

Chapter 8

Against the Odds – Two Self-Liberated Women in a Male Era

While the race is sold of all their rights – has not God given to all his creatures the same rights?. I knew Jesus. Then I learned that I was a human being.

—Sojourner Truth, Oct. 1856

I had crossed the line. I was free but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land; and my home, after all, was down in Maryland, because my father, my mother, my brothers, and sisters and friends were there. But I was free, and they should be free. I would make a home in the North and bring them there, God helping me.

—Harriet Tubman on her self-liberation,
related by Sarah H. Bradford 1869¹

1. Sarah Bradford (b. 1818) was an earlier biographer of Harriet Tubman. She relied on eyewitness accounts for her first book *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, NY, 1869) which was expanded into *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of her People* (Bedford, MA, 1886).

Women's Voices in Anti-Slavery

It is now widely recognised that, within much of the history of Christendom, women have been at best marginalised, and at worst abused and persecuted. They have also been excluded from full participation in the movements for social reform. The various societies on both side of the Atlantic that were formed in the nineteenth century to rid the world of the curse of slavery were no exception to this pattern.

William Wilberforce was resolute in his opposition to women taking any active part in the campaign to abolish British slavery, although some of his close associates such as Zachary Macaulay (1768-1838), the son of a Scottish minister, held a very different view. Even after British abolition, the London Congress meeting in 1840 to plan for abolition throughout the world allowed women delegates to attend, but decided that they could neither speak nor vote. Prominent American abolitionists such as Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady, sent by their societies, were forced to sit silently in the upper gallery where they were joined by the editor of *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison, and some other male delegates as a gesture of solidarity. The American Abolition Society had divided that same year on various issues, including the participation of women in its governance. All this makes it even more remarkable that several striking contributions to the struggle for freedom from slavery came from formerly enslaved women.

For years the first autobiographical account by a woman who had experienced the full weight of enslavement went unpublished. Harriet Jacobs learned to read and write in her early years in North Carolina before the state outlawed literacy for enslaved people in 1830. Resisting the sexual harassment of one of her 'owners', she hid in a swamp and then for seven years lived in a tiny space in her grandmother's house, constantly under threat of capture, until she was able to travel north. Harriet was persuaded by abolitionist friends to write *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* under the pseudonym Linda Brent. She made the first draft in 1852 the same year that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a best-seller, but an approach to Stowe for help was rebuffed. It took successful tours in England and America to finally secure a publisher in both countries in 1861-2. Most academic historians saw it as a fictional account, until research for a book in 1987 established conclusively that this was a genuine

autobiography.² Other formerly enslaved women were to make a substantial contribution to the liberation of others in different ways, two of whom were to have reformed roots in their spiritual journeys.

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883)– The Prophetic Voice

In the Ohio *Anti-Slavery Bugle* in June 1851 the following report occurred of the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio.

One of the most unique and interesting speeches was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or to convey any idea of the effect that it produced on the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her wholehearted earnest gestures, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. She came forward to the platform and addressing the President, said with great simplicity:

May I say a few words. I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights [Sic]. I have as much muscle as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that, I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if women have a pint and man a quart – why can't she have her little pint full.

You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, for we can't take more than our pint will hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion and don't know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's right, give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they won't be so much trouble. I can't read, but I can hear. I have heard the Bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again.

The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept and Lazarus

2. Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).

came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and women who bore him. Man where is your part? But the women are coming up, blessed be God, and a few men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.³

The speech was transcribed by a journalist and friend of the speaker, Revd Marius Robinson, who was in the audience at the time. Yet a myth that grew round a version published in 1863, which not only changed the speech, but ascribed the dialogue to a person brought up in the South, was far less polished, and ended with the rather submissive words ‘bleeged to ye for hearin’ on me, and now old Sojourner ha’nt s got nothing more to say’. Although that speech is often headed ‘Ar’nt or Ain’t I a woman’ and quoted extensively, most scholars today are agreed that the original is more authentic. In it the admission of illiteracy is found but also a sophisticated biblical and logical argument from a woman who by now had considerable experience of speaking at anti-slavery and feminist meetings.⁴

The speaker, Isabella Baumfree, was born into slavery in Ulster County, New York, in the last years of the eighteenth century on the estate of a Dutch family, the Hardenburghs. In 1808 she was sold to an Englishman, and in 1810 she was again sold locally to John J. Dumont. Dumont gave the early appearance of being a more humane owner, partly because he valued her loyalty and devoted behaviour. However it was likely that he sexually violated her, and he certainly whipped her. A tall strong woman, she worked all hours in the house and the field, was married to Thomas and bore five children.⁵

Slavery in New York State was abolished in 1828. Dupont had promised to free her in 1827 but refused on the grounds of her disability leaving her tasks unfulfilled. After a few more months she

3. *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* (Oct. 1856).

4. Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs, A Life* (Kansas: Basic Books, 2004). Yellin’s research in papers at the University of Rochester and the North Carolina Archives led to a new edition of the *Incidents* in 1987.

5. The reminiscences of these early years until she settled in Northampton, MA, in 1843 are found in *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* transcribed by Olive Gilbert and first published by the author in 1850 in Boston. The page references are from an unabridged edition by Dover Publications, Mineola, NY, 1997.

left his farm in the early morning, taking her infant daughter with her, and sought help with a sympathetic family, the Van Wagenens. Dumont demanded her return, but Isaac Van Wagenen declaring his opposition to slavery, offered \$25 to cover the remainder of Isabella's services for her and the child. Though still technically enslaved, she made landmark history as the first black woman in America to successfully sue through a County Court for the return of her son Peter who had been sold and resold illegally to Alabama.⁶

Isabella Baumfree went through a series of dramatic shifts in her understanding of the Christian faith. In her later memoirs she recalled how she believed that slavery was God's will, and that being obedient to the Dumonts was as important as being obedient to God, if not more so. When she began to renounce slavery and had liberated herself, she even returned to minister to the Dumonts in their old age. At an early age her mother, from whom she was separated and sold for \$100 when she was 9 years old, had instructed her to call on God at all times of trouble. Isabella remembered that she was taught to say the Lord's Prayer in Dutch, to value obedience, honesty and truth, the latter being crucial in later life.

