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The Social Work of the Clapham Sect

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Present, and Future (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1990), p. 46.

²²Indeed, in 1966 an eminent Orthodox Jewish philosopher, Eliezer Berkovits, wrote an extremely influential article called 'Judaism in the Post-Christian Era', in which he listed five clusters of reasons why Jewish people should not become involved in dialogue with Christians. These reasons came under the headings Emotional, Philosophical, Theological, Practical and Ethical. See *Judaism* 15 (1966), pp. 76-84.

²³This is quoted in Novak, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

²⁴Samuel Sandmel, *We Jews and Jesus* (N.Y.: OUP, 1965), p. 111. See also pp. 44, 46f.

²⁵Isaac Mayer Wise, *The Martyrdom of Jesus of Nazareth* (N.Y.: 1888), p. 132.

²⁶*Op. cit.*, p. 16. He closes the book by summing it up as a 'first step in what seems to be the direction of the real man' (p. 224).

²⁷Clemens Thoma, *A Christian Theology of Judaism* (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 107.

²⁸Jacob Neusner, *Jews and Christians. The Myth of a Common Tradition* (London: SCM, 1991), p. 21.

²⁹Daniel J. Harrington, 'The Jewishness of Jesus. Facing Some Problems', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49 (1987), p. 7.

³⁰Trude Weiss-Rosmarin (ed.), *Jewish Expressions on Jesus. An Anthology* (N.Y.: Ktav, 1977), p. ix.

³¹*Op. cit.*, p. 235, n. 1.

³²Geza Vermes, *The Gospel of Jesus the Jew* (Newcastle: University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1981), p. 4.

³³David Flusser, *Jesus* (N.Y.: Herder & Herder, 1969), p. 7.

³⁴E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

³⁵Sandmel, *We Jews and Jesus*, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

³⁶As quoted by Shalom Ben-Chorin in 'The Image of Jesus in Modern Judaism', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 11 No. 3, Summer 1974, p. 408.

³⁷Wise wrote in the 7 June edition of the magazine, *The Outlook*.

³⁸*Op. cit.*, p. 39.

³⁹Ernst Käsemann, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* (Göttingen, 1965), pp. 206f.

⁴⁰'Jésus devant la Pensée Juive Contemporaine', in *Les Grands Religions* (1978), p. 36.

⁴¹Lapide and Stuhlmacher, *Paul. Rabbi and Apostle*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁴²*Jesus of Nazareth*, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

⁴³William B. Silverman, *Judaism and Christianity: What We Believe* (1968), p. 93; Milton G. Miller, *Our Religion and Our Neighbours* (rev. ed., 1971), p. 59.

⁴⁴Craig Evans, *art. cit.*, p. 18.

⁴⁵Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn, 'Jews for Jesus — Are They Real?', in Gary D. Eisenberg (ed.), *Smashing The Idols* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1988), p. 167; C.G. Montefiore, 'Jewish Conceptions of Christianity', in *The Hibbert Journal* 28 (1929-30), p. 249. See also Gerald Friedlander, *The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount* (N.Y.: Ktav, 1969), pp. 226-238, esp. pp. 237f.; Klausner, *op. cit.*, p. 127; David Flusser, 'Jesus', in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 10, 1972, p. 10; Rabbi Randall M. Falk in the recently published *Jews and Christians. A Troubled Family*, by Walter Harrelson and Randall M. Falk (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p. 103.

⁴⁶*Op. cit.*, p. 355. Klausner deals with the NT account of the resurrection in only 4 pages.

⁴⁷Flusser, *Jesus*, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁴⁸*Art. cit.*, p. 427.

⁴⁹For Lapid's views, see Hans Küng and Pinchas Lapid, 'Is Jesus a Bond or Barrier?: A Jewish-Christian Dialogue', in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 14 (1977); Pinchas Lapid, *Auferstehung. Ein jüdisches Glaubensverlebnis* (2nd edn, Stuttgart and Munich, 1978). See also Randall Falk, *op. cit.*, pp. 111f.

⁵⁰Neusner, *op. cit.*, p. 1 (and *passim*).

⁵¹*Op. cit.*, pp. 18, 94.

⁵²*Op. cit.*, p. 120. For other contemporary rejections of this simplistic model, see Charlesworth, *Jews and Christians*, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-43; A.F. Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (London: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 1f., 179ff.; Norman Solomon, *Division and Reconciliation* (London: The London Diocesan Council for Christian-Jewish Understanding, 1980), pp. 2f.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁵⁵Joseph Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul* (ET by W.F. Stinespring, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1943, of the 1939 original), pp. 580f.; Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, *op. cit.*, p. 55; Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 161; Geza Vermes, *The Gospel of Jesus the Jew*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁵⁶Hyam Maccoby, *The Myth-Maker. Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1986).

