Podcast #201: Holy Hannah and the Power of the Poet’s Pen

I’ve been trying to get this podcast ready for quite some time. I want to share the life of Hannah More with you. I tried to pull it together last year in Month 8 when we talked about Slavery. And when I couldn’t get to it, I tried again in Month 3 when we were learning about England and then I thought I’d do it in Month 5 when we talked about Poetry. But the month ended and it still wasn’t quite ready.

But then I noticed something! Today, February 2nd, is her birthday! Hannah More would be 277 years old today. And what better way to celebrate her life than to show you the influence of just one woman and her pen to reform a world gone bad and even abolish slavery in England.

Her story is a testament to the power of art to transform the world.

But wait, you may say. Wasn’t that the story of William Wilberforce? Isn’t he the one who took on the moral reformation of England and brought forth the abolishment of slavery there? If you haven’t watched the movie Amazing Grace which is about the heroic work of William Wilberforce, I hope you will. What an incredible story of perseverance in the face of opposition. And you’ll see Hannah in the movie. The movie was based on a book –Amazing Grace--written by Eric Metaxas, one of my favorite writers. In fact, it was in another one of his books called 7 Women and the Secret of Their Greatness where he introduced me to Hannah More.

In the introduction to his sketch of her, he said he first met her when he was researching the life of William Wilberforce. Isn’t it so fun to discover new things when you’re out exploring? He wrote, “When I stumbled across Hannah More, I almost could not believe she existed. It was as though I had discovered a gurgling Bernini fountain in the midst of a desert.”

To put it simply, the work of Wilberforce in the halls of Parliament would have failed without the artful pen of Hannah More to first soften the hearts of the people . It’s the Pattern for Learning—and it is often the woman who provides the first step which is to open hearts.

Holy Hannah they called her.

The most influential woman of her day. Her works outsold Jane Austen’s ten to one. Yet hardly anyone knows her name anymore.

So let me share snippets from Eric Metaxes sketch as well as the book he highly recommended, Fierce Convictions, The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More—Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist by Karen Swallow Prior. I’ll link all of these books and movie in the notes.

Born February 2, 1745, she was the fourth of five daughters. Her parents homeschooled them, giving them an education far superior to what most girls received at that time. In those days, it was unladylike to be educated.

Every year for her birthday, she asked for paper, something that was rare and expensive at that time. She was endlessly writing poems and essays on every scrap of paper she could find, even as a young girl.

Her father raised his daughters up to one day open a school of their own. Hannah and her sisters believed that women had just as much right to education as men. And she would have felt very much at home in our Well-Educated Heart group. She was a believer in engaging the imagination in education, something that was considered unorthodox at the time. Years later she wrote that teachers should avoid ‘mere verbal rituals and dry systems’ and to communicate lessons “in a way which shall interest their feelings, by lively images, and by a warm practical application of what they read to their own hearts and circumstances.” The effective teacher should “enliven these less engaging parts of your discourse with some incidental imagery which will captivate the fancy; with some affecting story, with which it shall be associated in the memory.” She made effective use of songs and stories within and between lessons. “ Teach as HE [Jesus] taught, by seizing on surrounding objects, passing events, local circumstances, peculiar characters…appropriate illustration. …accustom your young audience to ‘Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, /Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.”

Her goal when she taught Bible stories was for her students to see Christ walking on the waters of the river Thames.

At age 18, she wrote her first play The Search After Happiness. Her writings all were written to heighten moral sensibilities, something that was actually out of fashion in her day.

As a young woman, she attracted the attention of a wealthy gentleman who proposed marriage to her and she began to prepare herself for her role as Lady of Belmont. But during the six years of their engagement, “a wedding date was set, only to have the groom back out, not once, not twice, but three times.” He didn’t want to end their engagement—just postpone it. He was the original runaway bridesgroom.

She finally had enough, and though he begged and pleaded for her to stay, she broke off the relationship with him once and for all.

And yes—it broke her heart. The stress took a toll on her health and she headed to the sea for fresh air and a quiet place to heal. While there, she received another proposal of marriage, this time from a man who had lost two wives in childbirth. But Hannah refused, though she remained friends with him.

She never married.

