

American Reformers

1815-1860

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4. Antislavery

In membership, communitarianism and the antislavery movement had little in common. A few abolitionists became involved in Hope-
dale and similar ventures, yet these were exceptions. As abolitionists saw their duty, it was not to retreat from society, even though they might withdraw from such corrupt institutions as proslavery churches and political parties. They were determined, in the words of a New Hampshire editor, "to stay amid the great community [of the world], destitute of *communio*n, as it is, and go for *community*-*zing* the whole" by breaking down slavery and other barriers separating humans from each other and from their own potential. That was an impulse almost as utopian and far-reaching as any to be found among genuine communitarians—a rarefied vision of brotherhood and a challenge to a system of racial injustice deeply embedded in American life.

On January 1, 1831, William Lloyd Garrison, a young native of Newburyport, Massachusetts, published the first issue of the *Liberator*. During its thirty-five-year run, the Boston newspaper would be abrasive, vituperative, and consistent in its loathing of slavery. It would never have a large circulation nor would Garrison ever represent the whole of abolitionism—the movement was diverse and decentralized. Still, more than any other event, the founding of the *Liberator* marked the beginning of a variety of antislavery that was new in tone, social composition, and doctrine.

Before 1831 opposition to slavery had taken several forms. From the outset blacks made their feelings clear by fleeing bondage, by day-to-day resistance, and by staging occasional insurrections. In the eighteenth century—and especially by the time of the Revolution—increasing numbers of whites were preaching abolition, inspired by religion, Enlightenment humanitarianism, and their own egalitarian rhetoric. Most Northern states ended slavery before 1800. Abolition sentiment, however, was on the wane by then and the institution, if anything, was becoming more strongly entrenched in the lower South, as the newly invented cotton gin and population growth pushed cotton production farther west.

Organized antislavery, although subdued, persisted in the early nineteenth century and differed strikingly from the caustic brand Garrison and his colleagues would promote after 1830. It was concentrated in the upper South, was conciliatory to the master, and had minimal sympathy for blacks. Above all, there was no particular urgency to it. Prior to 1831 most critics of slavery assumed that manumission would be gradual and ought not to cause social or economic dislocation. No organization better typified such an approach than the American Colonization Society, which was founded in 1816. Its mission was to send ex-bondsmen out of the country, preferably to its African outpost, Liberia. The society's supporters included slaveholders, prominent politicians, and distinguished men of the sort who would later shun abolitionism. Their motives were varied and conflicted. Some genuinely hated slavery but believed the races could never coexist without it. Their solution was to get rid of black people. Other colonizationists were proslavery and were merely determined to dispose of the small free black population of the South and to eliminate bondsmen who might become a burden on their owners or society. Without much consistency, idealism, or practicality to recommend it, the Colonization Society nevertheless profited from this ability to satisfy contradictory viewpoints. It sent few black people to Africa but it attracted generally favorable attention, discharged white anxieties about slavery and race, and otherwise did well in the 1820s.

Most post-1830 abolitionists regarded colonization as their great enemy. Their hostility was comprised of a combination of disillusion

—many of them had once believed in it—and tactical necessity. From personal experience they knew how powerful its appeal was and how difficult it would be to get whites to accept a truer, more demanding antislavery position. Yet even allowing for some understandable exaggeration, later abolitionists were right to contrast their crusade with colonization and everything else that had come before. The platform Garrison proclaimed on New Year's Day 1831 was different. It would find no favor in the South. It made few concessions to the sensibilities of slaveholders (they were "oppressors," "man-stealers," "despots," and "tyrants"). Although tainted with streaks of racism, post-1830 abolitionists like Garrison dismissed any thoughts of exiling blacks, accepted the idea of civil equality for them, and greeted the slave as "A Man and a Brother" or "A Woman and a Sister," phrases borrowed from British abolitionism. Most important, antislavery after 1831 repudiated what Garrison called the "pernicious doctrine of *gradual* abolition." "Immediate emancipation" became the new battle cry.

The phrase was ambiguous. Abolitionists—even Garrison—seldom insisted that it meant slavery should cease right away. More often, they intended it as a demand for people to decide instantly to renounce slaveholding. Abolitionists admitted that, for the sake of master and slave alike, emancipation might take time to complete. Immediatism, however, tolerated no delay in beginning the process, as earlier, gradualistic approaches had. It was a call to break off an evil practice without hesitation or equivocation, just as sinners, when saved, utterly repudiated sin. The revivalism of the 1820s encouraged abolitionists and most other antebellum crusaders to see reform as something akin to an act of repentance. That approach to problems slighted social, political, and economic factors, and it could be narrow and self-righteous; but it had a passion and moral firmness badly needed when men and women agitated unpopular issues in a society where the instinct to compromise was second nature. Instead of describing a well-worked-out plan, "immediate emancipation" served to jolt people out of their complacency and to infuse abolitionism with a fervor it seldom had before 1831.

Immediatism quickly made converts in New England, New York City and upstate New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. The first

organization based upon the doctrine was the New-England Anti-Slavery Society (1832). Nearly two years later, in December 1833, delegates from several states gathered in Philadelphia and created the American Anti-Slavery Society. For the next half decade it would play a crucial role in spreading abolitionism throughout the North.