Her perception of God in slavery changed considerably over the years. Her mother's idea of God as 'a great man', 'high in the sky' and unapproachable, even though the subject of prayer petitions, fitted the rationale of the system so much that she compared God to a slave-'owner'. However when she moved from enslavement to free servanthood with the Van Wagenens, she developed enough spirit to question God in her prayers, and even to bargain with the divine. This led, she said, to a feeling of disinterest and forgetfulness of God. At that point she had a vision of God's overwhelming judgement of her 'sinfulness' and she feared to approach God. A dramatic conversion then occurred. Isabella had heard people speak of Jesus, whom she thought was an eminent man akin to George Washington, but she had a burning conviction that she heard Jesus calling her and declaring his love for her. The fear of God as a 'consuming fire' disappeared, although there was enough of raw Calvinist doctrine imbibed from her contacts with the Dutch to convince her of her utter 'vileness'.⁷

In 1829 she moved to New York City to undertake domestic service as a free woman. Shortly before leaving Ulster County, Isabella had

6. *Narrative*, pp. 18-20, 23-28.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-40.

been received into the Methodist Church, but in the city she became disillusioned with them, and transferred to the Zion African Church, the founder church of what later would be the worldwide African Methodist Episcopal Zion denomination. She became fascinated and influenced by the varieties of new Pentecostal and ‘spirit filled’ religious expressions, that emerged from ‘The Great Awakening’ in America. When working as housekeeper to a Presbyterian business man turned evangelist and religious fanatic, she became embroiled with the leader of an ill-fated movement, Robert Matthias. Matthias was an immensely corrupt and violent man. He founded what now would be called a sect, in which he ruled the members with an iron fist in what he called his residential ‘Kingdom’. Possibly, as in her projected return to the Dumonts, Isabella sought in this community a place in a ‘family, for all that Matthias beat her, as he did the others who challenged him, and refused to allow her to preach, something that she had done in her previous church’. Even after 1835, when he served a prison sentence for violence and illegal activities, Isabella felt attached to him, and wanted to follow him as he went west.⁸

However she did leave New York with the conviction that she was called to evangelise, and took the name Sojourner Truth for the rest of her life. This was highly significant. For all she craved settled family and communities, she saw herself always as one who journeyed. She was a free spirit who believed that she was a temporary inhabitant of a world which, as many religious groups thought, would soon end by the coming of Jesus. She had become disillusioned with the city, which she compared to Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible. Her hatred of falsehood within the institution of slavery and her experience of the Matthias community meant that she valued unswerving devotion to truth, and yet her conviction that God was revealing divine purpose for her never plunged her into the trap of believing that all her actions were guaranteed to be righteous.

Another community to which she gravitated was the Northampton Association for Education and Industry in Massachusetts. This was founded by abolitionists and supported women’s rights and religious toleration. It was a residential agricultural and manufacturing community, and Sojourner worked as a supervisor in the laundry. Significantly here she met William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass. Her preaching went hand in hand now with her strong

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-56.

testimonies at anti-slavery meetings, and she found the beginnings of her passion for the rights of women. Truth also made a reputation for herself, not just by speaking, but in powerful rendering of hymns and songs. In the account of a camp meeting in 1844 where young hecklers spread themselves throughout the crowd, she admitted that she fled to a tent, fearing that as 'the only coloured person there' she would be attacked. Gathering courage, but failing to bring other leaders with her, she alone stood on a hill and sang a powerful hymn of the resurrection, which won them over until they urged her to preach, pray and sing.⁹

The Northampton Association went bankrupt and disbanded in 1846. The next year Truth went to work for George Bensen, a founder of the Association, and brother-in-law of Garrison. Four years later came the event for which she became best known, and where she combined anti-slavery with women's rights. In June 1851 she not only spoke at the Woman's Convention, but undertook an anti-slavery tour in company with William Lloyd Garrison and a visiting British Member of Parliament, George Thompson, a radical abolitionist. Truth described Thompson as 'genuine gentleman, the great hearted friend of my race'.¹⁰ Throughout the 1850s she became deeply committed to the two causes, and also to the role that her new life marked for her – an itinerant preacher. Her height and commanding voice in prose or song made her a popular and controversial figure.

When the Civil War broke out she unreservedly supported Lincoln, and was confident that the Union side would bring about abolition. In the meantime Truth had become involved with a spiritualist group, and from 1857 she moved to a new progressive Christian community in Harmony, Michigan. Alongside women's suffrage, her passion in later life was for the employment and resettlement of formerly enslaved people, first in a village in Virginia, and later in the newly acquired lands of Kansas. Between 1870 and 1871 she collected signatories for a petition to Congress in 1874. Although it failed to achieve the settlement grants requested, in the next decade the backlash in the

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-74 These are the last entries in *The Narrative*.

10. Nell Irvine Painter: *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol* (New York: Norton, 1996) pp. 258-87. Painter's book is based on research in University libraries in Princeton where she is a Professor Emeritus in History. She challenges many of the myths and stories about Sojourner Truth.