
Wendell Phillips: Orator and Abolitionist

by Eugene V. Debs

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The people is a beast of muddy brain
That knows not its own strength, and therefore stands
Loaded with wood and stone; the powerless hands
Of a mere child guide it with bit and rein;
One kick would be enough to break the chain,
But the beast fears, and what the child demands
It does; nor its own terror understands,
Confused and stupefied by bugbears vain.
Most wonderful! With its own hands it ties
And gags itself — gives itself death and war
For pence doled out by kings from its own store.
Its own are all things between earth and heaven;
But this it knows not; and if one arise
To tell the truth, it kills him unforgiven.

— *Campanella*.¹

To pay homage to the martyrs of history, the men and women who died that we who came after them might live, has always been to me a duty of love. I never go to Alton, Illinois, without visiting the tomb of Elijah P. Lovejoy, the pioneer abolitionist who was murdered there by a pro-slavery mob on November 7, 1837. The tragic end of Lovejoy's stormy career was the signal for the beginning of the still more tempestuous career of Wendell Phillips. When the torch fell from the nerveless grasp of the slain antislavery editor in Illinois it was eagerly seized and defiantly held aloft by a rising young lawyer in Massachusetts, who was destined to become the commanding figure and achieve worldwide fame in the bitter and bloody struggle, then in

¹ "The People," by **Tommaso Campanella** (1568-1639). Translation by John Addington Symonds.

its incipient stages, for the overthrow of chattel slavery in the United States.

It was in 1831, when young Phillips was in his twentieth year, that William Lloyd Garrison began the publication of his anti-slavery firebrand, *The Liberator*. In January of the following year, 1832, the Anti-Slavery Society of New England was organized in Boston with twelve apostles, Garrison heading the list. In October, 1835, the mob of “gentlemen of property and standing” attacked Garrison in Boston and attempted to lynch him for protesting against the lawless suppression of a meeting of the “Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society.” Wendell Phillips, then a youth of 24, was an eyewitness to this cowardly and disgraceful scene, the significance of which flashed upon his keen brain and struck him with horror and indignation. Says one of his biographers:

A young man, tall, stately, impassive, of deep convictions and of unquenchable resolves, witnesses the events of a day. His soul knows the manhood of force as well as the eloquence of speech. Garrison is being dragged through the streets of Boston; the young man follows, while respect for law, peace tenets, and personal rights are rioting in his brain. Pregnant liberty is heaving in the qualms. The mob, incited by the cries of violence, lay hands on Garrison, put a rope about his waist and drag him to imprisonment! What a memorable day for the Puritan city! The abolitionist, Wendell Phillips, is born.

Yes, it was on that eventful day that Wendell Phillips was born. He had but recently been admitted to the bar after completing his course in college with the most brilliant honors, but this shocking incident, so pregnant with sinister forebodings, terminated his career as a lawyer almost before it was begun. He had been struck speechless with amazement when he saw that the mob consisted of his own Beacon Hill friends, eminently conservative gentlemen of the “upper class” — that it was in truth a “broadcloth mob,” as he afterward characterized it, and with his keen intuition he understood at a glance what that mob and the incident which had given rise to it portended to the future of his country. He closed up his law books and turned the key in his office door. The brilliant future his friends had predicted for him at the bar now lay inexorably behind him. In the mad cry of that brutal mob he had heard the clarion call of his own high destiny. There was a sharp and sudden turn in his career. The path of

duty now lay clear before him. It was a thorny road to travel, and perilous, but his mind was made up and he would follow that road straight to the end wheresoever it might lead.

Friends and admirers of the brilliant, cultured, and aristocratic young man were shocked beyond belief when he proclaimed himself the foe of slavery. He must be taking leave of his senses to turn his back upon the wealth and culture which invited him with open arms, to spurn the honors and emoluments of the elect, and to ally himself with the despised abolition movement! For at that time Boston was even more abjectly servile to the slave power than were the cities of the South where slavery had its actual existence. Bourgeois Boston of 1835 did not disgrace herself by having slaves of her own. That would have done violence to her "culture" and, besides, the application of machinery to industry and the development of the factory system had made free (?) labor preferable to slave labor, and so she sold her slaves to her Southern neighbors and was content to enrich herself henceforth by trading with the slave owners, building her palatial splendors upon the bowed bodies and scarred backs of a race in chains, and amassing her proud fortunes out of their unpaid labor.

