

**Instigating Victorian Morality:  
The Clapham Sect And The Reformation Of Manners Campaign**

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
A Bachelor of Arts Degree with Honors in History

BY AMANDA GRAY DIXON

WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY  
LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

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DR. MICHELLE BROCK, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, ADVISOR

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DR. SARAH HOROWITZ, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HISTORY

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History is indeed not kind enough to present us with simple morality tales.

---Kenneth Ruscio, "Judging Patron Saints"

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## Preface

In the process of writing this thesis I have discovered that there have been several distinct periods of historical interest in the group of Evangelicals in late eighteenth century often referred to as the Clapham sect. Almost all of the works on the group date from the mid-nineteenth century, a generation after the group was active, the first decades of the twentieth century, the 1960s and 70s, or the last period, from 2000 to the present. I came into the study of the topic quite by accident, after hearing a brief mention of William Wilberforce's conversion and subsequent political action in abolition at a Greek Intersivity conference in the winter of my Junior Year. When I decided to focus my research on the Clapham sect, I had no conception of the extent of the waves of scholarship that had gone before me. As I worked, each new discovery of another author who had worked on the topic brought mixed feelings. There was, of course, excitement at another source of information, but as the works piled up I began to wonder what the point of my research was. After so many years and so much scholarship, was there anything that I could contribute to the conversation?

What I came to find was that the group has been studied so extensively largely because there is simply so much to study. The men and women who comprised the Clapham sect led extremely full lives, and were active in a wide array of causes and professions, only parts of which I touch on in this thesis. Each generation of historian that has come to the study of the Clapham sect has found new things to ponder and has brought a unique perspective. When I originally narrowed my topic to the reformation of manners campaign and its relationship to Victorian morality, I had not yet encountered much of that idea in my research. Of course the topic has been addressed, and the connection had already come to greater minds before me. However, in the course of study, I found that very few had explicitly addressed and explored the

connection between the Clapham sect's efforts and Victorian morality, and those who had did so from very particular perspectives. No one had focused sufficiently on what I felt was one of the most interesting aspects of Clapham's legacy- the reformation of manners campaign's class implications. The intersection of theology and practice that was key in the way that the Clapham sect did their work among the poor and the rich has often been taken on either by critics or defenders of the group's works, but I have encountered little work that balances the perspectives of the two sides and attempts to confront Clapham's views and actions in regard to the poor without judging or justifying. I have attempted to balance this conundrum in this thesis.

This thesis has been the culmination of many hours of work and much exploration, but of course, I could not have completed it on my own. Special thanks are due to Professor Michelle Brock, who agreed to take on the task of advising me with only a brief lunch and email correspondence as an introduction. I'm not sure she knew what she was getting into at the time, but I am eternally grateful that she did it anyway. Without her guidance and constant encouragement this work would not have been completed or, indeed, even started, because without her willingness to figure out this whole thesis process with me I would not have had the chance to try. Professor Sarah Horowitz deserves thanks as well, both for her sparking of my interest and knowledge of the nineteenth century over my years at Washington and Lee, and for her constant willingness to offer guidance and potential sources when I dropped by unannounced, on the off chance her office door would be open. I must also thank the staff of Leyburn Library and Washington and Lee Special Collections, especially Elizabeth Teaff, for always going above and beyond to secure me access to the necessary sources, no matter how obscure, and for letting me keep them long enough to finish this project. And of course, I must thank my family and friends, for encouraging me in all my endeavors, and being willing to listen

to and encourage me through this process, both the complaining and the excitement, even when they had no idea what I was talking about. I am especially thankful for Sydney Gay who read and edited the work multiple times, evidence of the depth of our friendship.

## *Introduction*

In 1844, speaking on the Clapham sect, historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, the son of a member of the Clapham sect, remarked to his sister that “the truth is that from that little knot of men emanated all the Bible Societies, and almost all the Missionary Societies, in the world. The whole organization of the Evangelical party was their work. The share which they had in providing means for the education of people was great. They were really the destroyers of the slave trade and of slavery.”<sup>1</sup> While Macaulay may have been biased in his estimation of the Clapham sect’s work, his statement pointed to the wide scope of the groups’ interests and social aims. Another Evangelical historian, writing a century after the abolition of the slave trade, commented that “little as well as great ways of doing good received [Clapham’s] effective support. ‘Schools, prison discipline, saving-banks, tracts, village libraries, district visitings, and church buildings, each for a time rivaled their cosmopolitan projects. Every human interest had its guardian, every region of the globe its representative.’”<sup>2</sup> In this wide array of efforts, the Clapham sect sought to transform British society in a Christian image.

Of the many efforts of the Clapham sect, only the abolition movement and one of its leaders, William Wilberforce, have become popular topics in contemporary history and modern Christian culture, leading to a new wave of works and even films like *Amazing Grace* on the topic.<sup>3</sup> The full range of the Clapham sect’s influence and actions remains somewhat neglected,

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Adam Kuper, *Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 137.

<sup>2</sup> John Telford, *A Sect That Moved the World: Three Generations of Clapham Saints and Philanthropists* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1907), 183. And Telford quoting from Overton and Relton, *History of the English Church, 1714-1800*, 234.

<sup>3</sup> *Amazing Grace*. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007. Film., Other examples include scholarly works such as Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s Circle Transformed Britain* (Oxford: Lion

largely due to the focus on Wilberforce's effort at the abolition of the slave trade. This effort was indeed important, both in its object and in the social context of the campaign. However, it was only one piece of the Clapham sect's work.

One commonly neglected but deeply influential effort that the Clapham sect held dear was the reformation of manners. This campaign engaged not only the group's political acumen and contacts but also the business, literary, theological, and social gifts of the group. It required extensive efforts from within the fellowship of Clapham as well as wide-reaching efforts to partner on a national scale. It was in the reformation of manners campaign that William Wilberforce and the Clapham sect first began to passionately engage society on multiple levels for an evangelical cause. It was also the reformation of manners campaign that sought to and largely succeeded at broad engagement and impact of each level of British society through engagement of the full range of the group's talents and connections.

In the reformation of manners campaign the Clapham sect attempted to apply universal moral principles to the different classes of British society in different ways. Bifurcated methods of engagement with the upper and lower classes rooted in both strategic necessity and theology

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Hudson, 2010); Milton M Klein, *An Amazing Grace: John Thornton and the Clapham Sect*, (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2004); Anne Stott, *Wilberforce: Family and Friends*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2006). There have also been several popular biographies on William Wilberforce including Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*, (New York, NY: Harper San Francisco, 2007), and William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-slave Trade Campaigner*, (Orlando: Harcourt, 2007). The group has also received attention from members of the modern evangelical movement including John Piper, the founder of the Desiring God movement, who wrote *Amazing Grace in the Life of William Wilberforce*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006). Other recent books on the topic for Christian consumption include Clifford S Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*. (Oxford: Monarch, 2004); and Jim Belcher, *In Search of Deep Faith: A Pilgrimage into the Beauty, Goodness, and Heart of Christianity*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

invited charges of hypocrisy and created a deep-rooted legacies for the treatment of the poor in social reform movements in British society. This impact proved both deep rooted and durable, sparking a change in perspective that helped mark the transition from the Hanoverian to the Victorian age. The group's campaign to increase the morality of British society through a reformation of manners took various forms, both public and private, and had long lasting impacts that helped to create the social and theological roots of what became Victorian morality.

### **Chapter 1: Character of the Clapham Sect**

#### Naming the Clapham Sect

The name Clapham Sect refers to a group of evangelical Christians in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The group was not a formal society or organization, but rather a collection of friends with common interests who engaged in a myriad of projects together and shared a social circle and a particular religious worldview.<sup>4</sup> The members of the Clapham sect were actively engaged in achieving the realization of their faith in practical terms in British society and the world. They gathered around William Wilberforce and occupied influential positions in politics, trade, education, the Church, and British society at large. Wilberforce was the son of a merchant from Hull and Independent member of the House of Commons who was close with the Prime Minister, William Pitt. After his conversion to Christianity in 1785, he became a force for Christian morality in British political life.<sup>5</sup> The group would not have known themselves as “the Clapham sect,” as the name was not used in their own

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2010), 11.

<sup>5</sup> John Wolfe, ‘Wilberforce, William (1759–1833),’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

time, and indeed the label is somewhat of a misnomer. They were centered in the Clapham neighborhood, a suburb of London and home of many of the group's members, at least as long as Wilberforce resided there. However, many of its key figures like Hannah More, a famous author, educator, and philanthropist who worked with her sisters on education for the poor, never lived there.<sup>6</sup>

The group was also resolutely not a sect, if a sect is defined as a group holding different views than those who are of the same religion, or deviating from the general tradition.<sup>7</sup> Despite sympathies for Methodists and other Dissenters, the members of the Clapham "sect" were devoted members of the Church of England, even as they sought its reform and revival.<sup>8</sup> Disparaging factions and political opposition referred to the MPs of the group collectively as "the Saints."<sup>9</sup> However, this name was confined specifically to the political members of the group. The title Clapham sect was popularized in 1844 by Sir James Stephen, Secretary of State for the Colonies and the son of one member of the group, who misremembered the insult of Sydney Smith, preacher and founder of the *Edinburgh Review*, who was one of the group's critics.<sup>10</sup> Smith had actually called the group the Clapham church, but when writing an article for the *Edinburgh Review* on his father, famous slavery abolitionist James Stephen, and his father's circle, Sir James Stephen used the mis-term Clapham sect repeatedly, and his editor liked the

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<sup>6</sup> David Spring, "The Clapham Sect: Some Social and Political Aspects," *Victorian Studies* Vol. 5, No. 1 (September, 1961), 37.

<sup>7</sup> "Sect, n.1," OED Online. March 2015. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/174576?rskey=hUiua1&result=1> (accessed March 24, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> John Telford, *A Sect That Moved the World*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Kuper, *Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England*, 137.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 11; Biographical information on Sydney Smith from: Peter Virgin, 'Smith, Sydney (1771–1845)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

phrase so much he used it as the piece's title.<sup>11</sup> The term caught on. By the centennial of the abolition of the slave trade the moniker Clapham sect existed seemingly un-ironically alongside the accolade "famous sons of the church of England" in John Telford's history of the group.<sup>12</sup> History now knows the group as the Clapham Sect.

### The Neighborhood of Clapham

While it gave the group of friends and activists their name and often formed the center of their meetings and fellowships, many of the friends and "members" of the Clapham sect never resided in Clapham. Some did so only briefly. More than any other physical place, however, Clapham was the heart of their movement and their group, and much of their activity swirled around the Clapham Common. Clapham was a small village on the outskirts of London that became a suburb of the capital city and convenient home for wealthy MPs and businessmen in the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In 1774 there were about 240 houses and 1,625 inhabitants; by 1778 the numbers had grown to 344 houses and 2,477 inhabitants.<sup>13</sup> The population rose rapidly and occupied 1,428 houses by 1826. In an indication of Clapham's close and growing connection with the capitol, regular coach services ran to London four times a day before the end of the century and had increased to run every ten minutes by 1827.<sup>14</sup> Clapham had grown into a busy outpost of the capital city, as befit the home of so many of the great and powerful of British life. The suburb formed the perfect retreat from the perceived immorality of

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> John Telford, *A Sect That Moved the World*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

the city, while still geographically close enough that the extremely well connected members of Clapham could engage in their daily business in the capital.

The beginnings of a Christian society formed in the neighborhood after John Thornton, a wealthy trader who lived in Clapham, came to the faith during Henry Venn's first year as rector in Clapham. Thornton became a dedicated Christian and for the remainder of his life was deeply involved in the church in Clapham. He even served as a spiritual mentor to William Wilberforce during his conversion.<sup>15</sup> When Wilberforce gave up his house in Wimbledon, he sought Christian society in his new living situation. John Thornton offered him a room in Clapham that Wilberforce accepted, marking the beginning of Wilberforce as the center of Clapham society.<sup>16</sup> Wilberforce's relocation drew other influential figures to Clapham to live or visit. In fact, Wilberforce's close friend, Prime Minister William Pitt (the Younger), was a frequent visitor to his Clapham home. Newspaper reports in the London Times noted several incidences of Pitt's visits to Clapham as a retreat from London life.<sup>17</sup> The centrality of the location of the neighborhood of Clapham allowed it to function as both a retreat for the influential and a home base from which the group could attempt to influence society at large.

### The Clapham Sect and Society

One of the keys to the Clapham sect's influence, and part of the reason for the importance of the neighborhood of Clapham's location as a suburb of London, was the fact that many members of the group held prominent positions in British society. Unlike previous generations of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>17</sup> *The Times* (London, England), Friday, May 11, 1787; Issue 746; and *The Times* (London, England), Saturday, July 22, 1797; Issue 3953.

Evangelicals, the Clapham sect embraced membership and influence in the upper echelons of British society. They claimed their positions of influence as tools for the redemption of the nation rather than deliberately avoiding it as a source of evil.<sup>18</sup> When, soon after his conversion, Wilberforce contemplated withdrawing from political life, William Pitt replied to dissuade him, “if a Christian may act in the several relations in life, must he seclude himself from them all to become so? Surely the principles as well as the practice of Christianity are simple, and lead not to meditation only but to action.”<sup>19</sup> This argument seems to have resonated with Wilberforce who went on to have an extensive parliamentary career. Moreover, the sentiment seems a fair characterization of the Clapham sect’s interactions with the larger world through their professional and social activities. Indeed Wilberforce, as a regular attendee, an eloquent speaker, and friend of the powerful, was an influential member of the House of Commons. More than that, for much of his career he represented the county of Yorkshire, a position that made him “a kind of uncrowned king of the House of Commons.”<sup>20</sup>

Other members of the Clapham sect also exercised influential positions in their respective fields. In the field of law, James Stephen was a Master in Chancery. The Thorntons held sway in finance as City bankers. Hannah More was an influential figure in education and as an author, acting as the preceptress of noble ladies and penning a manual of instruction on the upbringing of Princess Charlotte. Meanwhile in the religious and academic circles, Charles Simeon and Isaac Milner commanded substantial force, educating monarchs and dictating the education of the day

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<sup>18</sup> David Spring, "The Clapham Sect: Some Social and Political Aspects," 37.

