

**ALL ON FIRE: WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON  
AND THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY**

(HENRY MAYER)

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William Lloyd Garrison is one of those nineteenth-century American figures about whom most people know a little, realizing they are important to American history, but whom few can discuss with expertise. Into that same category I'd put men like Henry Clay, John Fremont, perhaps even Stephen Douglas, and quite a few others. Garrison is probably more neglected than those figures. But this book is an excellent corrective, not only showing the importance of Garrison for his time, but showing us how his principles apply today in a similarly fraught moral climate, and offering lessons in how society's powerful approach, or fail to approach, moral issues, then and now.

The title comes from Garrison's mantra, "I have need to be all on fire, for I have mountains of ice about me to melt." The book's author, Henry Mayer (who died suddenly in 2000, only two years after this book was published, and a year short of sixty), introduces his subject with a look back over past decades. He says his purpose is to rescue Garrison's reputation, not from those who view him as a fanatic, since by most definitions he was, in fact, a fanatic, but from those, the majority of historians over the modern period, who have viewed him as a lunatic. As Mayer says, "Our political culture is not kind to those who challenge its norms, and as abolition has come to seem inevitable, so has Garrison's nonconformist agitation come to seem shrill, weird, and counterproductive." But abolition was not inevitable, because the arc of the moral universe does not bend, on this earth, toward justice unless it is bent by human action, and it was that action that Garrison supplied in America, more than any other person.

My only complaint about this book, which manages to be gripping despite the enormous amount of detail and large cast of characters, is that it never really tells us why Garrison became a fanatic abolitionist. It may simply be that information on his early life, or his thoughts in early life, is lacking to the historian. Or maybe it is not complicated, any more than one has to explain a man intervening to stop a child being beaten in the street—it is just what someone of a certain moral makeup

and upbringing does. Maybe it was that combined with his personality: "Opposition always intensified his defiance and heightened his own sense of worth. Like his mother, Garrison took pleasure in feeling embattled." At the end of the day, I suppose, it doesn't really matter, and perhaps there is no simple explanation.

Garrison was born in 1805 of recent immigrant British stock, in a town north of Boston. His father was a wastrel merchant seaman who abandoned the family; his mother was a devout Baptist who impressed her Christian faith on her son, a faith which he never lost but which became ever more personalized and inward-driven during his life. At thirteen, he became apprenticed to a printer in town, a fortunate event, for he spent his entire life in the trade, able to spread his message without having to use intermediaries—similar, perhaps, to being able to use the internet today, although there was less of a cacophony with which to compete back then. Newspapers, of course, were the lifeblood of American cities and towns of the early nineteenth century, commonly a mixture of political action, reprinted material, bad poetry, and mediocre fiction, and the ability to disseminate knowledge and opinion was invaluable to Garrison's cause. So, at twenty-one, Garrison started his own generalist newspaper, but lasted only six months before being effectively forced out because of local politics, whereupon he moved to Boston, the center of his professional existence for the rest of his life.

Although he was firmly Baptist, Garrison fell in with the circles around Lyman Beecher, the noted Presbyterian minister. Temperance, not slavery, was the issue of the day, and Garrison was soon asked to edit a temperance-focused newspaper. By chance, Garrison was introduced to a Quaker harness maker, Benjamin Lundy, who, incensed by the sight of slaves being sold in Virginia, had taught himself printing and started an anti-slavery newspaper, the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. While the northern states had abolished slavery, that movement had no impact on the southern states where there were larger numbers of slaves, and in practice only the Quakers cared about abolition. This lack of interest was both because the plain text of the Constitution guaranteed the right to chattel slavery, and because, as Mayer notes, "For most Americans, however, a fatalism had set in that regarded slavery as an immutable feature of the landscape, an unlooked-for evil that had been fastened

upon them by generations long past and whose resolution had to be left to enlightened generations not yet born.”