⁵⁷Quoted in Harvey Cox, *Many Mansions. A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 111.

⁵⁸*Op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁵⁹Clemens Thoma, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

The social work of the Clapham Sect: an assessment

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The Clapham Sect was a small group of upper-class, influential, evangelical men and women who congregated in Clapham, which was then a small village just a few miles south of Westminster, in the late eighteenth century. There was little that was sectarian about them. They were all members of the Anglican church and enjoyed the ministry and counsel of John Venn (1759-1813), who became Rector of Clapham in 1793. The designation 'sect' may possibly have derived from a verbal jibe by the literary critic and wit, Sydney Smith (1771-1845).¹

The group's origins seem to follow the acquisition of a mansion on Clapham Common by Henry Thornton (1760-1815), MP for Southwark. William Pitt designed a beautiful oval library for the house and Sir James Stephen, in his *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, suggests that this became the headquarters for Clapham social action. He wrote:

... the Chamber he had thus projected became the scene which, amidst his proudest triumphs, he might well have envied and witnessed the growth of projects more majestic than any which ever engaged the deliberations of his cabinet.²

The central figure of the group was William Wilberforce (1759-1833), who experienced his evangelical conversion in 1785. Another prominent figure was the banker Henry Thornton. They became close friends and the 'sect' began to form around them. There were several other prominent members of the group. Granville Sharp (1735-1813), a scholar and pamphleteer whose work resulted in the 1772 decision to fight slavery in England, became Chairman of the Anti-Slavery Society and was active in the work of Sierra Leone Project and the British and Foreign Bible Society. James Stephen (1789-1859) had seen the evils of the slave trade first-hand, and on his return to England he made contact with Wilberforce and the Claphamites. Zachary Macaulay (1768-1838) had gone to work as an estate overseer in the West Indies at the age of 16. He returned to England obsessed by the evils of the slave trade and threw in his lot with the 'saints'. Charles Grant (1746-

1823) and John Shore (1751–1834), who later became Lord Teignmouth, both had careers in India and later, as 'Claphamites', became strong supporters of missions there. These men were the Clapham core, but there were other associates. Thomas Gisborne (1758–1846), the Squire of Yoxall in Staffordshire and Prebend of Durham, spent part of every year with Wilberforce labouring for their common causes. Hannah More (1745–1833) at Cheddar was linked strongly to the group and is chiefly remembered for her educational work in the Mendips and the production of countless cheap repository tracts. Thomas Babington (1758–1837) joined the Sect's activities, as did Sir Thomas Fowell-Buxton (1786–1845), as an avid fighter against slavery. Although John Venn only involved himself in the specifically religious Clapham projects, he was nevertheless one of the inner core and his advice and counsel were frequently sought.

Surrounded by such a fraternity, William Wilberforce was able to lead the parliamentary campaign against the slave trade, a crusade which lasted for the whole of his life. In addition, he gave much prayer, money and time to a whole range of causes. He was keen to see the suppression of vice and the reformation of manners in Britain. He showed concern for the education of men, women and children, and together with others of the group was instrumental in establishing a *Christian Observer* magazine in 1802.

Although the abolition campaign was the central Clapham concern and demanded the bulk of their energies, the 'saints' also engaged in a variety of other social and philanthropic concerns. Among the most notable were revision of the penal code, the abolition of the press gang, improvements in the care of the mentally ill, the relief of climbing boys, the regulation of factory conditions and the promotion of schools and other educational ventures.

It is this social action of the Clapham Sect which this article sets out to examine. It seeks to analyse and assess the motives, methods and scope of their work and concludes with an evaluation of their achievements.

The perspectives of the writers

The literature on the Clapham Sect begins with Sir James Stephen's *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, written in 1875. Stephen, the son of a Sect member (James Stephen, 1789–1859) and an evangelical, held the group in great esteem. He wrote favourably about each of the prominent members, most of whom he knew personally. He says of their religion: 'It was a hardy, serviceable, fruit-bearing and patrimonial religion.' He says of them: '... if not more than men, they were not less'.¹ He was convinced of their worth: 'In short, they, if any men could, might bear the test, by their fruits ye shall know them.'²

In general terms, those who have written on the Clapham Sect have adopted one of three perspectives towards their social action. Following Stephen, a number of writers, for the most part evangelicals or evangelical sympathizers, have spoken in positive terms of the achievements of the Clapham Sect. Others, particularly those who view the Claphamites from a liberal theological or Marxist standpoint, have tended to be disparaging or condemning of their motives for action. A further group of writers has tended to be somewhat more ambivalent and, whilst acknowledging the positive Claphamite successes, has focused on the limited scope of their activities.