Garrison had been instrumental in founding the American Anti-Slavery Society, but control of it passed to able and dedicated men at its New York headquarters. Chief among them was Lewis Tappan, blessed with ample financial resources and a fine managerial experience gained as a leader of the "benevolent empire" of Protestant charities. He and several energetic co-workers marshaled support for the cause and guided a remarkable outpouring of antislavery activity up to 1837 (when internal disputes and hard times slowed the crusade down temporarily). Affluent members like Tappan himself subsidized the printing and distribution of a wide range of American Anti-Slavery Society publications (at least three quarters of a million pieces of propaganda by 1838). In 1835 the organization flooded the mails with this literature, in an attempt to reach, and presumably persuade, clergy, editors, and other influential people in every state, particularly in the South. Two years later the society began to encourage and coordinate the circulation of antislavery petitions directed at Congress. Abolitionists—especially female ones—were so diligent in collecting signatures that they gathered over 400,000 by 1838.

Among the national organization's most significant enterprises during Tappan's stewardship was the recruitment of agents. These were zealous young men, charged with carrying abolitionism across the American countryside. Like Theodore Dwight Weld, their greatest orator, many were would-be, or former, ministers; several had been brought into the abolitionist fold during highly emotional debates over slavery at Lane Theological Seminary in Ohio in 1834. Whatever their background, the agents sparked controversy and inspired the rapid formation of town, county, and state antislavery groups. By 1838 the American Anti-Slavery Society claimed a membership of a quarter of a million and over 1,300 auxiliaries. Once begun, these local organizations worked in cooperation with

the parent society, published newspapers of their own, and waged campaigns of special importance to their areas (including challenges to segregation and racist legislation in the North). Before the 1830s were over, immediatism had passed into the hinterland and the agency system had served its purpose.

Neither its success, nor the bureaucratic expertise of Tappan, nor the blistering rhetoric of Garrison can entirely explain what drew men and women to antislavery. It is easier to understand the motives of the many black people who participated in the movement, sometimes in alliance with whites, sometimes independently. Those from free families often lived in fairly comfortable circumstances and risked retaliation from hostile whites for their public stand; but slavery and prejudice were intolerable insults to their pride in themselves and their race. Other blacks had even more immediate reasons for becoming abolitionists. They were among the thousands of escaped slaves who carved out new, precarious lives for themselves in the North. The most famous of them were Frederick Douglass and two remarkable women, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman (the latter courageously assisted hundreds of runaways fleeing the South). Their firsthand knowledge, and that of their fellow fugitives, made them bitter opponents of slavery and effective propagandists.

More puzzling is the reason why thousands of whites dedicated themselves to immediate emancipation and to achieving justice for black people. As best we can tell, most came from highly moralistic families, influenced by evangelical Protestantism, Quakerism, or Unitarianism. In their own accounts, they made much of the discrepancies between the way the United States was and the religious and political ideals they held. In itself, that described rather than accounted for their objections to slavery. Thousands of equally moralistic Americans, from the same areas and same sorts of families and maintaining the same values, felt no urge to attack the institution. It is difficult to say, with great confidence, what caused such people to ignore slavery while others, very much like them, condemned it.

For those who did become abolitionists, exposure to antislavery agitation often came at a crucial moment in their lives and helped them find direction, meaning, and companionship. To be an abolition-

ist was to declare allegiance to the principles of brotherhood and equality of opportunity, to suffer for those ideals, and to band together with like-minded individuals. It was to find a moral community in a society that appeared increasingly immoral.

Antislavery also attracted support because it spoke to a complex set of hopes and fears about the future. These were social in origin and they were expressed forcefully in a kind of moral drama present in much abolitionist propaganda. The chief protagonists in it were the master and the slave. The former was lustful and tyrannical; dominion over others, not greed, was what abolitionists usually regarded as his primary motive. The slave, on the other hand, was the epitome of powerlessness: his or her degradation came not primarily from cruelty, but from the loss of the right to exercise choice. Real freedom, abolitionists maintained, meant the absence, as much as possible, of external restraints on one's behavior. Only then could people be morally responsible for their actions and justly rewarded for their labor.

Most of those assumptions were familiar to Americans and permeated other reforms of the day. There was nothing novel about the abolitionist notion that restraint was the mark of a virtuous person, nor were a fear of power and a desire for individual autonomy unique to antislavery. Those attitudes had been current at least since the eighteenth century. Conditions in the 1820s and 1830s, however, gave them special urgency and made it easier for abolitionists to see them reflected in slavery and other evils. By the antebellum period, Americans had become mobile, energetic, and heterogeneous; they capitalized on the opportunities put before them and paid scant attention to anything except personal advantage. Religious and political leaders, according to abolitionists, did little to make the situation better; they were either ineffective or corrupt, or both. Reformers thought it necessary to find some means to make certain that virtue was not trampled in the rush to get ahead. One half of the abolitionist answer was not to trust anyone with too much power, lest he turn it to his advantage at the expense of everyone else. The other half was for people to be sufficiently self-disciplined to do what was right and resist what was wrong without help from ministers or politicians.

Abolitionists aimed that message at all Americans. In their bleak images of the slaveholder, the slave, and the South, they constructed a model of what happened when *any* people did not conquer their worst cravings. The slave states, according to antislavery rhetoric, were characterized by laziness, contempt for honest work, insolvency, violence, licentiousness, irreligion, and disrespect for the family. Tyranny and disorder prevailed. Moral desolation turned the South into a cursed land, upon which God showered few material blessings. It lacked such signs of progress as railroads, factories, public schools, and other benefits of Yankee culture. Abolitionists, however, refused to let Northerners take too much comfort in the contrast between their "civilization" and the "barbarism" of the South. The cardinal sin of Southerners—loss of moral control—appeared in the North in the guise of social turmoil and rampant selfishness; surely the free states would be punished for their transgressions just as severely as the slave ones were, unless repentance came in time. In an unconscious way, abolitionists were using the South as a mirror for their concerns about their own region and about people like themselves.

