

From: Margaret Hope Bacon, *As The Way Opens*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, © 1980 (OP)

Chapter 7

QUAKER WOMEN AS ABOLITIONISTS

Opposition to slavery was a deep and abiding aspect of Quaker belief from earliest days. George Fox did not go so far as to advocate the freeing of the slaves, but he was concerned about Quaker slaveholding in Barbados, and he urged masters to provide educational and spiritual nourishment to their black servants. In 1688, the Germantown Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (a group composed about equally of Quakers and Mennonites) wrote the first declaration against slavery in the New World:

There is a liberty of conscience here which is right and reasonable and there ought to be likewise a liberty of the body, except for evil doers, which is another case. But to bring men hither or to rob and sell them against their will, we stand against.

By 1776, the Quakers had made it obligatory for persons who wanted to remain members of the Society of Friends to give up their slaves, and, by 1780, they had persuaded the state of Pennsylvania to outlaw slavery. Many Quakers were instrumental in forming the *Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, the Relief of Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage; and for' Improving the Condition of the African Race*, the first abolition society in the world, which lobbied in the newly created U.S. Congress against the foreign slave trade and helped to bring about the abolition of slavery in most of the northern states. Many branches were also formed in the south. Southern Quakers were as opposed to slavery as those in the North and fought bravely against it.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was becoming apparent that the gradualist methods of abolishing slavery were not going to work. With the invention of the cotton gin, the economy of the deep South began to revolve heavily around slave labor, while states such as Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina became slave-breeding states to serve the need in the deeper southern states. Horror stories began to find their way North of black families separated for breeding purposes, of men and women sold South, of women used by their masters for sexual gratification. Whether these incidents were the exception or the rule, it was shocking that they occurred at all. Quaker women in particular were deeply upset by these stories and began to cast about for some method to register their position on slavery and to hasten its end.

Two schemes in which many Quaker women were involved in the early part of the nineteenth century were the boycotting of slave products and the colonization movement. The Free Produce Society urged its members to abstain from the use of cotton and of sugar and even paper made from cotton fabric. Free produce stores sold substitute products and several abolitionists devoted themselves to improving the process of making sugar from beets. The Colonization Society urged the return of free blacks to Africa, where they could not only establish a beachhead for their slave brothers and sisters but also bring the supposed benefits of a Christian civilization to a pagan land. Benjamin Lundy, editor of a newspaper called *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, was one of the chief promoters of this idea.

In 1831, two events occurred that gave the abolitionist movement a more radical turn. One was the slave uprising led by Nat Turner in Virginia. The other was the founding by William Lloyd Garrison of a new publication, *The Liberator*, criticizing the colonization scheme and calling for immediate emancipation. The slave uprising heightened Southern opposition to

abolitionists at the very time that Garrison began to lead a fiery crusade. The result was a polarization of the nation on the subject of slavery which continued through the next three decades.

Women's roles in the new movement were at first subordinate. When leading abolitionists met in Philadelphia in 1833 to found the American Anti-Slavery Society, they permitted women to attend the meeting and even to speak from the floor, but they did not invite them to become members. Instead, under the leadership of Lucretia Mott, the women formed the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Similar groups were formed elsewhere. In 1837, the first National Convention of Anti-Slavery Women met in New York City and pledged itself to circulate a petition and collect one million signatures opposing slavery in the District of Columbia and its extension to new territories.

Many Quaker women were members of this group. Two of these, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, were destined to stir up a national cauldron of controversy within the next year. Daughters of a wealthy slaveholding South Carolina family, the Grimke sisters had always been revolted by slavery and had fled to Philadelphia to escape it. They joined the Society of Friends and began to speak and write against the peculiar institution. Their speeches were first billed for women only, but so great was the reputation of Angelina for eloquence that men began to slip into the backs of the halls to hear them. By the summer of 1837, they were actually speaking to mixed audiences ("promiscuous audiences" was the quaint term used in that day), and they became the object of consternation among the vast majority of clergymen still obedient to Saint Paul's stricture against women speaking in public. The Council of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts issued a pastoral letter warning ministers and their congregations against the danger inherent in "itinerant female lecturers." Mobs began to collect where the sisters spoke to riot and throw stones.

In response, Sarah Grimke wrote a series of articles, published as a pamphlet entitled *The Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women*, which were in many ways the clarion call to the coming struggle:

I ask no favors of my sex. I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is that they will take their feet from off our necks, and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God has designed for us to occupy.

Many women responded to the courage of the Grimkes, but some of the men within the abolitionist cause feared that introducing the "women issue" along with the slavery issue would cause the whole movement to collapse. Among critics of the Grimke sisters were John Greenleaf Whittier and Theodore Weld, a Presbyterian minister turned abolitionist, who was engaged to marry Angelina Grimke. Not surprisingly, Angelina found his opposition hard to bear, and shortly after her marriage to him in May of 1838, ill health compelled her to retire from the speaker's platform.

