruth. Let us be clear of one thing. Those who struggle against *apartheid*, who are driven to take up arms against it, are not the ones we ought to condemn as 'terrorists'. They are the counterparts, 150 years later, of the slaves who in rebellion and uprising throughout the West Indian plantations threw off their chains and made a stand for freedom. Oppression is no less terrorism because it wears an official uniform. Those who fight for freedom do not because 'terrorists' merely because they cannot form themselves into conventional armies. The real terrorists in Southern Africa are not those who help the oppressed, but the oppressors themselves who command the heights of economic, social, political and military power in South Africa to sustain an evil system of racism that is itself the 'alpha' and 'omega' of terrorism against the human personality. A system that ineluctably will breed its own responses of violent retribution.

Can any act of commemoration of the historic achievement of 1833 be anything but a charade unless it rouses in us something of the passion of Wilberforce and the 'saints' in renouncing for our world and our time the legacy of slavery that is *apartheid*? Two hundred years ago the citizens of Hull sent Wilberforce to Westminster. Is there any truer way of commemorating his life of service to mankind than to send out from Hull this year the message that his memory demands: that *apartheid* is the same 'moral deformity' the same 'crime before God', as slavery is; that it must be viewed with the same detestation, and reprobated with the same boldness as was slavery 150 years ago; that Britain that led the way then must lead the way now; this time reinforced by a Commonwealth which itself became possible because of that first step in acknowledgement of the universality of the dignity of man which Wilberforce and Hull helped Britain to take.

And what a moral compulsion devolves upon West Indians to yield to none in abhorrence of *apartheid* and in resolve to stand against it. The spirit of every slave worked and beaten and degraded on West Indian sugar plantations, of every rebel against slavery hanged in the cause of freedom from Guyana to Jamaica, rises up to demand of us that abhorrence and resolve. They suffered in vain if the societies their suffering moulded can be ambivalent, or unequivocal and passionate only in words, towards another slavery against other Africans 150 years after their own freedom was won. We have no trade or investments to forego; but our sportsmen can help the world

to make a stand against *apartheid*; and we can, we must, help our sportsmen to do so. It will not be hard to be resolute if we remember what our forebears endured 150 years ago, and how much they needed the support of others in both moral and political terms to win their own freedom from enslavement.

5

A Feudal World

We are now confronted . . . not with one state
and two people but with one earth and two worlds.

Yet one further word remains to be spoken in reminder of the struggle against those inequalities that are at least in part the legacy of slavery. When 150 years ago the British Parliament took the final step in the abolition of slavery in lands under British jurisdiction, it was to be the beginning of a wider process of the abolition of slavery worldwide. It was, alas, the beginning also of the colonisation of Africa.⁷⁶ Great humanitarian instincts had played a powerful role, even if not an exclusive one, in putting an end to the systematic enslavement of man by man. But neither those instincts nor the religious mandates to which they were a response were a match for the economic forces which underpinned Europe's unseemly 'scramble for Africa' and the legacy of racism which slavery bequeathed to imperialism.

That legacy made the decolonisation process immeasurably harder and longer and in places more embittered than it should have been. But, by and large, the process itself has been accomplished. The Commonwealth was made possible because of it and because of the manner of its accomplishment. Yet, in one sense, decolonisation was a notional equalisation; the deeper economic disparities remained—inequalities embedded in the structures of a world economic system that had not yet recognised the convergence of principle and policy, the conjuncture of human solidarity and global interdependence. The moral imperatives for change, the hard-headed compulsions of mutual need which demand it, are unavoidable. As Barbara Ward once memorably declared: 'We dare not forget the really poor, who are the great majority, because prosperity, like peace, is indivisible'.⁷⁷

Yet, the reality of life within the poverty belts of Africa and Asia and within the many enclaves of absolute poverty beyond them, is that about one billion of 'the world's huddled masses' are caught in the trap of poverty and are still yearning to be free. Theirs, to use former World Bank President Robert McNamara's stark description:

is a condition of life so limited by illiteracy, malnutrition, disease, high infant

⁷⁶ Bolt and Drescher, *op. cit.*, pp 363 *et seq*; Lloyd, *op. cit.*, pp 156–62.

