

Garrison

GARRISON, WILLIAM LLOYD (Dec. 10, 1805–May 24, 1879), reformer, was born in Newburyport, Mass., the fourth child of Abijah and Frances Maria (Lloyd) Garrison, who had emigrated to the United States from Nova Scotia early in the nineteenth century. His father, a sea-captain, was intemperate in his habits and deserted his family before William was three years old. Placed under the care of Deacon Ezekiel Bartlett, the boy had a meager schooling, and in 1818 was apprenticed for seven years to Ephraim W. Allen, editor of the Newburyport *Herald*, in the office of which he developed into an expert compositor and wrote anonymously for the paper. When his apprenticeship was completed, he became on Mar. 22, 1826, editor of the local *Free Press*, in which he printed the

earliest poems of John Greenleaf Whittier, who was to be his lifelong friend. After the *Free Press* failed, Garrison sought employment in Boston as a journeyman printer, and in the spring of 1828, joined Nathaniel H. White in editing the *National Philanthropist*, devoted to the suppression "of intemperance and its kindred vices." It bore witness to his reforming propensities by attacking lotteries, Sabbath-breaking, and war. At this period he met Benjamin Lundy [q.v.], a Quaker, whose influence turned his attention to the evils of negro slavery. Soon Garrison went to Bennington, Vt., to conduct the *Journal of the Times*, an Anti-Jackson organ. He returned in March 1829 to Boston, where, on Independence Day, in the Park Street Church, he delivered the first of his innumerable public addresses against slavery. Later in the summer he was in Baltimore, cooperating with Lundy in editing the weekly *Genius of Universal Emancipation*.

Although Garrison was far from being the first American Abolitionist, he was one of the earliest to demand the "immediate and complete emancipation" of slaves; and it was to this movement that his energies, for the next thirty years, were to be principally devoted. In the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* he wrote more and more vehemently, until, having accused Francis Todd of engaging in the domestic slave-trade, he was sued for libel and found guilty. Unable to pay his fine, he was imprisoned for seven weeks in the Baltimore jail, being released on June 5, 1830, through the intervention of the philanthropist, Arthur Tappan. During the ensuing autumn he lectured in eastern cities, and finally, after issuing a prospectus, founded his famous periodical, the *Liberator*, "in a small chamber, friendless and unseen." He and his partner, Isaac Knapp, virtually without resources, printed the paper on a hand-press from borrowed type, and it appeared every Friday. The motto heading the first number, dated Jan. 1, 1831, was "Our country is the world—Our countrymen are mankind," and its leading article was a manifesto ending, "I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and I will be heard." The subscription price was only two dollars a year, but the circulation was never over 3,000, and there was usually an annual deficit.

Garrison was a philosophical non-resistant, trusting in peaceful means to attain his ends, but his pacifism was of a militant type. Unwilling to resort to the ballot, he voted but once in his lifetime, and he relied on the power of moral principles for the conversion of his opponents. He had no practical method for abolishing slav-

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ery, but confined himself to denouncing it as an institution. In his condemnation of slave-owners, he was irrepressible, uncompromising, and inflammatory, and even his supporter, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, did not try to defend him against the charge of "excessive harshness of language." In its early numbers the paper had a plain title; beginning with the seventeenth issue, however, it bore a rude cut of a slave auction near the national capitol, which goaded Southerners into a fury, and they threatened Garrison with bodily harm. But nothing could daunt him. Even when the state of Georgia set a reward of \$5,000 for his arrest and conviction, he was imperturbable, and, without making any distinctions or admitting any explanations, continued to pour out a torrent of invective against all those who had anything to do with slavery.

The need for effective organization was met in 1831 by the formation of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, the constitution for which was drafted in part by Garrison. He was elected corresponding secretary and in 1832 became a salaried agent for spreading its doctrines. His *Thoughts on African Colonization* (1832) was a small but forceful pamphlet, undermining the work of the American Colonization Society, the plans for which he had formerly approved. In early May 1833 Garrison sailed for England to solicit funds for a manual-labor school for colored youth. He made many friends, including Daniel O'Connell and George Thompson. After an absence of nearly five months he landed in New York in season to attend unofficially a gathering called for organizing an anti-slavery society in that city. On Dec. 4, 1833, in Philadelphia, he met with fifty or more delegates to form the American Anti-Slavery Society. Its declaration of principles, phrased largely by Garrison, announced that its members, rejecting "the use of all carnal weapons for deliverance from bondage," relied for the destruction of error only upon "the potency of truth." Although Garrison was elected foreign secretary, he soon resigned and would accept no other important office in the society.

In 1835 the English Abolitionist, George Thompson, came to the United States on a lecture tour and was met in many places with enmity. On Oct. 21, the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society held a meeting, at which a mob of several thousand persons assembled, expecting to tar-and-feather Thompson. The latter, however, had been warned, and the crowd, searching for a victim, seized Garrison, dragged him with a rope around his neck through the streets, and might have used him more roughly

But for the courageous intervention
of Mayor Theodore Lyman, Garrison
spent the night in the jail and in the morning with-
drew from the city for several weeks. Mean-
while the opposition to slavery was growing.