There was, however, another woman to take her place. Abby Kelley, a fiery young Quaker of Irish background, began her public speaking career just as Angelina ended hers. She began, almost literally, in flames. The night after she spoke, an angry mob burned down Pennsylvania Hall, built by Philadelphia abolitionists as a place to hold meetings. From that day on she was a symbol of militant advocacy of woman's right to speak for her slave sisters. Trouble grew within the American Anti-Slavery Society when she dared to assert her right to membership in that body. In 1840, when she was placed on a committee, it caused a split between the Garrisonians, who supported her, and the more clerical-minded, who opposed her. For the next few years, Abby was followed by angry mobs wherever she went, and she never lived down the epithet of "Jezebel," hurled at her by an angry minister in Connecticut.

Later in the summer of 1840, a World's Anti-Slavery Convention was held in London. Thanks to the pioneering of the Grimke sisters and Abby Kelley, the American delegation included a number of women: Lucretia Mott and Sarah Pugh, both Quakers, Mary Grew, Abby Kimber, and Ann Phillips. The British abolitionists, however, were not prepared to seat the women as delegates but relegated them to a balcony. Here William Lloyd Garrison joined them in protest. A young bride attending the conference with her husband found herself also on the balcony. She sought out Lucretia Mott who told her that women had the same right to speak in public as men. From that day on the bride, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, began to devote her thoughts to the need to do something for women's rights as an indispensable aspect of human rights.

The Society of Friends as a whole was not very supportive of these courageous women. In the depths of a period of quietism, and still reeling from the effects of the Hicksite separation, the Quakers distrusted the various antislavery societies where their members were bound to mingle with "the world's people." The inflammatory rhetoric of the Garrisonians and the confrontation tactics, toward which the more radical abolitionists were beginning to move, also upset the Friends. They feared the resulting polarization would lead to bloodshed, as, in fact, it did. Their opposition to the Garrisonians sprang also, it must be confessed, from the somewhat conservative position they had come to occupy in the business establishments of such cities as New York and Philadelphia. Most Northern businessmen were opposed to the antislavery agitation, since they did business with the South and the Quaker business men were influenced by their colleagues.

The abolitionists in turn were not very happy with the Religious Society of Friends, its current lukewarm attitude toward antislavery, and its ambivalence toward those blacks who wanted to join Meeting. In both Philadelphia and New York, special benches were set aside in Quaker Meetinghouses for black worshippers, and several of the blacks who applied for membership were given a cold reception.

As a result, many of the Quaker pioneers in the antislavery movement were either disowned from membership in the Society or withdrew themselves. Angelina Grimke was disowned for marrying "out of Meeting" when she married Presbyterian Theodore Weld, but she had intended to renounce the Society anyway. Isaac T. Hopper, a New York Quaker, was disowned and his daughter Abby Hopper Gibbons withdrew. Abby Kelley and Elizabeth Buffum Chace both withdrew, Abby in the process of being disowned. Lucretia Mott managed to retain her membership in the Society but often had to walk a fine line.

By far, the most influential of the Quaker women abolitionists, Lucretia Mott, was often called the Black Man's Goddess for her prominence in the abolition movement. Born on Nantucket of pioneering stock, she attended Nine Partners School in Poughkeepsie, New York, served briefly as a teacher and married a teacher on the boys' side, James Mott. The couple lived in Philadelphia from 1811 on and both were active in abolitionist and Quaker circles. Lucretia was an eloquent preacher and an ardent reformer of great vision. She supported Irish handloom weavers when they struck, established workshops for poor women, befriended the Seneca Indians, and helped with the establishment of the Female Medical College, as well as the Female College of Design. She and James together served on the committee that urged the creation of Swarthmore College, and both were active in the Pennsylvania Peace Society.

The mother of five children, Lucretia was famous as a fine housewife and gracious hostess as well as for her many reform activities. Visiting abolitionists, black or white, were always welcome to a place at her dining table and a bed in one of her upstairs chambers. She practiced social integration years before it was acceptable and led a campaign to integrate seating on a Philadelphia trolley line. A religious liberal, she believed that there was good to be found in all of

the world's religions and that men and women must free themselves from the narrow bonds of sectarianism. Her influence gave the early women's rights movement a strong Quaker orientation.

A source of inspiration to her sister Quakers and abolitionists was Sarah Mapps Douglass, a black Quaker school teacher, an active member of the Female Anti-Slavery Society, and a skilled antislavery orator. Despite continuing snubs, she attended Quaker Meeting regularly and worked with those Quakers who were attempting to change the Society's attitude toward antislavery agitation and black membership. Once when she attended a Friends Meeting in New York City, no one spoke to her except one matron who asked, "Friend, does thee go out to housecleaning?" Abolitionists, on the other hand, supported her warmly, took over the financial backing of her school for black children, and helped her get an appointment as head of the primary girls department at the Institute for Colored Youth, a Quaker supported school, at the time, which is now Cheyney State College.