Lundy’s purpose, therefore, was to force Americans to face up to the reality of slavery, leading them to take action rather than ignoring its evil, and Garrison immediately became a convert to the cause, never looking back. He began by editing the *Genius*, in 1829, joining Lundy in full-time anti-slavery activism through speeches and organizing as well. There was little interest among Boston’s educated classes. On the other hand, there was initially little opposition, since this was a new thing. Mostly, there was indifference—people recognized that slavery was bad, but they preferred not to talk about it, holding fast to the fatalism that Mayer identifies. To the extent that there was any organized focus on addressing slavery, it was through the American Colonization Society, which wanted to ship American blacks back to Africa (to modern-day Liberia, mostly). The ACS wanted to ship all black people back to Africa, free and slave, and was even supported by some slaveholders who thought getting rid of free blacks would help preserve the system of slavery. Garrison quickly rejected the ACS’s views, which were irredeemably racist, and demanded immediate, unconditional emancipation, a creed that became known as “immediatism.”

Immediatism was quickly identified by those in power in the North and in the South as a threat to their interests. So, already in 1830, Garrison was prosecuted for criminal libel in Baltimore, for allegedly defaming a Massachusetts ship captain by printing details of his shipments of slaves. This was part of a burgeoning legal campaign to suppress anti-slavery speech in the South, coupled with informal actions to suppress such speech in the North. In the South this was driven by an increasing fear of slave revolts, pumped up by a newfound sense of radicalism among slaves, such as that put into print by David Walker’s *Appeal*, and fed (in the following year) by Nat Turner’s rebellion. In the North it was driven by “commercial interests” afraid of disrupting trade. Garrison was sentenced to six months in jail, of which he served nearly two months, in comfortable conditions, before an anti-slavery New York philanthropist, Lewis Tappan, paid the considerable fine—and offered more money to support the *Genius*.

It doesn’t take much to realize that these suppression techniques haven’t changed in modern times, and are used today against Garrison’s

moral successors. Witness, for example, the indictment of pro-life activists such as David Daleiden for activities that would be celebrated as “whistleblowing” if done in the service of leftist causes. The Left today, and for the past fifty years, has controlled the courts (and today controls, in many states, such as California, the entire justice system) with respect to social issues, just as the moral equivalents of today’s leftist judges controlled the courts in the antebellum South. Such control allows suppression of dissenting viewpoints by harnessing the might of the State, and has no good response short of violence. On the other hand, I suppose we should be grateful that we did not see, at least not yet, the huge expansion of such abuses that would inevitably have characterized a Hillary Clinton administration.

Conservatives, though, should not congratulate themselves overmuch on their apparent heroic parallels to Garrison. Yes, pro-life activists are morally indistinguishable from Garrison, and equally deserving of our praise. But other bitterly contested conservative stands today, such as against same-sex “marriage,” are less clearly analogous, though also driven by religious beliefs. The abolition of slavery was something in which Christian and Enlightenment beliefs were aligned, even if non-Christian and Deist Enlightenment figures like Thomas Jefferson only paid lip service to ending slavery. And to the extent that the abolition of slavery is tied to the emancipatory drive that is part of the philosophy of the Enlightenment much more than of Christianity, and which is nearing its logical atomized conclusion today, it fits better with the program of the Left. Thus, an honest historical observer would place Garrison mostly on the Left of his day, not on the Right (the traditional Right, at least), although that’s analogy, not typology. His religiosity masks this point, given that the Left has abandoned any form of real religiosity (though today’s Right is well on its way to doing so as well). Really, I think, given changed circumstances, other than pro-life advocates, nobody today can correctly claim Garrison as a moral predecessor.

That aside, and back to history, Lundy had moved on to other forms of activism by the time Garrison got out of jail, so Garrison went around speaking and trying to raise money for a new newspaper. By this time, people in the North were mostly hostile, or at least the ruling classes were. The doors of lecture halls and churches were shut to him, so he ended up speaking in barns and warehouses. He was

viewed as a dangerous, fanatic agitator by the established churches and by the merchants who dominated Northern society, who were afraid of Garrison's rocking the boat of commerce with the South. They correctly viewed him as a man who cared nothing for their pocketbooks, or his own pocketbook, and, more philosophically, who thought that if the Constitution guaranteed the right to slavery, that was a failing in the Constitution which must give way to the moral absolutes Garrison championed. Thus, the rich and powerful saw him as a danger to the Union and as a man with a crazy glint in his eye. Still, getting support from black leaders in Boston and Philadelphia, some of whom were wealthy merchants themselves, Garrison managed, in January, 1831, to put out the first issue of *The Liberator*—which he would publish for thirty-five years, until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. Few newspapers have been as influential.