Efficient though he was as a propagandist, Garrison had a talent for antagonizing even his supporters. He was a natural autocrat who demanded from his followers implicit belief in all his views. "You exalt yourself too much," wrote Elizur Wright, one of his most loyal friends. He could not endure moderation, and in his self-righteous manner he was often very irritating. His wayward mind was so receptive of radical ideas, and he advocated reforms with such promiscuity that he was accused by his enemies of picking up "every infidel fanaticism afloat." Because of his desire to link abolitionism with other reform movements, he lost some of his influence with sincere anti-slavery people. The appearance of Sarah and Angelina Grimke as speakers at their meetings was distasteful to the more conservative Abolitionists, who did not favor woman's rights. The indifference of many clergymen to the slavery issue soon brought Garrison into open conflict with orthodox churches, which he characterized vividly as "cages of unclean birds, Augean stables of pollution." He eventually denied the plenary inspiration of the Bible and was conspicuously unorthodox. In November 1840 he attended a meeting of the "Friends of Universal Reform," described by Emerson as distinguished by "a great deal of confusion, eccentricity, and freak." He denounced theatres as "deep and powerful sources of evil," and he came out vigorously against the use of tobacco, capital punishment, and imprisonment for debt.

A decisive schism in the anti-slavery ranks developed over Garrison's opposition to concerted political action. The movement for the formation of a third party took shape ultimately in what was known as the "New Organization," and conflicting groups came to be known as the "Old Ogs," of which Garrison was still the leader, and the "New Ogs" (E. E. Hale, *Memories of a Hundred Years*, II, 1903, 129). Although Garrison for some years postponed defection, he could not prevent the nomination in 1839 of James G. Birney for president by the Liberty party. At a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in May 1840 in New York, Garrison and his adherents, coming from Boston in a specially chartered boat, packed the gathering and won a temporary victory. At the World's Anti-Slavery Convention, held the following June, in London, he refused to participate in the

proceedings where he found
that women were
excluded.

At least as early as 1841, Garrison became a disunionist, and publicly called upon the North to secede from a compact which protected slavery. This appeal drew an emphatic protest from the American Anti-Slavery Society; but the Massachusetts organization, in January 1843, under pressure from Garrison, resolved that the United States Constitution was "a covenant with death and an agreement with hell" and "should be annulled." Later in the same year Garrison was elected president of the American Anti-Slavery Society, which passed by a large majority an expression of disunion sentiments prepared by him. Actually, however, he was losing ground. Times were changing, and the fight against slavery was being carried on by more practical men. Garrison naturally disapproved of the annexation of Texas and of the Mexican War. In the summer and autumn of 1846, he was in England for a third visit, addressing reform gatherings. In August 1847 with the negro, Frederick Douglass, he took a lecture tour beyond the Alleghanies, meeting with some rowdyism, but debating night after night against defenders of the Union. In twenty-six days he spoke more than forty times. He was often exposed to wretched weather, and his health, never very good, was seriously impaired.

The compromise measures of 1850 were to Garrison a "hollow bargain for the North" (Swift, *post.*, p. 276), and he condemned Webster's Seventh of March Speech as "indescribably base and wicked," "infamous," and "dishonorable." One consequence of Webster's utterance was a strong reaction against Garrison and the anti-slavery disunionists. At the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society on May 7, 1850, a disorderly mob headed by Isaiah Rynders interrupted the proceedings, but the coolness of Garrison averted bloodshed. In the following year the Society could not obtain the use of any suitable hall in New York and was obliged to seek a haven in Syracuse. Unable to secure declarations against slavery from Father Mathew, the Irish temperance advocate, and from Kossuth, the Hungarian patriot, Garrison denounced them abusively.

On Independence Day in 1854, at Framingham, Mass., Garrison, at an abolitionist gathering, publicly burned the Constitution of the United States, crying, "So perish all compromises with tyranny!" He did not favor the formation of the Republican party, but continued to urge the peaceful separation of the states. As a non-resistant, he could not justify John Brown's

uprising. During the 5 years preceding the

Civil War, he suffered much from a bronchial affection and from financial troubles, which curtailed his activities considerably. When secession took place in 1860-61 Garrison welcomed the event as an opportunity for allowing the Southern states to reap the fruits of their folly, maintaining that any attempt to whip the South into subjection was "utterly chimerical." Toward Lincoln, Garrison was at first rather cold, and he criticized what he thought to be the President's uncertain policy; but he also prevented Abolition societies from openly condemning the administration. He soon recognized the significance of the Emancipation Proclamation of September 1862, and the meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in December 1863, at Philadelphia, produced a reconciliation between the two factions of Abolitionists.

