THE UNCOMMON EDUCATION OF LUCRETIA MOTT

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Historians of the women's rights movement in the United States inevitably begin their accounts with one of three significant events. Most often, they focus on the Seneca Falls (N.Y.) Convention of 1848 whose now-famous Declaration of Sentiments trumpeted the first American call for women's rights. Of the four women who organized the Convention, one was a spirited Quaker minister named Lucretia Mott. Some historians step back further to the London Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840. There the American women delegates, led by Lucretia Mott, were refused admission because of their sex. An occasional women's historian, seeking longer roots, will point out that at the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Convention of 1833, a woman dared to challenge popular custom and speak in public. That speaker was Lucretia Mott.

Lucretia Coffin Mott was a woman whose public career spanned more than fifty of America's most energetic and dangerous years. Her contributions to the women's rights movement, especially in the early and hesitant period between 1848 and 1860, were critical to its success. This veteran reformer and public speaker provided counsel, direction, and support to the rising generation of women's rights advocates. Young Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who first met Lucretia Mott in 1840, recalled:

"It seemed to me like meeting a being from some larger planet, to find a woman who dared to question the opinions of Popes, Kings, Synods, Parliaments, with the same freedom that she would criticize an editorial in the London Times, recognizing no higher authority than the judgments of a pure-minded, educated woman. When I first heard from the lips of Lucretia Mott that I had the same right to think for myself that Luther, Calvin, and John Knox had ... I felt at once a new-born sense of dignity and freedom; it was like suddenly coming into the rays of the noon-day sun, after wandering with a rushlight in the caves of the earth."

Despite Lucretia Mott's electrifying effect on twenty-five-year-old Stanton, and countless others wrestling with the dilemmas of the age, little attention has been given to Lucretia Mott's life beyond her early and continued commitment to the Abolition Movement and her profound influence upon Elizabeth Cady Stanton (who would later become the foremost spokeswoman for the women's rights movement).

Part of the reason for this lack of attention rests with Lucretia Mott herself. She was an activist, not a philosopher; her skill lay not in writing, but in speaking. Thus the remnants of her life are most often reflected in the words of others. Just how Lucretia Mott came to be a nationally-known figure is left to the imagination; her biographers do little more than hint at the character of her preparation. Inquiries into her formal education are virtually non-existent.

For historians of education, the puzzle surrounding Lucretia Mott's education and, indeed, the education of other women reformers, poses intriguing questions. At a time when female education remained, at best, an afterthought, how were nineteenth-century women prepared to assume positions of responsibility in national organizations? Were schools anywhere in the United States doing more than a cursory job of training their female students? How did women secluded from public life leap the barricades of custom and enter into the nation-shaking campaigns for social reform? An examination of Lucretia Mott's early life seems to suggest one set of answers.

From the middle of the 1970s, it may be difficult to imagine just how monumental a task it was for a woman in the second quarter of the nineteenth century to undertake a public career. It simply was not done. Woman was invisible in public life.
She had no voice, no vote, no legal existence. The planet of her life revolved around a masculine sun, held in orbit by rigid social custom and religious prohibitions. Through meager schooling, she acquired only those skills necessary to maintain her course. Beyond her orbit, there was endless void; or, so it seemed.

This generally accepted concept of woman's proper place received an early rejection by one important Protestant group: the Religious Society of Friends, commonly called Quakers. Lucretia Coffin Mott, born into a Quaker family in 1793, was raised on Nantucket Island, a whaling community where Quaker philosophy predominated. Like several leaders of the women's rights movement, she absorbed the values of her family's Quaker faith and remained committed to its principles throughout her life.

In order to understand the background of the early abolition and women's rights activists — women like Susan B. Anthony, Abby Kelley Foster, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, and others less well-known — it is important to understand the basic beliefs of Quakerism for those beliefs did much to establish a standard of woman's potential for the women's rights movement.

Philosophically, Quakerism challenged the Calvinist doctrine of original sin by asserting that there was "that of God in every one." Elitism and clerical hierarchy were discarded, and individuals assumed responsibility for their own salvation, standing equally before God. The authority of the clergy was denounced because Quakers were convinced that each individual was eligible for personal revelation, the divine "leadings of the Holy Spirit," and that the ministry should not be limited to an elite few.

George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, began his ministry in the north of England in 1652. Puritan officials quickly denounced him as a heretic, and he spent the rest of his life in and out of England's prisons. His message struck a responsive chord among the farmers and artisans of the countryside, however, and his fame and ideas soon spread throughout England. Casting aside the traditional forms of worship, Fox's converts sat in quiet, unstructured gatherings where the "Spirit of the Lord" caused them to tremble, hence the name, Quaker.