Following shortly after Stephen, John Overton published *The English Church in the Eighteenth Century* in 1878, in which he wrote of the Clapham fraternity that 'they learned and practised thoroughly the true lessons of Christianity'. In a later volume, the same writer asserted that 'the just sentiments and eloquence of the leaders of this movement won respect and admiration'. John Telford wrote *A Sect that moved the world* (1907).³ His volume is descriptive and uncritical and hails the Clapham Sect as having done 'a work in their own generation, the influence of which is still felt throughout the world of philanthropy and religion'.⁴ In the earlier years of the twentieth century, George R. Balleine (1933) admired 'the almost monastic self-discipline by which these well-to-do Christians ordered each day of their lives'. Balleine made a brief summary of their work and urged that we are indebted to them for their accomplishments and 'the ideal of strenuous service which they handed down'. Ernest Howse (1952) was unequivocal that 'their labours were of supreme significance to the world and were accomplished in the spirit of disinterested devotion to high

principles'.⁵ Michael Hennell, who published *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* in the same year, was similarly positive. He pointed out that their sense of accountability to God gave the Sect integrity and their concern with a future heaven resulted in a desire to produce the nature of heaven on this present earth.

Two recent authors, Bebbington (1988) and Hylson Smith, have also written in positive terms of the Clapham Sect. Bebbington expresses a high regard for the evangelical movement in the following comment: 'Stirring the elite in Church and State to care for the poor may have had the effect of reinforcing the social order, but its primary purpose was to ensure that the privileged took a humane interest in the welfare, secular and spiritual needs of those committed to their charge.'⁶ He believes the Clapham Sect were dedicated and earnest in their work and seems disappointed by 'a tendency in contemporary historiography to play down the Evangelical contribution to anti-slavery'.¹⁰ Hylson Smith urges that the Sect 'cannot justifiably be dismissed as repressive and reactionary',¹¹ and he asserts that 'they had given an example of what Christian zeal, compassion, devotion and co-operation could accomplish, and they had established the practice of politics as a true Christian vocation'.¹²

The Clapham Sect evoked early opposition. Among their earliest contemporary critics were the essayists Sydney Smith and William Hazlitt. Smith, who achieved something of a reputation as a literary wit, warned against 'that patent Christianity which has been for some time manufacturing at Clapham, to the prejudice of the old and admirable article prepared by the church'.¹³ He continued: 'I would counsel my Lords and Bishops to keep their eyes on that holy village, and its hallowed vicinity.'¹⁴ Hazlitt, in a collection entitled *The Spirit of the Age* (c. 1824), said of Wilberforce, 'he preaches vital Christianity to untutored savages, and tolerates its worst abuses in civilised states'.¹⁵

Twentieth-century critics of the Saints have centred their attack on the unlaudable motives which they suggest prompted their work. Ford K. Brown, in *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (1961), presented a mass of material in an attempt to prove that Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect had no humanitarian motives. He suggested that in all their campaigns, the first aim was to advance 'evangelism'. He wrote: '... the Evangelicals were concerned with no reform but the reform of vice and sin. Their object was to have a nineteenth century peopled by Evangelical Christians leading moral lives of a puritanical kind.'¹⁶ Brown was particularly severe on Hannah More's work. He maintained that her output of tracts was to urge subordination among the lower classes, and that the education which she provided was nothing less than indoctrination.¹⁷ Very recently, Boyd Hilton, in *The Age of Atonement* (1988), has argued that a major Clapham weakness was that they considered soul-saving to be more important than alleviating poverty and social injustice.¹⁸ He also suggests that part of the motivation for the abolition campaign was that slavery was opposed to free agency.¹⁹