At the age of 29, she visited the great city of London for the first time and became close friends of the famed actor David Garrick and his wife who introduced her to a long list of who’s who of late eighteenth century London. Among her friends were Edmund Burke, the great artist Sir Joshua Reynolds, the writer Edward Gibbons who wrote the History and Decline of the Roman Empire, and none other than the renowned and highly celebrated, Dr. Samuel Johnson.

She charmed everyone. An important aspect of Hannah’s personality was her “ready acceptance and love of those who did not share her faith. She did not let the indifference or even the lack of religion of most in these companies to dissuade her from enjoying their company,” even though her faith was very important to her. She was as comfortable around the poor as the rich. She loved all people. And they knew it.

When David Garrick unexpectedly passed away, Hannah found the life of high society much less appealing, and “turned more fully toward the Christian faith she had assumed all her life, but now embraced with full intention.”

It was John Newton’s book, Cardiphonia, also translated as The Utterance of the Heart or Voice of the Heart, that was a catalyst for change in her. You have likely heard his story. He had been the captain of a slave ship who gave up the trade after embracing the Christian faith. He eventually became minister in the Church of England and is most famous for writing the hymn Amazing Grace. She wrote Newton, “I know that many people whom I hear say a thousand brilliant and agreeable things disbelieve, or at least disregard, those truths on which I found my everlasting hopes.”

As her faith grew, her desire to lift her fellowman increased.

Metaxes writes “Hannah More understood that the culture in which one lived was as much or more influenced by the arts than by legislation, and she undertook to use her gifts in God’s service. She did not wish to retreat from culture into a religious sphere, but rather to advance with the wisdom and truth of religion into the cultural sphere.”

She wrote, “I hope the poets and painters will at last bring the Bible into fashion, and that people will get to like it from taste, though they are insensible to its spirits, and afraid of its doctrines.”

When her friend Samuel Johnson died, so did that last of her reasons to stay tied to the city, so she moved out to the countryside. “Cowslip Green offered generous trees and lush lawns….More spent her mornings working in her gardens and her evenings riding horseback “through delicious lanes and hills.”

And it was in this move that she met William Wilberforce.

Wilberforce was very involved in politics and when he found his faith, he wanted to get out of politics all together. But he, too, was a friend of the ex-slave ship captain, John Newton, who encouraged him to stay in politics, so that God could use him there.

But how would God use him?

Wilberforce wrote in his diary: “God almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.” He would devote the rest of his life to this calling.

And his closest collaborator was Hannah More.

When she first met William, she wrote home to her sisters: “That young man’s character is one of the most extraordinary I have ever known for talent, virtue and piety. It is difficult not to grow better and wiser every time one converses with him.”

After some prayer and reflection, Wilberforce accepted the role of leading the charge against the slave trade in Parliament, but he also knew he needed someone in the world of culture to help him, and Hannah was that person.

In 1788 as he brought his first bill forward—which didn’t pass--, Hannah began work on a poem called “Slavery”, designed to help sway public opinion on the slave trade and especially to influence the voting on the bill.

“The genius of the abolitionists is that they understood their battle was not just political; they had to make the cultural case against slavery.” It was the images of slaves in chains and stories of slaves packed in slave ships that touched people’s hearts.

“Hannah’s role in the war against slavery can hardly be overstated. With her great poetic powers, Hannah helped the Britons see that the slave trade caused tremendous suffering.

Whene’er to AFric’s shores I turn my eyes,

Horrors of deepest, deadliest guilt arise;

I see, by more than Fancy’s mirror shown,

The burning village, and the blazing town:

See the dire victim torn from social life,

The shrieking babe, the agonizing wife!

She, wretch forlorn! Is dragged by hostile hands,

To distant tyrants sold, in distant lands:

Transmitted miseries, and successive chains,

The sole sad heritage her child obtains.

E’en this last wretched boon their foes deny,

To weep together, or together die.

By felon hands, by one relentless stroke,

See the fond links of Nature broke!

The fibres twisting round a parent’s heart,

Torn from their grasp, and bleeding as they part.

African slaves were now seen as mothers, fathers and they saw little children being snatched from their parents. . Her words pricked the consciences of millions who came to feel their country must have no part in such an evil. Eventually hundreds of thousands of Britons signed petitions against the slave trade which Wilberforce was able to present in Parliament to sway its members toward abolition.

The poem’s influence lasted into the next century, when it was credited with inspiring missionaries, including the famous David Livingstone, to take Christianity to Africa.