Although the values behind that view were old, abolitionists were applying them in a manner that would have been unthinkable in the eighteenth century, before economic growth sharpened differences between the sections. Only after slavery vanished in the North, and after factories and cities blossomed there, was it possible to believe that the free states represented a higher level of development than the South. Antislavery men and women, naturally, did not entirely endorse the emerging urban and industrial order of their region—its excesses were what they had in mind when arguing that Northerners were in danger of losing self-control and becoming like Southerners. Yet abolitionists accepted many of the assumptions of Northern capitalism, particularly when they insisted that liberty meant the ability to buy and sell property and labor (although not humans) without hindrance. They used that definition to indict slavery and, to their credit, they worried about the consequences of economic individualism even while they promoted it. They always insisted that entrepreneurship had to conform to Christian morality and they declared that the free market had to be opened to blacks on an equal

footing with whites. Far from being uncritical apologists for their section, they demanded that the North live up to its best standards and fulfill its greatest promises.

Race prejudice prevented the majority of Northern whites from acknowledging how thoroughly antislavery expressed many of their own cherished economic and religious beliefs. But there must have been some recognition of the fact: much of the strength of abolitionism was in cities, towns, and rural areas swept by commerce and evangelical Protestantism.

The spread of immediatism in the mid-1830s came in the face of suppression. Defenders of slavery saw abolitionism as a dangerous assault on the status quo and believed it had to be stopped by all possible means. Their response, in retrospect, seems out of proportion to the actual threat—at the time supporters of antislavery were a tiny minority in the North. There were, nonetheless, reasons to be outraged and fearful. Many abolitionists did indeed proclaim radical social doctrines, including the heretical notion that blacks ought to be equal, under the law, with whites. If that idea ever became current, the system of race relations in the South (and in the North, for that matter) would come tumbling down. Moreover, the most terrifying North American slave uprising, Nat Turner's Revolt, occurred just seven months after Garrison began to publish the *Liberator*. Many white Southerners were wrongly convinced that the two events were related and that "agitation" from the North was bound to produce further rebellions. Abolitionists denied the charge and countered by saying that the only way to ensure the safety of Southern whites was for them to free blacks, words which did nothing to calm the defenders of slavery.

White Southerners and their Northern allies were especially adept at using force and the political system to thwart abolitionists in the 1830s. The American Anti-Slavery Society's postal campaign of 1835, for instance, prompted a mob in Charleston, South Carolina, to break into the post office to steal, and later burn, antislavery publications. Instead of deploring this clearly illegal act, public officials in the South, and some in the North, applauded. President Andrew Jackson put his seal of approval on the Charleston riot

when he suggested, some months later, that the real problem was with antislavery propaganda and that it ought to be banned from the mails. No such bill ever passed but proslavery forces were soon to be successful in stopping Congress from considering antislavery petitions. In 1836 the House of Representatives resolved that all of them should "be laid upon the table, and that no further action whatever shall be had thereon." Some form of this "gag resolution" remained in effect until December 1844.

Repression was not confined to Congress and the South. Consecut in the mid-1830s passed legislation to outlaw racially mixed schools and to silence antislavery lecturers. Although politicians in other Northern states were similarly inclined to give the South a helping hand, there was very little they actually could do. Mobs proved to be much more of a danger—from 1834 through 1838 abolitionists were the victims of several major riots. One occurred in Boston in 1835 (the crowd led Garrison through the streets by a rope) and on the same day a similar fracas took place in Utica, New York. In yet another violent episode two years later, Elijah Lovejoy, an antislavery editor, lost his life while defending his press in Alton, Illinois. As abolitionists were fond of noting, substantial citizens—"gentlemen of property and standing"—were prominent in creating most of these disturbances. Such people cared less about the South's "peculiar institution" than about the federal Union and the nation's racial and social hierarchy, both of which they thought the abolitionists were out to destroy.

Although fierce, efforts to stop antislavery agitation probably were more effective in making converts than in slowing down the crusade. Among those joining the movement in the 1830s were people who dated their commitment from revulsion at some piece of anti-abolition mayhem. Abolitionists well appreciated that and made much out of incidents like the slaying of Lovejoy and passage of the "gag resolution." (The American Anti-Slavery Society's great petition campaign, in fact, got under way *after* the first gag resolution passed.) Besides providing opportunities for publicity, repression strengthened the resolve of abolitionists and confirmed, in their minds, two cardinal tenets of their propaganda. The first was a belief that American institutions were dominated by the "slave power" (an

alleged conspiracy of slaveholders and their Northern lackeys). The second was an insistence that proslavery men had no respect for the civil liberty of whites. Congress, President Jackson, and mobs seemed to prove that every time they denied white abolitionists their right to free speech and to petition the government.

Abolitionists may have been helped by their enemies, but the results were less beneficial when they began battling each other, as they did with increasing frequency after 1836. The issues were seldom as clearly defined as the warring factions thought they were, and both geographical distance and irascible personalities played a significant part in dividing abolitionists. These disagreements, nonetheless, were severe enough to break the movement into fragments in 1840, a feat no amount of proslavery violence had been able to accomplish.