<sup>19</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-slave Trade Campaigner*, (Orlando: Harcourt, 2007), 86.

<sup>20</sup> David Spring, "The Clapham Sect: Some Social and Political Aspects," 37.

at Cambridge. The group's influence extended even beyond domestic concerns, as one member, John Shore, Lord Teignmouth, eventually became Governor-General of British India.<sup>21</sup> Zachary Macaulay served as governor of the British colony in Sierra Leone.<sup>22</sup> On the military front Sir Charles Middleton served as Comptroller of the Navy, and Lord Gambier was an admiral.<sup>23</sup>

As a whole, the influential group was convinced that it was through active engagement in the world that they would live their faith. As Hannah More said, "action is the life of virtue, and the world is the theatre of action."<sup>24</sup> Active engagement in the world through social excellence in fact became a hallmark of the Clapham sect and allowed the group to have such an extended reach into society. Their influence, however, was not premised simply on the fact that this group participated in society, or even the high level at which they did so. The extensive reach of their campaigns, and specifically the pervasive impact of the reformation of manners campaign, was the result of wide array of connections and skills that the group possessed. Excellence and influence in multiple platforms and areas of society provided the ability to conduct a multi-faceted campaign that could influence the legal, social, and cultural practices of the nation.

#### The Evangelical, Methodist, and Dissenting Movements, the Church of England, and the Clapham Sect

The members of the Clapham sect remained loyal members of the Church of England even while they capitalized on alliances of mutual interests with Dissenting groups. Though opponents accused the group of disloyalty to Anglicanism, often with anti-patriotic overtones,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> John Telford, *A Sect That Moved the World*, 136.

<sup>23</sup> David Spring, "The Clapham Sect: Some Social and Political Aspects," 37.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

the group maintained close loyalty to the Church of England even as they identified with the more Evangelical groups within the Anglican Church.<sup>25</sup> In fact, Sydney Smith once grouped them in with the Arminian and Calvinists Methodists, calling them fanatics.<sup>26</sup> Throughout his book, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*, Wilberforce referenced the history and the great figures of the Church of England with extreme deference. In setting the example for the behavior of Christians in his own day, he turned their eyes to “the religion of the holy martyrs of the sixteenth century, the illustrious ornaments of the English church.”<sup>27</sup> He also explicitly commended the liturgy of the Church of England, saying, “the Liturgy of the church of England strictly agrees with the representation, which has been here given of the word of God.”<sup>28</sup> This loyalty was politically important at a time when the threat of foreign conflict, real or perceived was constant, and the French Revolution created suspicion on those not loyal to the Anglican orthodoxy.<sup>29</sup> The French Revolution made the British, and particularly the British

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<sup>25</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 90-92. In fact the distinction between Evangelical and Methodists was sometimes difficult to make, even at the time, because the movements shared similar ideologies and interacted regularly. The distinctive difference that impacted the social standing of the two groups was in the organizational structure of the movements. While Methodists had their own organizational structure and tended to be isolated from society at large, Evangelicals remained tied to the Church of England and tended to be more connected to English culture and more likely to involve themselves in public life. Because of these differences, Evangelicals were more likely to be from the upper and middle classes while Methodists drew more heavily from the working classes.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>27</sup> William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*, 1797, Reprint, (San Bernardino, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 50.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>29</sup> The increased tensions and need for the appearance of political loyalty motivated by the French Revolution made any form of divergence of the norm due to independent conviction suspect. Linda Colley discusses the role of the French Revolution in creating tension and questions about patriotism and the increased use of the Church of England as a propaganda tool in response to revolutionary France in “Whose Nation? Class and National Consciousness in Britain, 1750-1830,” *Past and Present* No. 113 (November, 1986), 107-108. Colley also notes the increased scrutiny of the religious behavior of the political elite in the wake of the French Revolution in *Britons*, 192.

upper classes, nervous, and signs of deviance from the social norms like lack of association with the Church of England could and often did easily become questions of patriotism and loyalty.<sup>30</sup>

Though the Clapham sect's loyalty was firmly with the Church of England, they did align themselves closely with the Evangelical movement within the Anglican Church. According to Evangelical historian John Telford writing a century after the Clapham sect, "the Evangelical party, it has been pointed out, was the strongest spiritual force at the end of the eighteenth century, because there was no other."<sup>31</sup> As a staunch supporter of the Evangelical movement Telford's history here must be questioned, or at least taken with a grain of salt. However, this viewpoint certainly reflects the feelings of Evangelicals themselves on the state of religion within the Church of England at the time. This feeling of embattlement due to both the isolation, and the opposition the Evangelicals faced in society and the Church may have contributed to the extent of the activity within the relatively small Evangelical group, which despite its small size did have a disproportionate influence. Whether this influence was due to the group's spiritual conviction, a lack of energy to action by other Anglican groups, or the particular social influence of its adherents is unclear, though it seems that the combination of all three factors combined to make the Evangelicals such a potent force.<sup>32</sup> In addition to their desire to reform society, the Clapham sect wanted to see an Evangelical transformation of the Church of England and the nation at large.<sup>33</sup> They were committed to working within and reviving the traditional and

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<sup>30</sup> MJD Roberts, "The Society for Suppression of Vice and Its Early Critics, 1802-1812," *The Historical Journal* Vol. 26, No. 1 (March, 1982), 164.

<sup>31</sup> John Telford, *A Sect That Moved the World*, 88-89.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 53.

established structures to achieve their goals, just as they utilized their already established careers and spheres of influence to further their work on the reformation of manners.

Even as they worked at reform within the Church of England, the Clapham sect was committed to using all available contacts to achieve their goals. Their work and religious preferences brought them into fellowship and cooperation with Methodists and other schools of Dissenters regularly. This partnership with those outside the established church had roots in the forefathers of the Clapham sect. Henry Venn, in many ways the spiritual father of the Clapham sect, established ties to Methodists and other Evangelicals very early on in his clerical career. The Venn family had a history of service in the clergy of the Church of England, with several generations of Venns having served in the church.<sup>34</sup> Henry Venn's personal transition to a more Evangelical bent came after he discovered a passage in one of his favorite authors, William Law. The passage stated that "the blood of Christ was of no more avail for our salvation than the excellence of His moral character," and turned him to the study of the Bible. After that time his preaching became less legalistic and more evangelical.<sup>35</sup> Henry Venn became the curate in Clapham in 1754.<sup>36</sup> Venn was a good friend of the Wesleys, founders of the Methodist movement. The Venns and Wesleys were regular correspondents and visited one another throughout their lives. Before Venn began his position in Clapham, he wrote to Charles Wesley exhorting him to take him under his wing. In his letter, Venn acknowledged their theological

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<sup>34</sup> John Telford, *A Sect That Moved the World*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

differences briefly even while offering great complements to Wesley as a preacher sent to do the work of God.<sup>37</sup>

After taking up his place as curate of Clapham, Henry Venn continued to expand his Evangelical connections. He attended the Wesley's conference at Bristol in 1756 and went with Whitfield on his preaching tour in the West of England in 1757.<sup>38</sup> Like those who would attend his, and later his son's, church in Clapham, Venn remained a loyal member of the Church of England and had certain theological differences with his Methodist colleagues, especially as he became more Calvinist in his later years; however, he was always a moderate who prioritized adherence to the gospel over particular schools.<sup>39</sup> Historian John Telford reports that, "when Mr. Venn moved to Huddersfield the Methodists loved, esteemed and supported his ministry, thought they felt that their own preachers supplied some elements that were lacking in his teaching."<sup>40</sup> A common gospel passion and social causes brought the early founders of the Clapham sect into contact with Dissenters and Methodists, and these connections laid the groundwork for continued cooperation between those groups and the Clapham sect, later adding strength and resources to the sect's work on the reformation of manners campaign and Clapham's other efforts.

Common interests and fervor for the gospel kept the later generation of Claphamites in close contact with Methodists and other Dissenters. In fact one of the first bills that Wilberforce proposed in the Commons after his conversion was at the suggestion of a Yorkshire constituent who was a devout Methodist and became a lifelong correspondent of Wilberforce. The bill,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 19-21.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

which passed the Commons but failed in the House of Lords, would have allowed the dissection for medical research of the bodies of criminals killed for capital crimes not just murderers.<sup>41</sup> Additionally the Methodists and Baptists were deeply involved in other causes dear to the Clapham sect's heart, including Sunday schools and the abolition of the slave trade. Already on the forefront of the cause, before William Wilberforce and his friends had taken up the mantle, Methodists, particularly Methodist missionaries, supplied information and support to the abolition movement. In 1791, Wilberforce formally appealed to the Methodist Conference for help with his crusade and received all of the assistance that he requested.<sup>42</sup> After abolition of the slave trade the Methodist conference worked diligently toward Emancipation.<sup>43</sup> Thus, while the Clapham sect remained loyal members of the Church of England, they often worked with friends and colleagues who were Methodists or Dissenters on issues of common interest, including abolition and the reformation of manners, that fit with their general strategy of using the entire range of their social contacts to create the greatest impact. Clapham's loyalty to the Church of England was self-consciously, socially, and politically important to their continued influence, but their alliance with other Protestant groups that shared their convictions provided them with added resources and support that expanded their ability to impact society in practical terms.

## **Chapter 2: Historical Setting and Background**

### Earlier Reformation of Manners

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<sup>41</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 97-99.

<sup>42</sup> John Telford, *A Sect That Moved the World*, 150. Baptists and Quakers, among others, also worked with the group on the abolition efforts.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

In the early eighteenth century, the Societies for the Reformation of Manners, which were formed in the 1690s, had done wonders to advance the reformation of manners in England. Determined reformers promoted what they considered to be virtuous moral behavior and encouraged more stringent enforcement of laws governing “immoral” behavior. Indeed, the number of capital crimes in the criminal code multiplied considerably on the ascension of the Whig government around the turn of the eighteenth century, who made newly illegal many activities like hunting on the common green that had previously been social rights.<sup>44</sup> Thus enforcement of new laws made by the upper and middle class, represented in a parliament that was deeply unrepresentative of the population as a whole, was a social and political act in itself. Before the reformation of manners campaign, the early modern criminal justice system, largely reliant on private prosecutions, did not facilitate the prosecution of large numbers of “victimless offences,” such as immorality and irreligion, which were crimes that did not have a specific victim likely to push for legal action.<sup>45</sup>

However, even in the climate of increasing religious toleration, eighteenth century England remained a strongly Protestant country, and many people were offended by public displays of sin, at least partly because many people believed that such conduct “led sinners down a slippery slope of increasingly criminal conduct which would lead inevitably to the gallows.”<sup>46</sup> The societies that followed William and Mary’s Proclamation “for the encouragement of piety and virtue and for the preventing of vice, prophaneness and immorality” in 1692 encouraged

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<sup>44</sup> Douglas Hay, “Crime and Justice in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth- Century England,” *Crime and Justice* Vol. 2 (1980), 50.

<sup>45</sup> Tim Hitchcock, Robert Shoemaker, Sharon Howard and Jamie McLaughlin, et al., *London Lives, 1690-1800* (www.londonlives.org, version 1.1, 24 April 2012).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

prosecution of “victimless” crimes, such as practicing trades on the Sabbath, swearing or cursing, drunkenness or keeping gaming houses.<sup>47</sup> According to historians on London crime in the period, “the eighteenth century was the first great age of voluntary societies, and concerns about vice led to the formation, over the course of the century, of successive societies which aimed to suppress immorality. While members sought to promote reform through persuasion, in sermons and through the distribution of printed literature, they saw the need for coercion as well.”<sup>48</sup> With the Church Courts in decline, the reformers turned to the criminal justice system. The Societies produced an extensive range of pamphlets against vice and also sought to prevent vice by using the courts aggressively to punish those who committed a range of moral offences. These offenses included profane swearing and cursing, Sabbath breaking, drunkenness, “lewd and disorderly” conduct, brothel keeping, gaming, and sodomy.<sup>49</sup>

One of the main obstacles to these legal efforts was that ordinary people and even officers such as constables could not be counted on to prosecute such offenders. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the only active “police force” were parish householders who took turns acting as constables. For the most part they only assisted private citizens who were the victims of crimes in prosecution, which the victims paid for themselves. This climate did not promote the prosecution of crimes, and often once the trial went before a jury, the jury would acquit or greatly reduce the charge because of scruples about the severity of the law.<sup>50</sup> For theft and other

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<sup>47</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 104.