⁷⁷ Barbara Ward, cited by Brian Johnson, *The Environmentalist*, Vol. 1, Lausanne: Elsevier Sequoia S A, 1981, p 96.

mortality and low life-expectancy as to deny its victims the very potential of genes with which they are born.⁷⁸

How far are they from the margins of slavery? Are they not bound hopelessly in servitude to economic forces they cannot even comprehend, much less resist? In his book, *India—A Wounded Civilization*, V S Naipaul described the reality of grinding poverty as he found it in a village in Bihar:

In the village I went to, only one family out of four had land; only one child out of four went to school; only one man out of four had work. For a wage calculated to keep him only in food for the day he worked, the employed man, hardly exercising a skill, using the simplest tools and sometimes no tools at all, did the simplest agricultural labour. Child's work; and children, being cheaper than men, were preferred; so that, suicidally, in the midst of an over-population which no one recognised . . . children were a source of wealth, available for hire after their eighth year for, if times were good, fifteen rupees, a dollar fifty a month. Generation followed generation quickly here, men as easily replaceable as their huts of grass and mud and matting . . . Cruelty no longer had a meaning: it was life itself.⁷⁹

What Naipaul saw in India was but a sample of the hell-holes of absolute poverty that exist in all the continents of the South. Even in those countries that we categorise euphemistically as 'low income' and 'least developed', a year's earnings amount to just about two weeks social security benefit for an unemployed worker in Europe. In the report of the Brandt Commission which we called *North-South: A Programme for Survival*, we said this:

The crisis through which international relations and the world economy are now passing present great dangers, and they appear to be growing more serious. We believe that the gap which separates rich and poor countries—a gap so wide that at the extremes people seem to live in different worlds—has not been sufficiently recognised as a major factor in this crisis. It is a great contradiction of our age that these disparities exist—and are in some respects widening—just when human society is beginning to have a clearer perception of how it is interrelated and of how North and South depend on each other in a single world economy.⁸⁰

. . . The extent to which the international system will be made more equitable is essentially a matter for political decision. We are looking for a world based less on power and status, more on justice and contract; less discretionary, more governed by fair and open rules.⁸¹

Power and status again, the old enemies of freedom; justice and contract, the goals towards which Wilberforce reached. But between the idea and the reality still falls the long shadow of slavery. How much has changed, how much remains the same! Servitude within the feudal societies of Europe preceded slavery in the dominions abroad, just as domestic reform preceded

⁷⁸ Robert McNamara, cited by S S Ramphal, *One World to Share. Selected speeches of the Commonwealth Secretary-General, 1975-9*, London: Hutchinson Benham, 1979, p 78.

⁷⁹ V S Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, London: Deutsch, 1977, p 28.

⁸⁰ *North-South: A Programme for Survival* (The Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues under the Chairmanship of Willy Brandt) London: Pan Books, 1980, p 30.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p 65.

abolition; both were essentially inhumanities within national societies. We must now widen our horizons, looking to our global society and the unequal relations of states and people within it. It is a fearful prospect; one that should fill us with resolve to ensure that the malignancy of otherness deepened by the stain of race does not perpetuate such rank divisions in the state of man. In one sense, the difference between the 18th and 19th centuries on the one hand, and the 20th on the other is that we are now confronted not with so many separate feudal societies but with a human society that bears all the attributes of a feudal state: not with one state and two people but with one earth and two worlds. The latter cannot endure any more than could the former. Challenge is now unavoidable, not least because interdependence of the human condition has acquired a sharper focus in so many areas—in international security, in the preservation of the environment, in conservation of the resources of a small planet that an expanding human race must share, but, most pointedly of all, in the world economy.

For even the strongest economies, policies, it is clear, now have to be informed by the fact that the 'global economy' is a reality; that the self-interest of any nation can only be pursued effectively through taking account of the mutual needs and interests of all nations. In the area of international cooperation for development, therefore, not only is it right to do good, it has become necessary as well. It was not lightly that the Brandt Commission urged that if the world fails 'to become stronger by becoming a just and humane society' it will move towards its destruction.⁸² We have lost the option of ignoring our interdependent state—of ignoring the reality that we have become one world. And since we can no longer ignore it, we must respond to it.