*The Liberator* was meant to persuade. Unlike today's media, which pretend neutrality while aggressively advancing a political agenda, nineteenth-century newspapers had an editorial slant which directed the content of the paper. And while for decades Garrison sometimes emphasized one set of issues and other times another, or adopted varying positions on pacifism or social changes other than slavery, he never wavered in his core demand, based explicitly on his Christian principles—immediate emancipation for all African Americans, and their equal treatment both in society and at law. But his newspaper was only one part of his strategy and his work—the other part was organized activism, conducted through the new American Anti-Slavery Society, replacing the old ACS, which Garrison and his allies effectively destroyed as a lukewarm, worthless tool in the existential fight against slavery. The new AAS cried that “Slaveholding is a heinous crime in the sight of God” and demanded its “immediate abandonment without expatriation.” They destroyed the ACS by gradually eroding its support, including through the publication of a book-length polemic by Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization* (they were not favorable thoughts), until, abandoned in a middle ground nobody wanted to occupy, it became totally irrelevant except as a slaveholder's front (although it only was officially dissolved in 1964).

As is well known, even through the Civil War and for that matter beyond, most white people opposed to slavery thought that black people

were inferior, but Garrison from the very beginning maintained without flinching the unpopular and socially isolating view that a black man was every bit the equal of a white man, in all ways and without distinction. In this and all his views, Garrison never trimmed his sails. For him, the truth was what the truth was, and his job was not to find a political compromise, but to bring others to the truth. Therefore, Garrison was, almost always, opposed to political action. Not only did *The Liberator* rarely cover politics, Garrison and most of his allies in the AAS refused to vote at all, instead pressing “moral suasion” (although this issue caused a variety of splits in later years, with some third parties being formed and failing miserably).

Garrison grew to be violently opposed to the Constitution, at one point publicly burning a copy. He was not philosophically opposed to the Constitution in the abstract, but rather followed the logical path that if, as was generally agreed, the text of the Constitution protected slavery, and slavery must be destroyed, the Constitution, if it could not be amended (which it could not be, in practice), would have to go. And, again logically, the only mechanism for that would be “disunion”—the formation of two new countries. This was the position Garrison espoused prior to the Civil War: “Abolition or Disunion.” (By the same token, retail political action was pointless, since it was never going to lead to either.) This was a radical position, but of course, Garrison was right, perhaps a lesson for us in these days of fraying ties and massively incompatible and increasingly divergent positions among different groups of Americans.

Mayer covers all this, and the subsequent thirty years, in great but interesting detail. He discusses Garrison’s trips to, and alliances with, British abolitionists, who (again led exclusively by vigorous Christians) had managed to obtain abolition in Britain and its West Indian colonies, through Parliamentary action. He met with the aged William Wilberforce and the main English abolitionists, including George Thompson. Garrison noted that in England black people did not have the social debilities they had in America, reinforcing Garrison’s vigorous distaste for the near universal view of Americans to the contrary. Mayer covers the mob violence repeatedly directed at Garrison, in Boston and Philadelphia. Along the way Garrison got married and had several children—despite his well-deserved reputation as a firebrand,

in person Garrison was mild, humorous and fun to be around, and even his speeches were fiery more in content than in delivery, although they always had a glowing iron core. He worked with scores of other influential anti-slavery activists, white and black, including Frederick Douglass (with whom he ultimately came into some conflict) and Harriet Tubman. Ultimately, Mayer covers the gradual dominance of abolitionist sentiment in the North, the hardening of Southern defense of slavery, the run-up to the Civil War, including Bleeding Kansas, the Fugitive Slave Law, *Dred Scott*, the disintegration of the Whigs, the elections of 1856 and 1860, and the Civil War itself, all viewed through the lens of Garrison's life.

*All on Fire* concludes with the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth Amendment (and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth), and Garrison's subsequent closure of *The Liberator*, its purpose accomplished. Mayer also covers the old abolitionist's remaining years, in which he was often viewed as suspect by his old allies because he regarded *The Liberator's*, and the AAS's, goal accomplished, and did not view new "political" matters relating to Reconstruction, though very important, as having the same moral gravity as abolition itself (true enough, though also a failure to anticipate that abolition would be far from enough to accomplish complete emancipation for African Americans). He died in 1877, full of years and with a happy family, a man who set his mind to a God-given task and accomplished the charge he had been given.