<sup>48</sup> London Lives

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas Hay, “Crime and Justice in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth- Century England,” 46-47.

crimes outright conviction often meant a death sentence.<sup>51</sup> Therefore the reformers encouraged informers, some of who were paid a salary, to take up the mantle. A wide variety of illegal activities were prosecuted under the aegis of the reformation of manners campaign, and supporters and Justices of the Peace looked to the campaign as a useful means of addressing wider problems of crime and disorder in the metropolis.<sup>52</sup>

The movements worked to prosecute homosexuality and even drunkenness among the poor by these means. From the late 1690s to the 1720s informers and thief-takers used spies and provocateurs to arrest and prosecute dozens of men for sodomy, some of whom were hanged. In 1725, the Middlesex Justices began to investigate gin drinking among the poor. This, along with pressure from the Middlesex grand jury and others, led in 1729 to the first of a series of statutes passed against gin selling over the next three decades.<sup>53</sup> The number of offenders prosecuted by the Societies declined significantly after 1725 because of legal obstacles to the use of their informers. In 1736 widespread opposition to the use of informers to enforce the Gin Act dealt the Societies a deathblow, and they disappeared from the historical record in 1738.<sup>54</sup>

The societies largely formed and acted on a local level and continued to act into the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>55</sup> In a summary of the action for the year of 1718 there were listed 1,253 prosecutions for lewd and disorderly practices, 492 for exercising trades or callings on the Lord's Day, 228 for profane swearing and cursing, thirty- one for keeping bawdy or disorderly houses,

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 48. Most serious felonies and many lesser sentences were capital in 1700.

<sup>52</sup> London Lives.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 104.

seventeen for drunkenness, and eight for keeping common gaming houses. However, as the century wore on the societies became less effective, overwhelmed by the “riot of gambling, drunkenness, prostitution, and petty crime which became commonplace in Hanoverian England.”<sup>56</sup> After the initial fervor faded and the methods the societies had used to such success became less effective due to social opposition and legal obstacles, the Societies for the Reformation of Manners faded into the histories of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

### Moral State of Society In the Age of the Clapham Sect

By the late eighteenth century the moral fervor of the nation had abated and been replaced by a general moral laxity. Education, while still a necessary accolade for a rich young man of society, was no longer a labor to instill moral virtues. For the sons of privilege, universities were places to network and debauch before embarking in the family business or some other enriching path.<sup>57</sup> Many public figures were mired in ruinous gambling debt and the drunkenness of even the Prime Minister himself was well known.<sup>58</sup> In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in England, brothels had become both fashionable and acceptable. Pierce Egan, a journalist, author, and recorder of London life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries noted that “prostitution is so profitable a business, and conducted so openly, that hundreds of persons keep houses of ill-fame, for the reception of girls not more that twelve

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 21-23.

<sup>58</sup> Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians; the Age of Wilberforce*. (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1961), 23.

or thirteen years of age, without a blush upon their integrity.”<sup>59</sup> Habits like drunkenness, prostitution, and gambling were practiced openly in the social clubs of London’s elite.<sup>60</sup>

In the late eighteenth-century the pervasive reality of drunken indulgence was evident to many members of society. Sydney Smith claimed, “Everyone is drunk. Those who are not singing are sprawling. The sovereign people are in a beastly state.”<sup>61</sup> The matter even became a political issue. In a debate in 1740s the House of Lords commented on the ubiquitous states of drunkenness.<sup>62</sup> They heard that on every street and at all times of day drunks were stumbling, passed out, or committing crimes. Gin was particularly pointed out as a source of drunkenness.<sup>63</sup> Hannah More wrote a poem, “The Gin Shop,” about the menace of Gin subtitled *a Peep Into the Prison*, which blamed Gin for immorality among the working class.<sup>64</sup> This epidemic drunkenness pervaded all elements of society. Wilberforce’s political colleagues were evidence enough of the moral state of society. George Rose, the Secretary of the Treasury, once wrote to Wilberforce, “I have actually been drunk ever since ten o’clock this morning, and have not yet quite the use of my reason, but I am, Yours most faithfully and cordially, George Rose.”<sup>65</sup> After the moral crusades at the beginning of the century, British society fell into levels of debauchery, including

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<sup>59</sup> As quoted in William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 105-106; Biographical information on Pierce Egan from: Dennis Brailsford, ‘Egan, Pierce (1772–1849)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>60</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 109.

<sup>61</sup> As quoted in William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 106.

<sup>62</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 106.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>64</sup> Hannah More, *The Works of Hannah More, Part One*, 1843, Reprint, (United States: Kessinger Publishing, 2009), 51-52.

<sup>65</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 106.

vagrancy, drunkenness, prostitution, gambling, and other immoral diversions, that affected all levels of society from poor to peer.

Wilberforce believed that the general moral decay of the times was the result of immorality among the rich that had then spread through the whole body of the people.<sup>66</sup> Morality could be defined in different ways, but considered here it refers to the virtues the Clapham sect themselves, defined as moral. This conception of morality generally conformed that of traditional Christian society, though perhaps more stringently applied by the Clapham group and their Evangelical cohorts than Christian tradition at large.<sup>67</sup> However, this alarm over the moral state of society was not limited to Wilberforce and his friends. In fact, political radicals of the period pointed to the debauchery and immorality of the upper classes as a condemnation of the ruling classes as a whole.<sup>68</sup> One anonymous author in the period declared that,

Our nobility placed on an eminence among the people, instead of supporting the dignity of their station, are become a shame and disgrace to it. Our young noblemen are jockies, whoremasters, and spendthrifts, while those advanced in years are repairing the waste of their youth, by shameful plunder of the public.<sup>69</sup>

People throughout all levels of British society were concerned about the corrupt state of morality. Various strains of concern coexisted and intermingled to form a general unease about the moral failures of Hanoverian England. Religious traditions worried about the consequences of rampant sexual sin for individuals and society, while others worried about the societal and

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<sup>66</sup> Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, 1-2.

<sup>67</sup> Throughout I use the group's own definition of moral behavior as the standard for "morality" not an independent measure.

<sup>68</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 156.

<sup>69</sup> As quoted in Linda Colley, *Britons*, 156.

economic consequences of idleness, vagrancy, intemperance, and dishonesty on the nation's wellbeing.<sup>70</sup>

There was also a patriotic sense in which the moral decline and failures of individuals were seen as a threat to that national character and "a general decline in willingness to sacrifice immediate private advantage to the public good," which was especially pressing as the French looked more and more threatening across the channel.<sup>71</sup> Because the nation saw itself as distinctly Protestant, and defined itself as such in opposition to the nations that surrounded it as well as the places it conquered and ruled, this Protestantism became a shared religious allegiance and national identity.<sup>72</sup> This Protestant identity also created a sense of moral obligation that was connected in the British mind to the nation's military and commercial success. In the last decades of the eighteenth century many Britons reflected on the loss of the American colonies and attempted to explain the seemingly inexplicable loss in terms of divine Providence caused by their own failings in the sight of God.<sup>73</sup>

Hannah More expressed this concern for national character, and sense of national responsibility for morality in response to the grace of God for his blessings on the Empire, in her Preface to an edition of *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society* published in 1809, saying,

If this country, which God has signally distinguished by preserving it from the most unusual wreck of Empire...if this country has been singled out from among the nations of the earth, by such preeminent favour, should not such a country be anxiously desirous, to

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<sup>70</sup> Joanna Innes, "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England," in *The Transformation of Political Culture*, ed. Eckhart Hellmuth (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1990), 58- 59.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons*, 18.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 360.

render itself more worthy of its high destination, in having been preserved itself and appointed the preserver of others?<sup>74</sup>

Unlike some of other concerned patriots, More's statement was less an expression of fear that God had removed his hand, causing the British empire misfortune, and instead a call to moral action in response to the favor that More believed God had shown the nation. However, in her statement the deep tie between distinctly Protestant providence and the British nation and its morals is clear. In fact, in the same work More directly addressed the Protestant identity stating "Let us prove to them that the religion of the reformation is not a mere term, a nominal distinction..."<sup>75</sup> Horace Walpole, the fourth earl of Oxford and a well known author, politician, and patron of the arts, lamented that England had become "a gaming, robbing, wrangling, railing nation, without principles, genius, character, or allies; the shadow of what it was."<sup>76</sup> In a time when there was a constant sense of the threat to national security from the French, one minister preached from the pulpit "I make no hesitation to declare, that sin is the moral source of all our natural calamities" and recommended a national reformation of manners as "the most effectual means to save us from our destruction."<sup>77</sup> Morality was not simply a religious or a social concern in eighteenth century England; it had serious patriotic implications, especially in a time when the British felt threatened. The sense of outside threat gave broader relevance to alarm at the inner moral state of the nation, and provided reason for concern for many members of society.

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<sup>74</sup> Hannah More, *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*, London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1809), <https://archive.org/stream/thoughtsonimpor00moregoog#page/n7/mode/2up>, 19.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

<sup>76</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 58; Biographical information on Horace Walpole from Paul Langford, 'Walpole, Horatio, fourth earl of Oxford (1717–1797)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>77</sup> David Aitkin, A general reformation of manners, the best national defence in the time of danger: a sermon, preached on the 28th of February, the day appointed by His Majesty for a public fast. By the Rev. David Aitkin, Minister of the Gospel, Etal, Northumberland, (Berwick, 1794), 8.

## A Changing Britain

The context in which the Clapham sect came of age and eventually worked to change society was a nation in the midst of deep and fundamental transformations. Industrialization, urbanization, and rapid population growth in London in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries caused significant changes in popular culture and the structural character of Great Britain.<sup>78</sup> By the mid-eighteenth century most labor in Britain was outside of the agricultural sector.<sup>79</sup> The late eighteenth century saw the rise of the factory and growth of urbanization, but was also characterized by the destruction of wage and apprenticeship standards and the re-division of labor.<sup>80</sup> These economic changes both reflected and caused movement into the cities from the country and smaller towns and the growth of regional industrial centers as industries became regionally concentrated and grew.<sup>81</sup>

Outside of the familiar contexts of small towns and historical family relationships, the new mobility of the non-agricultural worker and the anonymity of city life created new concerns about crime and morality. The network of personal acquaintance in pre-modern society served as an effective method of personal and criminal identification. As society industrialized and large portions of the population relocated “from intimate rural villages to anonymous urban settings” this informal system of identification and accountability began to collapse.<sup>82</sup> Individuals no longer knew those they encountered in daily life and crime and debauchery became at once less

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<sup>78</sup> Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-century London*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 8.

<sup>79</sup> Boyd and McWilliam, *The Victorian Studies Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2007), 53.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Simon A Cole, *Suspect Identities: A History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 8.

personal and more threatening. According to historian Simon Cole, “nineteenth-century society shifted from a closely hierarchical society of ranks and orders, in which everyone knew his or her place and the place of others, into what historian Michael Ignatieff has called a ‘society of strangers.’”<sup>83</sup> In the late eighteenth century the number of homicides was falling to unprecedentedly low levels in English society.<sup>84</sup> In the nineteenth century the rate of crime generally dramatically increased, most likely because of a concern with new types of criminal behavior, the criminalization of previously legal behaviors, and increasingly professional prosecutions. The rate of crime increased even as the violence of society declined because the regulation and enforcement of behavior became stricter in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The period in which the Clapham sect was active was thus a time of transition in the economic, social, and political structures of England, and these changes created both new opportunities and new and uncharted concerns for individuals at all levels of society.

### **Chapter 3: The Mission of the Reformation of Manners**

#### Basis in Theology

In 1797, Wilberforce published *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*. According to John Telford the work was Wilberforce’s “attempt to fulfill the great task of the reformation of manners which he felt that God had set before him.”<sup>85</sup> Within six

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>84</sup> Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians*, 4.

<sup>85</sup> John Telford, *A Sect That Moved the World*, 122.

months 7,500 copies of the work has sold.<sup>86</sup> In the book, Wilberforce laid out many of the basic theological principles of the Clapham sect. Wilberforce clarified the difference between the true nature of Christianity and its perception and that of its defects by “the bulk of professed Christians.”<sup>87</sup> Wilberforce clearly considered the bulk of society “professed” Christians but not real adherents to the Christian faith. These professed Christians were nominally adhering to the ideas of Christianity without real belief, conviction, or life transformation, just as he had been before his own conversion. He therefore spent the first section of his book clarifying the doctrines of the Christian faith and what he meant by one who was truly Christian.<sup>88</sup>

For Wilberforce and the Clapham sect, the basis for all of their work on the reformation of manners, and indeed all legal work in general, was a proper understanding of both human nature and the gospel. Wilberforce regarded these truths about the nature of man as the necessary prerequisites for any other conception of the world or of governance.<sup>89</sup> In his book he stated,

It is here, never let it be forgotten, that our foundation must be laid; otherwise our superstructure, whatever we may think of it, will one day or the other prove tottering and insecure. This is therefore no metaphysical speculation, but a practical matter: Slight and superficial conceptions of our state of natural degradation, and of our insufficiency to recover from it ourselves, fall in too well with our natural inconsiderateness, and produce that fatal insensibility to the divine warning to “flee from the wrath to come,” which we cannot but observe to prevail so generally. Having no due sense of the malignity of our disease, and of its dreadful issue, we do not set ourselves to work in earnest to obtain the remedy, as to a business arduous indeed, but indispensable: for it must ever be carefully remembered, that this deliverance is not forced on us, but offered to us; we are furnished indeed with every help, and are always to bear in mind that we are unable of ourselves to will or do rightly; but we are plainly admonished to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>87</sup> William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System*, 7.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

Wilberforce acknowledged that a mere change in behavior was never the true goal of the reformation of manners. In a letter to Yorkshire cleric Christopher Wyvill he wrote that “I know that by regulating the external conduct we do not at first change the hearts of men, but even they are ultimately to be wrought upon by these means, and we should at least so far remove the obtrusiveness of the temptation, that it may not provoke the appetite, which might otherwise be dormant and inactive.”<sup>91</sup> Wilberforce’s ultimate ideal was true heart change in the nation, but until that could be accomplished, he at least wanted to reduce the temptations in society to make the living of a virtuous life less anathema to British society. Thus, for the Clapham sect, the social benefits and religious purpose of the reformation of manners were in both theory and practice inseparably intertwined.