And this shameless and inhuman traffic in which the ruling class of Boston and New England engaged had the unqualified and almost unanimous support of the press and the pulpit, the colleges and universities, as well as the courts, executive chambers, and legislative halls. The brutal mobbing of Garrison was approved and applauded by almost the entire press and pulpit of Boston. Editors, preachers, professors, politicians, officeholders, all were subservient, as they had always been and are today, to the "business interests," the master class power based upon the exploitation of labor, which ruled the community and the state.

The Southern states were frankly built upon the foundation of chattel slavery and defiantly avowed their determination to maintain their "peculiar institution" at any cost. The following article in the *Telescope* of Columbia, South Carolina, a representative Southern journal, voiced the sentiment and proclaimed the attitude of that section:

Let us declare, through the public journals of our country, that the question of slavery is not, and shall not be, open to discussion; that the very moment any private individual attempts to lecture us upon its evils and immorality, *in the same moment his tongue shall be cut out and cast upon the dunghill.*

And this crass brutality, now almost unbelievable, found a response in the sons of the men who fell at Bunker Hill. Boston, "The Cradle of Liberty!" What a myth and what a mockery! The slave mart had swept the cradle into the bay and coldblooded "business interests" now ruled supreme. All else, especially liberty to the slave, was under the ban. The manufacturing, business and trading interests of Massachusetts were hand in glove with the slave-owning power of South Carolina.

And this was the condition that confronted Wendell Phillips in his native Boston when he renounced his allegiance to his kith and kin and threw down the gauntlet to the heartless power that held a race in chains and disgraced the government under which he lived. That hour his fate was sealed. The darling of Beacon Street had now become the fiend incarnate. Wendell Phillips, by his own deliberate choice, turned his back upon society and all it had to offer him, bade farewell to family, friends and neighbors, and plunged into the fiery furnace to be tempered for the perilous part he was to take in the impending catastrophe.

The example was inspiring; the spectacle sublime. The soul of the orator was born. The tongue of Wendell Phillips became the scourge of flame and hot eloquence burned for utterance from his inspired lips. The scarred and bleeding back of the slave had set fire to every drop in his veins and charged him to the lips with avenging wrath.

At this supreme juncture the inevitable happened and the lightning fell. Lovejoy was foully murdered and Wendell Phillips stirred the nation with the first outburst of his fiery eloquence. Beside the fallen form of the first martyr stood erect and defiant the first orator of the abolition movement. Lovejoy's murder and martyrdom were Phillips' inspiration and consecration.

The Lovejoy speech of Wendell Phillips in Faneuil Hall, December 8, 1837, is the most remarkable utterance of its kind in history. The great crowd which packed the hall was anything but sympathetic when the youth of 26 arose to answer the commonwealth's apologist for Lovejoy's murder. But from the moment the first impassioned sentence fell from his lips he was the master of the situation. The pro-slavery claqueurs showed their teeth and snarled aloud, but soon subsided under the flow of molten rhetoric and daring eloquence which silenced all clamor and converted a threatening mob into a cheering multitude.

Wendell Phillips now stood forth the matchless champion, the unrivaled orator of the anti-slavery movement, and during almost 30 years of storm and stress, of trial and tempest, of savage hatred, bitter persecution, and oft-repeated threats of mobbing and assassination, he stood his ground fearlessly, defiantly, with never a shadow of compromise, until at last the bloody conflict ended in the overthrow of the slave power and the emancipation of the chattel slaves. The lofty motive, the supreme courage, the masterly oratory, the single-hearted devotion, the utter unselfishness, the noble idealism, the sublime faith of the man were challenged and tested by fire a thousand times. But he never trimmed or evaded, never dodged or excused, never apologized, explained, or compromised. He was the thunderbolt of retributive justice and knew only how to strike and shatter, to denounce and destroy the iniquitous slave system. The higher its defenders the bolder his attack and the fiercer his invective. Webster and Choate, when all they were ever famed for is forgotten, will be remembered for their merciless castigation by Wendell Phillips.

He stood upon the world's broad threshold; wide
The din of battle and slaughter rose;
He saw God stand upon the weaker side,
That sank in seeming loss before its foes;
Many there were who made great haste and sold
Unto the cunning enemy their swords.
He scorned their gifts of fame, and power, and gold,
And, underneath their soft and flowery words,
Heard the cold serpent hiss; therefore he went
And humbly joined him to the weaker part,
Fanatic named, and fool, yet well content
So he could be the nearer to God's heart,
And feel its solemn pulses sending blood
Through all the wide-spread veins of endless good.²

To the sordid merchants of Boston who were coining the blood of slaves into luxurious self-indulgence and forcing fugitives back into the jaws of hell from which they had escaped, he thundered: "One hundred percent profit is better than the most eloquent lips that ever spoke. You may think it strange for an American to speak thus of a system that is to make bankrupt one-half of his country, and paralyze the other; but though I love my country, I love my countrymen more,

² "Wendell Phillips," by **James Russell Lowell** (1819-1891).

and these countrymen are the colored men of America. For their sakes I say, welcome to the bolt that smites our commerce to the dust, if with it, by the blessing of God, it will strike off the fetters of the slave.”

