

ZACHARY MACAULAY



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Illustration taken from Viscountess Knutsford's *Life and Letters* (1900)

ZACHARY MACAULAY

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*To
my son-in-law
Chris Bennett,
kind friend and spiritual encourager*

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* With grateful thanks to the Evangelical Library

TIMELINE

- 1703 Birth of John Wesley
- 1735 Birth of Granville Sharp
- 1738 John Wesley's 'heart strangely warmed' at Fetter Lane Moravian meeting
- 1759 Birth of William Wilberforce
- 1760 Birth of Thomas Clarkson
- 1768 Birth of Zachary Macaulay
- 1772 Lord Chief Justice Mansfield forced to recognize freedom for slaves in Britain
- 1783 William Pitt the Younger becomes prime minister
- 1784 Macaulay goes to Jamaica
- 1786 Clarkson's Essay against slavery — serious campaigning begins
- 1787 Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade formed and Colony of Sierra Leone established
- 1789 Macaulay returns from Jamaica. His conversion. William Wilberforce's first Common's speech for abolition of slave trade
- 1789 Storming of the Bastille and French Revolution begins

- 1791 Napoleon Bonaparte First Consul of France
- 1793 Louis XVI of France executed. England and France at war
- 1794-99 Macaulay Governor of Sierra Leone
- 1799 Macaulay marries Selina Mills
- 1800 Birth of Thomas Babington Macaulay
- 1801 Union of Britain and Ireland
- 1802 William Pitt resigns — Henry Addington prime minister. Peace treaty signed with France
- 1803 War resumes with Napoleon
- 1805 Battle of Trafalgar
- 1806 Death of Pitt. Lord Grenville and Whigs in government
- 1807 Act of Abolition of Slave Trade
- 1814 Birth of Charles, last of Zachary and Selina's family of nine
- 1815 End of Napoleonic Wars with the Battle of Waterloo
- 1820 Death of George III
- 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act
- 1831 Death of Selina Macaulay
- 1832 First Reform Act
- 1833 Abolition of slavery — death of Wilberforce
- 1837 Victoria becomes Queen
- 1838 Death of Zachary Macaulay

INTRODUCTION

William E. Gladstone, four times prime minister of Britain, entered Parliament in 1832. Just one year later the Act finally abolishing slavery in the British Dominions was passed. Much rightful credit has been given to William Wilberforce as the moving force behind the 1807 Act that made the slave trade illegal and the build-up to the 1833 Act. But Gladstone had this to say:

There is another name still more strongly associated with the slave question ... one who has been the unseen modest ally of Mr Wilberforce, and the pillar of his strength — a man of profound benevolence, of acute understanding, of indefatigable industry, and of that self-denying temper which is content to work in secret, to forgo the recompense of present fame, and to seek his reward beyond the grave; the name of that man is Zachary Macaulay.

This study is an attempt to look behind the scenes at this self-effacing man — one far less known than Wilberforce or his

famous son, Thomas Babington Macaulay — and to correct the imbalance of the record. It is an endeavour to assess in some measure Zachary Macaulay's enormous contribution to the abolition of both the slave trade and of slavery itself in the British Dominions. More than all, as Macaulay himself would have wished, we seek to give God the glory for raising up such a man at so critical a juncture of British national history.

1

CRUMBLING FOUNDATIONS

The Macaulay household was a busy, noisy, crowded place — which is hardly surprising, for John and Margaret Macaulay had a family of twelve. John Macaulay (1720–1789), minister of Cardross Presbyterian Church, near Glasgow, and his wife often struggled to make ends meet; for not only had they to provide for the needs of a large family, but also to fund expenses incurred by visiting clergy, needy parishioners, domestic helpers and various tradesmen. For the Macaulays it was a life of continual sacrifice. But one thing troubled them more than any other: their inability to finance their children's education adequately, especially in the light of the obvious potential shown by some. And no child felt this deprivation more acutely than their third son, Zachary.

Born on 2 May 1768 during his father's first pastorate in Inveraray on the banks of Loch Fyne, western Scotland, Zachary soon began to show an unusual intelligence and a fascination with the world of books. His love of reading is

the more remarkable when we learn that the child was born with sight in only one eye, a defect that had been passed down through several generations of the Macaulay forebears. Despite this handicap young Zachary nursed an early longing that one day he might be able to gain a university education. While the rest of the family was playing, working or doubtless quarrelling, Zachary could be found curled up in a corner with a book.