The Clapham group also seemed to believe that those in different stations in society faced distinct challenges to their religion and moral behavior. As such they often treated challenges of the poor and the rich differently. Sometimes these differences came from practical considerations like problematic legal enforcement on the rich and the private venues in which the rich practiced immoral behavior. They may also have been rooted, however, in differences in the way the Claphamites saw the moral challenges of the rich and poor. Both Wilberforce and Hannah More addressed some of the challenges that they viewed as hindering the rich in their works specifically addressed to audiences of their own classes, Wilberforce in *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity* and Hannah More in *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*. More discussed the danger of the three vices of

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<sup>91</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 105.

“Inconsideration, Fashion, and the World” and the ability to obtain a “fair reputation” even without strict attention to religion as “a constant source of danger” specifically for the “rich and great.”<sup>92</sup> This distinction between the working and wealthier classes based in theological beliefs would have profound impacts on the way the Clapham sect attempted to carry out the reformation of manners among the two groups.

### Proclamation of 1787

After his conversion and before he famously took up the cause of abolition, Wilberforce turned his attention and newly found religious fervor to the reformation of manners, a cause that he was convinced could be the central mission and focus of his life. By 1786, Wilberforce, surveying the state of moral decay in both society at large and the personal habits of his friends and parliamentary colleagues, was determined to improve the morality of British life. To do this, he wanted to found a society, made up of the highest influence backing possible, to effect change through the courts, local government, censorship, legislation, prison reform, and any other possible means.<sup>93</sup> Wilberforce came to this determination after reading Joseph Woodward’s book, *The History of the Society of the Reformation of Manners in 1692*. Inspired, Wilberforce sought moral reform: “In my opinion the strength of a country is most increased by its moral improvement, and by the moral and religious instruction of its people. Only think what a country that would be, where every one acted upon Xtian principles.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Hannah More, *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*, 3.

<sup>93</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s Circle Transformed Britain*, 57.

<sup>94</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 105-106.

Wilberforce was convinced that the problem was not simply the individual crimes and misdemeanors; what needed to be addressed was the moral climate of the times.<sup>95</sup> In fact the previous reformation of manners campaign was such an inspiration that the committee of the Proclamation Society, that was later the fruit of Wilberforce's efforts, would cite the example of the societies established at the beginning of the eighteenth century in its first annual report to the Society as a whole.<sup>96</sup> It was traditional for new monarchs to issue a demand for higher moral standards upon ascending to the throne. In his book Woodward argued that William III and Mary's proclamation had made a significant impact because along with a proclamation the monarchs authorized the founding of local societies to bring offenders to court.<sup>97</sup> Indeed in the case of that particular proclamation, Woodward's book contained evidence of the considerable royal energy that had followed it to incite action, including a copy of Queen Mary's letter to the officers to the land and the King's address to the House of Commons on the issue.<sup>98</sup>

Wilberforce made a revival of this phenomenon his personal mission. This time he personally supplied the energy for reform that Woodward had so applauded in William and Mary's reformation of manners. He began by approaching his friends, including Sir Charles Middleton, the Evangelical Comptroller of the Navy, and Beilby Porteus, Bishop of Chester, among others. Porteus advised Wilberforce to proceed with caution and Wilberforce headed his friend's advice; in fact, tactical caution became a hallmark of the Proclamation Society that

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>96</sup> Society for Giving Effect to His Majesty's Proclamation against Vice and Immorality, Brief statement of the origin and nature of the Society for carrying into effect His Majesty's proclamation for the encouragement of piety and virtue: together with the report of the committee. To which is added, a list of the members of the Society. (London, 1789), 12.

<sup>97</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 57.

<sup>98</sup> Josiah Woodward, *An Account of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners*, xvii- iii.

Wilberforce would form.<sup>99</sup> He wanted George III to make a new proclamation against vice and sanction a new national reform society of lords and bishops on the pattern of William III's.

Wilberforce persuaded the Queen and the Archbishop of Canterbury to propose his plan to the King. On June 1, 1787 the King issued a proclamation denouncing moral decay in modern times, and calling for better enforcement of laws against profanity, gaming, drunkenness, and disorderly behavior.<sup>100</sup>

After the King's proclamation, Wilberforce toured the countryside gathering support for his proposed reform society of lords and bishops, and received an enthusiastic response.<sup>101</sup> He stated his philosophy for the campaign when writing to Wyvill, claiming, "the most effectual way of preventing the greater crimes is by punishing the smaller, and by endeavoring to repress that general spirit of licentiousness, which is the parent of every spirit of vice."<sup>102</sup> The stature the King's support gave the campaign a sense of legitimacy and importance. Hannah More referenced the boldness and license that the royal involvement lent to the moral reformers in her anonymously published work *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*, "under the shelter of so high a sanction, it may not be unseasonable to press on the hearts of the better disposed, such observances as seem to be generally overlooked, and to remark such offenses as commonly elude censure, because they are not commonly thought censurable."<sup>103</sup> Wilberforce leveraged his personal social influence and that of his sympathetic

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<sup>99</sup> Joanna Innes, "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England," 74-75.

<sup>100</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 57.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 105.

<sup>103</sup> Hannah More, *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*, 18.

friends to gather a supportive group and borrow social cache-- even to the royal level-- that would lend legitimacy and weight to the concept and campaign of the reformation of manners.

Despite the high-ranking support, reactions to the Proclamation were mixed. In a newspaper editorial entitled “Some Thoughts Concerning the Late Proclamation for the Reformation of Manners” and addressed to the government, published in the *London Times* on October 6, 1787, one critic took issue with the use of political power for moral reform. He specifically objected, that, while the reformation of manners would achieve a moral good, “it often happens that a moral evil is a political benefit.”<sup>104</sup> This was not, of course, a position that Clapham agreed with. In fact, Hannah More addressed this vein of criticism in her work *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*, arguing that “It should be held as an eternal truth, that what is morally wrong can never be politically right.”<sup>105</sup> On the other side of the argument, the critic suggested that the Proclamation would have the politically disastrous effect of decreasing revenue, because revenue was dependent on the taxation of the very vices that the reformation of manners would seek to eliminate. The author also viewed vice as a natural outgrowth of commercial prosperity and wealth, stating that “the four cardinal vices of all nations are lust, drunkenness, gluttony, and gaming; and these vices more especially predominate in a great commercial country.”<sup>106</sup> This position directly defied the beliefs and lives of the Clapham sect, those sons of traders and some of whom were even traders themselves. The author also claimed that, “virtue is incompatible with commercial

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<sup>104</sup> *The Times* (London, England), “Some Thoughts Concerning the Late Proclamation for the Reformation of Manners,” October 6, 1787; Issue 867.

<sup>105</sup> Hannah More, *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*, 25.

<sup>106</sup> *The Times* (London, England), “Some Thoughts Concerning the Late Proclamation for the Reformation of Manners,” October 6, 1787; Issue 867.

intercourse.”<sup>107</sup> This critic’s concerns suggest that, at this point, not every citizen had bought into Wilberforce’s campaign, and some never would.

### Formation of the Proclamation Society

In realization of Wilberforce’s work, the Society for Carrying into Effect his Majesty’s Proclamation against Vice and Immorality, known as the Proclamation Society, was established in November of 1787. The society’s aim was “to check the rapid progress of impiety and licentiousness, to promote a spirit of decency and good order, and to enforce a stricter execution of the laws against vice and immorality.”<sup>108</sup>

Wilberforce’s vision for the Society reflected views on moral reform that would be seen throughout the Clapham sect’s work. He particularly sought out influential members of society to sit on the committee, making use of his extensive network of friends. Wilberforce pursued this strategy because he believed that to change the moral tone of society effectively, the change would need to impact the moral behavior of the upper and middle-classes who set societal trends.<sup>109</sup> According to his friend the Bishop of London, Wilberforce took to the task ““with indefatigability and perseverance’ and ‘made private application to such of his friends of the Nobility and other men of consequence.””<sup>110</sup> Wilberforce was so determined to see the success of this mission that he visited Earl Fitzwilliam, a man who had tried to prevent his election for Yorkshire in 1784, who then laughed in his face and told him the only way to avoid immorality

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s Circle Transformed Britain*, 57.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>110</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 105.

was to become poor.<sup>111</sup> Even after such setbacks, the forty-nine founding members of the Society included four Members of Parliament including the Prime Minister, six Dukes and a Marquis, and the Archbishops of both Canterbury and York.<sup>112</sup> It was chaired by the Earl of Montagu and consisted of eighteen lords and twenty bishops along with thirteen other members, including at one point all three Thornton brothers and Edward Eliot.<sup>113</sup> Almost half the peers were or had been close to the royal household, and two, Grafton and North, were former Prime Ministers.<sup>114</sup> The power and influence of the Society's collected membership was truly impressive. Though reactions to the society were mixed, the King's support helped mute criticism. Prominent figures from across the spectrum, and several High-Church enemies of the Evangelical faction, even participated in the movement.<sup>115</sup> This broad participation reflected a wider concern about the state of society, but it also revealed Wilberforce's genius for coalition building.

The broad but influential makeup of the Proclamation society took the cause beyond Evangelical circles and made it both palatable and relevant to the elite of British society. The makeup of the society reflected an array of political and religious positions. While most were Anglican, the group also included Presbyterians, a Unitarian, and some that were of distinctly High Church sympathies.<sup>116</sup> The chair, the Earl of Montagu, was a friend of Wilberforce's but did not share his particular religious convictions. Perhaps most significant was the anti-

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>113</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 57.

<sup>114</sup> Joanna Innes, "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England," 81.

<sup>115</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 58.

<sup>116</sup> Joanna Innes, "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England," 81.

Evangelical Bishop of Lincoln, a friend of Pitt's, who was a founding member and an influential figure.<sup>117</sup> His participation is an example of Wilberforce's willingness to call on his significant social and political resources to ensure the success of this project. These weighty contacts were mostly supporters of Wilberforce's friend, William Pitt the Younger, because the loose morals of the political opposition led by Fox made their inclusion in the project difficult. As historian Joanna Innes has noted, "the Society's founders seem, not surprisingly, to have drawn heavily upon their own friendship and kinship networks."<sup>118</sup> However Lord North was Fox's former ally and his inclusion was probably intended—and does seem by some to have been read—as a signal of the Society's non-Partisan intent.<sup>119</sup> In the end the membership of the group represented an impressive selection of the most influential members of British society and the culmination of extensive efforts by the Clapham sect to assemble the best possible array of the makers of social taste to align their energies toward the reformation of manners.

In November of 1787, six core members met for the first formal meeting toward forming the Society. In this meeting the group agreed on an "outline of a plan," appointed a secretary, and agreed on the annual subscription, which they set at two guineas.<sup>120</sup> The Proclamation Society's steering committee met formally for the first time the following February and a list of the Society's members was published at the end of that month.<sup>121</sup> A smaller committee, usually of several dozen members, or a subcommittee of that committee, conducted most of the Society's

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<sup>117</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 58.

<sup>118</sup> Joanna Innes, "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England," 83.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

business. In 1789 the Society published a *Brief statement of the origin and nature of the Society for carrying into effect His Majesty's proclamation for the encouragement of piety and virtue: together with the report of the committee. To which is added, a list of the members of the Society.*<sup>122</sup> The document referred explicitly to the positive effects of enforcement of the King's proclamation at the local level and gave the stated purpose of the society as "assisting the Magistrate (where he conceives such assistance to be required) in checking the rapid Progress of Impiety and Licentiousness; in promoting a Spirit of Decency and good Order; and in enforcing stricter Execution of the Laws against those dissolute, immoral and disorderly Practices..."<sup>123</sup>

The published announcement of the Society to the world also revealed the organization's structure with the larger organization represented by a committee of sixty, which met once a month and empowered a smaller subcommittee of nine with a quorum of three to make decisions on behalf of the Society.<sup>124</sup> Meetings usually occurred in the winter and spring, which was the London season, when many of the Society's members would already have been gathered in the capital. The Society usually met at the homes of the Proclamation Society's leading members, often Montagu House or the Bishop of Salisbury's residence. The work of the Society was presented in a report to a meeting of the full Society once a year. Wilberforce almost always wrote these reports himself.<sup>125</sup> Early on the Society seemed to have rather active participation

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<sup>122</sup> Society for Giving Effect to His Majesty's Proclamation against Vice and Immorality. Brief statement of the origin and nature of the Society, 4.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>125</sup> Joanna Innes, "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England," 89.

from a wide sample of its membership, though later on it waned to a “supporting cast for Wilberforce and Porteus.”<sup>126</sup>

### Work of the Proclamation Society

The work of the Proclamation Society had many of the strategic and ideological hallmarks of Clapham that would be evident throughout their campaigns. Strategically, the reformers of the 1780s were aware of the value of publicity in the newspaper press and the power of “project-oriented association.” They also attempted to mobilize support from across a broad range of public opinion. As Joanna Innes stated, “all good men had to be mobilized to promote the public good.”<sup>127</sup>

Like its predecessors and inspiration from the first part of the century, the committee of the Proclamation society worked toward enforcement of existing laws concerning behaviors that they viewed as immoral. This strategy involved significant communication with the Magistrates of London. The first *Report of the Committee of the Society for carrying into effect His Majesty's proclamation for the encouragement of piety and virtue* detailed the Society's efforts in its first year to build working relationships with the Magistrates in the capitol city.<sup>128</sup> According to the report this effort involved overcoming perceptions among the Magistrates that it was “the Design of the Society to usurp their Province.” After contact with the Society the report claimed that the Magistrates “were persuaded that it [the Society] might be of essential Use to them, and it was determined that a Correspondence and Communication should be constantly kept up with them,

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>128</sup> Society for Giving Effect to His Majesty's Proclamation against Vice and Immorality, Brief statement of the origin and nature of the Society, 13-15.

the Maintenance of which will be the continual Object of the Attention of the Committee.”<sup>129</sup>

Through these connections the Society encouraged the prosecution of law-breakers and closed down illegal venues, and they encouraged local magistrates and clergy to do the same. The Society’s focus was on the enforcement of laws related to the printing and sale of pornography and blasphemy, drunkenness, swearing, Sabbath-breaking, gambling, prostitution, and other threats to decency and order.<sup>130</sup> Other legal efforts included attempts to enact new laws, get reforming magistrates appointed, and energize magistrates by disseminating information about points of law.<sup>131</sup>

The character of the Society’s efforts differed from previous efforts at reformation of manners in that informers were used sparingly, and they relied on high profile prosecutions of a small number of "examples" as a means of discouraging vice rather than large numbers of prosecutions.<sup>132</sup> The committee’s report to the Society in 1789 referenced this tactic in describing “exemplary Punishments” that some “principal Offenders” received and the “reason to hope that the Terror of these Examples has already worked its due Effect on others.”<sup>133</sup> The group secured convictions against *Fanny Hill*, which, according to scholar David Foxon, was “the first original English prose pornography, and the first pornography to use the form of the novel," and shopkeepers who sold inappropriate prints to Westminster schoolboys. The goal was that tough

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>130</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s Circle Transformed Britain*, 58.