To the cowering black slaves and the meek and submissive majority of all colors he appealed with flaming passion and thrilling eloquence: “The greatest praise government can win is, that its citizens know their rights and dare maintain them. The best use of good laws is to teach men to trample bad laws under their feet.”

He was in very truth “the unconscious hero of the cause he pleaded.”

I was too young to realize the monumental work, the immortal achievement of Wendell Phillips until long after it was completed. Slavery had a firm grip on Indiana where I lived, and we did not learn of Phillips and Garrison in our school books. But in the years that followed we began to hear about these apostles of freedom. Their cause had finally triumphed. They were no longer infamous but honorable, no longer monsters but heroes. Garrison’s work was finished, Phillips’ just begun. Phillips saw with prophetic eye that the abolition of chattel slavery was but the prelude to the infinitely greater struggle for the emancipation of the working classes of all races and colors on the face of the earth. He clearly foresaw the mission and comprehended the import of the labor movement, and once more his great heart, his magnificent abilities and his moving eloquence were enlisted in the cause of oppressed and suffering humanity. He glorified the cause of labor and declared the labor movement the greatest of the age.

He wrote labor’s platform of protest against exploitation under the wage system and its declaration of revolt against that cruel and oppressive system. At a labor convention held at Worcester, Massachusetts, in September 1871, the first platform containing the essential principles and demands of socialism in the United States was unanimously adopted.³ This platform was written and presented by Wendell Phillips and reads, in part, as follows:

We affirm, as a fundamental principle, that labor, the creator of wealth, is entitled to all it creates.

³ The Labor-Reform Convention, over which Phillips presided, was convened in Worcester, MA on Sept. 4, 1871.

Affirming this, we avow ourselves willing to accept the final results of the operation of a principle so radical — such as the overthrow of the whole profit-making system, the extinction of all monopolies, the abolition of privileged classes, universal education and fraternity, perfect freedom of exchange, and, best and grandest of all, the final obliteration of that foul stigma upon our so-called Christian civilization — the poverty of the masses....

We declare war with the wages system, which demoralizes the hirer and the hired, cheats both and enslaves the workingman; war with the present system of finance, which robs labor, and gorges capital, makes the rich richer and the poor poorer, and turns a republic into an aristocracy of capital.⁴

The platform pledged the movement to the cooperative control of industry, a shorter workday, equal rights for women, and in advocating its adoption Mr. Phillips said: “I regard the movement with which this convention is connected as the grandest and most comprehensive movement of the age.... I can hardly name the idea in which humanity is interested, which I do not consider locked up in the success of this movement of the people to take possession of their own.” That was almost half a century ago. The keen eye of Wendell Phillips saw even then the proletarian forces of the future gathering, and there spread out before his clarified vision the modern labor movement embracing its millions of revolutionary devotees of all races and nationalities and destined to emancipate all the working classes of the world.

Having myself joined the labor movement in 1875, I came to hear and know more and more of Wendell Phillips. He was then in the lecture field and I proposed to a little club of which I was a member that we secure him if possible for a date at Terre Haute.⁵ The arrangement was soon made and on November 25, 1878, he came to our city to fill his engagement. It was the first and only time I ever met him. He was then 67, erect as a pine, and the handsomest figure of a courtly elderly gentleman I had ever seen. His locks were white as snow but his complexion was florid, his step agile, the grip of his hand firm and hearty, and he appeared, notwithstanding his years, a

⁴ Published in Theodore C. Pease (ed.), *Speeches, Lectures and Letters of Wendell Phillips: Volume 2*. Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1891.

⁵ The Occidental Literary Club, which seems to have been akin to a debating society or lecture lyceum.

tower of strength. Yet, alas, less than seven years later he fell into his last sleep.