William Lloyd Garrison was the center around which most internal conflict revolved. He was deeply disturbed by mobs, by the mindlessness of partisan politics, and by the reluctance of well-established ministers to endorse antislavery. There was nothing unusual about Garrison's perception of things: most abolitionists shared his disgust with the level of public morality in the country and with the weak-willed performance of politicians and of many clergymen. But where other abolitionists tried to purge the churches and the government of corruption, the Boston editor sought alternatives. Disillusion and his own spiritual restlessness made him uncommonly susceptible to theological and social notions that upset his straitlaced contemporaries.

Within a short span of time in the mid-1830s Garrison did indeed adopt an impressive number of unconventional positions. He questioned whether Sunday ought to be celebrated as the Sabbath (all days should be holy, he maintained). He denounced both the Protestant denominations and the majority of clergy for "sectarianism"—the sin of putting selfish interests ahead of morality. In addition, Garrison came to believe in a form of Christian anarchism known as nonresistance. It involved repudiating all varieties of force, among which Garrison included laws and governments. As we shall see in the next chapter, nonresistance was subtle beyond simple summary and rooted in evangelical Protestantism. Yet neither its complexity

nor its origins made it acceptable to most Americans or to many within the antislavery movement. Along with the rest of Garrison's crusades, it struck the public as silly at best, horrifying at worst.

But there was more. At the very moment that Garrison's multiple heresies were offending many former supporters, he added woman's rights to the controversial causes he favored. Garrison himself had no particular responsibility for raising the issue, which largely grew out of the activities of female abolitionists. By the mid-1830s women had become deeply involved in antislavery agitation, working within separate organizations affiliated with those run by men. That kind of arrangement was common in the antebellum period and suited contemporary notions of propriety. What some antislavery women did, nevertheless, was not so consistent with a Victorian sense of decorum. For instance, they welcomed blacks as equals (thereby stirring white fears of miscegenation), and they left the family circle (supposedly their "sphere") for such unladylike ventures as petitioning the government to end slavery. Women chafed at opposition from the public and at the condescending attitudes of their male comrades. Yet despite the discontent that had been simmering, it took an unforeseen event to elevate the "woman question" into a matter of open contention among abolitionists and further to alienate Garrison from some of his colleagues.

The catalyst was a lecture tour of New England, undertaken in 1837 by two sisters who were valuable and unusual additions to the antislavery crusade, Angelina and Sarah Grimké. Unlike most abolitionists, they were Southerners, members of a prominent South Carolina slaveholding family. Their public appearances drew curiosity seekers. Originally, the Grimkés were to talk only to female audiences—it was generally thought improper for women to address "promiscuous assemblies" (those with both sexes in attendance). Men frustrated the sisters' intentions by sneaking into antislavery gatherings to see them and to hear what they had to say. This outrage to public decency attracted the attention of New England clergy, ever vigilant to spot sin and preserve the social order. A grandiose Pastoral Letter, circulated to the Congregationalist churches, chastised the sisters. It declared that women should not speak in public and should obey men, rather than lecture to them.

Some abolitionists shared the clergy's consternation over the Grinkés' tour, while others, perhaps a majority, had trouble arriving at a consistent view of the matter. They could not entirely repudiate the sisters nor could they endorse the Pastoral Letter, which made extreme claims for ministerial authority; yet they were unwilling to flay in the face of public opinion on issues other than slavery. Garrison, characteristically, was not the least uncertain. He argued that there was nothing immoral about the sisters, or any woman, participating in public life or addressing men. Like many other abolitionists, he was in the process of shaking loose from his old assumptions about feminine roles and beginning to comprehend, in quite sweeping terms, the injustices done to women.

Taken along with his other enthusiasms, Garrison's support of the Grinkés convinced many abolitionists that he was either abandoning antislavery or taking it straight to ruin by associating it with strange crusades and by assaulting the sensibilities of decent folk. Garrison responded that expediency should never prevent a person from speaking out against evil and, moreover, that his views on questions other than slavery were his own, not an essential part of the crusade for abolition. He advocated an "open platform" where all who believed in immediate emancipation were welcome, no matter what their differences were on other social or theological questions. That point was lost on anti-abolitionists, who saw Garrison as representative of the cause and who cited him to show that the movement consisted of dangerous crackpots. Some of his colleagues felt they had to put distance between themselves and him simply to refute such charges and to gain respectability and credibility. Garrison, meanwhile, subtly closed the "open platform" and frittered away support by using harsh language to describe allies who disagreed with him. By 1838 he had repelled many admirers while retaining an intensely loyal cluster of followers, concentrated in New England and labeled "Garrisonians." They were diverse in religion, had a high proportion of women, were flamboyant in their tactics, and were extreme on social issues.

Abolitionist opponents of Garrison were not of one mind, nor did they ever form a coherent group. They included a great number of evangelical Protestants who were put off by Garrison's heterodoxy

and who believed that the clergy and other influential men, if approached tactfully, would provide greater support for the movement (a notion many of them lost with time). Some, like Lewis Tappan, were quite traditional regarding the role of women, while others, like Theodore Dwight Weld—who married Angelina Grimké—took a woman's rights position but felt it should not be proclaimed openly, lest it detract from abolitionism.

