

The proper study of mankind is man, said Alexander Pope. The proper study of international law is anything but man, said the international lawyers over the centuries. Fortunately for mankind, man himself disagreed with the lawyers -- not for the first or last time. And that, in a nutshell, is the story of how human rights have come to occupy their present place in international law and international affairs.

There can be no doubt, today, that man has become a subject as well as an object of international law. The atrocities of the Second World War compelled governments to enshrine human rights in the U.N. Charter. In addition, more than 20 international agreements on human rights have now been elaborated in very considerable detail -- indeed, more than twice that number if we include all the conventions developed under the auspices of the International Labour Organization.

We should not be too quick to congratulate ourselves, however. The concern for human rights in foreign affairs is by no means a phenomenon exclusive to our own time. Think, for instance, of the 19th-century drive for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade, which surely represents the supreme effort and the supreme triumph for human rights in all history.

Not slavery but another denial of humanity unhappily continues to be practised even now in South Africa in the form of apartheid. This rather suggests that even now we could learn much from the 19th century -- about the force of organized public opinion, for instance, and about harnessing national power to serve a great cause. For the first thirty years of Victoria's reign, the Royal Navy's chief task was the interception of slaving ships, sometimes on the basis of international agreements, sometimes without the benefit of such agreements. Every interception was a diplomatic gamble which could provoke charges of interference in the affairs of other states, or even be considered as an act of war or piracy. But the British public forced the British Government to act despite the cost and the risks involved, and so the traffic in human beings was ended.