

Henry Clarke Wright (1797-1870): Origins of the Reform Impulse

The Man Behind the Firehouse Letter Book

By Holly Clay



Wright circa 1847, the eve of his departure from the British Isles ultimately to touch down on Cape Ann

By the time of his arrival in the British Isles in 1842, Henry Clarke Wright, then in his mid-forties had taken to moving frequently. Necessity, urgency and, sometimes a calling, had transplanted him numerous times in his life. When still a youth, his family resettled in western Connecticut and later moved further west into New York's frontier lands. Encountering physical hardships and adjusting to new communities proved to be challenging and Wright, still a child, carried an adult load of responsibilities. But, a religious conversion experience in 1817 provided new direction, even as he toiled to carve out an existence in upstate New York. The resulting change in orientation convinced him to study for the ministry. He attended Andover Theological Seminary and was ordained in the Congregational/Presbyterian denomination. Wright heeded and embraced the sect's conservative interpretations of scripture.

After a few years of study, church governors sent him to coastal Massachusetts, to a church in Newbury, to continue studies and gain on-the-ground experience. In 1822, not long after his move, Wright married Elizabeth Stickney (nee Le Breton), a wealthy Newburyport widow. Twenty years his senior, Stickney had four children. Her wealth allowed a comfortable lifestyle. Wright was able to give full attention to ministerial responsibilities. Known for accessible sermons that couched everyday matters in ethical terms, rather than dry interpretation of scripture, Wright proved himself a natural orator. Documents testify to Wright's genial spontaneity. He attracted parishioners. This affinity for people reinforced him in the pulpit and later glued him to the life of a roving crusader.

Wright was happy during the early years of his marriage and chaplaincy in West Newbury. But, restlessness emerged in the early 1830's. Undoubtedly, he felt the same kind of yearning that led to his escape from a mundane apprenticeship in central New York and prompted theological studies at Andover.

In the years that followed, Wright honored the inner call to missionary and reform work. He spoke out loudly and publically for radical pacifism. He saw non-violence as the only acceptable response to aggression or conflict. He began taking posts in far-flung locations. On relinquishing his pulpit, he became an Amherst College agent, from 1832-33, roving in the institution's behalf and shoring up its reputation when it stood on the brink of dissolution. He saw Amherst's more socially progressive approach to religious strictures as a discrete alternative to Harvard's intellectual orthodoxy, elitism and Unitarianism. Defending Amherst's efforts to educate the common man, Wright lauded the upward mobility education afforded. He developed a disdain for entrenched clergy and authoritative laypeople. This perspective would guide his thinking for a lifetime.

Educating young people, imparting Christian doctrine and imbuing the young mind with appreciation of Christian virtues, became a priority. In 1835, a benchmark year in Wright's life, he moved to Boston and took up residence in

Mrs. Bliss' boarding house. It was the height of the English and American Sunday School movement. Wright served as the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches' minister to the city's children. He loved young people and tending to their moral edification. Children adored him and, in turn, were receptive to his teachings. As the years went on, Henry exploited the natural rapport he built with young and old. He traveled near and far to champion causes, endearing himself to audiences of children as often as adults.

Just as young people became an inducement to his roving "ministry," so did the then-current notion that man had choice. In this, Henry was breaking from convention, attributing power to humans heretofore relegated to God and doctrine. His thinking changed... a man/woman had the right (God given) to choose his/her doctrinal path. This view led him to advocate for equal rights and ultimately to rally for the anti-slavery cause. These two pursuits would figure prominently on his agenda in the years before and during the Civil War, a period when Wright's actions came to be seen as increasingly radical in character.

Over time, Wright tended more and more to extremist positions on abolition and equal rights. Brief interaction with the American Union for the Moral and Intellectual Improvement of the Colored Race brought Wright in touch with William Lloyd Garrison and acquainted him with Englishman George Thompson. Thompson and Garrison eventually broke with the organization. Henry joined ranks with the two reformers. Under the pseudonym "Genius of Africa," Wright began writing anti-slavery tracts for Garrison's *Liberator*, founded in 1831. He incurred criticism in 1835 for accompanying an African American woman, taking her arm, as they paid a visit to the parents of one of her students in Boston. That same year Garrison was mobbed on the street in Boston, and Thompson fled back to the British Isles under threat of assassination. A year later, in 1836, an African American woman stayed as a guest in Wright's Newburyport home. Actions such as these drove a wedge between him and the more cautious, conservative elements in the anti-slavery movement.

In 1836 Wright made another occupational change, taking a position as a roving agent for the American Peace Society. Assigned to spread the creed of peace west to Cincinnati, OH, he made it only as far as Rochester, NY. Correspondence from his wife made clear his itinerancy was impinging on their marriage. Wright also found himself at odds with principals in the Peace Society, who allowed that nations could go to war in their own defense. Henry would accede to no such half measures. He would not support war, no matter what the circumstances. He elected to abandon the Peace Society post and return East.

While retained by the American Peace Society, Wright's friendship with Garrison deepened. Their relationship was highly collaborative, based on shared values. They took positions on equal rights issues that other abolitionists didn't support. Garrison and his followers within the anti-slavery movement fought for immediate eradication of slavery. Powerful forces within the ranks favored gradual emancipation. Wright and Garrison supported broadening women's rights. Not all their reform-minded cohort agreed women should have greater control of their lives nor take leading roles in the struggle to free enslaved people of color. Wright and his wife Elizabeth hosted abolitionists Angelina and Sarah Grimke at her Newburyport home. They backed the outspoken sisters in their controversial effort to bring women's voices to the fore in behalf of black emancipation.