Indeed it is remarkable how true today rings the argument of mutual interest that Wilberforce used in the 1820s in a narrower context. As he girded himself in 1823 for the foundation of the Anti-Slavery Society and the long push towards emancipation, he was not afraid to bolster the claims of humanity and justice by the argument of self-interest. In his *Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire on behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* he asserted that:

While we are loudly called on by justice and humanity to take measures without delay for improving the condition of our West Indian slaves, self-interest also inculcates the same duty, and with full as clear a voice.⁸³

The appeal to self-interest was not the core of a case coated with humanitarian concern; that concern itself was central; the call to self-interest was designed to bring along those whom the moral imperative was not strong enough to move.

The free trade doctrines of Adam Smith had by then taken deep root; they provided the conjuncture which Wilberforce needed. It was an age, he declared, in language that is as apposite to our age as well:

in which it has been incontrovertibly established by the soundest of our political economists—that the base and selfish, though plausible, views, which formerly

⁸² *ibid.*, p 33.

⁸³ Wilberforce, *op. cit.*, p 68.

prevailed so widely among statesmen, and taught them to believe that the prosperity and elevation of their country would be best promoted by the impoverishment and depression of its neighbours, were quite fallacious; and when we have now learned the opposite and beneficent lesson—that every nation is, in fact, benefited by the growing affluence of others and that all are thus interested in the well-being and improvement of all.⁸⁴

Accordingly, as with slavery 150 years ago, the demands of compassion, of morality, of humanitarianism, even of human solidarity, do not today stand alone; they need not contend in vain against the claims of national interest. They are in fact being constantly reinforced by the compulsions of mutual interest. We have reached in our global society that conjuncture of principle and prudence, of morality and 'sound policy', that made the abolition of slavery possible 150 years ago and makes inevitable now the eradication of its continuing legacy of servitude and inequality.

There is no higher need than that we should understand this convergence well, should acknowledge that we have to find in our minds the way to do what we know in our hearts to be right; should recognise that poverty is not only a stain spread across our civilisation, but also an economic blight that will ultimately destroy the first fruits of that civilisation and the prosperity of those who would reap them. Humanity must respect worldwide the precept that Wilberforce laboured for all his life in the context of slavery and knew at the end had prevailed; namely, that justice and survival are conjoined; that the task is to bring man's mutual interests and his moral impulse together; that Auden's words do remain true: 'We must love one another or die'.⁸⁵

Wilberforce was driven forward by a profound conviction that slavery transgressed the limits of immorality within community. We must look now to a wider community and to a new morality, but the limits are the same. Why do we not answer the call of their transgression? Is it because we have lived for so long in a world of separate worlds that we find it hard to recognise the one world we have become? Or are we reluctant to give up our comforting illusions of 'otherness', to acknowledge our inseparable humanity, fearful lest morality prove too fragile a support for oneness, or our self-interest be left unprotected and unserved?

Our political and economic systems must now provide conceptual space for the reality of an interdependent world economy. We talk, all of us, about that 'world economy' and we accept its interdependent character even as we acknowledge its existence. Yet, we continue to act as if the 'world economy' is merely the sum total of national economies, a statistic extrapolated from national economic reality.

At a time which has seen interest rates reach unprecedented levels, which has produced greater unemployment in the industrialised world than at any time in the living memory of anyone under fifty, which has produced a debt problem of such staggering proportions that it threatens countries whose credit-

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, pp 69–70.

⁸⁵ W H Auden, 'September 1, 1939' in *Selected Poems*, London: Faber, 1979, p 88.

worthiness has previously been beyond question; which has seen commodity prices fall in real terms to their lowest levels since the 1930s; which has produced foreign exchange deficits for the vast majority of developing countries so severe that they are depriving many an economy of even the capacity for survival: in a time such as this, can we any longer pretend that the answers are in the keeping of individual states; that the solutions can be produced through domestic policies alone?