<sup>131</sup> London Lives.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Society for Giving Effect to His Majesty's Proclamation against Vice and Immorality, Brief statement of the origin and nature of the Society, 16.

prison sentences in these cases would serve as a deterrent.<sup>134</sup> It also recorded punishments for obscenity and blasphemy and took action against “places of public entertainment.”<sup>135</sup> As historian Joanna Innes points out, “rather than setting on foot a host of petty prosecutions, its members bent their efforts towards infusing new attitudes into the whole body of the magistracy, diffusing new forms of governmental practice and promoting the enactment of new laws.”<sup>136</sup> The Proclamation Society was also successful in getting laws on licensing and vagrancy.<sup>137</sup> Through partnership with the authorities, the Proclamation Society was able to instigate legal enforcement largely by a strategy of making examples in prosecuted cases for the purpose of influencing the attitudes and behavior of the populace.

While the national movement focused on prosecution in key cases to make an example and on broader issue reform, some on the local levels pursued more stringent enforcement that more closely resembled the actions of the earlier societies. William Hey, the Evangelical mayor of Leeds and a surgeon who specialized in syphilis, was particularly vigilant. Instead of high-publicity prosecutions, Hey “tried to enforce all laws against all offenders” going to extreme lengths that sometimes created resistance.<sup>138</sup> In one instance officials arrested a person for saying “Damn my eyes and limbs.” In this case, Hey’s constables were successfully prosecuted for false

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<sup>134</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s Circle Transformed Britain*, 59; Quotation from David Foxon, *Libertine Literature in England, 1660-1745* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1965), 45.

<sup>135</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s Circle Transformed Britain*, 59.

<sup>136</sup> Joanna Innes, “Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England,” 88.

<sup>137</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s Circle Transformed Britain*, 59.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

arrest. In fact Wilberforce had to bail him out of this and further suits, and Hey had to deal with threats and retaliations for his campaign.<sup>139</sup>

Meanwhile some of Wilberforce's associates worked to stir up local judicial benches for action. Wilberforce's contacts, like Samuel Glasse of Middlesex and Sire William Dolben of Northamptonshire, worked to coordinate action on the local level. County benches shared ideas across regions and across the country, eager to make an impact. For example the West Riding Bench transmitted their resolution to every other county bench and had them printed in local and London newspapers in addition to having transmitted to county magistrates and ministers in West Riding.<sup>140</sup> Thus Wilberforce and the Society were active in encouraging action by associates on the local level and reformation of manners campaigns were at work across the country, though the strategy of the local campaigns differed from the more calculated and strategic plan of the national level work of the Proclamation Society.

The holiness of the Sabbath was a particularly deep concern of the Clapham sect and the Proclamation Society. Wilberforce helped to prosecute Sunday shopkeepers under the 1677 Act. He also conspired to produce a Bill to prohibit Sunday newspapers in 1799. Pitt supported his friend's bill until he was informed that most of those newspapers supported his government.<sup>141</sup> In addition to attempting to enact laws through Parliament that would create a more holy society, "the Saints" of the Clapham sect pushed for changes within Parliament itself. Though the Proclamation Society was not able to make as much progress as it would have liked in enforcing

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Joanna Innes, "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England," 78-79.

<sup>141</sup> John Wigley, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Sunday*, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1980), 28-29.

observance of the Sabbath, Wilberforce persuaded Perceval, when he was Prime Minister, to abandon Monday sittings of the House of Commons, since it forced some members to travel on a Sunday.<sup>142</sup>

Outside of this parliamentary victory, in the area of Sabbath breaking the committee took a more social strategy. Wilberforce and his friends certainly desired to improve the manners of the great as well as those of the multitudes. However, they believed that the most effective way to achieve this goal was to involve the elite in their movement. The goal was to make morality palatable to the social and political elite rather than distasteful.<sup>143</sup> This was a necessary step because they had seen that Members of Parliament did not react well to the Sabbatarian zeal of the prosecutions. In fact, in 1794 Parliament enacted the London Bakers Act, which clarified the cookshop classes of the 1677 act to allow in London to work part of the day on Sundays when they might “sell bread and bake meat, puddings, and pies (the poor man’s Sunday dinner).”<sup>144</sup> As historian Joanna Innes has noted, “the Society is especially likely to have relied upon the discreet exertion of influence when its object was to influence the conduct of the great: people whom it would not have been easy, and might not have been thought appropriate, to pursue by law.”<sup>145</sup>

The Society authorized private approaches to individuals of wealth and power on several occasions around the turn of the century in an attempt to persuade them to observe the Sabbath

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<sup>142</sup> Adam Kuper, *Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England*, 150.

<sup>143</sup> Joanna Innes, “Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England,” 76.

<sup>144</sup> John Wigley, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Sunday*, 28.

<sup>145</sup> Joanna Innes, “Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England,” 90.

more strictly.<sup>146</sup> This was intended to pave the way for a society encouraging observation of the Sabbath that would then have been parleyed into stricter Sabbatarian legislation. These private approaches may have been the first step in making this kind of legislation more palatable to the great figures in society, by attempting to convince them of the value of the Sabbath on a personal level.<sup>147</sup> However, the Proclamation Society proved unable to make progress in the legal arena on issues around the observation of the Sabbath.<sup>148</sup> Efforts on this front included admonitions and, outside of the Society, work by other members of the Clapham sect like Hannah More who published *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society*. That work devoted a large section to proper observance of the Sabbath, including a portion disapproving of the practice of ladies calling for hairdressers on the Sabbath, which managed to change the Queen's opinion on the practice.<sup>149</sup> In the work More acknowledged that she sought to address practices that could or would not be touched by law.<sup>150</sup> The committee adopted the strategy of employing these more social type efforts that in the area of the Sabbath "where it would have been vain to expect any Thing from the Operation of Law."<sup>151</sup> In fact this strategy of alternative methods to achieve reform when legal methods were inefficient became a hallmark of the Clapham sect and the strategic modus operandi of the Society.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 90-91.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>148</sup> Joanna Innes, "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England," 92. For the most part however it seems that the Clapham sect attempted to attempt this kind of social persuasion outside the aegis of the Proclamation Society, and mostly made use of the Society for efforts in legal and official channels.

<sup>149</sup> Hannah More, *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*, 18-25; and Joanna Innes, "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England," 92.

<sup>150</sup> Hannah More, *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*, 18-25.

<sup>151</sup> Society for Giving Effect to His Majesty's Proclamation against Vice and Immorality, Brief statement of the origin and nature of the Society, 17.

Outside of social pressure and legal reform the Society expanded its reach to new platforms for reform in which it was less likely to encounter popular opposition. Some of these included inspecting prisons, setting up a philanthropic society, and, eventually, transforming itself into the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor. The reformers had to adjust their tactics of reform as popular and legal opposition to the systematic prosecution of vice grew.<sup>152</sup> The Society and the Clapham sect grasped and leveraged the power of public opinion in addition to their work to enforce and expand the laws on immoral behavior. Reflecting on the Clapham sect's work in the mid-nineteenth century, Sir James Stephen commented "the direction of public opinion... is one of those social acts which during the last half century has almost assumed the character of a new invention," and the Clapham sect and the Society for the Reformation of Manners made extensive use of that "invention."<sup>153</sup>

One of these new efforts that was good for the Society's public image and expanded the reach of manners reform to different parts of society was reform of prisons. The Society saw prison reform as a necessary undertaking because the group believed that prison conditions were connected to the morality of the poor. As the British legal system evolved and capital punishment was employed less often to manage crime in society, penitentiaries and penal sentences became more important to the legal system. More crimes were punished with prison sentences making prisons increasingly important in society.<sup>154</sup> In the Committee of the Proclamation Society's first annual report the group claimed, "the State of our Prisons and Houses of Correction has great and considerable Influence on the Morals of the lower Orders of

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<sup>152</sup> London Lives.

<sup>153</sup> As quoted in David Spring, "The Clapham Sect: Some Social and Political Aspects," 42.

<sup>154</sup> Douglas Hay, "Crime in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England," 55.

the Community.”<sup>155</sup> In pursuit of this effort they published research on the state of prisons in various districts.<sup>156</sup> According to the society’s own report prisons were dirty, crowded, corrupt, and brutalizing.<sup>157</sup> The Committee hoped to promote better regulation of the prisons and, according to its own reports, this effort occupied much of the Committee’s attention.<sup>158</sup> The society did have some success in improving prison conditions.<sup>159</sup> This included officials commissioning the building of new prisons.<sup>160</sup> However, the group eventually gave this effort up as too expensive.<sup>161</sup> The prison reform aspects of the campaign also helped the group to convert into allies some who were initially against the work of the Society.<sup>162</sup> Their efforts saw some limited success, but they also foreshadowed considerable later interest in the prison system during the Victorian era.

Despite its mixed record, the very formation of the Society was a success for Wilberforce and his Clapham cohorts, several of whom were founding members of the Society. In fact the campaign for the reformation of manners and the establishment of the Proclamation Society was Wilberforce and Clapham’s most successful effort at rallying the forces of the establishment to

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<sup>155</sup> Society for Giving Effect to His Majesty's Proclamation against Vice and Immorality, Brief statement of the origin and nature of the Society, 17. Capitalization from original.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>157</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s Circle Transformed Britain*, 60.

<sup>158</sup> Society for Giving Effect to His Majesty's Proclamation against Vice and Immorality, Brief statement of the origin and nature of the Society, 18.

<sup>159</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s Circle Transformed Britain*, 59.

<sup>160</sup> Joanna Innes, “Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England,” 65.

<sup>161</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s Circle Transformed Britain*, 59.

<sup>162</sup> Joanna Innes, “Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England,” 95-95.

one of their causes.<sup>163</sup> Even some of the Clapham circle that were not members of the Society contributed to the effort. The Proclamation Society did not admit women as members until 1800, but in March 1788, More made her first contribution to the moral campaign by publishing *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society*.<sup>164</sup> She published the work anonymously to allow for the ideas to stand on their merit without scrutiny of the author's personal behavior, and for a period after the piece was published some people even speculated that Wilberforce was the author, until he publicly commented on the work.<sup>165</sup> The work itself specifically claimed to have been inspired by the King's proclamation and contained a note specifying that it was written soon after the Proclamation society was instituted.<sup>166</sup> The piece made moral behavior the topic of high society conversation. The Queen even stopped her practice of sending for hairdressers on Sundays after reading the statements against it in the work. Thus More helped the society's campaign expand into to the sphere of public ideas in addition to the wars being waged in the courts and Parliament.<sup>167</sup> Her book became a topic of public conversation, moving the discussion of reformation of manners beyond parliamentary debate and legal conversations into parlors and private conversation. The different skills of the various members of Clapham allowed them unprecedented influence in multiple spheres of society.

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 76

<sup>164</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 64.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Hannah More, *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*, 18.

<sup>167</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 64-65.

Historian Ford K. Brown claims that an effective reform movement in this period required an extraordinary leader. Idealistically based reform movements based on moral and religious principle fought an uphill battle during that time.<sup>168</sup> To overcome such significant social obstacles would require a unique set of skills. Brown suggests that the leader needed the ability to use “worldly means for spiritual ends, a genius for expediency, opportunism and ‘accommodation’, [and] steadfastness in staking calculated moral risks” and points to the fact that Wilberforce possessed these qualities as well personal wealth and access to politically and socially important sectors of British society.<sup>169</sup> The particular skills and position of Wilberforce gave him the political and social capital and the willingness and social agency to chart a difficult course to social relevance for the Proclamation Society. However, while Wilberforce may have been the most visible of the group, it was the combined social, literary, business, religious, and administrative skills and contacts of Clapham as a whole that made the group and their campaign so effective. The political connections of Wilberforce and “the Saints,” with the business contacts of Thornton, the government and international connections of Macaulay, and the literary talents of Hannah More, as well as the other skills and connections of the group, allowed Clapham to have long lasting impacts on British society when combined and engaged as a force for moral reform.