Later in 1836 Wright transitioned, devoting his copious energy to Garrison's American Anti-Slavery society. Wright was one of the "Seventy," 50-60 ministers trained in New York to travel the country in support of the anti-slavery movement. He handled outreach to youth anti-slavery groups in the Northeast.

First posted to Maine, he was soon re-assigned to New York and the Juvenile Anti-Slavery Society (an organization of youth who called for abolition of slavery) and ultimately to Essex County, Massachusetts. This assignment brought him back to Newburyport in 1837. His home became a headquarters for the more radically inclined anti-slavery activists. With the Grimke sisters, who

were staying with the Wrights that year, Henry condemned slavery so vociferously and called so loudly for its immediate end that he alienated Theodore Weld and John Greenleaf Whittier, well-known, respected abolitionists.

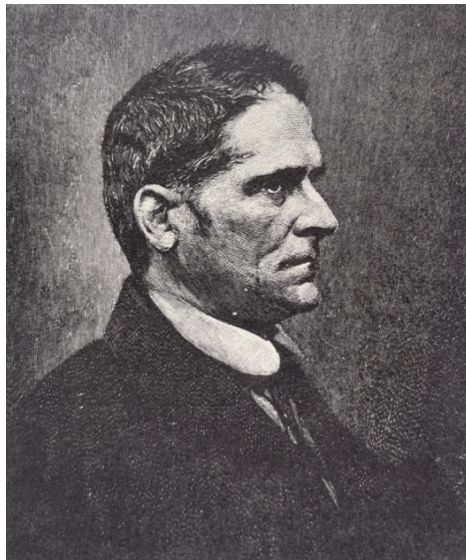
Backers of abolition, like Weld and Whittier, Arthur Tappan, Lewis Tappan and Wendell Phillips, relied on discretion in their advocacy. They avoided public displays that could alienate moderate segments of the U.S. population. Instead of blaming the Constitution of the U.S. for allowing slavery and calling for a change in the Constitution to right its language, they believed in working inside the political system. They formed the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, an alternative to Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society. (The American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society became the Liberty Party in 1840.) They also opposed Garrison's and Wright's inclusion of women in anti-slavery dealings.

Simultaneously, Weld fell in love with and wooed Angelina Grimke. He maneuvered to separate her from the charismatic Wright. Garrison went along with Weld and transferred Wright to Pennsylvania, to diffuse tension over Wright's more extreme views as well as his connection to the Grimkes. Wright resettled his family in Philadelphia, but Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society did not give him another commission. His extreme views and fierce oratorical style, combined with his advocacy of causes other than abolition, provided ample fodder for dismissal. Wright, once again without contract, had to rely on his wife for support. Nevertheless, Wright regularly wrote columns for the *Liberator*. Wright and Garrison would continue to collaborate for the next almost two decades. Their friendship would last for the rest of their lives.

Wright didn't find the Philadelphia state of affairs to his liking. No doubt, filial dependence and an unquenchable appetite for field work led to frustration with his homebound existence. After more than a year of unemployment, Henry took an unpaid position with the New England Non-Resistance Society, founded in 1840. Within Non-Resistance ranks he found a philosophical home. Traveling the country, he survived on donations, whipping up support for peaceful agitation and resolution of conflict and for human equality. In 1842, his first

book, A Kiss for A Blow, was published to wide acclaim that followed him overseas in 1842. The Society collected donations to send Wright to London for Benevolent Meetings, despite misgivings of fellow anti-slavery activist-in-arms John Greenleaf Whittier. Whittier, who once asked for Wright to tone down his rhetoric, apparently felt Wright had become an asset. He said the anti-slavery movement would lose traction in the U.S. if Wright went off to the U.K., which indeed it did.

Notwithstanding colleagues' misgivings, Wright traveled to Great Britain in 1842. He would spend the better part of five years there, making many friends and sowing reform notions in fertile ground, often in Quakers' company. The letters in the letter book in the Annisquam Historical Society's Firehouse tell us about Wright's time in the U.K., the impressions he made and his association with Garrison, Douglass, Thompson and the Dublin publisher Richard D. Webb. They reveal the groundswell of support there for abolition of slavery in the U.S.



In Ireland, About 1847

In 1847, after almost five years, Wright must have had to wrench himself away from Great Britain. He enjoyed widespread popularity, particularly in the North of England, Scottish border lands and amongst reformers in Dublin and

Belfast. Letters from concerned friends indicate he made the homeward-bound, trans-Atlantic journey under duress, given poor health and a weakened constitution. We have no record of Wright's returning to his wife and her family in Philadelphia. It seems he took up an itinerant existence, sometimes landing in one spot, sometimes another.



Wright, Late 1850's (Property of NY State Historical Assoc, Cooperstown, NY)

Wright continued on his reform trajectory, begun so many years before as a young man. Likewise, he continued to travel and publish, addressing matters of morality and giving speeches. (You can find a list of books and essays he authored on the Annisquam Historical Society website.)

It was during and after the post-Civil War period that he visited Gloucester. Here he found kindred souls, as he had in England. He apparently forged relationships with people on Cape Ann, particularly Julia Friend, at that time married to Elbridge Friend, Annisquam resident Elliott Rogers' uncle. When Wright died in 1870, it was to Sarah Friend he left property he managed to accrue. (see Wright Introduction on Annisquam Historical Society website).

To get a feel for the Henry Clarke Wright, the man and reformer, to learn how the 19th century English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish supported abolition of slavery in the U.S. and equal rights around the globe, please read the letters we have transcribed and posted at: annisquamhistoricalsociety.org.