Divisive as Garrison and the "woman question" were, the most serious dispute among abolitionists came over politics. From the beginning antislavery had been non-partisan, as well as non-sectarian. Abolitionists did, however, expect to have political influence by acting as a pressure group, by changing public opinion, and by extracting pledges from major-party candidates for office. In the late 1830s a number of abolitionists in New York and Ohio, led by such men as James G. Birney, Myron Holley, and Henry B. Stanton, became dissatisfied with those tactics. They recognized that abolitionists were being taken in by wily politicians who found promises easier to make than to keep. Politicking, moreover, seemed a good way to focus abolitionist energies and to give publicity to the cause. Since many abolitionists regarded the Whigs and Democrats as hopelessly corrupt and chained to Southern votes, the logical conclusion was to form a separate antislavery political organization, with its own electioneering apparatus and candidates. After months of talk, the Liberty Party emerged in time to run Birney for the presidency in 1840.

Garrisonians opposed the move on practical and philosophical grounds. Politics, they felt, demanded unacceptable moral compromises as the price of success. They further argued that an antislavery party would do poorly in elections (they were right) and that it would actually diminish the influence of abolitionist votes since the major parties would no longer bother to compete for them in close elections. Even if they had swallowed those objections, many Garrisonians would not have joined the Liberty Party under any circumstances. As Christian anarchists, they believed the proper course of action was *not* to vote or to have anything else to do with human governments, which they regarded as inherently sinful. Yet Garrison and his followers did not entirely reject political means—for others.

Garrison frequently said that he expected antislavery to be manifested at the ballot box. He added that it would only get there if abolitionists kept their moral purity (which meant staying clear of party politics) and if they persuaded public opinion of the evils of slavery. What Garrison failed to see was that the Liberty Party did not necessarily have to make moral compromises or to win elections in order to have a purpose: in a highly political nation, electioneering and losing can serve as a valuable form of propaganda.

Well before the Liberty Party materialized, cracks in antislavery unity became too obvious to ignore. The worst of the early breaches appeared in Garrison's home territory. In 1838 his critics organized an alternative organization to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (which he dominated). In the meantime, politically minded abolitionists like Henry B. Stanton and James G. Birney pressed for resolutions defining the voting obligations of antislavery men. Although Garrisonians suggested compromise declarations, Birney and his allies stuck to a formula calculated to purge the movement of non-resistants and of abolitionists who wanted to stay within the Whig or the Democratic Party. The "woman question" also remained a source of irritation. It nearly broke up the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1839, when female delegates were admitted for the first time on equal terms with men.

The following year the American Anti-Slavery Society did indeed split under the accumulated weight of all the disputes. With the election of a woman, Abby Kelley, to serve on a previously all-male committee, a substantial minority of delegates walked out of the annual meeting. Some of the seceders left to work primarily within the Liberty Party; others joined Lewis Tappan in a new, largely ineffective venture, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.

The schism might have been averted. When the positions taken by Garrison and his critics appeared in various state and local organizations they often did not cause any comparable disruption. Abolitionists in places remote from the battles in Boston and New York commonly regarded the feuding as silly and refused to take sides. The antagonists, and historians, nevertheless persisted in blaming the division of 1840 on drastic and irreconcilable differences in world-views between the factions. Supposedly, it was Garrison, the

radical, opposed by moderates who accepted Protestant orthodoxy and the legitimacy of American institutions. That interpretation, however, fails to acknowledge that Garrison's "radicalism" grew out of the values of the day (it stemmed from Protestant perfectionism and millennialism) and that he was capable of altering it with circumstances—in spite of his pacifism and anarchism, for example, he accepted the Civil War and the Republican Party as means of achieving reform goals. His abolitionist opponents, furthermore, were not always so "moderate" as they seemed to Garrison. They, too, made drastic criticisms of the political system and of American religion (James G. Birney called it the "bulwark" of slavery). Non-Garrisonians also had visions of a society morally transformed and they endorsed causes in addition to antislavery, although usually in more temperate fashion than the Boston editor. Indeed, all factions recognized that the basic principles of abolitionism—control of one's self and one's labor, personal moral responsibility, human brotherhood, and so on—applied to a great many situations beyond the institution of slavery. Still, whatever underlying agreement there was among abolitionists, their personality conflicts and disagreements over tactics made a parting of the ways difficult to prevent by 1840.

The schism seemed a major tragedy to Garrison, who blamed it on "traitors" and insisted that it was a blow to the cause of antislavery. The results were less dramatic than he made them out to be. Neither the American Anti-Slavery Society nor the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society was especially effective in coordinating abolitionist efforts after 1840; yet the movement may no longer have needed firm central direction. The American Anti-Slavery Society seems to have been past its prime before the division occurred. The Panic of 1837 dried up funds for major undertakings of the sort it mounted earlier. More important, the functions of the national society were already being passed down to the auxiliaries—probably a healthy thing since local control permitted maximum participation in decision making and allowed abolitionists to modify tactics to suit circumstances in their areas.

Whether for better or worse, the fate of the American Anti-Slavery Society paralleled that of other reform organizations in the antebellum decades. National voluntary societies were a relatively

new and exciting development, a product of early-nineteenth-century improvements in communication and transportation. Virtually every antebellum movement generated its own central organization, although some, like phrenology, did so belatedly. Virtually every such organization fell apart within a short span of years. National reform institutions—national institutions of any sort—were hard to maintain in a country as diverse and with such a tradition of localism as the United States. Yet few crusades seem to have suffered irreparable damage from lack of central direction (the exception may have been labor reform, which needed to be able to control wages and working conditions over a broad area). More remarkable than the failure of organizations like the American Anti-Slavery Society is the fact that antebellum Americans were able to build them in the first place.