### Sunday Schools

Separate from the work of the Proclamation Society, another facet of the Clapham sect’s attempts at a reformation of manners and the first cause that Wilberforce and Thornton got involved with was that of Sunday schools. Sunday schools began in England in the 1760s to

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<sup>168</sup> Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, 3.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

teach working class children to read. They became more and more common after a Gloucestershire printer, Robert Raikes, wrote about his own Sunday school in the *Gentlemen's Magazine*.<sup>170</sup> Sunday schools were very much a late eighteenth century movement of the moment. Popularized by media campaigns they became the latest social fashion.<sup>171</sup> Wilberforce and Thornton were founding members of the Society for the Support and Encouragement of Sunday Schools, formed in 1785.<sup>172</sup> An interdenominational group led by William Fox, a Baptist merchant, formed the society.<sup>173</sup> The society did not set up or run schools. Instead it provided books and money to those who did and publicized their work. In the first twenty years, the society sent out 50,000 New Testaments, 200,00 spelling books, and £4,100 in grants.<sup>174</sup> In a few years thousands of new Sunday schools were started in every region of the country.<sup>175</sup> The aim of the society was to make the pupils better Christians, better citizens, and better off.<sup>176</sup> This trend built upon the efforts of middle-class earlier in the century to build charity schools. However, this new form of schooling was more successful because working class families wanted these efforts. Working class families increasingly valued literacy, in part because of the Evangelical revival, and Sunday schools allowed their children to learn to read without losing

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<sup>170</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 53.

<sup>171</sup> Joanna Innes, "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England," 66.

<sup>172</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 53.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> Joanna Innes, "Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth Century England," 66.

<sup>176</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 54.

wages. It is estimated that three quarters of working class children aged five to fifteen were in enrolled in this types of schools by 1851.<sup>177</sup>

In practice most Sunday schools were organized and staffed by the working class themselves, and only a small proportion received support from the society. The Society for the Support and Encouragement of Sunday Schools, however, played a key role in publicizing the work of the Sunday schools, lending respectability to the movement. The eminent names connected to the Society, including Wilberforce and Henry Thornton, as well as William Pitt's cousin, W.M. Pitt, and John Newton who raised money for the organization, helped to calm the minds of the political elite who were nervous about the concept of teaching the working class to read and write.<sup>178</sup> In addition to work with the society, the members of the Clapham sect also privately supported Sunday schools. Thomas Babington taught the school in his parish, Leicestershire. Hannah and Patty More also ran several Sunday schools, and Wilberforce supported Dorothy Wordsworth's school in Norfolk with ten guineas a year.<sup>179</sup>

The exact goals of the supporters of the Sunday Schools varied, as some hoped to create social and economic advancement for the working class and others sought their moral improvement alone. The Clapham sect was primarily concerned with encouraging the growth of the moral character of the working class through these enterprises. Indeed, in discussing the efforts for her and her sister's school in Cheddar, Hannah More made clear that the goal of literacy for the poor was for them to be able to read religious documents. It was so that they may

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 55.

save the souls of the working class that Clapham invested in such endeavors as Sunday schools.<sup>180</sup>

Hannah More wrote her Cheap Repository Tracts precisely so that the literate poor would have safe and moral things to read.<sup>181</sup> This was an especially important concern because the increasing literacy of the poor was a real cause for fear and concern among the Clapham sect and their circles. While the Clapham sect contributed to Sunday schools and encouraged teaching the poor up to a point, this was with the intention that the working classes use their literacy only to read religious works, and accompanied by a fear of the literate working class.<sup>182</sup> In this context Hannah More's "Cheap Repository Tracts" were advertised in 1830 with this enticement,

To improve the habits and raise the principles of the mass of the people, at a time when their dangers and temptations, moral and political, were multiplied beyond the example of any other period in our history, was the motive which impelled the writer of these volumes to devise and prosecute the institution of the Cheap Repository... As an appetite for reading had from various causes been increasing among the inferior ranks, it was judged expedient at this critical period to supply such wholesome aliment as might give a new direction to the public taste, and abate the relish for those corrupt and impious publications which the consequences of the French Revolution have been fatally pouring in upon us.<sup>183</sup>

The tracts were produced beginning in 1795, and were a combination of stories, poems, and analyses of Bible stories and parables intended to make the poor more sober, industrious, and pious. Explicitly intended to counter the revolutionary ideas from France, the Tracts encouraged the poor to be content with their station in life.<sup>184</sup> In order to achieve this the Tracts were produced in the popular style of broadsides and chap-books and at the same prices.<sup>185</sup> It was

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<sup>180</sup> Mona Scheuermann, *In Praise of Poverty*, (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2002.), 98-99.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-99.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, Epigraph.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>185</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 140-141.

important that literacy not give the poor pretensions of a different station in life or expose them to a dangerous ideas.<sup>186</sup> Sunday schools served as a vehicle for teaching and enforcing middle-class moral standards on the working class. However both the respected middle-class supporters of Sunday schools and the parents who sent their children to them had a mutual interest. As historian Stephen Tomkins has argued, “the schools were as successful as they were because funders, teachers, and parents wanted such similar things from them.”<sup>187</sup>

### The Movement and the Poor

The Clapham sect was concerned with reforming the manners, and indeed the souls, of society as a whole. However, they often took separate views and methodologies on changing the habits of the poor and the rich. The title of Wilberforce’s book, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*, explicitly identifies the intended audience as those of Wilberforce’s own ilk.<sup>188</sup> This is not to say that Wilberforce himself, or Clapham more broadly, were unconcerned with the poor. However, as a whole it seems that the group viewed a reformation of manners among the elite as the most necessary and immediate task. By reforming the behavior of the elite, who set societal norms and standards they could affect a “trickle-down morality.” Hannah More wrote that “reformation must begin with the GREAT or it will never be

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<sup>186</sup> Mona Scheuermann, *In Praise of Poverty*, 146.

<sup>187</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s Circle Transformed Britain*, 55.

<sup>188</sup> William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System*.

effectual. *Their* example is the fountain whence the vulgar draw their habits, actions, and characters.”<sup>189</sup>

In a letter to the Proclamation Society on the issue of dueling that was printed for J. Hatchard in 1805, the author chose a front quotation that expressed this idea perfectly. He quoted from Bishop Llandaff’s sermon, “I should be ashamed to recommend from this place the suppression of vice amongst *some*, if I did not recommend its suppression amongst *all*; being sensible that the good example of their superiors would be of more efficacy in surpassing the vices of the lower orders than the very best execution of the very best laws ever can be.”<sup>190</sup> In theory, the Clapham sect was concerned to maintain just such equality of action in the reformation of manners among all classes of society. Indeed Hannah More, in her work *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*, stated that “to attempt the reform the poor while the opulent are corrupt is to throw odors into the stream while the springs are poisoned.”<sup>191</sup> Though reforming the manners of the great in order to influence the many may have been a priority, it was also tactically more difficult. In practice the wealthy and influential would have to be brought to a more moral standard of living by persuasion and example while the Clapham sect, Proclamation Society, and other reformers had other more coercive means at their disposal to upend the habits of the poor.

It was both possible and socially acceptable to bring to bear increased legal enforcement on vices that were largely the province of the poor. Thus gambling in the private homes of the

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<sup>189</sup> Hannah More, *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*, 78. Capitalization and italics from original source.

<sup>190</sup> “A Letter to the Members of the Proclamation Society and the Society for the Suppression of Vice,” (London: J. Hatchard, 1805). <https://archive.org/details/alettertomember00socigoog>

<sup>191</sup> Hannah More, *Thoughts on The Importance of The Manners of the Great to General Society*, 78.

upper classes would have to be dealt with through private shame and changes of heart, while public houses and gaming yards that hosted the immoral entertainments of the poor were shut down and members of the lower classes faced charges for their participation. The first report of the Committee of the Proclamation Society, in 1789, described the Society's hope to influence the "highest Ranks of Society" through "the Force of Example and a Sense of Consistency."<sup>192</sup> Meanwhile the reform that the report specifically mentioned as a hope for the reform of the lower orders was prison reform.<sup>193</sup> In many ways the reformation of manners, especially in its legal aspects, mostly affected the poor.<sup>194</sup> Though reforming the manners of the great was a primary objective, much of the "immoral behavior" that the campaign encouraged stricter legislation and enforcement of was particularly likely to affect the poor. As noted, the immoral entertainments of the rich often occurred within private clubs and residences, while the poor gathered in more public venues for their drinking, gambling, and other debauchery. This left the poorer members of society significantly more likely to face legal repercussions for their behavior. At the same time, the religious reform interests of the Clapham sect in limiting and banning these "low forms" of entertainment, which they deemed immoral, often coincided with the interests of factory masters who supported the enforcement for both moral and economic reasons.<sup>195</sup> This alliance with the economic elite could only serve to make the campaign both more legally effective and more popularly despised.

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<sup>192</sup> Society for Giving Effect to His Majesty's Proclamation against Vice and Immorality, Brief statement of the origin and nature of the Society, 21. Capitalization from the original.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>194</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 109.

<sup>195</sup> Douglas Hay, "Crime and Justice in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth- Century England," 72.

Due at least in part to this tactical discrepancy, the Clapham sect and the Proclamation Society faced criticism for hypocrisy in treatment of the vices of the poor and the upper classes. These critics consisted of a mix of political opponents, society men of more liberal morality, and those who defended the poor. Among the group of social liberals who disliked the group's restrictive morality was Lord Byron, who often mocked Wilberforce both in conversation and in print. Byron used Wilberforce as a foil for the King in his epic poem, *Don Juan*, in several passages, including the line "O Wilberforce, thou man of black renown."<sup>196</sup> Political enemies accused Wilberforce and the Clapham sect of hating and harming laborers. This group of critics included William Cobbett, a political writer and eventually member of the House of Commons, who stood as a representative of the agricultural working class in the south of England.<sup>197</sup> Indeed Cobbett ended a pamphlet against Wilberforce with "one of the greatest political lies of the era," according to Wilberforce biographer Kevin Belmonte, as he accused Wilberforce of having never "done one single act in favour of the labourers of this country."<sup>198</sup>

Sydney Smith, an early practitioner of what would become the social gospel and defender of the poor, was one who criticized the group for their differing treatment of the wealthy and the poor.<sup>199</sup> Years later, when the work of the Proclamation Society had been overtaken by the Society for the Suppression of Vice, Sydney Smith would characterize them as having the aim of "suppressing the vices of persons whose income does not exceed £500 per annum."<sup>200</sup> Indeed

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<sup>196</sup> As quoted in Kevin Belmonte, *William Wilberforce: A Hero For Humanity*, (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2007), 163.

<sup>197</sup> Ian Dyck, 'Cobbett, William (1763–1835)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>198</sup> Kevin Belmonte, *William Wilberforce: A Hero For Humanity*, 168.

<sup>199</sup> Kevin Belmonte, *William Wilberforce: A Hero For Humanity*, 161. And biographical information on Sydney Smith from: Peter Virgin, 'Smith, Sydney (1771–1845)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>200</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 109.

Smith, though he admired Wilberforce as a person and approved of the goals of the group, maintained that in pursuing endorsements from the leadership class Wilberforce had left himself open to criticism that he did not care about the vices of the upper and middle-classes.<sup>201</sup> The Clapham sect was conscious of this inequity. In the words of Hannah More,

Will not the common people think it a little inequitable that they are abridged of the diversions of the public house and the gaming yard on Sunday evening, when they shall hear that many houses of the first nobility are on that evening crowded with company, and such amusements carried on as are prohibited by human laws even on common days?<sup>202</sup>

Thus the actions of the Clapham sect in their attempts at the reformation of manners were often stratified by class due to both tactical concerns and theological positions that opened the group up to charges of hypocrisy and made for a legacy of unequal treatment of the poor.

Even as they attempted to use social pressure on the upper classes to change the tone of society, Clapham initiatives like prison reform, stricter law enforcement, and Sunday Schools were aimed at affecting the lower orders of society. Reforms aimed at this group tended to be more legal in nature than other types of efforts and mostly aimed at improving the morality of the poor. While the Clapham sect was truly concerned with the hardships of the poor of society, the philanthropy of the group was generous without trying to change the parts of society that created inequality, like low wages and social alienation. This practical methodology was supported by and perhaps grew out of a general belief that the class structure and stratification of society was ordained by the will of God.<sup>203</sup> Hannah More displayed this impulse to preserve the stratification of society on a more personal level in her often discussed relationship with Ann

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<sup>201</sup> Kevin Belmonte, *William Wilberforce: A Hero For Humanity*, 161.

<sup>202</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 109.

<sup>203</sup> SC Carpenter, *Church and People 1789-1889; a History of the Church of England from William Wilberforce to "Lux Mundi,"* (London: S.P.C.K., 1933), 40-45.

Yearsley, a milkmaid whose poetry More helped to get published and whose financial affairs she managed. In her management of Yearsley's career there was no question for More that Yearsley, through her art, would rise in society above the station of milkmaid and begin to live off of her poetry. Yearsley was, for More, always to remain a milkwoman who happened to have a talent for writing poetry.<sup>204</sup> Indeed the Clapham sect and their friends shared the fear that in giving too much to the poor they could, in the words of More's friend Mrs. Montagu, "do harm where I intend to confer benefit."<sup>205</sup> There was a real concern that in giving enough to take away the "terrifying spectre of poor poverty" they could introduce "a legion of little demons: vanity, luxury, idleness, and pride."<sup>206</sup> Thus the group avoided efforts that would actually transform rather than alleviate the station of an individual in poverty. In their philanthropy they were concerned, in the words Horace Walpole used in writing to Hannah More, "to keep the poor honest instead of corrupting them."<sup>207</sup> Many of the internal inconsistencies and hypocrisies that were woven throughout the work of the Proclamation Society, particularly with regard to the poor, were evident in the various efforts of the Clapham sect to reform Britain's manners.