John Macaulay taught the children himself as much as possible, but considering the many responsibilities of his pastorate he inevitably had insufficient time to spare. And as Zachary grew older he too was expected to teach the younger members of the family. He tells us, however, with a touch of pride that he actually achieved a working knowledge of Latin, enough Greek to be able to read Homer satisfactorily, an ability to read French and a considerable grasp of mathematics. We may imagine the slim grey-eyed boy always immersed in some book whenever he had opportunity, for he had an insatiable, even obsessive passion for knowledge. Poetry, the classics, history, political developments: nothing seemed beyond his all-absorbing interests. Like many clever children, Zachary enjoyed showing off his abilities in adult company. Whenever visitors were present and some intellectual topic was raised, a childish voice would pipe up with his own contribution to the conversation — although often, as he admits, it was ‘with very little judgement and a great share of conceit and assumption’. With a troubling lack of wisdom, the adults would compliment the child on his intelligence until he developed an unattractive degree of arrogance about his own opinions — a characteristic he later found hard to throw off.

Another reason why young Zachary spent so much time with his books was an accident he had at the age of nine, involving a serious break to his right arm. At least two painful operations followed, and without the aid of anaesthetics it was a traumatic experience for the boy. For the next five years he was unable to join with others in normal outdoor activities. Not until he was nearly fourteen did he recover the full use of his arm. At about the same time came the fateful day when all his long-held hopes of a university education were finally dashed. John Macaulay had to inform his son that in view of the family's financial difficulties he had no option other than to ask Zachary to leave home and earn his own living. In fact, his father had already secured a position for the boy in the finance department of a Glasgow merchant's business — a 'counting-house' as it was then called. Although Zachary fully understood his family circumstances, he was crestfallen. The hopes of years had gone. He confessed: 'I felt the disappointment very acutely and thought I lost by this arrangement all my past labours.' His cherished aspirations of academic achievement faded from that moment.

From a little child Zachary had been taught the basic truths of the Christian faith. He had enjoyed hearing sermons. We may imagine that he commented volubly on all he heard. He prayed dutifully each night, and was troubled when he acted against his conscience. But for Zachary his religion remained a notional acceptance of truths. Leaving home at only fourteen years of age, he quickly became vulnerable to the corrupting influences of some around him.

On taking up the position in Glasgow, three distinct pressures began to have an impact on Zachary's thinking

and behaviour. The first sprang from his new work associates: many were coarse in their ways and indulged in excessive drinking. Although Zachary hated the taste of alcohol, he was soon joining his companions as they drank into the night. It became a mark of distinction among them to see who could drink the most before becoming totally inebriated — a competition that young Zachary contrived to win. Explaining his behaviour, he later admitted: ‘I began to think excess of wine, so far from being a sin, to be a ground of glorying; and it became one of the objects of my ambition to be able to see all my companions under the table.’

Far different from such scenes was the influence of a more sophisticated company. These were the Macaulay family friends and relatives living in Glasgow at the time. Anxious that his father should not receive adverse reports of his conduct, Zachary carefully hid any signs of coarse behaviour. Among this society he copied their sophisticated ways and learnt about the most recent plays being produced and popular novels published, adding these items to his repertoire of interests. So when he had not drunk himself senseless, Zachary could be found burning the midnight oil as he devoured all the latest literature of the times.

More pernicious than the influence of heavy-drinking workmates was the company of the university students. Despite being denied a university education, Zachary sought out their society. Finding the boy highly intelligent, they welcomed him into their student social gatherings. With the Scottish Enlightenment just reaching its height, the widespread advances in science, medicine and the arts were fundamentally changing society. The student world

was naturally caught up in the intellectual ferment. Coupled with this came the influence of philosophers and thinkers: men like Adam Smith, David Hume and others who downplayed and even debunked the authority of Scripture and the existence of God, truths that Zachary had long been taught to respect.

The youth proved easy prey to these rationalistic concepts. At first he recoiled with horror at the unbelief rife in the university and made some attempt to counter such arguments; but before long he gave in. Softened up by flattery and dazzled by intellectual arguments, he soon found 'every trace of religious belief' eradicated from his mind. Worse than this, he made it his aim to undermine the faith of others. In his own words he confesses: 'David Hume was now my oracle. To profane the sacred name of God, to prostitute his word to the purpose of exciting licentious merriment, to tease and perplex with questions and sarcasm, simple and well-meaning people, and to shake the faith of such of my companions as were not favoured with so bright a light as myself, was my pastime.'