While all this is important history, we can see that some of the challenges Garrison faced are still faced today by those who engage in moral crusades, all of which are conservative in content (every single modern Left crusade, except, perhaps, certain ones related to African Americans, is mere cannibalistic identity politics or insanity lacking any actual moral content). Most notably, we can see that it is still an uphill battle to challenge the interests of the powerful. In Garrison's time, the powerful were concentrated in the upper classes, in business and in the mainline churches. Today more power is located in a variety of other groups who are able to decide what is "news"; or who can direct opprobrium onto disfavored groups through social media and its censorship; or who, as I mention above, control the courts; or who are professional agitators, such as that extremist hate group, the so-called Southern Poverty Law Center. Most powerful of all is when

these combine with big corporations, either because their leaders want to virtue signal or because their leaders perceive it as in their economic interest to cooperate, to gain business or to avoid attacks that may lead to lost sales.

Thus, for example, pressure groups demanding acceptance and celebration of homosexual “marriage” have been very successful at vicious campaigns to restrict religious freedom, such as the notorious and successful effort to force Mike Pence’s Indiana to repeal a “religious freedom restoration act,” a RFRA, identical to the federal law that has been in effect for decades. Commercial leaders such as those who opposed Garrison were instrumental in that success, viewing anyone who held Christian beliefs as distasteful, and being deathly afraid of their acquaintances in Left-dominated areas looking down their noses at them. At the time of Pence’s disgraceful knuckling under to such pressure, I was on the board of directors of a small publicly traded bank, and the spineless sniveling of the other board members was really a sight to behold. They (none of whom would describe themselves as Left) crawled all over each other to complain about RFRA and to spend money advertising the bank’s implicit repudiation of it, even though certainly very few of the customers cared what the bank thought, and those that did care most definitely heavily favored RFRA. No matter—virtue signaling was the order of the day, and the same men (with one token woman) would have turned up their noses at William Garrison in just the same way.

On the other hand, some things do change, and the forces of evil are very good at learning their lessons. If there were an equivalent of *The Liberator* today that, for example, was successfully turning people against our current radical pro-abortion regime, it would be suppressed effectively and would not be able to have the impact that Garrison did. Some of that would be direct censorship by government action, such as SWAT raids on the businesses and houses of its publishers and writers (as has been done repeatedly to conservatives in recent years, though not yet of media types), coupled with seizure of assets to prevent further publishing, along with indictments for bogus crimes. This would be coupled with private strike lawsuits organized by deep-pocketed leftists in cooperation with the leftists who utterly dominate large law firms and donate, every year, tens or hundreds of millions of dollars in free



legal services to advance leftist causes, while refusing even paid services for conservatives. At the same time, Facebook, Google, and Twitter would suppress the reach of today's *Liberator*, ensuring it disappeared from newsfeeds as "hate speech" or "fake news," formally banning or shadowbanning anybody sharing its articles, forbidding monetization of its content, and suppressing its appearance in search results. (Today Twitter, for example, announced a new, automatic, algorithm to do just this—although its use was not specified, nobody is fooled, least of all those who run Twitter.) Along the way, crowdfunding platforms would make sure their use was denied to anyone defending himself or others against these attacks.

Some taste of this can be gained from Facebook's and Google's attempts to ensure a pro-abortion result in the upcoming Irish referendum on modifying the Irish constitution. Google, for example, has banned advertising on the topic, and Facebook has banned advertising from outside the country. You can be sure that if advertising was perceived as beneficial to the pro-abortion side, it would be made easy, reduced in price, and heavily promoted. But since the Irish political and media establishment is moving in lockstep to legalize baby murder in one of the last European countries where babies in the womb are protected, and have themselves taken the lead in suppressing contrary voices inside Ireland, Google and Facebook have joined in to prevent external voices from being heard. Thus, today's conservatives should not take from Garrison the simplistic lesson that merely by adhering to the principle "reform is commotion," that they can take the same path, since in the modern world their commotion will be punished and suppressed, and never be heard. This is, of course, one of the prime challenges facing conservatives today, both in their moral crusades in which they are Garrison's successors, and in their moral crusades that are less emancipatory in nature. "Moral suasion" is, sadly, unlikely to be enough, so in the end, more stringent methods will be necessary.