A Revolutionary Gathering: The World’s Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840

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Thomas Clarkson, at eighty years of age and having devoted most of his life to fighting against slavery, dreamt one night that a voice commanded him: “You have not done all your work. There is America.” Clarkson said it was so clear that he was inspired to write a pamphlet, *A Letter to the Clergy of Various Denominations, and to the Slave-Holding Planters, in the Southern Parts of the United States of America*, and he hoped that it would not leave “the Americans a leg to stand on.” Even though the pamphlet had no major effect on American slavery, Clarkson’s inspiration to write it demonstrates the concern British abolitionists had regarding slavery in the United States.¹

Clarkson had this inspirational dream following the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840, which was planned for the purpose of strengthening the fight against slavery, and, more saliently, to combine forces of Anglo-American abolitionism. “I know nothing more fitted to preserve peace between the two continents, than the union of religious and disinterested men on both sides of the ocean in the cause of humanity,” wrote James Birney on April 14, 1840, to

William E. Channing. Birney was looking towards the convention planned for the following June in London, and hoped the meeting would solidify the Anglo-American abolitionist relationship that had been developing since William Lloyd Garrison crossed the Atlantic seven years earlier. As Channing responded, “I doubt not that you and the other delegates will be refreshed and strengthened in spirit by meeting a host of brethren, of the slave’s friends.”

Delegates attending the conference from June 12th to the 23rd, hoped it would provide constructive plans for abolishing slavery. As Daniel O’Connell declared the first day, “this Convention is more important than any which has yet assembled on the face of the globe.” O’Connell continued that the convention was the result of “higher and more ennobling motives – from a desire to serve the cause of humanity.”

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3 Garrison, a staunch American abolitionist, had traveled to England in 1833 in order to meet with British abolitionists Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce. Garrison hoped to raise funds for an African American college; however, he also wanted to establish a relationship with British abolitionists. It was believed that by establishing such a relationship American abolitionists would learn how the British abolitionists had aroused public support for emancipation, how their anti-slavery organizations were conducted, and any other instructions pertinent to America’s fight against slavery. This information was obtained from Garrison, Wendell Phillips and Francis Jackson, William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life Told By His Children (New York: Century Co., 1885), 1:337, 344-346.

4 Channing, Letters of Birney, 1: 553.

propose methods for abolishing slavery worldwide. Men and women traveled from America, France, the Caribbean, Latin America, and other countries to attend. It was the first convention of its type, and the delegates were fully aware of the momentous occasion. Benjamin Robert Haydon, an English painter who specialized in historical paintings, was commissioned to make an official painting of the convention that now hangs at the National Portrait Gallery in London.

At the time of the convention it was estimated that 6,240,000 slaves were in the United States and Texas, Brazil, and the Spanish, French, Dutch, Danish, and Swedish colonies. This figure excluded slaves in some of the British settlements as well as those in France, Holland, Portugal, and parts of Asia and Africa whose inclusion would have increased the estimate by several million more. Resolutions proposed during the conference not only attacked slavery morally, but also dealt with how to confront it politically and how to overcome the economic dependence of slavery. The convention discussed slavery globally, and in particular, focused on the American internal slave trade, constitutional problems within the United States, the question of Texas, fugitive slaves, the inadequacy of colonization, and the relationship between churches and slavery. The convention also represented, as historian Howard Temperley argues, “a drawing together of antislavery talent unique in the history of the movement.” In addition, the convention brought British and American abolitionists together, set the tone for the transatlantic abolitionist relationship in the

due to the success he had in achieving Catholic Emancipation. He met Frederick Douglas and became not only a friend, but a source of inspiration for Douglas. William Grenville stated that history would call him “one of the most remarkable men that ever lived.”

6 Proceedings, iii.
7 Howard Temperley, British Antislavery, 1833-1870 (University of South Carolina Press, 1972), 92.
following years, and clearly stated proposed measures for fighting American slavery.