The fires of his earlier life had softened to a mellow glow at 67, and the asperity of the fighter seemed entirely gone. The majestic form, the elegant figure, the graceful carriage, the gentle manner, the benignant smile, all betokened the sweet and soulful nature of the genuine gentleman. He was the very essence of bodily and spiritual refinement. Every line in his handsome countenance denoted nobility of birth and breeding. His eyes were kind and gentle as those of a mother, and I remember wondering how eyes filled with such tenderness could once have flashed with the fires of volcanic wrath which burst from his indignant soul. His voice was soft and sweet and musical as the tinkling of a silver bell, and his manner gracious and urbane, without the slightest affectation. I was too young to study critically the features of our illustrious guest, but I remember distinctly feeling that I stood in the presence of true greatness. Behind the gentleman I could visualize the man, the warrior, the liberator, the humanitarian, the lover of his kind. I did not look upon him with awe, but with reverence and love. He had fought for me and my class with all his strength of body and soul his whole life long. He had been hated, denounced, and socially exiled that I and mine might live and enjoy, aspire and fulfill, and here he stood, and with my own eyes I could now behold the man, meditate upon his greatness, and find inspiration in his noble example. Here before me stood the hero who had challenged the whole wicked, malevolent power of human slavery and had preserved unsullied as the honor of his mother the high purpose of his manhood and the priceless integrity of his soul. He never once lowered his standard, never hesitated or faltered, never cowered or compromised, but stood erect and unafraid in every hour of trial and demanded the unconditional surrender of the robber systems of chattel and wage slavery.

The beautiful lecture he gave at the opera house at Terre Haute cannot be described in words. The picture of the great abolition orator on the stage that night is vividly preserved in my memory. His commanding figure, clad in conventional black, was one of noble majesty, his florid features eloquent with animation, his every gesture grace itself; he spoke in soft, mellow, musical tones and held his audience breathless to the last word of his masterly discourse, which was as scholarly as it was eloquent, profound, and impressive.

After the lecture he was our guest at a quiet little luncheon. He seemed to enjoy the occasion. He chatted with us freely in a most familiar manner. He thanked us graciously for our hospitality and I then accompanied him to his room at the hotel. As the chairman of the lecture committee it fell to me to pay the lecturer his fee. The audience, unfortunately, had not been large and the financial loss was considerable. Mr. Phillips felt this keenly, and it plainly distressed him not a little. "Please take back part of the fee to cover your loss," he said to me in the kindest possible way, when I placed the money in his hands.

"No, Mr. Phillips," said I, "you have earned it, it is yours, and you must keep it. If we had come out ahead you would have accepted no more than your fee and we cannot consent to your accepting less than the stipulated amount." He generously insisted upon handing back part of the money, but it was as persistently declined, and he consented at last, reluctantly, to keep it.

Soon afterward he left the city. The next day I received a note from him which read as follows:

Tuesday.

Mr. Eugene V. Debs.

Dear Sir:—

Should you chance to receive any more letters for me, please forward them care of Jno. I. D. Bristol, Milwaukee, Wis. I shall not soon forget yesterday's pleasant evening.

Yrs. truly,

Wendell Phillips.

Two years later the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, with which I was then officially connected, held its annual convention at Terre Haute, and I extended an invitation to Mr. and Mrs. Phillips to be our guests. The following acknowledgment came by due course of mail:

8 Sept., '82.

Mr. Eugene V. Debs.

My dear Sir:—

Many thanks for your invitation to Mrs. Phillips and myself to the Annual Convention of the Locomotive Firemen. Most earnestly do I wish we were in such health as would allow us to come.

But I feel glad to be remembered in the far off city whose hospitality I have enjoyed so often.

Cordially yrs.,

Wendell Phillips.

The brave, beautiful wife of Wendell Phillips, a life-long invalid, was his unfailing solace and his chief inspiration. They were lovers indeed, and their mutual tenderness and devotion was touching in the extreme. Mrs. Phillips, who had been Ann Terry Greene, was as heroic of soul as she was frail of body. She was abolitionist to the core and gloried with her husband in the high privilege of serving the cause.

Woman Suffrage had in Wendell Phillips one of its earliest and most eloquent and effective champions, and it is noteworthy that the last public speech he delivered was in eulogy of Harriet Martineau and of the cause she had so fearlessly and faithfully served. He advocated prison reform and he opposed capital punishment. He stood for equal suffrage, for equality of opportunity, and for universal freedom. He knew no distinction of race, color, or sex, and recognized no boundary lines between human beings. He had cosmic vision and the highest sense of social obligation. His heart was in his work and his soul was in his speech. The great work he did will endure and his matchless orations will live for all time. The name of Wendell Phillips will forever honor the cause of freedom and forever glorify the American Republic.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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