

**FAMILIAR SKETCH OF
THE LATE WILLIAM
WILBERFORCE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649284726

Familiar sketch of the late William Wilberforce by Joseph John. Gurney

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Cover @ 2017

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JOSEPH JOHN. GURNEY

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WILLIAM WILBERFORCE.

BY

JOSEPH JOHN GURNEY.

NORWICH:

JOSIAH FLETCHER, UPPER HAYMARKET;

LONDON: W. BALL, ALDINE CHAMBERS.

1838.

116.

THE Sketch contained in the following pages was written in 1833, and a few copies printed for circulation among the author's friends. The printer, however, received instructions not to publish it, till the *Life of Wilberforce*, by his sons, was before the public. This circumstance will explain why this little publication has been so long delayed, and why it now makes its appearance in the absence of its author, who is pursuing, in a foreign land, those labours of christian benevolence, which have so long been his delight and honour in our own.

NORWICH, JUNE, 1838.

FAMILIAR SKETCH.

I TRUST that the biography of this statesman-like philanthropist and christian senator will be given to the public by some of his friends who are well informed of his history, when he was in the zenith of his powers. There can be no doubt that in the times of Pitt, Fox, Sheridan, and even Burke, Wilberforce often displayed, in parliament, a flow of oratory which was fully on a level with theirs. Indeed, I have heard it asserted that, on particular occasions, his wit, volubility, and vivacity in speaking, exceeded any thing which could

be heard, even in those days of the giants, within the walls of parliament.

When I first enjoyed the pleasure of his acquaintance, he was in his fifty-seventh year; the great object of his fervent efforts of mind had long since been accomplished; he had exchanged the representation of a vast county for that of a small borough; and was no longer prominent in the *strife* of parliamentary business. His health too was feeble; and his voice, although still melodious, had lost something of its strength.

Nevertheless, even at that period, his eloquence was delightful; it fully corresponded with those living words of the poet, which, after Wilberforce's death, were applied to him, in the house of commons, by his faithful friend and successor in the race of humanity, Thomas Fowell Buxton:

A veteran warrior in the christian field,
Who never saw the sword he could not wield;
Who, when occasion justified its use,
Had wit as bright as ready to produce;

Could fetch from records of an earlier age,
 Or from philosophy's enlightened page,
 His rich materials, and regale the ear
 With strains it was a luxury to hear.

I was introduced to Wilberforce in the autumn of 1816. He was staying with his family by the sea-side, at Lowestoft, in Suffolk. I well remember going over from the place of my own residence in the neighbourhood of Norwich, partly for the purpose of seeing so great a man, and partly for that of persuading him to join our party, at the time of the approaching anniversaries of the Norfolk Bible and Church Missionary Societies. I was then young; but he bore my intrusion with the utmost kindness and good humour, and I was much delighted with the affability of his manners, as well as with the fluency and brightness of his conversation. Happily he acceded to my solicitations; nor could I hesitate in accepting his only condition—that I should take into my house

not only himself, but his whole family group—consisting of his amiable lady and several of their children, two clergymen who acted in the capacity of tutors, his private secretary, servants, &c. We were, indeed, to be quite full of guests, independently of this accession; but what house would not prove elastic in order to receive the abolisher of the slave trade?

In point of fact, by dint of various contrivances, we managed the affair with tolerable facility. It was a large party composed of persons of several denominations, who were all anxious to promote the extension of the kingdom of their Redeemer; and Wilberforce was the star and life of our circle.

The picture which the dead leave on the minds of their survivors is not always lively or distinct. Although we may have fondly loved them, and may hallow the memory of their good qualities, we cannot always summon their image before us,

and by the power of conception, gaze on their features, and listen to their voice; but I venture to express my conviction, that no one who has been accustomed to observe Wilberforce, will ever find the slightest difficulty in picturing him on the tablet of the mind. Who that knew him, can fail to recall the rapid movements of his somewhat diminutive form, the illuminations of his expressive countenance, and the nimble finger, with which he used to seize on every little object that happened to adorn or diversify his path? Much less can we forget his vivacious wit—so playful, yet so harmless—the glow of his affections—the urbanity of his manners—and the wondrous celerity with which he was ever wont to turn from one bright thought to another. Above all, however, his friends will never cease to remember that peculiar sunshine which he threw over a company by the influence of a mind perpetually turned to *love* and *praise*.