The group always held in tension a genuine care for the poor that often manifested in an extreme and unabashed generosity with a sense of station that mandated the poor not reach for a higher place in society. This view prevented them from supporting any kind of assistance or

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<sup>204</sup> Mona Scheuermann, *In Praise of Poverty*, 75-76. Yearsley accused more of exploiting her and mismanaging the funds. Much had been written on both sides in defense and accusation of More's handling of the situation with Yearsley. Whatever the facts of the very confused situation may have been, More's intentions in the matter reveal her characteristic view of the proper place of the poor in society also present throughout her writings in the Cheap Repository Tracts.

<sup>205</sup> Mona Scheuermann, *In Praise of Poverty*, 77.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 97.

reform that would have improved class structure or economic issues in society. In his book Wilberforce addressed the challenges of the poor as spiritual advantages,

To the former, the poor and the ignorant must be indeed confessed unequal; but they are far less indisposed than the great and the learned, to bow down to that “preaching of the cross which is to them that perish foolishness, but unto them that are saved the power of God, and the wisdom of God.” The poor are not liable to be puffed up by the intoxicating fumes of ambition and worldly grandeur. They are less likely to be kept from entering into the strait and narrow way, and when they have entered to be drawn back again or to be retarded in their progress, by the cares or the pleasures of life. They may express themselves ill; but their views may be simple, and their hearts humble, penitent, and sincere. It is as in other cases; the vulgar are the subject of phaenomena, the learned explain them: the former know nothing of the theory of vision or of sentiment; but this ignorance hinders not that they see and think, and though unable to discourse elaborately on the passions, they can feel warmly for their children, their friends, their country.<sup>208</sup>

Thus while poverty itself was often addressed in the lives of individuals, the Clapham sect did not view the class based structure of society, or even its treatment of the lower orders, as inherently problematic. The poor were different from the wealthy and this had to be taken into account when attempting to encourage morality among them. For the Clapham sect, though, this difference was seen as natural and not a problem to be rectified. The group accepted as fact that the challenges and character of the poor would be different but also that the poor, spared from much of the temptation of excess or pride by lack of access, would have moral advantages that did not apply to the rich. It was in this vein that the Clapham sect’s assistance to and work with the poor was focused on their spiritual health and general well being as well as meeting immediate needs, but not on changing their place in society.

### Personal Application of Theology

While the Clapham sect and their friends may have applied different standards to the poor and the elite in practice, their moral expectations were theologically universal. They desired the

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<sup>208</sup> William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System*, 56.

same type of morality from all members of society, that goal ideally being the practice of Biblical morality as motivated by the love of Christ. The Claphamites genuinely believed in the benefits of the moral behavior they and their societies sought to promote and impose. And, while they did not attempt to enforce such behavior on their wealthy friends, they held themselves to strict moral discipline. Indeed, like true Evangelicals, the Clapham sect expected the application of Biblical principals in the everyday life of its fellows. In one expression of the fulfillment of these expectation in a life, Henry Venn's memorial service for John Thornton in 1790 was entitled "The Love of Christ the Source of Genuine Philanthropy" based in 2 Corinthians 14-15. In it, he proclaimed, "doing good was the great business of his life, and may be more properly said to have been his occupation, than even his mercantile engagements, which were uniformly considered as subservient to that nobler design."<sup>209</sup>

In his book Wilberforce expressed that one cannot expect to be Christian without "labour, study, or inquiry," and this principle was evident in the life of Clapham and the education of the children of the Clapham sect.<sup>210</sup> The Clapham sect raised their own children to value such acts of charity. From a young age they began carrying dinners to the sick and aged poor and they progressed to reading hymns and passages of Scripture to the blind and illiterate. When they were old enough, the children of Clapham taught Sunday school, and conducted classes and cottage meetings.<sup>211</sup> It was because of this earnest belief and genuine passion that their efforts, though often cast as hypocritical, seemed moral and necessary in their own minds. The Clapham

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<sup>209</sup> John Telford, *A Sect That Moved the World*, 68.

<sup>210</sup> William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System*, 10.

<sup>211</sup> John Telford, *A Sect That Moved the World*, 191.

sect genuinely believed in and attempted to live out within their own community, the values that they hoped to spread to the rest of British society through the reformation of manners campaign.

## **Chapter 4: Larger Victorian Context**

### Defining Victorian Values and Norms

Victorianism is a broad category and a social and historical construct.<sup>212</sup> However the era marked by the rule of Queen Victoria, used as a rough marker of periodization, was distinctive in part because it embraced values of gentility, propriety, and modesty that contrasted greatly with the character of debauchery of the Hanoverian age that had preceded it. Beginning in earnest in the 1830s with cultural and social transformations in society, the Victorian period followed on the heels of the work of the Clapham sect.<sup>213</sup> Victorianism “was called on to evoke an historical period, a series of styles in fashion and architecture, a moment when the novel flourished and a lavish empire continued to grow, but, perhaps most of all, a state of mind.”<sup>214</sup> In their essay “Rethinking the Victorians,” historians Kelly Boyd Ann and Rohan McWilliam describe the Victorian era and Victorianism as both a reality and a historical and social construct. They claim

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<sup>212</sup> It is popular to write about ways the Victorian era did not conform to popularly conceived Victorian values. However this section will focus on those values recognized as Victorian, which were perceived as characteristic of the time period despite exceptions and historical works that problematize the morality of the time period. Works that discuss exceptions to the Victorian rules include Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-century London*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Ari Adut, “A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde,” *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 111, No. 1 (July, 2005); Downing, Lisa. *The Subject of Murder*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. Print; Patrick R. Malley, *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance, and Victorian Gothic Culture*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Walkowitz, Judith R. “Chapter Seven: Jack the Ripper” *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992; and Walkowitz, Judith. *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1980.

<sup>213</sup> Martin Hewitt, “Why the Notion of Victorian Britain Does Make Sense,” *Victorian Studies* Vol. 48, No. 3 (Spring, 2006), 396.

<sup>214</sup> Boyd and McWilliam, *The Victorian Studies Reader*, 1.

that Victorianism “meant earnestness, prudery, hypocrisy, overly ornate and elaborate design, imperialism, narrow mindedness, cosy but stifling family life, rote-learning, extreme religiosity, racism, respectability, corporal punishment, hard work and drudgery.”<sup>215</sup> Meanwhile, in her defense of the Victorians, historian Gertrude Himmelfarb highlighted the values of thrift, prudence, diligence, and temperance as particularly Victorian.<sup>216</sup> These descriptions of the Victorian age show the similarity of the character of that era to the picture of the Clapham sect and its reformation of manners. Indeed much of that description of Victorianism would either be proudly claimed by the Clapham sect as a descriptor of their circle or was at one time or another used as an accusation against them by their opponents.

These highlighted values were particularly emphasized in, and thus became characteristic of, the period marked by the rule of Queen Victoria. The values and morals emerged in the context of changes that were precipitated by social, economic, and political transformations that had their roots in the second half of the eighteenth century but crystalized in the second and third decades of the 1800s.<sup>217</sup> Economically, the industrial revolution, whose early stages had been initiated in the previous half-century, began to result in even more widespread and rapid economic change. This economic change also contributed to the social revolution that included the transition from a hierarchical to a more class-based society. In the 1830’s the middle-class gained political power and influence, changing the landscape of state politics, and the Reform Act of 1832 marked a shift in the political character of representative politics in Britain.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, "In Defense of the Victorians," *The Wilson Quarterly* Vol. 12, No. 3 (Summer, 1988).

<sup>217</sup> Martin Hewitt, "Why the Notion of Victorian Britain Does Make Sense," 397.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 397-99.

These fundamental changes in British life mark off the Victorian era as a distinctive period in British history. One major component of this distinctiveness was the moral values and manners that Britons in Victorian England claimed as their own. Many of the attitudes and ideals that came to characterize the Victorian period were foreshadowed in the Clapham sect's earlier efforts, their campaign for a reformation of manners in British society.

### The Clapham Sect and Victorian Morals and Manners

Like their late eighteenth century counterparts, Victorian philanthropists, particularly Evangelicals, saw Protestantism as a point of patriotism. As such, philanthropy was one way that Protestantism could test itself against Catholicism.<sup>219</sup> During the period of the Clapham sect, from the last decades of the eighteenth century through the first decades of the nineteenth century, the nation's moral character was viewed as a source of anxiety and even a threat to national security, but by the height of the Victorian age, philanthropic efforts were subjects of national pride.<sup>220</sup> While motivations for philanthropy evolved within the Victorian period, historian Brian Harrison has pointed to the mid-Victorian motivation to save souls as a driver of philanthropy. Victorian philanthropist Charlotte Hanbury, who worked in ragged schools in the mid-nineteenth century and later became concerned with the welfare of Moorish prisoners in North Africa, exclaimed in her diary, "Oh their souls, their souls! Could I not see them saved, if there is *anything* I can do, I ought to, I *must*, I *must* do it."<sup>221</sup> This motivation to see souls saved as a drive to philanthropy was rooted in the belief in the divine worth of each human being.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Brian Harrison, "Philanthropy and the Victorians," *Victorian Studies* Vol. 9, No. 4 (June, 1966), 357.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Brian Harrison, "Philanthropy and the Victorians," 359; Biographical information on Charlotte Hanbury from Timothy C. F. Stunt, 'Hanbury, Elizabeth (1793–1901)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

As a motivation to philanthropic efforts, this religious language and drive mirrored that of Clapham, whose reformation of manners campaign, and indeed all of their other efforts, including abolition of the slave trade and the many Bible societies, were rooted a desire to see souls saved and transformation of lives by the gospel. Wilberforce revealed this underlying motivation in his letter to a Yorkshire cleric with the statement, “I know that by regulating the external conduct we do not at first change the hearts of men.” In this statement Wilberforce acknowledged the ultimate goal- “changing the hearts of men” – in conceding that the measures would not “at first” achieve it.<sup>223</sup> This inward spiritual transformation rooted in each individual’s eternal value was the ultimate goal, not mere outward behavioral transformation, no matter how beneficial. The Clapham sect and the Victorian philanthropists that followed them shared a common spiritual motivation to philanthropy, rooted both in the desire for conversions and the evangelical conception of human dignity flowing out of the conception of human beings as divine creations; though in the time of the Clapham sect, the moral state of society was a cause for concern, whereas philanthropy was a point of Protestant pride for British Victorians.

Historian Brian Harrison points out that in the Victorian era “philanthropy helped to validate existing social institutions by highlighting the generosity of the rich and the inadequacies of the poor.”<sup>224</sup> This structure praised the rich for giving generously but ignored the generosity of the poor to their friends and neighbors. This neglect occurred because those forms of generosity practiced by the poor often functioned through and within informal social

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<sup>222</sup> Brian Harrison, “Philanthropy and the Victorians,” 359.

<sup>223</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 105.

<sup>224</sup> Brian Harrison, “Philanthropy and the Victorians,” 368.

networks, like the oft villanized public house, rather than formal philanthropic societies.<sup>225</sup> While firmly committed to the social order, as it was and deeply allied with the traditional nobility, on whom they depended for support and social influence, the Clapham sect as the driving force behind their own movement was a foreshadowing of the middle-class political and moral reform initiative of the Victorian era. As merchants, sons of merchants, members of the House of Commons, and non-noble but popular authors, the Clapham sect were a cross section of the influential and wealthy middle-class that would rise to political and social influence during the Victorian era. They took initiative not in self or class-conscious efforts to change the political or social dynamic, but rather from deep theological conviction in their cause and concern for the upper classes of society.

By the Victorian era many of the values that the Clapham sect worked so hard to instill had become at least the outward creed of the middle and upper classes. One London tailor reflecting on the transformation of British society from the late eighteenth century to the Victorian period reflected in his autobiography that “we are much better people now than we were then, better instructed, more sincere and kind hearted, less gross and brutal and have fewer of the concomitant vices of a less civilized state.”<sup>226</sup> While much of the Clapham sect’s focus had been to use soft influence to reform the dreadful manners of the higher orders of society and convert them to Christian virtue, by the Victorian age the middles classes and nobility, in word, if not always in practice, identified with these characteristics as their own.

While public perception in the late eighteenth century had created alarm over the moral depravity in society, in the early parts of the Victorian era men and women feared that crime,

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians*, 16.

including violent crime, was on the rise. This fear was confirmed by official statistics like the number of prosecutions in London courts, which legitimated the fears despite the fact that the increase was largely due to administrative changes like the criminalization of previously legal behaviors, like drunkenness and legitimate uses of public space from street selling to street stalls.<sup>227</sup> This fear, among other things, created a greater emphasis of criminality. The emphasis on criminality is reflected in the different directions and areas of emphasis between the Clapham sect and their Victorian counterparts. While the Clapham sect was focused on reforming manners and motivated by their horror at the moral depravity of their time, Victorian social reformers, though often concerned with the same behaviors, placed more emphasis on the criminality of the actions and law enforcement.

Both groups sought legal reform and used prosecutions as a tool, however, in their rhetoric, Victorians were more likely than the Claphamites to focus on the criminal rather than moral status of an offender. This difference can also be attributed to the fact that many of the behaviors that so concerned the Clapham sect began to be criminalized in the period and were more completely criminalized by the later part of the Victorian era.<sup>228</sup> Indeed the Victorians had significantly more resources of law enforcement at their command than did their reforming counterparts in Clapham. The Metropolitan Police in London were not created until 1829, and the “science” of criminology was on the rise in the nineteenth century.<sup>229</sup> Clapham’s law enforcement efforts were by comparison modest and their aims more focused on morality than criminality.