Where rational arguments had failed, her poetry reached deep into the heart, where all true change takes place.

Yet, change takes time. Wilberforce entered his first anti-slavery bill in 1788. But it wasn’t until July 26, 1833,--45 years later-- the Emancipation Bill passed in the House of Commons, decreeing that all slaves in the British Empire were to be freed within one year. Wilberforce died three days later. One month later, the House of Lords passed the Slavery Abolition Act. Hannah More would die on September 6, just two months after Wilberforce’s death.

Their work was done. It was time to rest.

The day before she died, her friends held the morning devotion at her bedside. As one of her friends wrote, “She was silent, and apparently attentive, with her hands devoutly lifted up. From eight in the evening of this day, till nearly nine, I sat watching her. Her face was smooth and glowing. There was an unusual brightness in its expression. She smiled, and endeavoring to raise herself a little from her pillow, she reached out her arms as if catching at something, and while making this effort, she once called, “Patty,’ (the name of her last and dearest sisters,) very plainly, and exclaimed, “Joy!” These were her last words.

In Percy Shelley’s essay, A Defence of Poetry, which he wrote not long after her passing, he reflected “a poet essentially compromises and unites” the characteristics of both the legislator and the prophet. “Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.” It was, in fact, owing to “the effects of poetry” of Christians, Shelley argued, that the abolition of slavery took place. More was one of these “unacknowledged legislators” who helped write the laws that made others free.

Oh. But we can’t leave the story yet. I’ve only told you about the abolition of slavery. The other task they took on was the complete reformation of the manners of society. England had sunk to a low level of immoral vices and degrading practices.

So now let’s take a look at what a small group of friends can do to change the world. Do pay attention, those of you who are forming Mothers of Influence groups.

In Clapham, a close-knit group of Christian friends believed that serious Christian faith could actually make a difference in the world. One of their members, Henry Thornton kept adding to his home until he had over thirty bedrooms and a legendary oval library that served as the meeting room of their community. Dwellings were built on the grounds where other members, including Wilberforce and Hannah More, took up residence for periods of time. This home was part of a great plan of Thornton. “I am in hopes some good may come out of our Clapham system.”

The home was so celebrated, a hymn commemorating it was written in 1841.

Old house, how long I’ve known thee,

By high, historic fame,

By Thornton, Inglis, Wilberforce,

Each loved and sainted name;

And now, my pilgrim feet have trod

Thy consecrated ground,

And underneath thy sacred roof,

A pilgrim’s rest, have found.

This little group came to be known as the Clapham Sect, this fellowship of like-minded believers, “bound together by shared moral and spiritual values, by religious mission and social activism, by love for each other, they sought to serve God in every area of their lives, personal and public, at home and abroad. They functioned as a large, extended family. Here, gathered in Thornton’s home, they decided on projects and issues and mapped out strategies for accomplishing their goals. There were less than 20 of them, and Hannah was the only woman.

“Although they operated as one body, the genius of the group lay in capitalizing on the particular gifts of each member. They assigned tasks based on each person’s gifts and skills in order to accomplish their common causes. Rather than trying to force all to follow one’s pattern, each was supported in his or her talents and passions put to the service of the greater vision. Thornton had wealth and connections. Wilberforce was blessed with eloquence. More’s powers were wit and pen…who…, as mentioned, mixed comfortably and enthusiastically with rich and poor, churched and unchurched, and all in between. …

The Clapham Sect was remarkable for crossing rigid barriers of class party and creeds. They moved easily among and with liberal Christians, freethinkers and unbelievers alike in pursuit of their prodigious goals.

They sought to “make goodness fashionable.”

Powers, in her book, writes: “All their efforts and resources were crystallized in one quiet, simple domestic scene back in Clapham. The ‘silent revolution’ begun by the Clapham Sect infused society with benevolence and compassion that had not before existed on such a scale. Indeed, “in proportion to numbers,” the Claphamites “achieved perhaps more than any other group in English history” by influencing Britain’s political and social policies, particularly those that affected the poorest classes of people. The reforms they sought and achieved set the tone for the coming Victorian age with its emphases on religion, morality, family and duty. For her central role in this, Hannah More has been called “the first Victorian.

Their strategy?

They turned to the woman in their Clapham family.