The antislavery movement depended heavily on the impact of its women orators. Abby Kelley continued to barnstorm for the cause, covering New York State, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. In 1845, she married Stephen S. Foster, a radical abolitionist as fiery as herself and a courageous nonresistant. Together they devoted their lives to antislavery agitation until emancipation was finally proclaimed; then they began to lobby for land for the freed slaves.

Abby had the knack of inspiring other young women to "take the field" as antislavery lecturers. Among her proteges were Lucy Stone, Sallie Holley, and Susan B. Anthony. In 1845, she invited a young woman, Jane Elizabeth Hitchcock to travel with her as companion and to learn to be an antislavery lecturer. A young Quaker, Benjamin Jones, accompanied the two women when they went to Ohio, and eventually Lizzie and Benjie were married. Abby undertook to raise money for the support of the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, a new antislavery publication covering eastern Ohio and central New York, and put the young couple in charge as co-editors. After this experience, Jane (Lizzie) found her ability as a writer and published a book, the *Young Abolitionists*, illustrating antislavery ideas for children. She later became well known as a lecturer on abolition and on women's rights. Her championship of a property law for married women in Ohio at the eve of the Civil War was a lasting contribution to women's rights.

A much younger woman to make her name as an antislavery lecturer was Anna Elizabeth Dickinson. Daughter of orthodox Quakers, she grew up in Philadelphia, attended Friends Select School and Westtown Boarding School, and at the age of eighteen began to speak out against slavery. Her beauty, earnestness, and extreme youth made her an immediate success, and for the next four years she spoke to packed houses and was called the Joan of Arc of the Union cause. She campaigned for the Republicans but was critical of Lincoln for his vacillation over emancipation. So important was she as a vote-getter at the age of twenty-one that Lincoln sought and obtained a personal interview with her in order to try to persuade her to change her mind.

Unfortunately, Anna's subsequent career never came up to the high level of her first years. She tried more lecturing, writing, and acting, and eventually wrote several plays that were produced on Broadway. She was never again a success, however, and died a bitter and disappointed woman.

The Civil War was a time of great troubles for American Quakers in general, and the Quaker women abolitionists in particular. However half-hearted the President seemed about emancipation, it remained one of the war goals of the Union side. But for Quakers to support the war meant turning their backs on pacifism. Some women, like Lucretia Mott and Sarah Pugh, remained true to nonresistance and kept aloof during the war. Others, including Anna Dickinson, Abby Hopper Gibbons, and Cornelia Hancock, threw themselves into support of the struggle,

raised money for the Union cause, and in some cases became battlefield nurses. Still others, like Susan B. Anthony, tried to steer a middle course.

Elizabeth Comstock, whom we have met before, was also prominent as an abolitionist. Elizabeth spent most of her time during the war years visiting army hospitals and the camps for the contraband, or refugee slaves. After the war, she threw herself into a concern for the freedmen, helping to organize and to raise money for freedmen relief efforts, traveling as far as England in her fundraising efforts. When large numbers of Southern blacks migrated to Kansas in 1879, Elizabeth Comstock went to that state to administer relief and was for two years secretary to the Kansas Freedmen's Association. She visited President James Garfield to urge his help for the blacks in Kansas and continued to speak and write on their behalf until failing health intervened.

Another Michigan Friend active in abolition was Laura Haviland. Like some of her sisters, Laura withdrew from the Religious Society of Friends over the issue of opposition to antislavery agitation and did not rejoin it until 1872. With her husband, she helped to organize the first antislavery society in Michigan and to play an active role in the Underground Railroad. After her husband's death in 1845, she began to travel widely to speak against slavery. During the Civil War, she also visited the army camps and refugee slave communities and afterwards became a paid agent for the Michigan Freedmen's Aid Commission. With Elizabeth Comstock, she went to Kansas in 1879 to aid the large black population that had moved there. Later she turned her attention to such other reform issues as temperance, suffrage, and the founding of a home for wayward girls.

Supporting such women as Hancock, Comstock and Haviland were parent freedmen associations in such major cities as Philadelphia and New York. Sarah Pugh, who was president of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society for many years and accompanied Lucretia Mott to the London Conference in 1840 and lectured against slavery in the 1850's, was one of those active in the support organizations. She was, at the same time, increasingly drawn to the women's rights issue and often accompanied the aging Lucretia Mott on her many trips, making the path smooth for her. Encouragement of women such as Sarah Pugh made the active work for the freedmen throughout the South and the Midwest possible.

Most of the Quaker women abolitionists, like Sarah, moved from a burning concern for the rights of the blacks to a concern for the rights of women. Denied an opportunity to follow what they believed to be a Divine leading to work against slavery, they became aware of the fetters which society's attitude toward women placed on all members of their sex. Human liberation, they saw, would never be possible while women occupied a subordinate position. The rights of all were bound up together. The full consequences of the concept of "that of God in everyone" were at last coming into sight. Like prophets everywhere, these women were not fully appreciated by the majority of Quakers, nor the majority of women yet they forged ahead against a storm of criticism and abuse, aware that they were obedient to the Light within. It remained only for another generation of Quaker women to bring to national attention the implications of their courageous stand.