

Herald of Freedom

A review of *Herald of Freedom*, a magazine of the New Hampshire
Anti-Slavery Society.

Henry David Thoreau

1844

We have occasionally, for several years, met with a number of this spirited journal, edited, as abolitionists need not to be informed, by Nathaniel P. Rogers, once a counselor at law in Plymouth, still further up the Merrimack, but now, in his riper years, come down the hills thus far, to be the *Herald of Freedom* to those parts. We have been refreshed not a little by the cheap cordial of his editorials, flowing like his own mountain-torrents, now clear and sparkling, now foaming and gritty, and always spiced with the essence of the fir and the Norway pine; but never dark nor muddy, nor threatening with smothered murmurs, like the rivers of the plain. The effect of one of his effusions reminds us of what the hydropathists say about the electricity in fresh spring-water, compared with that which has stood over night, to suit weak nerves. We do not know of another notable and public instance of such pure, youthful, and hearty indignation at all wrong. The Church itself must love it, if it have any heart, though he is said to have dealt rudely with its sanctity. His clean attachment to the right, however, sanctions the severest rebuke we have read.

We have neither room, nor inclination, to criticise this paper, or its cause, at length, but would speak of it in the free and uncalculating spirit of its author. Mr. Rogers seems to us to occupy an honorable and manly position in these days, and in this country, making the press a living and breathing organ to reach the hearts of men, and not merely "fine paper, and good type," with its civil pilot sitting aft, and magnanimously waiting for the news to arrive — the vehicle of the earliest news, but the *latest intelligence* — recording the indubitable and last results, the marriages and deaths, alone. The present editor is wide awake, and standing on the beak of his ship; not as a scientific explorer under government, but a Yankee sealer rather, who makes those unexplored continents his harbors in which to refit for more adventurous cruises. He is a fund of news and freshness in himself — has the gift of speech, and the knack of writing, and if anything important takes place in the Granite State, we may be sure that we shall hear of it in good season. No other paper that we know keeps pace so well with one forward wave of the restless public thought and sentiment of New England, and asserts so faithfully and ingenuously the largest liberty in all things. There is, beside, more unpledged poetry in his prose than in the verses of many an accepted rhymers; and we are occasionally advertised by a mellow hunter's note from his trumpet, that, unlike most reformers, his feet are still where they should be, on the turf,

and that he looks out from a serener natural life into the turbid arena of politics. Nor is slavery always a sombre theme with him, but invested with the colors of his wit and fancy, and an evil to be abolished by other means than sorrow and bitterness of complaint. He will fight this fight with what cheer may be. But to speak of his composition. It is a genuine Yankee style, without fiction — real guessing and calculating to some purpose, and reminds us occasionally, as does all free, brave, and original writing, of its great master in these days, Thomas Carlyle. It has a life above grammar, and a meaning which need not be parsed to be understood. But like those same mountain-torrents, there is rather too much slope to his channel, and the rainbow sprays and evaporations go double-quick-time to heaven, while the body of his water falls headlong to the plain. We would have more pause and deliberation, occasionally, if only to bring his tide to a head — more frequent expansions of the stream, still, bottomless, mountain tarns, perchance inland seas, and at length the deep ocean itself.

We cannot do better than enrich our pages with a few extracts from such articles as we have at hand. Who can help sympathizing with his righteous impatience, when invited to hold his peace or endeavor to convince the understandings of the people by well ordered arguments?

“Bandy *compliments* and *arguments* with the somnambulist, on ‘table rock,’ when all the waters of Lake Superior are thundering in the great horse-shoe, and deafening the very war of the elements! Would you not shout to him with a clap of thunder through a speaking-trumpet, if you could command it — if possible to reach his senses in his appalling extremity! Did Jonah *argufy* with the city of Nineveh — ‘yet forty days,’ cried the vagabond prophet, ‘and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ That was his salutation. And did the ‘Property and Standing’ turn up their noses at him, and set the mob on to him? Did the clergy *discountenance* him, and call him extravagant, misguided, a divider of churches, a disturber of parishes? What would have become of that city, if they had done this? Did they ‘approve his *principles*’ but dislike his ‘*measures*’ and his ‘*spirit*’!!

“Slavery must be cried down, denounced down, ridiculed down, and pro-slavery with it, or rather before it. Slavery will go when pro-slavery starts. The sheep will follow when the bell-wether leads. Down, then, with the bloody system, out of the land with it, and out of the world with it — into the Red Sea with it. Men *shan’t* be enslaved in this country any longer. Women and children *shan’t* be flogged here any longer. If you undertake to hinder us, the worst is your own.” — “But this is all fanaticism. *Wait and see.*”

He thus raises the anti-slavery ‘war-whoop’ in New Hampshire, when an important convention is to be held, sending the summons

“To none but the whole-hearted, fully-committed, cross-the-Rubicon spirits.” — “From rich ‘old Cheshire,’ from Rockingham, with her horizon setting down away to the salt sea.” — “From where the sun sets behind Kearsarge, even to where he rises gloriously over *Moses Norris’s* own town of *Pittsfield*; and from Amoskeag to Ragged Mountains — Coos — Upper Coos, home of the everlasting hills, send out your bold advocates of human rights — wherever they lay, scattered by lonely lake, or Indian stream, or ‘Grant,’ or ‘Location’ — from the trout-haunted brooks of the

Amoriscoggin, and where the adventurous streamlet takes up its mountain march for the St. Lawrence.

