

“Voices of Freedom: Poets of the Abolitionist Movement” with Kim Roberts

Smithsonian Associates
Thursday, July 21, 2022

SARAH CLARKE LIPPINCOTT, aka **GRACE GREENWOOD** (September 23, 1823 - April 20, 1904)

The Leap from the Long Bridge

An incident at Washington

A woman once made her escape from the slave-prison, which stands midway between the Capitol and the President's house, and ran for the Long Bridge, crossing the Potomac to the extensive rounds and woodlands of Arlington Place.

No rest for the wretched. 'The long day is past,
And night on yon prison descendeth at last.
Now lock up and bolt.—Ha, jailer! Look here!
Who flies like a wild bird escaped from the snare?
 A woman,—a slave! Up! Out in pursuit,
 While linger some gleams of the day!
 Ho! Rally thy hunters, with halloo and shout,
 To chase down the game,—and away!

A bold race for freedom!—On, fugitive, on!
Heaven help but the right, and thy freedom is won.
How eager she drinks the free air of the plains!
Every limb, every nerve, every fibre, she strains;
 From Columbia's glorious Capitol
 Columbia's daughter flees
 To the sanctuary God hath given,
 The sheltering forest-trees.

Now she treads the Long Bridge,—joy lighteth her eye,—
Beyond her the dense wood and darkening sky;
Wild hopes thrill her breast as she neareth the shore,—
O despair!—there are men fast advancing before!
 Shame, shame on their manhood!—they hear, they heed,
 The cry her flight to stay,
 And, like demon forms, with their outstretched arms
 They wait to seize their prey!

She pauses, she turns,—ah! will she flee back?
Like wolves her pursuers howl loud on her track;
She lifteth to Heaven one look of despair,
Her anguish breaks forth in one hurried prayer.
 Hark, her jailer's yell!—like a bloodhound's bay
 On the low night-wind it sweeps!
 Now death, or the chain!—to the stream she turns,
 And she leaps, O God, she leaps!

The dark and the cold, yet merciful wave
Receives to its bosom the form of the slave.
She raises,—earth's scenes on her dim vision gleam,
But she struggleth not with the strong, rushing stream,
 And low are the death-cries her woman's heart gives
 As she floats adown the river;
 Faint and more faint grows her drowning voice,
 And her cries have ceased forever!

Now back, jailer, back to thy dungeons again,
To swing the red lash and rivet the chain!
The form thou wouldst fetter a valueless clod,
The soul thou wouldst barter returned to her God!
 She lifts in His light her unmanacled hands;
 She flees through the darkness no more;
 To freedom she leaped through drowning and death,
 And her sorrow and bondage are o'er.

JOHN PIERPONT (April 6, 1785 – August 27, 1866)

A Word from a Petitioner

What! our petitions spurned! The prayer
 Of thousands,—tens of thousands,—cast
Unheard, beneath your Speaker's chair!
 But ye will hear us, first or last.
The thousands that, last year, ye scorned,
Are millions now. Be warned! Be warned!

Turn not, contemptuous, on your heel;—
 It is not for an act of grace
That, suppliants, at your feet we kneel,—
 We stand;—we look you in the face,
And say,—and we have weighed the word,—
That our petitions SHALL be heard.

There are two powers above the laws
 Ye make or mar:—they're our allies.
Beneath their shield we'll urge our cause,
 Though all your hands against us rise.
We're proved them, and we know their might;
The CONSTITUTION and the RIGHT.

We say not, ye shall snap the links
 That bind you to your dreadful slaves;
Hug, if ye will, a corpse that stinks,
 And toil on with it to your graves!
But, that ye may go, coupled thus,
Ye never shall make slaves of us.

And what, but more than slaves, are they,
 Who're told they ne'er shall be denied
The right of prayer; yet, when they pray,
 Their prayers, unheard, are thrown aside?
Such mockery they will tamely bear,
Who're fit an iron chain to wear.

Nay, start not from your chairs, in dread
 Of cannon-shot, or bursting shell!

These shall not fall upon your head,
 As once upon your house they fell.
We have a weapon, firmer set,
And better than the bayonet;—

A weapon that comes down as still
 As snow-flakes fall upon the sod;
But executes a freeman's will
 As lightning does the will of God;
And from its force, nor doors nor locks
Can shield you;—'t is the ballot-box.

MARGARET LUCY SHANDS BAILEY (November 12, 1812 – 1888)

The Blind Slave Boy

Come back to me mother! why linger away
From thy poor little blind boy, the long weary day!
I mark every footstep, I list to each tone,
And wonder my mother should leave me alone!
There are voices of sorrow, and voices of glee,
But there's no one to joy or to sorrow with me;
For each hath of pleasure and trouble his share,
And none for the poor little blind boy will care.

My mother, come back to me! close to thy breast
Once more let thy poor little blind one be pressed;
Once more let me feel thy warm breath on my cheek,
And hear thee in accents of tenderness speak!
O mother! I've no one to love me—no heart
Can bear like thine own in my sorrows a part,
No hand is so gentle, no voice is so kind,
O! none like a mother can cherish the blind!