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>228</sup> Douglas Hay, “Crime and Justice in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth- Century England,” 46-47.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 56, 58.

Concern for the Sabbath was a major aspect of the Clapham sect's work, particularly their efforts at social influence. This value for respecting the Sabbath and attempting to clean up behavior and ban work on Sundays continued into the Victorian age. Sabbatarianism was looked on at least in part as a means of helping the poor through providing a Sabbath rest. The Victorian version of Sabbatarianism was a continuation of the Sabbatarian movement of the late eighteenth century, but generally was stricter in its behavioral prescriptions than the Clapham sect. However, while the Clapham sect respected the nature of Sundays, not all could be called Sabbatarians; neither Elliot nor Venn were Sabbatarians, and Thornton engaged in mailing and writing letters on Sundays, which strict Sabbatarians opposed. Even Wilberforce himself was cautious about adopting too strict an attitude with regard to the Sabbath.<sup>230</sup> In his book *A Practical View*, he commented on the moderate nature of the Sabbath, and in 1821 he defended Sunday letter writing with the statement, "often good people have been led by the terms of the Fourth Commandment to lay more stress on the strictness of Sunday than on its spirituality."<sup>231</sup>

Victorian Sabbatarians were largely middle class. Many members of both the upper classes and the working class resented the restrictions on their leisure time that Sabbatarians attempted to impose. These restrictions were even stricter in the Victorian period than they had been in the previous century, limiting not only, "immoral" entertainments and commerce, but also amusement and recreation generally.<sup>232</sup> For the lower classes Sabbatarians tried to impose a Sunday of church and Sunday school attendance along with "domestic comfort." The Sabbath they encouraged was characterized, however, by hushed voices, half-drawn blinds, and best

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<sup>230</sup> John Wigley, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Sunday*, 29.

<sup>231</sup> As quoted in John Wigley, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Sunday*, 29.

<sup>232</sup> John Wigley, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Sunday*, 185.

clothes rather than true comfort or rest.<sup>233</sup> In this way Victorian Sabbatarianism continued with some of the legacy of the Clapham sect's work to improve society's observance of the Sabbath, but the Victorian imposed the principle in a much stricter manner and also focused much of their efforts on enforcement among the poor, while Clapham had attempted to use social influence to sway the attitudes and behavior of the rich.

Victorian modesty and purity in certain eras can also be seen as a continuation of the Clapham sect's reformation of manners. This is especially evident in the Victorian views on public decency and "prudish" attitudes on printed or otherwise public sexual content. The reformation of manners campaign had included efforts to restrict such "inappropriate" material, including the Society for the Reformation of Manner's successful prosecution of the first pornographic English novel and producers of inappropriate prints.<sup>234</sup> In a famous report on the state of the society of the poor of London, Henry Mayhew, a renowned Victorian social reformer and author on poverty and London street life reported on the behavior and habits of prostitutes, thieves, beggars, and other assorted criminals.<sup>235</sup> In the course of the report, Mayhew's associate Bracebridge Hemyng, author of the section on prostitutes, expressed relief at recent legal reform, which restricted pornographic and inappropriate imagery. Hemyng was displeased that, "until very lately the police had not the power of arresting those traders, who earned an infamous livelihood by selling immoral books and obscene prints."<sup>236</sup> He was also hopeful that "the

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, 59.

<sup>235</sup> Deborah Vlock, 'Mayhew, Henry (1812–1887)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>236</sup> Henry Mayhew and Others, *The London Underworld in the Victorian Period*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 1.

disgraceful trade of Holywell street and kindred districts has received a blow from which it will never again rally.”<sup>237</sup>

The mid-century Victorian sentiment was in fact so tied to the work of the Clapham sect that Hemyng referenced the priorities listed by William Wilberforce as the main goals of the Society for the Suppression of Vice in 1802.<sup>238</sup> Hemyng mentioned the work the society had begun in effort to clean society of these inappropriate articles as a beginning and the present work of the middle of the century as a continuation of that earlier effort.<sup>239</sup> Thus the Clapham sect’s legacy had direct effect on Victorian efforts to limit public display of expressions of sexual content.

Prostitution was a major concern of Victorian reformers. Influential figures like Josephine Butler attempted to address the issue, and the sensational journalistic piece “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” about prostitution and human trafficking in London, called massive public attention to the subject.<sup>240</sup> This concern over prostitution was much more widespread and socially relevant in the Victorian period than in the time of the Clapham sect. In fact, in most of British society in the late eighteenth century prostitution was seen as a necessary evil to society. The Clapham sect certainly did not approve of this attitude, yet the Proclamation Society did little to address the issue of prostitution because “the subject abounds with practical difficulties.”<sup>241</sup> With so many other pressing issues to address in areas with more promising

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Walkowitz, Judith. “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” in *City of Dreadful Delight*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 81-134. Print.

<sup>241</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s Circle Transformed Britain*, 59.

outlooks, the Clapham sect left reform in the area of prostitution to the generations that would follow. Steeped in the moral lessons the Clapham sect had hoped to instill on society, the Victorians had a better shared moral framework from which address the issue of prostitution in earnest.

Hemyng also addressed the issue of prostitution, which he regarded as a major problem in London, and greater British, society. He characterized prostitutes largely as innocent victims sucked into lives of sin by those who kidnap and corrupt them and blamed the prevalence of the problem on lack of legal enforcement.<sup>242</sup> This too contained echoes of the concerns of the Clapham sect about prostitution. However, the Victorian work goes farther, investigating the potential economic causes of prostitution. Hemyng suggests that the greatest and most difficult to combat cause of prostitution is “the low rate of wages that the female industrial classes of this great city receive, in return for the most arduous and wearisome labour.”<sup>243</sup> So while Clapham had not been able to address the issue of prostitution, which was so deeply ingrained in their society, their work to instill morals and a sense of decency in society helped to create a culture in which it was possible to address the problem of prostitution.

Like the members of the Clapham sect, Victorians were increasingly concerned with prison reform. As capital punishment as a public device for the social control of criminality continued to decline, with the public hangman finally being hidden in the prison in 1868, the nature and structure of prisons became of utmost concern.<sup>244</sup> The use of prisons further escalated as the other popular form of sentencing, transport to the colonies, was repeatedly interrupted with

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<sup>242</sup> Henry Mayhew and Others, *The London Underworld in the Victorian Period*, 3-4.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-6.

<sup>244</sup> Douglas Hay, “Crime in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England,” 55.

the American Revolution, French Wars, and by the mid-nineteenth century, the Australian colonies' refusal to accept more shipments of convicts.<sup>245</sup> In the Victorian period, there was a renewed belief that criminality was the result of a criminal character, not the product of circumstance. Because of this, the goal of prison terms was a reformation of the character through strict discipline.<sup>246</sup> Thus the hygiene of prison conditions needed to be impeccable to encourage hygienic impulses in the criminals that society sought to reform.<sup>247</sup> These concerns for the conditions of prisons as essential features in the reformation of criminals' characters bear echoes of the Proclamation Society's efforts in prison reform. Those efforts too saw the condition of prisons as intimately connected to the character to the poorer classes of society, who the Victorian age came to call the dangerous classes. The Victorians continued and expanded the focus that reformation of manners campaign, through the work of the Proclamation Society, had pioneered in the area of prison reform.

The divide between lower class social norms and the "middle-class morality" that came to define the Victorian era can trace some roots the Clapham sect's efforts at reforming the manners of British society. In the later reaches of the Victorian era those Victorian values were largely viewed as imposed onto working class population usually through coercive means. Those coercive means usually combined carrot and stick, with harsh law enforcement and poverty measures such as the particularly draconian Poor Laws. The charity efforts themselves also tended to be conditioned on recipients meeting the middle-class donors' expectations for behavioral standards. This situation harkened back to the contradiction that, while the vision of the reformation of manners was universal improvement of the morality of British society, the

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

realities of enforcement, tactical decisions, and underlying beliefs about the place and position of the poor promoted by the Clapham sect helped to create a divide in moral standards.

However, much like the Sunday school movement that the Clapham sect participated in, which depended on both the desires of the working class and the efforts of the middle and upper classes, the morality and philanthropy of the Victorian era was not entirely imposed. “Victorian morality” was not the exclusive province of the rich. As historian of the Victorian period Gertrude Himmelfarb has noted, while “Victorian values” were bourgeois, those respectable Victorian working class aspired to them as well.<sup>248</sup> Despite this, the methods and views of the Clapham sect on effecting the reformation of manners among the poor also helped to create a missional rather than communal vision of working with and in poor communities, much like the “White Savior” complex of colonization, that had long lasting ramifications on the social dynamics of moral standards in Victorian England.

Victorian conversation about poverty was more nuanced than that of the late eighteenth century. Whereas Clapham had sought to alleviate the negative affects of poverty while supporting the underlying social structure, the Victorian age contained an active debate about the causes of poverty and crime. Victorians, subscribing to ideas from the newly developing “science” of criminology saw crime as an outgrowth of character problems and not a circumstance of poverty. In some ways, this development echoed Clapham’s ideas. Indeed, just as the Victorians made distinctions between the honest working poor and the criminal elements of the “dangerous classes,” the Clapham sect made some distinctions even among the imprisoned.<sup>249</sup> Several members of the Clapham sect, including Wilberforce and the Thornton

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<sup>248</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, "In Defense of the Victorians," 96.

<sup>249</sup> Douglas Hay, “Crime in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England,” 69-70.

brothers, were benefactors of the Society for the Discharge and Relief of Persons Imprisoned for Small Debts.<sup>250</sup>

Certainly echoes of Clapham-like thought remained as some still sought to address the symptoms of poverty while maintaining the traditional social structure. Even some of the prevention efforts harkened back to ideas of Clapham. These similarities are particularly evident some of the theories of Henry Mayhew, who believed in education as the solution to prevention of crime and destitution among the poorer classes.<sup>251</sup> In a work compiled by Mayhew and his associates in the middle of the nineteenth century about the poorest of Londoners, John Binny suggested that “We believe that the most effective means of checking the crime of the metropolis is to have an efficient machinery of ragged schools in these low neighborhoods, where neglected children are to be found...”<sup>252</sup> They believed in this strategy because, much like the Clapham sect in their support of Sunday schools, Mayhew and his associates were convinced that “it is far easier to train the young in virtuous and industrious habits, than to reform the grown-up felon who has become callous to crime.”<sup>253</sup> This devotion to education contained echoes of the moral education ideas of the Clapham sect, particularly in the work of Hannah More and the promotion of Sunday schools.

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<sup>250</sup> Society for the Discharge and Relief of Persons Imprisoned for Small Debts, An account of the rise, progress, and present state, of the Society for the Discharge and Relief of Persons imprisoned for Small Debts throughout England. The eleventh edition. [London], 1792. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. The Society also worked to correct what they perceived as an injustice in the legal system, which provided recourse for those unable to pay off large debts, but not for those with debts in small amounts. They also pointed to the contribution of this issue to the escalating problem of emigration from England.

<sup>251</sup> Henry Mayhew and Others, *The London Underworld in the Victorian Period*, 112.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

As Victorian middle-class reformers attempted to encourage Victorian values in the working classes, they were in fact applying a single standard of values to everyone.<sup>254</sup> However, the methods through which these values were imposed may have been less democratic and less universal across the class landscape. This pattern too shows echoes of the Clapham sect, whose vision of moral reform had one single moral standard, a standard that for social, practical, and sometimes theological reasons was encouraged and enforced differently for the working and middle and upper classes. Similarly, the Clapham sect's efforts to reduce public immorality may at least in part be the root of the Victorian "prudishness" and often the resulting hypocrisy that followed in its footsteps. Clapham's motivation for this was, even while acknowledging that immorality could never be completely eliminated, to remove it from visibility so as to decrease the possibility of contagion.<sup>255</sup> Thus even some of the ideological and practical roots of Victorian hypocrisy can be found in the Clapham sect's work.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century the Clapham sect sought to reform the morality of British society from the debauched state, which they, and others, observed around them. The group waged this reformation of manners campaign through official channels with the Proclamation Society, through their work in Sunday schools, and through their social and professional influence in the various fields and circles in which members of the group circulated. The Clapham sect had the broad aim of restoring morals and manners to British society. The influence of their example through both their ideology and methodology can be seen in the work of Victorians who followed them in various arenas of social reform. Their Victorian protégés were able to delve more deeply into many of the problems that the Clapham sect wanted to

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<sup>254</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, "In Defense of the Victorians," 98.

<sup>255</sup> Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, 18.

address precisely because the morals that the Clapham sect had worked to spread in society had become, by the height of the Victorian period, the accepted and touted moral standard of British society— particularly of the middle-class. This accepted standard existed in part because of the efforts of the Clapham sect to reawaken morality in British society, and its existence created a common language and basis of behavior and expectation from which Victorian reformers could begin their work. In several avenues Victorians went further than the Clapham sect, and in cases like the Victorian Sabbatarian movement, perhaps further than the Clapham sect would have wanted. Despite the differences and variations, however, the philanthropic and reform movements of the Victorian era contained many echoes of the ideas and efforts of the Clapham sect, and the success of the Clapham sect's reformation of manners campaign is evident in the fact that the values characteristic of Victorian morality were the very same ideals that the Clapham sect invested so much talent, effort, and social influence to impart upon British society.

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