After 1840 Garrisonians continued to rely on "moral suasion," believing that slavery would end when Americans were convinced of its sinfulness. But they did shift tactics, most notably when they endorsed "disunionism," the idea that the free states ought to secede from the Southern ones. First promoted by Garrison in 1842 and officially proclaimed by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1844, disunionism had several things to recommend it. It shocked public opinion, got publicity, and provoked defenders of slavery into behaving foolishly. It also fit well with the "ultraist" desire, prevalent among antebellum reformers, to be cut off from anything impure.

Disunionism, finally, expressed a principle abolitionists had long been trying to establish—that slavery was the responsibility of all Americans, not just Southerners. To a degree, abolitionists *had* to make that argument or find some other line of work since they had no audience among whites in the South. But they sincerely believed that slavery depended upon Northern military might, available to put down slave insurrections, and upon Northern economic assistance. Remove these, Garrisonians argued, and the institution must fall. In its own fashion, disunionism was both a politically sophisticated tactic and an affirmation of American nationhood—a curious thing coming from the branch of abolitionism which seemed most non-political and most sectional. (The real irony was that the South, not

the North, made disunionism a reality in 1860, and in the name of preserving slavery.)

After 1840 non-Garrisonians worked to free slaves in their own fashion, with little sympathy for disunionism. Lewis Tappan corresponded with foreign abolitionists, financed propaganda, and mounted religious and legal campaigns to help blacks. Liberty men continued electioneering, with minimal success, until 1848, when the thrust of political antislavery was drastically redirected.

Even earlier, there were stresses and strains apparent within the Liberty Party. The lines of conflict crisscrossed in complicated ways and, as usual, personality conflicts figured in. Some members were dissatisfied with Birney, the presidential candidate in 1840 and 1844—he spent much of his first campaign for office in London and was given to casting aspersions upon the morality of the electorate, neither of which did much to stir enthusiasm. Matters of more substance also divided Liberty men. There were debates over whether to stay with the one issue of slavery or to add others in an effort to apply abolitionist ideals to all social problems and thus to become a party with a broad platform. There was disagreement over the constitutionality of slavery and over Congress's power to touch the institution. And there were those who wanted to keep to the purest possible antislavery position and those who were willing to make concessions in order to attract moderate, even racist, voters.

These quarrels continued among abolitionists into the 1850s, but by the late 1840s events had upset the calculations of Liberty men and Garrisonians alike. At first the trouble had to do with Texas. In the 1830s American settlers there declared independence from Mexico and set up their own republic, sparking controversy over whether Texas ought to join the Union. To bring it into the United States meant adding slave-state representation in Congress and shifting the delicate balance there. Not to bring Texas in implied a censure of slavery and denied political and economic advantages to the South. Texas was eventually annexed in 1845, although through a devious procedure which reinforced the abolitionist suspicion that Southerners secretly controlled the federal government.

The worst was yet to come. Shortly after annexation, the United States and Mexico went to war over a disputed boundary. Although

the war was not glorious, the United States won. The total amount of real estate acquired from Mexico (counting Texas) came to over a million square miles, including what is now the state of California.

The war disturbed many Northerners who cared nothing for black people and who were not especially hostile to the South. So long as slavery stayed where it was, they could tolerate it and comfort themselves by believing it would die a natural death. They were not prepared to see it expand and they were uneasy about the acquisition of fresh soil for the South's "peculiar institution." In 1846 David Wilmot, a Pennsylvania congressman, spoke for them. A piece of legislation he sponsored—the Wilmot Proviso—demanded that slavery be prohibited in territories taken from Mexico as a result of the war. The upshot was sharp sectional conflict in Congress (where the South defeated the Proviso in the Senate) and, through a long chain of circumstances, the emergence of a new force in American politics. In 1848 an odd coalition—disaffected Democrats, Liberty men, and a few stray politicians looking for a home—formed the Free Soil Party. Its candidate was ex-President Martin Van Buren, once an obnoxious figure to abolitionists. Its platform advocated the non-extension of slavery, the position of the Wilmot Proviso.

The Free Soil Party posed an intellectual problem for all abolitionists and a tactical one for Liberty men. It was far from being truly antislavery: it did not demand immediate emancipation, nor did it propose to touch slavery where it already existed. It depended, as the Colonization Society did, on an alliance of ardent racists and genuine racial egalitarians. To the former, it promised that Northern whites could preserve western land for themselves and keep blacks out. To the latter, it offered the possibility of a broadly based coalition capable of checking the power of slaveholders in government. Perhaps because of its ideological adaptability, the Free Soil Party met with far greater success than the Liberty Party. It drew 10 percent of the presidential vote in 1848, a respectable showing for a hastily assembled organization, and it elected candidates to state and national offices.

Quick to point out the Party's moral lapses and personally unable to endorse it, Garrisonians were cheered nonetheless. They interpreted Free Soil gains as encouraging signs that the Northern public was slowly moving toward abolitionism and that the South would

soon be at bay. Many Liberty men agreed and a few prominent ones such as Salmon P. Chase of Ohio were among the party's founders and most diligent supporters. James G. Birney and some other key Liberty men, however, saw Free Soil as a betrayal of the cause and had nothing to do with it. They persisted in waging hopeless, but morally pure, campaigns of their own in the 1850s, running as self-styled "radical political abolitionists." Free Soil further fragmented the abolitionists at the very time public controversy over slavery was reaching its peak.