**Preparations for the Convention**

The idea to hold such a convention originated with Joshua Leavitt, the editor of the New York *Emancipator*. In the March 21, 1839 edition, he suggested that in order to concentrate their energies, a “general anti-slavery conference” should be held in London with delegates from “the United States, France, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Jamaica, Haiti, Columbia, Mexico.”8 He wrote that the conference would serve as a means of uniting the trans-Atlantic abolitionist movement. British abolitionists agreed and Joseph Sturge, an English Quaker and abolitionist, began organizing the convention. Having previously traveled to West Indies on a fact-finding mission, Sturge realized the need for a new, trans-continental anti-slavery organization.9 Hence, Sturge founded the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) in April, 1839. The BFASS would prove to be “the most enduring of all antislavery organizations…[and] became the clearing house for information about slavery and antislavery throughout the world.”10 One of the first resolutions of this new group was “[t]o open a correspondence with the abolitionists in America, France, and other countries.”11 Such a transatlantic abolitionist network would establish a

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8 Ibid., 85.
11 *Proceedings*, 19. In the case of America, this was the first time it was written down, but such a correspondence was already in existence with American abolitionists. See Betty Fladeland’s *Men and Brothers*:
means of supporting American abolitionists, and moreover, British abolitionists would come to better understand the complexities of fighting slavery in the United States.

The BFASS sent invitations to all “friends of every nation and of every clime” for the purpose of determining how “to hasten the utter extinction of the slave trade,” and the best ways of abolishing slavery.\footnote{Proceedings, 8.} The BFASS also sent queries to all countries planning to send delegates, requesting information that could be used for discussion during the convention.\footnote{Fladeland, \textit{Men and Brothers}, 261.} The meeting attracted nearly 500 abolitionists and about 5,000 visitors.\footnote{Maurice Bric, “Debating Slavery and Empire: The United States, Britain and the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840,” in \textit{A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century}, eds. William Mulligan and Maurice Bric (New York, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 61.} Approximately forty of the delegates were from the United States, a handful from France, and the rest were from the United Kingdom and its colonies – the British West Indies were especially well represented. Even African American abolitionists were present.\footnote{R. J. M. Blackett, \textit{Building An Antislavery Wall: Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830-1860} (Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 43. Blackett also argues that African American abolitionists, following the splits in the ranks after 1840, became “the crucial unifying factor among British abolitionists.” (42) Especially interesting to note is that Remond decided, like Garrison and others, to sit with the female delegates and not participate in the convention as a delegate. His association with Garrison would affect his efforts. As Blackett argues, though he was “warmly received,” his efforts “could have done much more for the antislavery cause had he not associated with himself so closely with Garrison.”} The British abolitionists expected a great many American abolitionists to attend, although some could not make the trip. Lewis
Tappan, for example, was deeply involved in the *Amistad* case. Still, a respectable number of well-known American abolitionists from New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New England were in attendance.

A problem arose when Pennsylvania and Massachusetts selected female delegates to attend the London convention. This issue – whether female representatives should participate in the movement – had torn apart American abolitionism. The division first appeared in 1839 when, during the American Anti-Slavery Society’s (AASS) annual meeting, some members wanted to “elect female officers.” Lewis Tappan stated that the election of four women to an executive committee went against “the constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society,” was a “firebrand” in the antislavery movement, was “contrary to the usages of civilized society,” and destroyed “the efficiency of female action in behalf of the cause.” As a result, Lewis Tappan established the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (AFASS) in April 1840 to focus only on the abolition of slavery instead of promoting “civil and political rights for women.” This divided the abolitionists in the United States into two camps – Garrisonian abolitionists and Tappanite abolitionists. This split would also divide British abolitionists, who were introduced to the significantly divisive issues during the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840. However,

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16 Fladeland, *Men and Brothers*, 262.
18 Ibid., 456.
21 The term “Tappanite abolitionists,” is not a term previously used to describe the abolitionists that belonged to, and supported, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. However, since this group of abolitionists were led by Lewis and Arthur Tappan, it is an appropriate title.
the division did not significantly hamper the proceedings of the convention, nor did it greatly affect the relationship among American and British abolitionists. The BFASS would support the Tappanite abolitionists, while Garrisonians abolitionists would form alliances with other European groups, such as the Glasgow Emancipation Society.\(^22\)

The Tappanite abolitionists informed the organizers in London of concerns regarding female delegates’ participation at the convention. Sturge, fearing this controversy could disrupt the proceedings, declared that female delegates should be excluded.\(^23\) Therefore, the arrival of American female abolitionists would cause problems. Once the chairman of the convention, Thomas Clarkson – one of the greatest British abolitionists – retired from the proceedings due to his frail condition, Wendell Phillips from Boston made a motion.\(^24\) Phillips