The revolutionary ideas of Fox had many implications. If there were "that of God in every one", then wars were not simply undesirable, they were sacrilegious. Pacifism was a practical consequence. If each person were equal before God, that meant noble and commoner, male and female, slave and master, alike. No signs of secular rank would be recognized, no hats removed in the presence of nobles, no flattering forms of address employed. Instead, Quakers adopted the "plain speech," using the singular pronoun "thee" to all persons regardless of rank, anticipating the later adaptation of the plural "you" to both singular and plural subjects. This "witness," as the uncustomary Quaker practices came to be called, carried an additional benefit to women. Like men, women were addressed with their whole name, or simply as "Friend." Hope Elizabeth Luder points out that, when titles were omitted, the distinction of marital status implied in the use of "Miss" or "Mrs." was swept away. Quaker belief in the equality of persons cast early suspicion on the practice of slave-holding, and the subsequent effort of Quakers in the anti-slavery movement is perhaps their most widely-recognized achievement.

If personal revelation were a possibility to all who genuinely sought it, women as well as men were equally likely to receive God's call to the ministry. Of the original sixty-six "Publishers of the Truth" who traveled the roads of England in the 1650s preaching the faith, twelve were women.

One of the twelve was Margaret Fell whose spiritual guidance and organizational skills gained her the title, "The Mother of Quakerism." Following George Fox's lead, Margaret Fell took upon herself the task of defending the right of women to public ministry. In 1667, she published a treatise which argued the right of women to preach their faith, twelve were women.

Her efforts also included the establishment of women's meetings for business at which the secular affairs of Quakerdom were managed. Men's business meetings, held monthly in each local district, and quarterly and yearly in successively larger geographic areas, were already being established. The women's meetings paralleled the men's and took on special responsibilities considered suitable, such as relief of the poor and imprisoned, the education of children, and the training and employment of Quaker young women. These were among the earliest organizations to provide European women with an opportunity to govern their own business affairs and to develop their skill in public speaking and administration.

In the centuries that followed, monthly,
quarterly and yearly meetings in Europe and America would prove to be the training ground for countless Quaker leaders, male and female alike. For the young woman with religious commitment and ability, the opportunity for public achievement and recognition within the Quaker community was, by comparison with other Christian faiths at that time, infinite. Whether in supervision and administration, or in the ministry, or both, women found opportunity for public service offered nowhere else.

These opportunities could not have prepared Quaker women for entry into the nineteenth-century reform movements, however, without one additional option: the option of non-conformity. Quakerism glorified and encouraged action for the sake of principle. The heroes and heroines of the faith were those like Mary Dyer, whose persistent refusal to obey Massachusetts law prohibiting Quaker meetings resulted in her public hanging on Boston Common. John Woolman, a Quaker teacher, wrote so passionately of the injustice of slavery that Quakers everywhere took up the anti-slavery cause. Defiance of injustice came to be an integral part of the Quaker culture and those who suffered at the hands of the world could expect praise from the close-knit, supportive Quaker community, so long as individual dissent conformed to Quaker doctrine.

Given a philosophy of spiritual equality and an expectation of full and principled participation by men and women in Quaker life, a policy of educational parity for boys and girls followed. Stressing first the religious and then the practical aspects of education, Quakers offered a substantially equal curriculum to both sexes. By the end of the eighteenth century, the concern of Quaker primary schools everywhere was to provide a "guarded religious education" to all children. The four R's — reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion — were taught, "with emphasis on Religion." Deference was paid to the separate tasks performed by males and females, and thus Quaker girls, like their non-Quaker cousins elsewhere, learned the art of needlework while Quaker boys undertook special instruction in agricultural skills. In scholastic matters, however, their curriculae were, apparently, the same.

Thus, Lucretia Coffin, enrolled in a Quaker primary school on Nantucket, would have received a solid grounding in the rudiments of learning and, at the same time, an equally solid grounding in the rudiments of Quakerism. Attendance at meeting for worship was required and students were often privileged to hear the words of the unsalaried traveling ministers — male and female — who kept the scattered Quaker settlements united in spirit.

The Quaker school on Nantucket required its boys and girls to attend school all day, year-round. When the Coffin family moved from Nantucket to Boston in 1804, Lucretia discovered that girls received quite a different sort of treatment in the Boston public school she attended. Although boys were afforded a year-round education, girls were allowed to attend only "from the 20th of April to the 20th of October..." Beyond that, George Martin points out, the number of hours girls spent in school were very few.