Despite these spiralling downward trends, Zachary worked well and gained the respect of his superiors. But after only two years in the Glasgow merchant office a critical situation arose which once more dramatically changed the young man's life. In his account of these days Zachary remains deliberately vague in his allusions to the catalyst that brought about this change, telling us only that it resulted in an end to his career in the business. Clearly in serious trouble, he later wrote: 'The only way I could extricate myself from the labyrinth in which I was involved was [by] going abroad.' He

must leave Scotland altogether. But where could he go? It has been surmised that the problem may have been some emotional entanglement with a young woman that had gone badly wrong. Certainly, in Zachary's own words, the circumstances 'led to a few sober reflections'

A relative who had formerly been governor of Jamaica assured Zachary's father that he had excellent connections on the island and knew men of influence there who could help his son set out on the path to success and wealth. He would therefore write a number of letters of recommendation for Zachary to take with him. So in 1784, shortly before his seventeenth birthday, the young man set sail for far-off Jamaica, leaving behind all he had ever known. The long voyage gave him further space for 'sober reflections' and also time to make a number of resolutions. Two things had precipitated his downfall: his love of company — unhelpful company, as it had often proved — and the vulnerability to which an excess of alcohol can so easily expose the unwary. Zachary Macaulay resolved to keep his drinking under strict control from that moment on — a resolution from which he never deviated.

As his ship sailed into Kingston harbour and he gazed around the impressive blue bay ringed by mountains, Zachary might well have felt a pang of home-sickness. The sense of isolation rapidly worsened, as he discovered that not one of those to whom his relative had written was prepared to spare more than a passing glance at the letters of recommendation Zachary had brought. All his visions of wealth and advancement crumbled to the dust. The sixteen-year-old was utterly alone in a strange country. But a streak

of grit in Zachary's character saved him from despair, even causing him to respond positively to a desperate situation.

Jamaica, described as 'a jewel in the English crown', had been a British colony since 1655. The English were not slow to spot the lucrative advantages of developing the production of sugar cane in the island. To facilitate this, they had vastly increased the numbers of slaves transported from the west coast of Africa to work the plantations. At the time Zachary stepped off the vessel carrying him to this new world of slave-dominated labour, the slave population of Jamaica had reached more than 200,000. Cities back in England such as Liverpool and Bristol were developing and flourishing on revenue secured by the lucrative profits of the slave trade with the Caribbean.

The infamous triangular route associated with the trade began in these English ports. Vessels were loaded with goods for sale in Africa; on arrival these ships would dock at one of a number of off-shore islands where black men, women and children were being held in slave depots. Dragged from their inland homes and villages by black tradesmen bent on gain, or sometimes as captives from inter-tribal warfare, these hapless prisoners would be bartered to English merchants for manufactured commodities and then crammed mercilessly aboard the slave ships. The 'Middle Passage', as the transatlantic voyage to the New World was called, could take up to three months; sometimes even longer, depending on wind and storm. Kept chained together in atrocious, stinking conditions, the slaves suffered indignity, disease and death — a death toll that could amount to forty-five per cent of those packed onto a single slave ship. Sharks eager

for a meal followed in the wake of the slave ships. On arrival at their destination, whether America or the West Indies, surviving slaves were sold or traded for raw materials: sugar, timber or cotton to be taken back to England.

Into this maelstrom of human exploitation Zachary Macaulay stepped in 1784 to begin life afresh after the failures of his life in Glasgow. Even though few offered him any help, it was not long before he obtained a job as a book-keeper on one of the sugar plantations. Every remnant of sensitivity in his nature recoiled at the sufferings of the slaves that he was compelled to witness. To hear the piteous cries as a weak, exhausted slave was whipped to force him to work harder appalled the young man. Worse still, his duties sometimes meant that he must carry out the punishment himself. 'My mind was at first feelingly alive to the miseries of the poor slaves. I not only revolted from the thought of myself inflicting punishment upon them, but the very sight of punishment sickened me,' he wrote to a friend.