Other writers have exhibited a certain ambivalence in their views of Clapham achievements. In the main, such writers have been impressed or at least ready to acknowledge the results of their work, but then have either pointed out the limitations in its scope or identified condescending attitudes on the part of the group's membership. J.R.H. Moorman (1952), for example, was impressed with their considerable achievements and wrote that 'the success of Wilberforce and his friends shows what religious and moral conviction can do even against the heaviest odds'.²⁰ He nevertheless noted that they appear 'intolerably condescending'.²¹ Vidler (1961) made the point that the Clapham Sect worked 'for the poor rather than with the poor'.²² He also observed that they 'consecrated themselves to good works and noble causes', they were indeed 'full of benevolence and philanthropy towards the poor'.²³ Bradley made a similar point in *The Politics of Godliness* (1976) and stated that: 'For all their protestations about the cruelties inflicted on the negro slaves and other groups in the far-flung corners of the world, the Evangelicals generally, and the Saints in particular, seemed to be singularly unconcerned with the sufferings of those at home.'²⁴

Motivational factors

A major pre-occupation, particularly of the more recent writers regarding Clapham social work, has been with questions concerning their motivation. As attempts are made to probe in this area, it is evident that these are not easily disentangled. There were a number of significant motivating factors which lay behind the Saints' campaigns for reform. On some occasions, several of these

combined together to generate action. In other instances, different individuals were urged to the same course of action but for rather different reasons.

A major root of evangelicalism lay in the Wesleyan revival and what John Wesley termed 'personal religion', in which the believer entered into what Hilton had called 'the all-important contractual relationship with Christ'. Sir James Stephen recounted the depth of devotion to prayer and meditation from which the Claphamites drew their strength and inspiration. Sect members frequently spoke of an 'inner conviction' by which they believed God was calling them to action. Bebbington encapsulates their point in the following sentence: 'Evangelicalism as a whole taught that good works are a fundamental element of Christian duty.'²⁵

Closely allied to this motivation is the suggestion of Ford K. Brown and others that the Sect used their social work as a vehicle for evangelism. Brown quoted Sydney Smith, who once said: 'Wherever they gain a footing, . . . proselytism will be their main object; everything else is a mere instrument.'²⁶ There would certainly appear to be a substance in Brown's view. Henry Venn, for example, considered education as a 'preparation evangelical'. In the schools which they founded, Venn urged that 'the soil may be cultivated and prepared for the reception of heavenly seed'.²⁷ After the same pattern, the rules of the Clapham Bettering Society required that all who received financial aid should regularly attend public worship.²⁸

A number of writers have suggested that 'fear of judgement both personal and national lay behind a good deal of Clapham social action'. Sir James Stephen, reflecting in 1875 on the abolition of the slave trade, wrote: 'Time has shown that to that law we may now confidently ascribe the deliverance of our own land from this blood-guiltiness for ever.'²⁹ In a speech to the house in May 1789, Wilberforce claimed that the Irish ceased to trade in slaves in the reign of Henry VII when 'a great plague infested the country'. They were 'struck with panic' and suspected, Wilberforce commented, '(I am sure very properly), that the plague was a punishment sent from heaven, for the sin of the slave trade'.³⁰ Wilberforce continued: 'All I ask, therefore, of the people of Britain, is that they would become as civilised now, as Irishmen were four hundred years ago.'³¹ In his celebrated *Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade to the Freeholders and other Inhabitants of Yorkshire*, Wilberforce wrote: 'Of all the motives by which I am prompted to address you which operated on me with greatest force, is . . . that the sufferings of nations are to be regarded as the punishment of national crimes; and their decline and fall are to be regarded as the execution of his sentence.'³²

The background to the formation of the Society of the Suppression of Vice was to some extent fear of national judgment. An early report on Society activities in the *Christian Observer* reflected that 'this nation, on account of its irreligion and vices, has just reason, rather to dread the displeasure, than to rely on the favour of the Almighty'.³³

The view has been expressed, notably by Hilton, that the Clapham Sect were to some extent motivated by their millenarian ideas.³⁴ It is likely that, as heirs of Wesley, the Claphamites were post-millenarians, as Hilton suggests. Post-millenarians, unlike the pre-millenarians, believed that the world would gradually improve and that finally the millenium would be reached. Post-millenarians were therefore happy to play their part in hastening the arrival of the New Jerusalem on earth by engaging in reformist activity.