Poor blind one! No mother thy wailing can hear,
No mother can hasten to banish thy fear;
For the slave-owner drives her, o'er mountain and wild,
And for one paltry dollar hath sold thee, poor child!
Ah! who can in language of mortals reveal
The anguish that none but a mother can feel,
When man in his vile lust of mammon hath trod
On her child, who is stricken and smitten of God!

Blind, helpless, forsaken, with strangers alone,
She hears in her anguish his piteous moan;
As he eagerly listens—but listens in vain,
To catch the loved tones of his mother again!
The curse of the broken in spirit shall fall
On the wretch who hath mingled this wormwood and gall,
And his gain like a mildew shall blight and destroy
Who hath torn from his mother the little blind boy!

MARY ABIGAIL DODGE, aka **GAIL HAMILTON** (March 31, 1833 - August 17, 1896)

To Dr. Bailey, With a Pair of Gloves, Christmas

I fear it will seem an Hibernian stroke
 To mark the sincerest of loves
By begloving a man whose great glory it is
 That he handles all sin without gloves.
But remember, I pray, that the glove in old times
 Was a signal of mortal defiance—
And in these evil days if a man can be found
 On whom Christendom places reliance—
Who always stands ready to shiver a lance,
 For the love of the right, not renown,—
It is surely the least his admirers can do
 To provide him with gloves to throw down.

JOHN SELLA MARTIN (September 27, 1832 – August 12, 1876)

The Sentinel of Freedom

“Watchman what of the Night?”

The storm has begun, the thunders are pealing,
The lightnings of truth, like the stern, flashing eye
Of Justice, that sleeps now, of vengeance unfeeling
Are bursting from clouds in their conflict on high;
The winds of discussion like the ploughshares of terror
Sink deep ‘neath the surface of slavery’s dead sea;
And the monsters of crime on the billows of error,
Appear to the horrified gaze of the free.

The weepings of mercy in showers are failing
On slavery’s grim altars, to dampen their blaze.
The deep tones of progress like trumpets are calling
To red revolution, who fiercens his gaze;
The earthquakes of interest are shaking with fury
The groves and high places of tyranny’s power,
And molten free speech like lava will bury
Its temples and altars to rise never more.

Now stern agitation, all sleepless and busy,
Throws open the flood gates of feeling’s deep sea;
And the swift rushing torrents make nations grow dizzy,
As they leap over dams built to check their wild glee.
The merciless whirlwinds of God’s indignation
Are sweeping through earth disenthralled from their cave.
And reason all quenchless, in bright conflagration,
Is melting the chains from the limbs of the slave.

The champions of slavery in wild desperation,
Are cutting their flesh as the all potent charm,
And pouring their blood as the needed libation
This wrath to appease and their terrors to calm
The truth crushing genii of policy is waving,
His wand of corruption to silence the roar,
And the great fish of Mammon his Jonahs are saving
From watery destruction to die on the shore.

The altars of bondage are blazing with fire.
The slave in his chains is its grim sacrifice;

The tones of the priest rise higher and higher,
But his God now in conflict regards not his cries.
The merchant in fear brings his gift to the altar,
The statesman and jurist bring laws all in vain:
The demagogue's accents in doubt 'gins to falter
Though "Union" is sounded again and again.

But all is in vain, the heavens grow thicker
With portents of dread to oppression's weak soul,
And almighty truth flashes brighter and quicker,
While terrific reason in thunders still roll;
The earthquake is shattering their prisons to pieces
Amid the eruptions of volcanic speech
While whirlwinds and torrents in fury increases,
Though tyrants alternately curse and beseech.

And thus shall it be until freedom shall cover
With an ocean of light our nation so dark
Till justice and mercy united shall hover
O'er manhood untrammelled, in liberty's ark.
Then 'neath truth's great sun-light by conflict unfaded,
And earth renovated by fire and flood,
Shall man in his majesty stand undergraded,
The Lord of Creation, the image of God.

FANNY JACKSON COPPIN (October 15, 1837 – January 21, 1913)

The Black Volunteers

We welcome, we welcome, our brave volunteers,
Fling your caps to the breeze, boys, and give them three cheers;
They have proven their valor by many a scar,
But their god-like endurance has been nobler by far.
Think ye not that their brave hearts grew sick with delay
When the battle-cry summoned their neighbors away;
When their offers were spurned and their voices unheeded,
And grim Prejudice vaunted their aid was not needed.

Till some pious soul, full of loyal devotion,
To whom flesh and muscle were more than a notion,
Proposed, that in order to save their own blood,
As "drawers of water and hewers of wood"
They should use their black brothers;—but the blacks "couldn't see"
What great magnanimity prompted the plea;
And they scouted the offer as base and inglorious,
For they knew that, through God, they should yet be victorious.