The question of the territories remained unresolved throughout 1849, only to be "settled" in the Compromise of 1850, which created new tensions while trying to soothe old ones. The terms of the Compromise cost the South a bit of political leverage. Until then the number of states—hence the number of U.S. senators—had been evenly balanced between slave and free. The admission of California in 1850 as a free state changed that. In return for accepting its new minority status in the Senate, the South received concessions. The most significant of these was a Fugitive Slave Act to assist masters in retrieving their runaway property, some of whom were providing Northern audiences with eyewitness testimony about the South. The law was not the first of its kind, but it was offensive because, contrary to the principles of Anglo-American justice, it stacked the deck against the accused and because it gave Northerners direct responsibility for helping to retake bondsmen. As almost no other piece of legislation could have done, the Act gave credence to the abolitionist argument that slavery rested on a total disrespect for civil liberties and that it could not survive without the support of Northerners, who were now called upon to do the slaveholder's dirty work for him.

The Act probably captured more headlines than fugitives. It led to well-publicized episodes of civil disobedience—blacks and whites fought slave catchers, rescued fugitives from courtrooms and jails, and broke the law in the name of a higher law. Abolitionists made the most of these incidents and wrote movingly of the runaways and their quest for freedom. Beyond that, the Act inspired the single most effective piece of antislavery propaganda, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852 by Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was more of a

colonizationist than an abolitionist. With its vivid cast of characters, the novel was wildly popular in the North and was quickly transformed into countless stage productions (leading one abolitionist to note wryly that the theater became antislavery before many churches did).

It is in the nature of compromises to outrage people at the extremes, to please no one fully, and yet to work, at least for a while. Despite the furor over the Fugitive Slave Act, the Compromise of 1850 undercut abolitionism by settling the fate of slavery in the territories, seemingly in favor of freedom. The Free Soil Party did poorly in the election of 1852.

The relative calm was easily shattered. In 1854 a Democratic senator from Illinois, Stephen A. Douglas, introduced legislation to organize territory west of Iowa and Missouri. In order to secure Southern support for the Kansas-Nebraska Act (as it was known), he wrote in the principle that settlers ought to be able to decide for themselves whether the newly formed territories would be slave or free. He graced this notion with a glittering phrase, "popular sovereignty." The problem, so far as Northerners were concerned, was that this changed the rules of the game. According to the Missouri Compromise of 1819-20, slavery had been prohibited from much of the area. Now, with passage of the Act, slavery might gain a foothold there.

Dismay over this brought together ex-Free Soilers, a few old Liberty men, a smattering of disaffected Democrats, and many onetime antislavery Whigs, who created the Republican Party. Like its predecessor, the Free Soil Party, it stood for the non-extension of slavery while professing not to want to harm the institution in the Southern states. Even so, the party's rhetoric was bound to make white Southerners edgy. In addition to criticizing slavery, Republicans (again like Free Soilers) envisioned a nation consisting of independent, prosperous white property holders. That image implied a criticism of the Southern way of life and was powerfully appealing to Northern voters. In a short time the Republicans made remarkable gains and threatened to win the presidency and control Congress without having any support in the South.

These events of the mid- and late-1850s partially vindicated abolitionists, and then passed them by. As Garrison and others predicted, slavery had become something the major parties could not ignore: it broke up the Whigs, divided the Democrats, and produced the Republicans. Southern aggressiveness and political maneuvering also made it appear that abolitionists had been right in their charge that there was a sinister conspiracy in the government, hell-bent on promoting the interests of slavery. The actions of Southerners and their Northern supporters, furthermore, lent weight to the abolitionist argument that the institution was a national evil. The Fugitive Slave Act, of course, did that, as did a Supreme Court decision in the case of Dred Scott. (It appeared to write slavery and racial discrimination into the Constitution.) Yet even while Northerners slipped closer to abolitionist views, older members of the antislavery vanguard had little to do with guiding public affairs. Initiative and leadership belonged to people like Charles Sumner and Henry Wilson (senators from Massachusetts), Salmon P. Chase, and others. Many of these men were ex-Whigs, some former Free Soilers; all were antislavery politicians and Republican stalwarts. Few came out of the original abolitionist organizations.

That was not especially disturbing to the older abolitionists. None expected popularity and most had always assumed their greatest effect would come from persuading others. Many, including Garrison, were pleasantly surprised to find a politician as righteous as Sumner winning office and they had cordial feelings for such men (even while being critical of their public stands and suspicious of their involvement in partisan activities). For abolitionists the unsettling thing about Republican victories was their partial nature. Northern voters were indeed beginning to elect moderately abolitionist candidates. They were also beginning to see slavery as a threat to the republic and to the civil liberties of whites. They were not, however, convinced of the utter sinfulness of slavery, ready to demand its immediate extinction in the South, and prepared to accept black people as fellow citizens. Clearly there was a great deal left to do before the abolitionist message got through to the white public in its entirety.

Yet the time for propaganda seemed to be passing: violence, not

moral suasion, was the order of the day in the late 1850s. Vicious guerrilla warfare raged in Kansas between free- and slave-state settlers, each exercising "popular sovereignty" with firearms rather than honest ballots. Violence even invaded the chambers of the United States Senate. A speech made by Sumner in 1856 maligned slavery, administration policy toward Kansas, and, almost incidentally, a fellow senator from South Carolina. The senator's kinsman Preston Brooks (himself a representative from South Carolina) approached Sumner, then seated at his desk, and used a cane to administer a savage beating, presumably vindicating the honor of Brooks's relative and his region. Feelings about slavery were running so high that each man became a hero to many. Sumner was glorified as a martyr to Southern brutality; Brooks, whose cane broke over Sumner's skull, received a fine collection of replacements from well-wishers.