“Scattered and insulated men, wherever the light of philanthropy and liberty has beamed in upon your solitary spirits, come down to us like your streams and clouds — and our own Grafton, all about among your dear hills, and your mountain-flanked valleys — whether you *home* along the swift Ammonoosuck, the cold Pemigewasset, or the ox-bowed Connecticut.” —

“We are slow, brethren, dishonorably slow, in a cause like ours. Our feet should be ‘as hinds’ feet.’ ‘Liberty lies bleeding.’ The leaden-colored wing of slavery obscures the land with its baleful shadow. Let us come together, and inquire at the hand of the Lord what is to be done.”

And again; on occasion of the New England Convention in the Second-Advent Tabernacle, in Boston, he desires to try one more blast, as it were, ‘on Fabyan’s White Mountain horn.’

“Ho, then, people of the Bay State — men, women, and children; children, women, and men, scattered friends of the *friendless*, wheresoever ye inhabit — if habitations ye have, as such friends have not *always* — along the sea-beat border of Old Essex and the Puritan Landing, and up beyond sight of the sea-cloud, among the inland hills, where the sun rises and sets upon the dry land, in that vale of the Connecticut, too fair for human content, and too fertile for virtuous industry — where deepens the haughtiest of earth’s streams, on its seaward way, proud with the pride of old Massachusetts. Are there any friends of the friendless negro haunting such a valley as this? In God’s name, I fear there are none, or few, for the very scene looks apathy and oblivion to the genius of humanity. I blow you the summons though. Come, if any of you are there.

“And gallant little Rhode Island; *transcendent* abolitionists of the tiny Commonwealth. I need not call you. You are *called* the year round, and, instead of sleeping in your tents, stand harnessed, and with trumpets in your hands — every one!

“Connecticut! yonder, the home of the Burleighs, the Monroes, and the Hudsons, and the native land of old George Benson! are you ready? ‘All ready!’

“Maine here, off east, looking from my mountain post, like an everglade. Where is your Sam. Fessenden, who stood storm-proof ’gainst New Organization in ’38? Has he too much name as a jurist and orator, to be found at a New England Convention in ’43? God forbid! Come one and all of you from ‘Down East’ to Boston, on the 30th, and let the sails of your coasters whiten all the sea-road. Alas! there are scarce enough of you to man a fishing boat. Come up, mighty in your fewness.

“And green Vermont, what has become of your anti-slavery host — thick as your mountain maples — mastering your very politics — not by balance of power, but by sturdy majority. Where are you now? Will you be at the *Advent* Meeting on the 30th of May? Has anti-slavery waxed too trying for your off-hand, how-are-ye, humanity? Have you heard the voice of Freedom of late? Next week will answer.

“Poor, cold, winter-ridden New-Hampshire — winter-killed, I like to have said — she will be there, bare-foot, and bare-legged, making tracks like her old bloody-footed

volunteers at Trenton. She will be there, if she can work her passage. I guess her minstrelsy will — for birds can go independently of car, or tardy stage-coach.” —

— “Let them come as Macaulay says they did to the siege of Rome, when they did not leave old men and women enough to *begin* the harvests. Oh how few we should be, if every soul of us were there. How few, and yet it is the entire muster-roll of Freedom for all the land. We should have to beat up for recruits to complete the army of Gideon, or the *platoon* at the Spartan straits. The foe are like the grasshoppers for *multitude*, as for *moral power*. Thick grass mows the easier, as the Goth said of the enervated millions of falling Rome. They can’t stand too thick, nor too tall for the anti-slavery scythe. Only be there at the mowing.”

In noticing the doings of another Convention, he thus congratulates himself on the liberty of speech which anti-slavery concedes to all — even to the Folsoms and Lamsons:

“Denied a chance to speak elsewhere, because they are not mad after the fashion, they all flock to the anti-slavery boards as a kind of Asylum. And so the poor old enterprise has to father all the oddity of the times. It is a glory to anti-slavery, that she can allow the poor friends the right of speech. I hope she will always keep herself able to afford it. Let the constables wait on the State House, and Jail, and the *Meeting Houses*. Let the door-keeper at the Anti-Slavery Hall be that tall, celestial-faced Woman, that carries the flag on the National Standard, and says, ‘without *concealment*,’ as well as ‘without compromise.’ Let every body in, who has sanity enough to see the beauty of brotherly kindness, and let them say their fantasies, and magnanimously bear with them, seeing unkind pro-slavery drives them in upon *us*. We shall have *saner* and *sensibler* meetings then, than all others in the land put together.”

