

The Age of Exploration: Primary Source: William Wilberforce

William Wilberforce, Speech Delivered in the House of Commons, May 12, 1789

Primary and Secondary Sources Activity The Age of Exploration

Background

British merchants and politicians viewed the transporting of slave labor to their colonies as essential to the country's commercial interests. Enslaved people provided a cost-effective workforce for plantations that produced goods, and resources required to purchase and transport these people supported the growth of shipbuilding and other industries back home. Most merchants and politicians either ignored or were unaware of the personal consequences of the slave trade, and the majority of individuals who were actively involved in trading remained silent.

As the slave trade grew, however, an increasing number of people in England and the colonies became aware of the barbaric practices associated with it. The Society of Friends, called Quakers, was one of the first organized groups to voice public opposition to the practice. Quakers were strict pacifists and proponents of the Golden Rule—"Do to others what you would have them do to you." In the mid-1700s, influential colonial Quaker leaders lectured and wrote pamphlets urging fellow Quakers to denounce slave trading and actively work for its abolition.

In England at about the same time, a small but dedicated group of religious and political leaders—including scholar and philanthropist Granville Sharp, clergyman Thomas Clarkson, and Parliament member William Wilberforce—worked together, publicly and privately, to protest British involvement in slave trading. Motivated by horrifying eyewitness accounts of physical and emotional hardships that enslaved people suffered, these reformers established a committee in 1787 for the specific purpose of drafting a strategy for petitioning Parliament to abolish the slave trade. The task was a long and difficult one. Twenty years later, in 1807, after enduring many setbacks and defeats, they succeeded in bringing about the passage of the Slave Trade Abolition Act, which ended British participation in the African slave trade.

Primary Source Reading

Directions: The brief excerpts that follow are taken from a speech that William Wilberforce delivered in the House of Commons on May 12, 1789. It is admired today for its eloquence, clear presentation of facts and arguments, and subtle use of persuasive techniques. Read the excerpts. Then answer the questions.

When I consider the magnitude of the subject I am to bring before the House . . . it is impossible for me not to feel both terrified and concerned at my own inadequacies for such a task. . . . I mean not to accuse any one, but to take shame upon myself, in common, indeed, with the whole parliament of Great Britain for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty. . . .

[The transporting of slaves] in my opinion is the most wretched part of the whole subject. . . . Let anyone imagine himself 6 or 700 of these wretches chained two by two, surrounded with every object that is nauseous and disgusting, diseased, and struggling under every kind of wretchedness! . . . The slaves . . . are so wrung with misery at leaving their country, that it is the constant practice to set sail in the night, lest they should be sensible of their departure. . . . when West-Indian planters and merchants retorted it upon me that it was the British parliament had authorized this trade . . . It naturally suggested to me, how strange it was that providence . . . should so have constituted the world, as to make one part of it dependent for its existence on the depopulation and devastation of another. . . .

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There is a principle above every thing which is political; and when I reflect on the command which says, 'Thou shalt do no murder' believing the authority to be divine, how could I dare to set up any reasonings of my own against it? . . . The nature and all the circumstances of this trade are now laid open to us; we can no longer plead ignorance. . . . this House must decide, and must justify to all the world, and to their own consciences, the rectitude . . . of their decision. . . . Let not parliament be the only body that is insensible to the principles of national justice. Let us make reparation to Africa, so far as we can, by establishing a trade upon true commercial principles. . . .

—William Wilberforce, from speech delivered in the House of Commons, May 12, 1789

1. **Making Inferences** Why do you think Wilberforce expressed his inadequacy for the task he had taken on?

2. **Determining Cause and Effect** Why did he blame all of Parliament, including himself, for allowing the slave trade to continue, rather than specifically blaming only those who supported the trade?

3. **Drawing Conclusions** The examples of abusive treatment included here are only a few of many that Wilberforce detailed in his speech. Why do you think he included such unsavory facts?

4. **Analyzing and Evaluating Ethical Issues** How did West Indies merchants defend the abusive trade practices? What was Wilberforce's response? What effect do you think he wanted it to have on Parliament?

5. **Analyzing Primary Sources** In closing, what decision did Wilberforce ask Parliament to make, and what reasons did he give for its members to make that decision?