Yet, while the world has accepted at one level of perception the reality of a world economy, while governments themselves speak of commitments to world economic recovery, most continue to act as though that world economy does not itself need attention and management. Governments, international institutions, the banking community, transnational corporations, all know that it does; yet the skills of management so exalted at home remain withheld at the global level. The collective search for world economic recovery is deferred and we rush like lemmings—separately but together—towards the abyss of economic disaster, continuing the pretence that our fate is ours alone, that humanity is separable.

Two hundred years after Wilberforce went from Hull to Westminster, are we willing to accept from our human society the kind of world satirically endorsed in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*:

Some in light and some in darkness
That's the kind of world we mean.
Those you see are in the light part.
Those in darkness don't get seen?⁸⁶

Do we really believe that such a feudal world could now subsist? If we do, we will have learnt nothing from the history of the Anti-Slavery Movement. We will be as purblind and myopic as the old plantocracies, unable to recognise that they could not hold back the dawn and that if instead they welcomed it they too would share in the light and warmth it shed.

'One day', said Martin Luther King, speaking of his dream—not just a dream for America but for all the world: 'One day, the sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood'.⁸⁷

We are all bidden to that feast, but until we bridge the differences that still divide mankind, barriers of race and poverty, of ideology and of religion, above all, the barriers in our minds that preserve the prejudice of 'otherness', we cannot hope to reach that table. We must begin to make our way towards it; how better to do so than by following the signposts established by Wilberforce over 150 years ago in his exhortation against slavery:

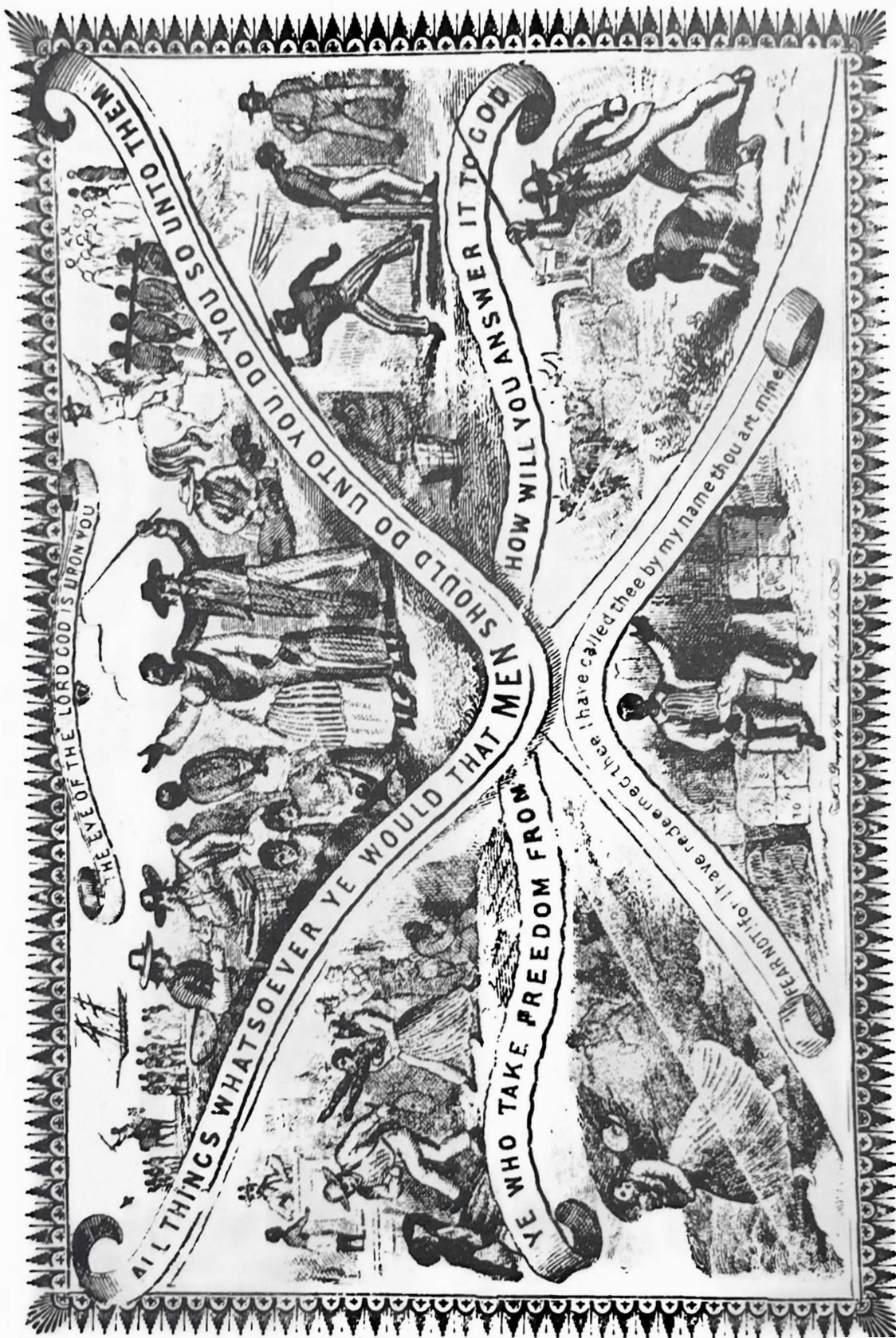
Let us act with energy suited to the importance of the interests for which we