More recently, speaking of the use which some of the clergy have made of Webster’s plea in the Girard case, as a seasonable aid to the church, he proceeds:

“Webster is a great man, and the clergy run under his wing. They had better employ him as counsel against the Comeouters. He wouldn’t trust the defence on the Girard will plea though, if they did. He would not risk his fame on it, as a religious argument. He would go and consult William Bassett, of Lynn, on the principles of the ‘Comeouters,’ to learn their strength; and he would get him a testament, and go into it as he does into the Constitution, and after a year’s study of it he would hardly come off in the argument as he did from the conflict with Carolina Hayne. On looking into the case, he would advise the clergy not to go to trial — to settle — or, if they couldn’t to ‘leave it out’ to a reference of ‘orthodox deacons.’ ”

We will quote from the same sheet his indignant and touching satire on the funeral of those public officers who were killed by the explosion on board the Princeton, together with the President’s slave; an accident which reminds us how closely slavery is linked with the government of this nation. The President coming to preside over a nation of *free* men, and the man who stands *next to him a slave!*

“I saw account,” says he, “of the burial of those slaughtered politicians. The hearses passed along, of Upshur, Gilmer, Kennon, Maxcy, and Gardner — but the dead slave, who fell in company with them on the deck of the Princeton, was not there. He was held their equal by the impartial gun-burst, but not allowed by the *bereaved* nation a share in the funeral.” ... “Out upon their funeral, and upon the paltry procession that went in its train. Why didn’t they enquire for the body of the *other man* who fell on that deck! And why hasn’t the nation inquired, and its press? I saw account of the scene in a barbarian print, called the Boston Atlas, and it was dumb on the absence of that body, as if no such man had fallen. Why, I demand in the name of human nature, what was that sixth man of the game brought down by that great shot, left unburied and above ground — for there is no account yet that his body has been allowed the right of sepulture.” ... “They didn’t bury him even as a slave. They didn’t assign him a jim-crow place in that solemn procession, that he might follow to wait upon his enslavers in the land of spirits. They have gone there without slaves or waiters.” ... “The poor black man — they enslaved and imbruted him all his life, and now he is dead, they have, for aught appears, left him to decay and waste above ground. Let the civilized world take note of the circumstance.”

We deem such timely, pure, and unpremeditated expressions of a public sentiment, such publicity of genuine indignation and humanity, as abound everywhere in this journal, the most generous gifts a man can make, and should be glad to see the scraps from which we have quoted, and the others which we have not seen, collected into a volume. It might, perchance, penetrate into some quarters which the unpopular cause of freedom has not reached.

Long may we hear the voice of this Herald.

But since our voyage Rogers has died, and now there is no one in New England to express the indignation or contempt which may still be felt at any cant or inhumanity.

When, on a certain occasion, one said to him, “Why do you go about as you do, agitating the community on the subject of abolition? Jesus Christ never preached abolitionism:” he replied, “Sir, I have two answers to your appeal to Jesus Christ. First, I deny your proposition, that he never preached abolition. That single precept of his — ‘Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them’ — reduced to *practice*, would abolish slavery over the whole earth in twenty-four hours. That is my first answer. I deny your proposition. Secondly, granting your proposition to be true — and admitting what I deny — that Jesus Christ did not preach the abolition of slavery, then I say, “*he didn’t do his duty.*”

His was not the wisdom of the head, but of the heart. If perhaps he had all the faults, he had more than the usual virtues of the radical. He loved his native soil, her hills and streams, like a Burns or Scott. As he rode to an antislavery convention, he viewed the country with a poet’s eye, and some of his letters written back to his editorial substitute contain as true and pleasing pictures of New England life and scenery as are anywhere to be found.

Whoever heard of Swamscot before? “Swamscot is all fishermen. Their business is all on the deep. Their village is ranged along the ocean margin, where their brave little fleets lay drawn up, and which are out at day-break on the mighty blue — where you may see them brooding at anchor — still and intent at their *profound* trade, as so many flies on the back of a wincing horse, and for whose wincings they care as little as the Swamscot Fishers heed the restless heavings of the sea around their barks. Every thing about savors of fish. Nets hang out on every enclosure.

Flakes, for curing the fish are attached to almost every dwelling. Every body has a boat — and you'll see a huge pair of sea boots lying before almost every door. The air too savors strongly of the common finny vocation. Beautiful little beaches slope out from the dwellings into the Bay, all along the village — where the fishing boats lie keeled up, at low water, with their useless anchors hooked deep into the sand. A stranded bark is a sad sight — especially if it is above high water mark, where the next tide can't relieve it and set it afloat again. The Swamscot boats though, all look cheery, and as if sure of the next sea-flow. The people are said to be the freest in the region — owing perhaps to their bold and adventurous life. The Priests can't ride them *out into the deep*, as they can the shore folks."

His style and vein though often exaggerated and affected were more native to New England than those of any of her sons, and unfinished as his pieces were, yet their literary merit has been overlooked.

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This is a hybrid of two versions of this essay. The first was written before Rogers's death and was published in The Dial in 1844; the second was composed after Rogers's 1846 death, and omits the dash-underlined portions, includes the paragraphs that follow those portions, and makes some minor changes (for instance, shifting some verbs to past-tense) to the rest of the text.

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