The paradox in Hilton's suggestion is that the Claphamites made little if any attempt to articulate any form of post-millenarian scheme in their writings. Furthermore, they seem to have been possessed by fears that the world was going to get worse rather than better. For example, early in 1795 Wilberforce gave Pitt support which was perhaps decisive in passing two severe measures of repression, the *Treasonable Practices Act* and the *Seditious Meetings Act*.³⁵ The *Christian Observer*, in 1802, commenting on Hannah More's numerous tracts, declared: 'She has done more, perhaps, and certainly as much, to repel the dark and menacing tide of levelling and anarchical principles, as the ablest among the very able rulers either of the Church or State.'³⁶ It was for the same reason that about this time the Clapham-sponsored Proclamation Society prosecuted Thomas Williams, a practising Christian, for publishing Tom Paine's *Age of Reason*. The poor man's family were completely ruined but the Society stood firm.³⁷

Since the time of William Cobbett, critics of the Clapham Sect have been very ready to accuse them of being motivated by a desire for social control. Cobbett himself once asserted: 'The mission of the Saints . . . was to teach the people to starve without making a noise and keeping the poor from cutting the throats of the rich.'³⁸ There is, without doubt, truth in his accusation. It was epitomized in a prayer in Henry Thornton's collection for families: 'Give to the poor contentment with their lot, and to the rich a spirit of compassion and benevolence.' The Society for the Suppression of Vice 'strongly recommended it to all persons, who employ servants or apprentices, to take means for regulating their conduct, and infesting the streets in the evening of the sabbath'. Such behaviour, it continued, exposed servants to 'great temptation, and is highly injurious to their morals'.³⁹ Gisborne, in his volume entitled *An Inquiry into the Duties of Men in the Middle Classes of Society in Great Britain* published in 1795, urged employers to put down, albeit mildly, all combinations on the part of their workmen.⁴⁰ Of all the Clapham group, perhaps Hannah More has been felt to have been the most motivated by social control. Her scheme for education was a narrow one, with each child being taught only what was appropriate to his or her social class. For example, the son of a farmer might be taught 'the beneficial and appropriate knowledge for the boy of his class'. However, the children of day labourers 'must be given no writing, nor any reading but the Bible, the catechism, and such little tracts as may enable them to understand the church service'.⁴¹

Over against these seemingly rather self-centred motivations, the case can be put that members of the Sect were also motivated by Christian values and genuine feelings of compassion for the sufferings and the condition of the poor. In a letter to a friend, Wilberforce wrote: 'Where anything is directly contrary to the laws of God, there we ought to resist as stubbornly as possible.'⁴² In his attacks on the slave trade, Wilberforce most frequently rested his case on the plain principles of Scripture. For example, on the title page of his celebrated volume *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade addressed to the Freeholders and other Inhabitants of Yorkshire*, Wilberforce put the text 'There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, . . . bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.' Later in the volume itself, Wilberforce attacked the denigrating views of the negro expressed in Long's *History of Jamaica*. Against Long's stupid and bland prejudice that 'an Oran-outang husband would be no dishonour to a Hottentot female', Wilberforce urged: 'Christ has done away all distinctions of nations, and made all mankind one great family, all our fellow creatures are now our brethren.'⁴³

Wilberforce and his fellow labourers were also men and women of deep feelings and compassion, and this, as much as other considerations, frequently motivated their campaigns. For example, in 1808 the *Christian Observer* gave a heart-rending account of how Susanna Whitfield, together with an older servant, forced one of her servant boys to climb up into a chimney against his will. The boy, Nicholas Realy, became stuck and died, but no legal action was taken against the mistress of the house.⁴⁴ Again, in his *Letter on the Abolition*, Wilberforce displays a deep compassion over the suffering of the slaves. He particularly identifies insufficiency of food; their defective clothing and lodging, their working under the whip and their cruel and indecent punishments.⁴⁵

It is clear therefore that the Clapham Sect were motivated to their social action by a variety of impulses. Some of these may strike us as less laudable than others. However, it will be apparent from these considerations that motivation is a complex issue. So much is this so that it is probably not as easy to be as precise about Clapham motives as some critics would have us believe. Having made this point, however, it does seem reasonable to assume that evangelical religion was a basic underlying root factor. Evangelical religion was central to the whole of Clapham; indeed, without it there would have been no Sect and no social action.

The scope of Clapham social action

Another aspect of Clapham social work with which historians have concerned themselves is its scope. In particular, several accusations have been made that its scope was too limited – both in its extent and in its philosophy. The view has been put by several writers that the Sect were overly concerned with black slavery, and not enough given to the miseries of the white slaves at home.⁴⁶

It is a fact that the abolition campaign became an all-engrossing concern. Clearly, the time which the Saints invested in

this cause was out of all proportion to any of their other projects. For Wilberforce, the abolition was essentially a lifetime's work. The group, and most notably Clarkson, Wilberforce and Sharpe, gave themselves untiringly to research, writings and the organization of public meetings. Zachary Macaulay actually travelled on a slave ship in 1795 so that he could view the plight of the slaves at first hand. At the height of the campaign, Wilberforce was working nine-and-a-half hours a day gathering and sifting evidence.