\(^23\) *Proceedings*, 12. Due to Thomas Clarkson’s age (he was eighty years old) and health, it was decided that Vice-Chairmen should be appointed to relieve the president. Since it was expected to be a laborious task, four men were appointed to this position. They were William Thomas Blair, Esq. of Bath, James Gillespie Birney, Esq. of New York, Joseph Sturge, Esq. of Birmingham, and Robert Kaye Greville, Esq. LL.D., of Edinburgh. (*Proceedings*, p. 4)

\(^24\) *Proceedings*, 12.
wanted a list of the attending members composed because the women delegates had been refused tickets of admittance. He argued that after making the sacrifice of traveling to London, the women could not be justly refused “a place in its deliberations.” In response, one delegate – Professor Adam from Cambridge – argued that if the women’s credentials did not allow them a place in the convention, then the other delegates also were not “entitled to occupy such a position.” Mr. Stacey stated that it was not the intention to show disrespect to the female delegates, but that British customs prevented females from being a part of any “matters of mere business.” He further argued that women had not been included in the invitation to the convention and that the organizers had never even considered including female delegates. 25

The situation threatened to disrupt the convention. One attendee, Mr. W. Allen, regretted that an attempt to exclude women had been made. He added that it was a shame that the convention should be distracted by considerations that were not central to its purpose. 26 In the end, female delegates were not allowed to serve as delegates and had to “observe the proceedings from the visitor’s gallery.” 27 When Garrison arrived and realized the female abolitionists were not recognized as official delegates, he chose to sit in the gallery with them, refusing to participate in the convention. 28

Resolutions Passed at the Convention

25 Ibid., 24-25.
26 Ibid., 32.
28 Ibid. Garrison and others had elected to delay departure for London in order to attend the May meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society. They felt it was more important to attend this meeting – in fact; it was this meeting where the Garrison wing won control of the group. (Maynard, 458).
On the second day of the convention following the reading of a paper titled, “On the Essential Sinfulness of Slavery and its Direct Opposition to the Percepts and Spirit of Christianity,” the delegates debated on a controversial resolution. From the Christians’ viewpoint, the very existence of slavery was sinful and there was only one way to deal with it. Christians should work to “exterminate it altogether.”

Several delegates voiced concern declaring that they had no right to tell individual churches what to do or how to govern themselves, especially since several denominations and other religious groups were represented at the gathering. In the words of Rev. John Young, “[w]e are a Convention from various denominations” and therefore he dissented “from the principle that this Convention should take any part in matters of church discipline.” In response, several delegates spoke out in favor of the resolutions. For example, Reverend Henry Taylor from Woodbridge, Suffolk, believed that the resolution was only a suggestion that churches refuse to allow slave-owners to become church members; it was not a demand.

After much debate back and forth, the resolution stated

this [c]onvention, while it disclaims the intention or desire of dictating to [C]hristian communities, the terms of their fellowship, respectfully submits that it is their incumbent duty to separate from their communion, all those persons who, after they have been faithfully warned in the spirit of the gospel,

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29 Proceedings, 47, 55.
30 Ibid., 56-57.
continue in the sin of enslaving their fellow-creatures, or holding them in slavery.\textsuperscript{31}

The convention, therefore, recognized they did not have the right to tell churches what to do, but they did encourage religious communities to ban slave-owners. Copies of the resolution, the delegates voted, should be sent to all the “ecclesiastical authorities” of every Christian church worldwide.\textsuperscript{32}

Another resolution passed at the convention concerned the publication of British anti-slavery literature in America and other slave holding nations in order to educate the world of the “successful results of the West India emancipation.”\textsuperscript{33} As O’Connell stated, “when emancipation was granted, massacre, there was none; outrage, there was none; violation of property, there was none; no mischief, no evil, no injury to a human being; peace, quiet, contentment, religious feeling, morality, were the consequences of that great measure.”\textsuperscript{34} Delegates believed the British literature had a significant influence on the American public, and therefore should be published in the United States. The resolution also proposed publishing papers and other material from the convention. For example, one of the papers presented at the convention, “Replies to the Queries of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, on Slavery in the United States,” was sent to a committee to prepare it for publication. Finally, the resolution

\textsuperscript{31} Minutes of the Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention (London, 1840), 9.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{34} Proceedings, 381,11
proposed informing Americans “of the deep indignation” felt by the “civilized world” in regards to slave holding nations.\footnote{Ibid., 6.}