

Freedom fighters: Abolitionist drama

by [Jana Riess](#) in the [March 20, 2007](#) issue

Just about every marketing card seems to be stacked against *Amazing Grace*. It's not just that the film is a costume drama set in England at the turn of the 19th century, or that there are no big-name American actors in the cast (plenty of Jane Austen adaptations have thrived in similar circumstances). The real obstacle is the setting: it's a movie about British politicians, in wigs, and the inner maneuverings of the British Parliament. Moreover, *Amazing Grace* speaks openly of Christian faith and the Bible's demands for justice for all people—not a recipe for a blockbuster. Yet the film is genuinely inspiring.

Directed by Michael Apted, *Amazing Grace* tells the story of William Wilberforce, a nouveau riche member of Parliament who fought to abolish the slave trade in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Wilberforce (passionately portrayed by Welsh star Ioan Gruffudd) is an adult convert to Christianity who becomes increasingly certain that God has called him to abolish slavery. Together with some pious friends from Clapham and his ambitious schoolmate William Pitt (who becomes one of the youngest prime ministers in British history), Wilberforce embarks on what seems a foolhardy campaign: convincing his fellow MPs, many of whose pockets are lined with profits from sugar plantations, that the slave trade is immoral. The film was released on February 23—the 200th anniversary of the day that Parliament finally passed antislavery legislation that Wilberforce had been introducing almost annually for years.

This cinematic Wilberforce seems a bit too much of a saint and a bit too modern. We see him saving lame animals, hanging out with his servants and compulsively feeding the needy. But Wilberforce was indeed a man whose social views were ahead of his time. In life as in the film his activism came at the price of his health, which was poor to begin with and further weakened by the laudanum he became addicted to while trying to ease the pain. (Wilberforce's trials as depicted in the film aren't the half of it; Eric Metaxas's new biography *Amazing Grace* goes into greater depth about the MP's considerable impediments and heartaches.)

The cast is a veritable Who's Who of the BBC: Ciarán Hinds, Michael Gambon, Albert Finney, Nicholas Farrell and Benedict Cumberbatch (playing Pitt) all perform to the highest standard. Finney steals the movie in the first 30 seconds of his appearance; he is reformed slave trader John Newton, who penned the hymn "Amazing Grace." Unfortunately, this tune is sung ad nauseam throughout the film, and played in a gratuitous bagpipe sequence at the end. The obtrusive orchestral score is one element that prevents a promising film from reaching its full potential. And although Steven Knight's screenplay has a brisk pace and offers moments of humor, it sometimes succumbs to sermonizing ("No matter how loud you shout, you will not drive out the voice of the people!" Wilberforce cries on the Parliament floor).

The chief problem with the film, however, is the tidy triumphalism of its execution. It never quite succeeds in generating the kind of urgency that would make 21st-century audiences imagine themselves in the place of these characters. There is always the taint of inevitability: we know how the story is going to turn out. Like *Amistad* and other films about slavery, this work is well made but emotionally distant from the history and the quest for justice. It is never quite about *us*, about our timeless human nature, steeped in moral laziness and greed.

Nevertheless, the film has become the rallying point for activists who seek to free what they say are more than 27 million people enslaved around the world. Activists from the group The Amazing Change have been on hand at screenings of the movie, collecting petition signatures.

In their usage the term *slavery* encompasses more than chattel slavery. The activists aim to call attention to modern forms of exploitation such as the use of bonded labor, the sexual exploitation of children, the coercive employment of prostitutes and the mistreatment of migrant workers. In many cases, laws already exist banning such activities, but enforcement is weak, especially against forces of poverty and criminality. For addressing these issues, the passion of a contemporary Wilberforce would be welcome, along with tenacity and amazing grace.