Perhaps, if it is true that the Saints were all over-engrossed in the abolition crusade, it could be justified. The enormity of the trade was such that in 1786 100,000 slaves were taken from Africa, of which 42,000 were carried by English ships. Of these, only half lived to become labourers on the other side of the Atlantic.⁴⁷ The wickedness and the inhumanity of the slave trade should not be underestimated. It was without doubt the greatest single evil in the world of the early nineteenth century. It could be argued that without the attention which the Sect gave it, they would not have succeeded.

Yet when the evidence is assessed in detail, the picture is not as one-sided as has often been supposed. The men and women of Clapham engaged in wide-ranging campaigns on behalf of the nation's poor and disadvantaged. In an age when there was no government system of public education, the Sect were great promoters of day and Sunday school education. At the end of his life, John Venn was gratified that by the enlargement of the parochial school 'every child in the parish may be gratuitously taught to write'.⁴⁸ What Venn accomplished in Clapham itself became the vision for other places. One area where the Saints supported day schools strongly was the Mendips, where they gave much money to the village institutions run by Hannah and Martha More. Thornton personally supported schools in Southwark. Thornton, Sharp and Hannah More were all prominent figures in the Sunday School Society, which promoted the organization of hundreds of schools and provided funds for them. The *Christian Observer*, reporting in May 1809 on the previous six months, noted that 8,995 spelling books and 1,666 Testaments had been distributed.⁴⁹ Hannah More became a pioneer in providing suitable literature for the poor. She produced three *Cheap Repository Tracts* each month which were to educate and guide the poor.

A number of other home concerns occupied the Sect's attention. Time was given to helping the prisoner. Henry Thornton was chiefly responsible for the establishment of The Society for the Relief of Persons Imprisoned for Small Debts. In just over five years, this Society released 14,007 people who had been jailed for small debts. In February 1818, Thomas Fowell-Buxton published his work entitled *An Inquiry whether Crime be produced or prevented by our present system of Prison Discipline*. On entering Parliament, he directed his initial attention to the different forms of judicial punishment.⁵⁰ In 1809 the Sect became involved in the founding of The Society for the Refuge of the Destitute, which aimed to help and provide for persons discharged from prisons or the hulks.⁵¹ Wilberforce was hostile towards 'our numerous laws', 'our bloody laws' and the 'barbarous custom of hanging'. In 1819 he spoke out in a Commons debate against the severity of the criminal code.⁵² Thomas Clarkson published *The Grievances of Our Mercantile Seamen: A National and Crying Evil* in 1845. In this work he attacked and exposed the brutality and cruelty of the way in which British sailors were treated at sea and in port. Such was the harshness of life at sea that 'at least one quarter of all the crews were on the dead list before returning home', and at least another quarter were lost to their country, 'discharged' or 'deserted'.⁵³ Once back in port in England, the sailors were frequently induced into 'long rooms' at the back of public houses, where evil girls put drugs in their drink, induced them back to their lodgings and often robbed them of every penny they possessed. Clarkson became a staunch campaigner for the mistreated British sailor and even took ships' captains to court for their brutality.⁵⁴

The group gave their energies to attacking the use of small boys to sweep chimneys, and to the needs of the unemployed in the manufacturing districts. In 1801, Wilberforce demanded medical and financial public aid 'for the relief of individual distress'.⁵⁵ Thomas Gisborne addressed advice to the unemployed of the manufacturing population of Great Britain.⁵⁶ Clapham interests also embraced hospital treatment, and their concern led them to support the Indigent Blind Institution and the Foundling Hospital. It further extended to 'war widows' and The Refuge for the Destitute.

In a similar vein, charges have been brought against the Clapham Sect that they concerned themselves with the vices of the

poor but not the conditions of the poor. As with the black slavery/white slavery debate, the accusation seems at first sight to be justly made, yet when the evidence is more closely scrutinized, it is less convincing. It is a fact that a number of the issues with which the Saints concerned themselves directly affected the social life and leisure of the poor. The most obvious example would be the keeping of the Lord's Day. This was a major aspect of the Vice Society's work. The Hull branch, for example, stated that 'the principal evils against which the society is to direct its effort is the profanation of the Lord's Day, disorderly houses of every description, lewdness, drunkenness and profane swearing'.⁵⁷ Campaigns were also mounted against obscene publications,⁵⁸ cock fighting⁵⁹ and bull and bear baiting.⁶⁰