⁸⁶ Bertolt Brecht (R Manheim and J Willett, eds), *The Threepenny Opera*, London: Methuen, 1979, p 84.

⁸⁷ Martin Luther King, speech to Civil Rights March on Washington, 28 August 1963, cited in D L Lewis, *Martin Luther King. A Critical Biography*, London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1970, p 288.

contend. Justice, humanity and sound policy prescribe our course, and will culminate our efforts."⁸

⁸ Wilberforce, *op. cit.*, p 77.





WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

William Wilberforce was born in Hull on 24 August 1759, the only son of a Hull merchant. After leaving Cambridge he was elected MP for Hull in 1780 and four years later became MP for Yorkshire. A leading Evangelical Christian of the 'Clapham Sect', Wilberforce led the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade in Parliament while the Abolition Society rallied public opinion. He was vigorously opposed, principally by the West India lobby; but in 1807 the 'Abolitionists' achieved their first victory with the Act to abolish the slave trade. However, slavery itself continued to flourish, and the Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1822, redoubled the struggle. In 1833, as Wilberforce lay dying, the Abolition of Slavery Bill was passed. He died on 29 July 1833, a month before it became law. He had devoted his life and his considerable parliamentary talents to the abolition of slavery under British law. It was to be an achievement of worldwide significance.

SHRIDATH S RAMPHAL

Shridath Ramphal has been Commonwealth Secretary-General since 1975. He comes from Guyana where he was formerly Minister of Foreign Affairs and Justice; but regards himself as belonging to a nascent West Indian nation. In June 1983 he delivered a Public Lecture in the series 'Out of Slavery' organised by the University of Hull to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery Act 1833, and the death of William Wilberforce. 'Sonny' Ramphal speaks out of the West Indian and wider Third World experience drawing attention to the continuing legacy of servitude and inequality. In his Lecture he brings together themes that have been prominent in his work: the task of bringing man's mutual interests and his moral impulse together, the evil of racism in modern society and the need for our political and economic systems to provide 'conceptual space' for the reality of an interdependent world economy. They are all underpinned by the special West Indian experience of slavery and indenture.





Shridath Ramphal has been Secretary General since 1975. He comes from Guyana where he was formerly Minister of Foreign Affairs and Justice; he regards himself as belonging to a nation of West Indian origin. In June 1983 he delivered a Public Lecture in the series 'Our Heritage' organised by the University of Hull to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery Act 1833, and the death of William Wilberforce. 'Some of the issues speak out of the West Indian and the Third World experience drawing attention to the continuing legacy of slavery and inequality. In his Lecture he brings together themes that have been prominent in his work: the task of history, the national interests and the global issues together, the role of the individual in the development of the nation and the world, and the importance of the individual in the development of the nation and the world.