The bloodiest and most ominous episode of the late 1850s was the work of John Brown, a strange old man and a veteran of antislavery battles in Kansas. In October 1859 he and a small band of black and white followers attacked the Federal Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Most of his men were killed or captured. Brown survived, only to be tried and executed soon after. In the minds of Southerners the raid raised the nightmarish prospect of future slave revolts in which Northern whites might similarly assist blacks in the carnage. Northerners, abolitionists among them, had a harder time interpreting the meaning of Brown's actions. Insurrection was abhorrent to them; yet Brown had taken up weapons in order to strike down evil—a noble gesture, many thought. A failure in most things in his life, Brown helped his reputation in the North by dying well: he accepted his fate with eloquence and dignity. He was an avenging angel. Admiration for the old man appeared even among pacifists like Garrison and Transcendentalist intellectuals like Henry David Thoreau, who had not previously committed himself unreservedly to antislavery.

From the beginning abolitionists had advocated peaceful means to end slavery; but they also predicted it would die violently if emancipation did not come quickly. Kansas, the beating of Sumner, and Brown's raid appeared to justify their darkest fears. Some of them

began to wonder, in the bleak days of the 1850s, whether America's sins might not be so horrible that they would have to be washed away in blood.

They were. On December 20, 1860, South Carolina responded to the election of Abraham Lincoln, the Republican presidential candidate, by declaring that the Union between it and the other states was "dissolved." Four months later the Civil War began. As usual, abolitionists were divided. Consistent with their pacifism (and with Garrisonian nonresistance), many believed the Southern states should be allowed—even encouraged—to secede. Others endorsed the use of force to prevent them from going. Abolitionists were far more agreed upon the moral inadequacy of Lincoln's position, which was that the North was fighting only to preserve the Union, not to meddle with Southern institutions. Opposition to the war, however, faded as the Emancipation Proclamation (to take effect in 1863) and the course of events made it impossible to deny that the conflict was over slavery after all. In 1864 Garrison, for thirty years a nonvoter and nonresistant, cast a ballot for Lincoln.

The war did end slavery. Many abolitionists, pleased with the North's victory, were aging and ready for retirement. A weary Garrison published the last issue of the *Liberator* and left the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1865. The organization continued another five years until the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution promised to guarantee civil liberties for blacks. Yet even in 1870 there was much left undone: racism lived on, although slavery did not.

A few abolitionists did recognize that only the first battle had been won and continued throughout the rest of the nineteenth century to press for equal justice. They, however, were not intellectually prepared to agitate for the freedman with the same passion and thoroughness they had brought to the cause of the slave. In common with most antebellum reformers, abolitionists tended to believe that both evil and success were problems of the human spirit, not matters of economics and social structure. Blacks, they felt, needed opportunity, not help. With freedom, ex-slaves could fend for themselves. Those who were virtuous would succeed; those who were not would fail. Although some former abolitionists recognized the weaknesses in that line of reasoning, it was a common one and it tragically

underestimated the economic, psychological, and social damage slavery inflicted on both sections and both races.

It is difficult to gauge precisely the importance of the antislavery crusade. Unlike temperance and school reformers, abolitionists were not directly responsible for any great amount of legislation, nor did the original band of abolitionists ever wield much influence in government, although such antislavery politicians as Charles Sumner eventually did. Propaganda campaigns, nevertheless, have an effect. Reformers often find that they remain personally unpopular while voters and leaders come, in time, to accept much of what they have to say. Certainly antislavery images and language passed into common usage and into the rhetoric of elected officials. When that happened, it was because abolitionists phrased things in a manner making sense out of events and speaking to general concerns of the day. In the best example, antislavery talk about a conspiracy of slaveholders gained currency by playing to American fears of arbitrary power and by seeming to describe the actual behavior of Southerners. The importance of antislavery (or any antebellum reform) came through a similar ability to help the public perceive situations, or institutions like slavery, in a new, emotionally charged way. The pity is that abolitionists could not communicate their entire vision: slavery was ended, but largely as a boon to whites. The higher goals of racial harmony and of a society ruled by God's law remained elusive.

5. Women and War

Virtually all the major figures of antebellum reform participated in several causes besides the one they were primarily engaged in. These additional commitments usually fell into predictable patterns. Secular communitarians, for instance, often were interested in health or labor reform; prison reformers tended to be concerned with such related issues as construction of almshouses, insane asylums, and schools. Among abolitionists the secondary reforms frequently had to do with health and morality—temperance, anti-licentiousness campaigns, and so on. But the causes most closely linked to antislavery were the woman's rights and peace movements. The connection was not entirely a matter of numbers: probably more abolitionists were active in temperance than in either of the other crusades, both of which were relatively small. The common bond was a set of assumptions about human beings and human society.

"The investigation of the rights of the slave," Angelina Grimké wrote, "has led me to a better understanding of my own." What Miss Grimké had come to realize was that power and domination were sexual as well as racial. In the antebellum period she and thousands of other reformers—male and female—created the first feminist movement in the United States. From a late-twentieth-century perspective, their demands for increased opportunities and legal protection seem a reasonable, even modest, reaction against discrimination. Only the most hardened present-day male chauvin-