"The boys were sent home an hour earlier in the forenoon and afternoon, and the girls came in; or the girls came an hour in the morning, before the boys, and on Thursday afternoon (the boys' holiday); this only during the summer months, so tender was the consideration for what, in the language of the time, was called 'the female health.'"

According to Martin, the curriculum for girls in public school was quite narrow, and it was "... the more ambitious girls [who] worked their way a little into arithmetic and geography and grammar."

Not only did the public school system limit the opportunities for girls to study, its textbooks established the "modest, meek and silent" woman as the ideal. Ruth Miller Elson, in her definitive analysis of nineteenth-century American schoolbooks, notes that "... schoolbooks, except those few specifically designed for female education, are addressed to boys. In the minds of most schoolbook authors 'the child' is male...." Women as portrayed in the texts were adjuncts of males; whether they were father, brother, husband, or son, males dominated and females submitted.

Elson argues persuasively that textbooks were one of the major tools of social control in American education. When one compares the commonly-used nineteenth-century texts with the textbooks used in Quaker schools, a distinction becomes clear. Quaker-authored texts consistently reflected the philosophy of the Quaker faith. In non-Quaker texts, not only the role of women but the relationships of human beings generally were portrayed in un-Friendly terms. Stated simply, war was glorified, Negroes vilified, and women nullified.
Obviously the preparation given girls in public schools was inappropriate to the demands of Quaker life. Lucretia Coffin apparently attended only one six-month session in the Boston public school. Her parents, convinced of the importance of female education, enrolled both Lucretia and her sister, Elizabeth, in Nine Partners Boarding School, a Quaker school near Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1806.

Nine Partners School was one of several boarding schools which sprang into existence at the end of the eighteenth century. Quakers who valued Quaker education believed that the rural boarding school, secluded from the temptations of urban life, would foster the proper development of their children and serve to protect the Quaker culture. Nine Partners had been founded with the help of a Quaker minister named Elias Hicks, one of the most vigorous defenders of the anti-slavery cause. Hicks took an active interest in Nine Partners, believing that it was more important for Quaker children to "be brought up and educated in the fear of the Lord" than they "should make great advancement in scholastic science, or obtain the riches and popularity of the world; all of which were of momentary duration." In Hick's view, education should prepare children to live a simple Quaker life, withdrawn from the concerns of the world, intent upon the will of God.

Hick's ascetic philosophy was somewhat balanced by the academic goals of James Mott, Sr., the school's resident superintendent and grandfather of Lucretia's future husband. Mott believed that education should appeal to and develop reason and independent judgment. Before coming to Nine Partners, Mott had gone so far as to recruit Yale graduates to teach at the family school he had established near his Long Island home. At a time when Quakers viewed higher education, especially of the Puritan stamp, with great suspicion, Mott's choice of teachers demonstrates both his concern for solid academic training and his independence of mind.

For Nine Partners, Mott sought the most qualified — albeit Quaker — teachers, and the curriculum aimed at providing "a thorough academic course." The school advertised its beginning studies as "Reading, Writing & Accounts together with English Grammar, . . . Branches of the Mathematics, . . . and Business and Domestic Employment." If parents so desired, they could arrange for their children to study "the more advanced branches of Literature," at an extra charge. This ambiguous phrase seems to have implied not only literature, but history and geography as well. In addition, there may have been some science classes. In their efforts to provide a useful education to Quaker children, the Friends had been eager to adopt the practical sciences into their curriculae. Botany, astronomy, and "natural philosophy" were included in the academic programs of advanced students at about this time.

It is worth noting that one of Lucretia's teachers was Susan Marriott, "an Englishwoman of uncommon acquirements," who prodded her students to a complete awareness of the subtleties of English grammar. Apparently there were oral presentations in her classes because she was very critical of their pronunciation and their choice of language, and made a nice discrimination between words." This strongly suggests that Lucretia Coffin had a chance to study a kind of informal public speaking with Susan Marriott.

Although consistent with the role of women in the Society of Friends, such a thing was unheard of outside the Society. Women simply did not speak in public, and as late as 1833, Lucretia Mott had to contend with men who had never heard a woman speak at a public meeting, "turning to see what woman there was who knew what the word 'transpose' meant. . . ." It was at Nine Partners that Lucretia Coffin became committed to the anti-slavery cause. First Quaker textbooks described the plight of the slave and vividly conveyed the wretchedness of the "middle passage," the journey by ship from Africa to the slave markets. Before she left Nine Partners, Lucretia Coffin was fully aware of a great wrong to be righted.