Against this position, it can be countered that the Clapham Sect certainly did stand against some of the practices of their own class. Prominent among these was the question of duelling. Granville Sharp wrote a tract against duelling,⁶¹ and the *Christian Observer* pronounced against it as 'manifestly at variance with the precepts of Christianity'.⁶² Although they did not succeed in changing the law, the Sect certainly influenced the tide of public opinion against what was widely recognized as an evil and unnecessary practice. Attacks were also made against horse-racing, hunting,⁶³ the over-use of horses,⁶⁴ Sunday newspapers and Sunday posting, as well as cock-fighting, which the *Christian Observer* described as a 'diabolical amusement' of which 'men of fortune and rank' should be ashamed.⁶⁵

The Sect have been charged with working in such a way as to deal with the manifestations of poverty but not the roots of poverty. Similarly, it has been suggested that they worked for the poor rather than with the poor. Both of these criticisms are hard to refute, yet it needs to be asked: 'Would any other group of social reformers of this period have been capable of answering this criticism?' Care must be taken not to assess the Clapham Sect with twentieth-century hindsight. It was not until a generation later that Christian Socialists even began to grapple, albeit inadequately, with these issues. The education which the Claphamites promoted among the poor was clearly insufficient to enable them to pass beyond their appointed station and to break free from their cycle of poverty. Nevertheless, few people in the early years of the nineteenth century regarded education as a necessity for the poor. The 'bettering' envisaged by the Bettering Societies was of a limited nature; nevertheless, it could be seen as a form of self-help. Even the hero and heroines of Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* made some small advance in life as a result of their turning to Christian principles — witness the case of Betty Brown, the St Giles' Orange girl, who rose at length to keep that handsome sausage-shop near the Seven Dials.⁶⁷

Methods of Clapham social work

One other aspect of Clapham social work which deserves scrutiny is their methods of working. Some of the techniques which they utilized in their campaigns contributed in no small measure to their successes and effectiveness. The Saints extended their efforts through 'networking', by means of both family and church connections. Howse commented on the family and friendship links: 'The Clapham Sect', he wrote, 'developed subsidiary ties of blood and kinship . . . Henry Thornton was Wilberforce's cousin; Gisborne married Babington's sister; and Babington married Macaulay's sister'.⁶⁸ These close bonds not only created solidarity and loyalty but also provided links with other geographical localities which could be influenced for the cause. For example, Fowell-Buxton was a relative of Elizabeth Fry, and this undoubtedly aided him in his campaign for penal reform and in the search for information for his pamphlet on *Prison Discipline*, which he published in 1817.

The Sect were skilled in the art of campaigning through books, pamphlets and tracts. All of the inner core of the group wrote at least one substantial volume on an aspect of their social concern. Buxton, Clarkson, Sharpe, Stephen and Wilberforce made significant contributions to the literature on slavery. Clarkson wrote on *The Grievances of our Mercantile Seamen*, whilst Granville Sharpe produced several important works on the British legal system. Hannah More was perhaps the most fertile author, and her tracts certainly helped to popularize the group's goals and objectives. In their own journal, the *Christian Observer*, they had an ever-growing readership to imbibe and spread their views. The Sect were also past masters of the parliamentary pressure group. This included public meetings, petitions and speeches.

Beyond their own core membership, the Saints counted on the fairly consistent support of a wider group of evangelically minded MPs. In addition, they knew how to win friends and influence people in high places. Prime Ministers Pitt and Perceval were among those whose friendship was courted in support of their various causes. Clapham influence was also spread through church links, Society meetings (including clerical societies) and, on occasion, by means of the pulpit.

By the standards of the early years of the nineteenth century, the Clapham Sect were clearly advanced in their social thinking. In particular, their campaign against slavery, their educational endeavours, their proposals for poor relief and their efforts to secure the proper treatment of animals were without parallel. The slave trade was without doubt one of the greatest moral evils of the period, yet it was widely regarded as a necessary part of the British economy and justified on religious and social grounds. Notwithstanding, despite enormous opposition, the Sect persevered to achieve abolition of the trade in 1807 and the ending of slavery as an institution in 1833. Ultimately, they achieved what William Lecky, in his work *European Morals*, categorized as one of 'the three or four perfectly virtuous acts recorded in the history of nations'.