After the conclusion of peace, in April 1865, Garrison went to Charleston, S. C., with the once execrated George Thompson for his stateroom companion. As the guest of the government he went to attend the ceremonies at the raising of the Stars and Stripes over Fort Sumter. In a brief address, he declared, "I hate slavery as I hate nothing else in this world. It is not only a crime, but the sum of all criminality." As he stood by the grave of Calhoun in the cemetery of St. Philip's Church, he laid a hand upon the tombstone and said solemnly, "Down into a deeper grave than this slavery has gone, and for it there is no resurrection."

In January 1865 Garrison had moved that the American Anti-Slavery Society dissolve, but his proposal was rejected. He did, however, decline a twenty-third term as its president, and was succeeded by Wendell Phillips. He felt that his great task had been accomplished; and, after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, he prepared a valedictory editorial for the *Liberator*, locked the form in type, and sent the final number to the press on Dec. 29, 1865. The paper had been published continuously for exactly thirty-five years.

Garrison had married, on Sept. 4, 1834, Helen Benson, daughter of a retired merchant of Brooklyn, Conn., and had settled in Roxbury, Mass., in a house called "Freedom's Cottage." Seven children were born to them, of whom two died in infancy. In December 1863 Mrs. Garrison, whose systematic management and tactful ways had brought order into her husband's chaotic affairs, was stricken with paralysis and lived for several years more as a helpless invalid. A few months later, Garrison moved to a more retired residence on Highland Street, in

Roxbury, where he found "poor ^{after} stormy seas."

Two painful accidents greatly hampered his physical activity, but he made in 1867 another voyage to England, where he was greeted as a hero. On his return, he became an intermittent contributor to the New York *Independent*. In 1868 a testimonial fund of more than \$30,000 was raised among his admirers and presented to him. Although his vitality was diminished, he never ceased to be a crusader, and he fought unceasingly for prohibition, woman's suffrage, justice to the red man, and the elimination of prostitution. It seemed to be his mission to act as "an antidote to American complacency." On Jan. 28, 1876, his wife died of pneumonia. In the next year, on his last visit to England, he was so enfeebled that he could appear only occasionally in public. On Oct. 13, 1878, in the office of the Newburyport *Herald*, he set type for three of his sonnets on the sixtieth anniversary of the beginning of his apprenticeship as a printer. A disease of the kidneys soon prostrated him, and he died in New York, at the home of his daughter, Helen Garrison Villard. He was buried in the Forest Hills Cemetery, in Boston. In appearance he was slightly under six feet in height and erect in bearing. His spectacles, which he began to wear before he was twenty, relieved the sharpness of his face and gave him a mild and benevolent expression. Lowell wrote of him,

"There's Garrison, his features very
Benign for an incendiary."

As a speaker, he was described by Higginson as "usually monotonous, sometimes fatiguing, but always controlling." In his household he was cheerful, patient, and hospitable, but he was inclined to procrastinate and was always unsystematic. His sense of humor was not well developed. Although he suffered from chronic illness, he could endure long hours of drudgery, and he was rarely in low spirits. He cared little for nature, but he always enjoyed sacred music and wrote no small amount of verse, moralistic in tone, but highly imaginative. His *Sonnets and other Poems* was published in 1843.

Garrison was an extremist, incurably optimistic, often illogical, and extraordinarily persistent. Seldom has individualism been more vehemently asserted than in his protests against social and moral orthodoxy. He was without perspective or a sense of proportion, and could be astonishingly credulous. He had implicit faith in pills and nostrums of all kinds, was keenly interested in phrenology, clairvoyance, and spiritualism, and was frequently deceived by charlatans. Opinion regarding him has differed widely. To some

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he has been the high-minded idealist who provided the chief impetus for the Abolition movement. By others he has been regarded as an impractical fanatic, who accomplished some good in a disagreeable way. His importance as a dominating figure in starting the campaign against slavery is conceded, but he inspired more than he led and the actual task of freeing the negro was carried through by better balanced leaders. He was a perplexing blend of contradictory qualities, of shrewdness and gullibility, of nobility and prejudice, who will be remembered chiefly for his courage in upholding a righteous cause when it was unpopular.

[The standard, although too extravagantly laudatory, life of Garrison, is *Wm. Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of his Life Told by his Children* (4 vols., 1885-89). The best short biography is Lindsay Swift's *Wm. Lloyd Garrison* (1914), in the *American Crisis Biographies*; John Jay Chapman's *Wm. Lloyd Garrison* (1913) is so strongly eulogistic as to be useless for those desiring to form a fair estimate of Garrison's character. A complete file of the *Liberator* may be found in the Boston Athenaeum. Among other books to be consulted are Henry Wilson, *Hist. of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America* (3 vols., 1872-77); Oliver Johnson, *Wm. Lloyd Garrison and his Times* (1880); John J. Currier, *Old Newspapers* (1896), pp. 681-86; O. G. Villard, *Some Newspapers and Newspaper-Men* (1923), pp. 302-15; Gilbert Seldes, *The Stammering Century* (1928), pp. 239-47; Thos. W. Higginson, *Contemporaries* (1899), pp. 244-56.]

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