At age fifteen, Lucretia Coffin was asked to join the Nine Partners faculty as an assistant to Deborah Rogers, one of the experienced teachers. The following year, Lucretia was hired as a regular faculty member. During these two years, Lucretia Coffin came face to face with the difference between the theory of sexual equality within the Religious Society of Friends, and its application. Years later, she recalled:

"Learning that the charge for the tuition of girls was the same as that for boys, and then when they became teachers women received only half as much for their services, the injustice of this distinction was so apparent, that I early resolved to claim for myself all that an impartial Creator had bestowed."
In point of fact, Lucretia Mott erred on the side of generosity with regard to the percentage of salary paid the women teachers. Otelia Cromwell reports that the superintendent received an annual salary of £150, the novice teacher of the boys (Lucretia’s future husband), £100, but Deborah Rogers, the seasoned master teacher, received only £20.18

The injustice of Deborah Rogers’ lower pay appeared even greater, set as it was against the avowed Quaker theory of equality between the sexes. It is precisely this contrast which struck Lucretia Coffin. Had the discrimination in pay been consistent with a general attitude of women’s inferiority, she probably would have given it no thought. Most women of her time did just that. Lucretia’s early exposure to Quaker theory and the achievements of Quaker women, her later experience of the limitations placed on the females of Boston, and now her confrontation with discrimination in the Society of Friends itself set in motion a chain of thought that eventually led to her vigorous defense of women’s rights.

In the years following her Nine Partners education, Lucretia Coffin married James Mott, Jr., settled in Philadelphia, raised her family, and continued to study independently. Her religious commitment was recognized in 1821, when 28-year-old Lucretia Mott was recorded a minister of the Society of Friends. By 1830, she had been chosen Clerk (that is, presiding officer) of her Women’s Yearly Meeting, a position she held for a total of five years, providing leadership for nearly six thousand Quaker women. Her public ministry grew to include more frequent and wide-ranging travel; between 1828 and 1840, Lucretia Mott repeatedly journeyed through New York and New Jersey, as well as Pennsylvania and Maryland, to meet and speak to Friends, following the tradition established over 150 years earlier by Margaret Fell and others.
In all her work — writing, meeting, presiding, speaking, guiding — Lucretia Mott's administrative judgment and organizational abilities were strengthened at every turn. Having committed herself to the anti-slavery cause, Lucretia Mott was one of the first women to join William Lloyd Garrison in public defense of the slave; her efforts on behalf of the abolition movement continued unabated from 1833 to the end of the Civil War. Her reform activities increased to encompass woman's rights, peace, temperance, and many others. With success and wider recognition came a habit of confidence and self-assurance. By 1840, Lucretia Mott would be one of a handful of American women who could claim comparable achievements. It was these achievements which lent order and strength to the rising women's movement.

In addition to ministerial and reform activities, her influence and untiring efforts supported the establishment of educational facilities for girls, from Quaker primary schools to Swarthmore College, the first Quaker college to admit women. She also aided in the establishment of the Woman's Medical College of Philadelphia, the first school to offer a regular medical education for women.

Lucretia Mott carried from her own uncommon education a belief that the education of girls and boys should not differ. Asserting, "mind has no sex," she continued to work for the improvement of the human condition. It was out of her own Quaker experience of woman's abilities and her belief in the dignity of the human spirit that Lucretia Mott spoke in 1849. In defending the rights of women, she said,

"Let woman then go on — not asking favors, but claiming as a right the removal of all hindrances to her elevation in the scale of being — let her receive encouragement for the proper cultivation of all her powers, so that she may enter profitably into the active business of life ... coveting earnestly the best gifts, let her strive to occupy such walks in society as will befit her true dignity in all the relations of life." 19

In this plea, and throughout her life, Lucretia Coffin Mott asked no more for other women than she had come to expect for herself. Within her Quaker experience, she had found acceptance as a woman and opportunity as a gifted individual. Her principles, shaped by Quakerism, would accept nothing less for other human beings.

Footnotes

4Margaret Fell. Women Speaking, Justified, Proved And Allowed Of By The Scriptures, All Such As Speak By The Spirit And Power Of The Lord Jesus (London 1647).
10Ibid., pp. 322-334, 87-88 and 302-312, respectively.
11Other Friends' boarding schools in 1806 were located in Wilmington, Delaware; Duck Creek Meeting, Virginia; Fair Hill, Maryland, and Westtown, Pennsylvania. See J. William Frost, The Quaker Family in Colonial America (New York 1973), p. 103.
16Ibid., p. 63.
17Ibid., p. 38.
18Cromwell, op. cit., p. 18.

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