A fearful choice lay before Zachary. Either he must write to his father begging him to send money to secure a passage home — a thing he determined he could never do in view of his family finances — or he must steel his feelings against the sufferings he was witnessing and allow his need for survival to banish pity and sensitivity. Starve or succumb: he chose the latter. Gradually he became accustomed to the crack of the whip as it lashed his fellow human beings into further servitude. Writing to the same friend from his Glasgow days, Zachary gives a vivid description of the scene: 'View me in a field of canes amidst perhaps a hundred ... cursing and bawling [slaves] while the noise of the whip resounding

on their shoulders and the cries of the poor wretches would make you imagine some unlucky accident had carried you to the doleful shades.'

The 'head driver' of a gang of slaves, sometimes a black man himself, treated his underlings like a coachman dealing with a team of recalcitrant horses. Nor was this the only cruelty to which Zachary gradually became accustomed. Floggings were the order of the day for any that rebelled or refused to comply. As the slave population vastly outnumbered their white overlords, the fear of rebellions or uprisings often lay at the root of the brutal treatment meted out on the slaves.

In addition to toiling each day in the relentless heat, often in twelve-hour shifts, the slaves faced fearful risks associated with the processing of the sugar canes. As the sugar juices were squeezed from the canes in huge vertical rollers, exhausted slaves would often catch their fingers in the rollers or scald their hands in the boiling syrup as the raw sugar was refined. Many would lose fingers and even arms in horrible accidents. Under these conditions a slave's life expectancy in Jamaica could be a mere three years or less. But the abundant supply of replacement labour arriving from Africa made such statistics of little concern to the merchants and their representatives.

Describing himself as becoming 'callous and indifferent' to the suffering he was witnessing all around him, Zachary also had serious troubles of his own which he later regarded as a 'righteous retribution' for his conduct. Unaccustomed to the climate and the infectious diseases rife on the island, he experienced repeated illness. Pride and Scottish reserve

prevented him from asking for help or even complaining, and the cold-hearted indifference of his associates meant that no one offered any comforts or relief. Lying on a hard floor on nothing but straw, his body wracked with fever, the young man frequently teetered on the verge of the grave. No one troubled to offer him even a drink of cold water to slake his burning thirst. The only solution was for Zachary to drag himself to some nearby stream and scoop up a little water. His own later comment describes the situation:

I tremble to think on the stupid insensibility, nay the desperate hardiness with which at times I stood tottering on the brink of eternity. Surely, if I had died thus, my place would have been where mercy is clean gone for ever, and where even God forgets to be gracious. May I not regard myself emphatically as a brand plucked out of the burning?

As soon as he recovered, all serious thoughts quickly evaporated. Yet in spite of his surroundings, Zachary still clung to a vestige of his early training, those firm foundations laid in his home life far off in Cardross, and to his love of learning. He read poetry, cultivated his French and Latin, and studied the philosophical thoughts of the times. Amid all the coarseness of his surroundings he actually gained a reputation for culture and intelligence. In addition he learnt how to deal with ordinary men judiciously, drawing out the best from those with whom he worked. On the negative side, he also became strongly partial to the gambling table. Only his cautious Scottish thrift prevented him from squandering all his hard-earned funds.

During the next four years Zachary remained at his post in Jamaica, largely conforming to the standards around him,

turning a blind eye to much of the inhumanity he witnessed. But through these experiences he was being prepared by God himself for a life work purposed for him though quite hidden as yet. Despite outward appearances, springs of compassion for the oppressed within his nature were not quite stifled by his environment and he would often plead the cause of young African boys and girls on the plantation condemned to a life of degradation and servitude.

At last in 1789 a letter came from one of his uncles, a letter telling him of 'an advantageous offer' of employment if he would consider returning home. A maze of contradictory thoughts flashed through the young man's mind. He had changed; he had become brutalized and insensitive and he knew it. What would his father¹ think of him now? Would he welcome him home? What about his favourite sister Jean to whom he had been very close? He had scarcely seen one white woman since he had arrived in Jamaica in 1784. At twenty-one years of age Zachary feared he might not know how to behave properly in feminine company. Perhaps it would be better to remain in Jamaica for life and gain a prominent position as a plantation manager. But as he weighed up the alternatives between the call of home, of family, of a job as promised by his uncle, with his present position, he decided he must venture, and at last booked a passage back to Britain.

Note

1. The lack of any mention of his mother suggests that she had died in the intervening years.

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