But alas! for our country, her insolent horde
Has "melted like snow in the glance of the Lord"
Aye, the face of the nation grew ghastly and white,
When the angel of death crossed her sill in the night
And her first-born were slain—*then* she bowed her proud head,
While in sackcloth and ashes she mourned for her dead.
Let her weep for her martial pride, weep for her noblest;
The southern plains reek with the blood of her boldest

Yet her pride is not humbled by what she has borne,
'Tis necessity's goad that is urging her on
To enlist you, my brothers. 'Tis natural, we read,
To hate whom we've injured by word or by deed.
But God's ways are just: His decrees are immutable,
Though often to us they seem dark and inscrutable.
He meant not that slavery always should last
And over his people its dark shadow cast.

Now, Freedom stands holding with uplifted face,
Her hand, dipped in blood, on the brow of our race.
Attest it! my country, and never again

By this holy baptism, forget we are *men*,
Nor dare, when we've mingled our blood in your battles,
To sneer at our bravery and call us your "chattels."
Our ancestors fought on your first battle-plains,
And you paid them right nobly with insult and chains;

You pitied not even the sad and forlorn,
You pensioned their widows and orphans on scorn!
In your hour of bitterest trial and need
You have called us once more—to your voice we give heed
No longer your treacherous faith we'll discuss:
But *let God be the witness between you and us!*
We have stout hearts among us, as well do you know,
That ne'er quailed before danger or shrank from a foe.

They have come, at your bidding, in dangers to share,
And that which is grander, to do and to dare!
Then away to the battle-field, brave volunteers,
We'll not sadden your parting with womanish tears!
Fling out to the breezes your banner of Right,
And under its broad folds assemble your might.
Go Liberty, Honor, aye, all things most dear,
Are intrusted to you to defend and to clear

From the stain of oppression, whose poisonous breath
Is less welcome to us than the black wing of death!
Tho' millions assail ye, yet fear not their might;
They shall vanish like mist in the sun's ruddy light,
For God will go with you—His word has been spoken,
His gleaming blade never in battle was broken.
With Him as your leader, your cause will fail never,
Sic itur ad astra—your watchword forever!

HENRY McNEAL TURNER (February 1, 1834 – May 8, 1915)

One Year Ago Today

Dedicated to the Emancipated Slaves of the District of Columbia

Almighty God! we praise thy name
For having heard we pray;
For having freed us from our chains
One year ago today.

We thank thee for thy arm has stayed
Foul despotism's sway
And made Columbia's District free
One year ago today.

Give us the power to withstand
Oppression's baleful fray;
That right may triumph as it did
One year ago today.

Give liberty to millions yet
'Neath despotism's sway,
That they may praise thee as we did
One year ago today.

O! Guide us safely through this storm;
Bless Lincoln's gentle sway,
And then we'll ever praise thee, as
One year ago today.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS (February 1818? - February 20, 1895)

A Parody

“Come, saints and sinners, hear me tell
How pious priests whip Jack and Nell,
And women buy and children sell,
And preach all sinners down to hell,
And sing of heavenly union.

"They'll bleat and baa, dona like goats,
Gorge down black sheep, and strain at motes,
Array their backs in fine black coats,
Then seize their negroes by their throats,
And choke, for heavenly union.

"They'll church you if you sip a dram,
And damn you if you steal a lamb;
Yet rob old Tony, Doll, and Sam,
Of human rights, and bread and ham;
Kidnapper's heavenly union.

"They'll loudly talk of Christ's reward,
And bind his image with a cord,
And scold, and swing the lash abhorred,
And sell their brother in the Lord
To handcuffed heavenly union.

"They'll read and sing a sacred song,
And make a prayer both loud and long,
And teach the right and do the wrong,
Hailing the brother, sister throng,
With words of heavenly union.

"We wonder how such saints can sing,
Or praise the Lord upon the wing,
Who roar, and scold, and whip, and sting,
And to their slaves and mammon cling,
In guilty conscience union.

"They'll raise tobacco, corn, and rye,
And drive, and thief, and cheat, and lie,
And lay up treasures in the sky,
By making switch and cowskin fly,
In hope of heavenly union.

"They'll crack old Tony on the skull,
And preach and roar like Bashan bull,
Or braying ass, of mischief full,
Then seize old Jacob by the wool,
And pull for heavenly union.

"A roaring, ranting, sleek man-thief,
Who lived on mutton, veal, and beef,
Yet never would afford relief
To needy, sable sons of grief,
Was big with heavenly union.

"'Love not the world,' the preacher said,
And winked his eye, and shook his head;
He seized on Tom, and Dick, and Ned,
Cut short their meat, and clothes, and bread,
Yet still loved heavenly union.

"Another preacher whining spoke
Of One whose heart for sinners broke:
He tied old Nanny to an oak,
And drew the blood at every stroke,
And prayed for heavenly union.

"Two others oped their iron jaws,
And waved their children-stealing paws;
There sat their children in gewgaws;
By stinting negroes' backs and maws,
They kept up heavenly union.

"All good from Jack another takes,
And entertains their flirts and rakes,
Who dress as sleek as glossy snakes,
And cram their mouths with sweetened cakes;
And this goes down for union."