“We can tell people their duty from the pulpit; but you have the art to make them desirous of performing it, as their greatest pleasure and amusement.”

One must not merely rail against the darkness, but must instead light a proverbial candle by creating literary and cultural works that rival and surpass the bad.

So, she had written plays and poetry. But now came her greatest contribution to the world: stories. And I guess that gives us another reason to include her in this month’s rotation study as we turn to the Mother’s University topic of Storytelling. More understood that more than ideas, imagination moved the world. The idea of writing more stories, many more, she recorded in her journal was an idea that “engages my whole heart.”

With the full support of the Clapham Sect, now came the age of her Cheap Repository Tracts. In her own words, their purpose was to “improve the habits, and raise the principles of the common people, at a time when their temptations, moral and political, were multiplied beyond the example of any former period. “ It would turn out to be one of the most successful projects of the Clapham Sect.

They were to both ‘instruct’ and ‘delight’. She wanted to offer an alternative to the unwholesome street literature circulating in abundance; she hoped to reform the appetite of the masses, ‘to abate their relish for those corrupt and inflammatory publications” and develop in its place a taste for wholesome reading. Thus, the stories, songs, and poems of the Cheap Repository Tracts offered reading that was simple, substantive and fun, all written at the reading level of the newly literate, and highly affordable.

The colorful cover art was groundbreaking, featuring details that illustrated the song or story within. Two million were circulated in less than a year.

But another class of readers was unreached—the swelling middle class. They craved novels, but novels were not considered part of the class of polite letters. Novels are so much a part of todays’ reading habits, so central to our cultural imagination, that it’s hard to imagine a time when they were frowned upon. In More’s time, novels were viewed as merely popular and low, at best, and corrupting, at worst. And the idea of a woman writing one was unthinkable.

Still, More saw in the novel a ripe opportunity. Knowing the power it could hold over the imagination, she figured such a power could be harnessed for good rather than ill.

Emboldened by her success in adapting cheap tracts towards a similar end, More heeded her friends’ ‘’implorations and set out to redeem the novel.”

Her first and only novel was a wild success. Its success was “unprecedented in the annals of English literature” and was one of England’s earliest bestsellers. She made the search for love and marriage the central theme of her work. Interesting, given her own single life. In her day, you didn’t marry for love. You married for practical purposes. She tapped into the unspoken longings of the heart. Her single novel helped lift the genre of the novel from base entertainment to respectable literature. More’s novel was a beginning in the genre’s transformation from lowbrow to high art in the hands of historic nineteen-century novelists such as Charles Dickens, the Bronte Sisters and William Makepeace Thackerey.

In the epilogue to her book, Powers wrote:

“More’s life spanned the reign of four kings. She witnessed the American, French and Industrial Revolutions. She died mere weeks after England abolished slavery for good. At the time of her death, ,she had amassed nearly thirty thousand pounds, an amount unknown to women writers. Most of this went to about two hundred charities, including many she founded. The beneficiaries of her wealth included numerous schools, mission societies, and outreaches to orphans, slaves, and the poor. ..Her pen left virtually no area of her society unmarked: literature, education, morality, religion, and abolition. She reached high and low in her nation and across the globe.”

Yet, within a couple of generations of her death, her reputation fell into disfavor as a generation rose up that defined themselves principally by their rejection of the values that most defined the Victorian age—duty, family, piety. A parliamentarian who I will not even credit with a name, , in 1905, tarnished her reputation in an essay in which he boasted ‘that he had planted his nineteen volume set of her collected works in his garden. Ten years earlier he had written in a short biography of More that the ‘celebrated Hannah More is one of the most detestable writers that ever held a pen. She flounders like a huge conger-eel in an ocean of dingy morality. “ She was, he announced, “a pompous failure.”

That seems to be the pattern of how the world esteems its greats.

But even if Hannah had lived long enough to read it, I doubt it would have ruffled her in the least, for she had written:

The woman who derives her principles from the Bible, and her amusements from intellectual sources, from the beauties of nature, and from active employment and exercise, will not pant for beholders. She is no clamorous beggar for the extorted alms of admiration. She lives on her own stock. She possesses the truest independence. She does not wait for the opinion of the world, to know if she is right; nor for the applause of the world, to know if she is happy.

If you are notebooking, that’s a gem worth holding on to.

Holy Hannah—Happy Birthday