By today's standards, the Sect's outlook and provision of education would be regarded as indoctrination, propaganda and social control. In their generation, however, with its fear of revolution, it was thought by most to be the safest policy to leave the lower classes uneducated. To enable them to read and write would open them to the spirit of the French Revolution and radical thinking. In the end, it could alter the entire social structure. The limited education that the Sect provided was, on the whole, better than nothing, and marked the beginnings of what was to become a universal system. No-one can defend their prosecution of Thomas Williams for publishing the *Age of Reason*, or their support of repressive legislation. Their campaign for Sabbath observance could, however, be defended for the reason that it gave one day of relief for the labourers from the harsh environment of factory and mine. It also made time available to the working class for sport and recreation.

In general, the work of the Saints to improve the conditions of the poor was advanced compared with the standards of their day. And whilst it is true that the Clapham Group tended to work 'for' rather than 'with' the poor, they inspired a whole generation of later, nineteenth-century philanthropists which included figures such as Lord Shaftesbury, William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, and Hugh Price Hughes, the leader of the Wesleyan Methodist 'Forward Movement'. It was such individuals, together with the work of several hundred evangelical societies, which it has been argued formed the basis of the twentieth-century welfare state.

¹E.M. Howse, *Saints in Politics* (Allen & Unwin, 1952), pp. 187-188.

²J. Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography* (Longman, 1885), p. 524.

³C.J. Abbey and J.H. Overton, *The English Church in the Eighteenth Century* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1878), Vol. II, p. 216.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁵J.H. Overton, *The English Church in the Nineteenth Century* (Longmans, 1894), p. 78.

⁶J. Telford, *A Sect that Moved the World* (Charles Kelly, 1907).

⁷G.R. Belleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (Longman, Green & Co., 1933), p. 148.

⁸*Op. cit.*, p. 137.

⁹D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 70.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹¹K. Hylson Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734-1984* (T. & T. Clark, 1988), p. 91.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹³Cited in A. Bell, *Sydney Smith* (Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 78.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁵Cited in A. Brockett, *Evangelicalism and Social Concern in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (UCCF, 1974).

¹⁶F.K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 5.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 259.

¹⁸B. Hilton, *The Age of Atonement* (Clarendon, 1988), p. 208.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 209.

²⁰J.R.H. Moorman, *A History of the Church of England* (A. & C. Black, 1952), p. 320.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 318.

²²A. Vidler, *The Church in An Age of Revolution* (Pelican, 1961), p. 37.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁴J.C. Bradley, *The Politics of Godliness*, p. 192.

²⁵D.W. Bebbington, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

²⁶Cited in F.K. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

²⁷M. Hennell, *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (Lutterworth, 1952), pp. 136-137.

²⁸Cited in *ibid.*, p. 144.

²⁹Sir James Stephen, *op. cit.*, p. 546.

³⁰E. M. Howse, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-36.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 36.

³²*Christian Observer*, 1807, p. 250.

³³*Ibid.*, October 1803.

³⁴B. Hilton, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

³⁵E.M. Howse, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

³⁶*Christian Observer*, March 1802.

³⁷E.M. Howse, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

³⁸Cited in A. Smith, *The Established Church and Popular Religion* (Longmans), p. 51.

³⁹*Christian Observer*, March 1808.

⁴⁰T. Gisborne, *An Inquiry into the Duties of Men in the Middle Classes of Society in Great Britain* (London, 1795), Vol. II, p. 375.

⁴¹E.M. Howse, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

⁴²R.I. Wilberforce and S. Wilberforce, *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, Vol. I, pp. 43-46.

⁴³W. Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade addressed to the Freeholders and other Inhabitants of Yorkshire* (London: T. Cadell, 1807), pp. 26-28, 149-150.

⁴⁴*Christian Observer*, March 1810.

⁴⁵W. Wilberforce, *op. cit.*, pp. 55, 57, 66-67.

⁴⁶See, for example, A. Vidler, *op. cit.*, p. 37, and I. Bradley, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷J. Telford, *The Sect that Moved the World* (Charles H. Kelly, 1907), p. 131.

⁴⁸J. Venn, *Pastoral Farewell Address to his People*, in *Sermons by the Rev. John Venn, MA, Rector of Clapham* (London: J. Hatchard and S. Revington, 1814), Vol. I, p. xxvii.

⁴⁹*Christian Observer*, May 1809, p. 669.

⁵⁰C. Buxton (ed.), *Memoirs of Sir Thomas Fowell-Buxton* (London: John Murray, 1848), p. 83.

⁵¹*Christian Observer*, June 1809.

⁵²E.M. Howse, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁵³T. Clarkson, *The Grievances of our Mercantile Seamen: A National and Crying Evil* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Co., 1845), p. 3.

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