Engraved by C. G. Childs, 1829

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA



## William Henry Furness Philadelphia Antislavery Preacher

The Reverend Dr. William Henry Furness (1802–1896) was the pastor of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia from 1825 to 1875 and its emeritus pastor from that date until his death. From 1839 until the beginning of the Civil War he was also one of Philadelphia's most ardent and tireless abolitionists, a storm center in that most southern of northern cities, attacked in the public press, abused in public gatherings, opposed and finally deserted by a hostile segment of his own congregation, and subjected to the gentler but none the less potent arts of dissuasion practiced by members of his own family. Furness pursued his course in spite of all of them. William Still, the corresponding secretary of the Vigilance Committee of the Underground Railroad, in his account of that organization published by the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, wrote of Furness' antislavery achievements:

Among the Abolitionists of Pennsylvania no man stands higher than Dr. Furness; and no anti-slavery minister enjoys more universal respect. For more than thirty years he bore faithful witness for the black man; in season and out of season contending for his rights. When others deserted the cause he stood firm; when associates in the ministry were silent he spoke out.

Furness had come to Philadelphia from Medford, Massachusetts, in 1825 as the first full-time, regularly ordained pastor of the small 1 William Still, *The Underground Rail Road* (Philadelphia, 1872), 659.

Unitarian congregation which worshipped in an octagonal brick building at the corner of Tenth and Locust streets, on the outskirts of the city.<sup>2</sup> The group had been in existence less than thirty years, having been organized in 1796 as "The Society of Unitarian Christians of Philadelphia" by fourteen men, most of them English by birth and merchants by occupation, immigrants who had brought their Unitarian faith with them to their new homeland. As an import from England, the Philadelphia Society enjoyed a unique distinction in the history of the denomination, being the only branch of American Unitarianism which had not grown out of the native American experience.<sup>3</sup> It was also the first permanently organized church in the United States to take the name "Unitarian," a name which was then under great odium, even among the liberal Congregationalists of New England,<sup>4</sup> being equated in the public mind with "Deist" or "Atheist."

Furness had been born in Boston on April 20, 1802, of solid New England stock. Electing the ministry as his vocation, he had entered Harvard College, from which he was graduated in 1820, and had then gone on to the Theological Department of that institution, receiving his degree there in 1823. He had delivered his first sermon in the fall of that year in Watertown, Massachusetts, and had then preached for a few months in the general neighborhood of Boston, without receiving a call to settle with any congregation. Early in 1824 he had gone to Baltimore, where he had spent three months as the assistant to the Reverend Mr. Greenwood, and was on his way home to New England when he was invited to stop in Philadelphia and preach for the Society there. He did so in July, purely out of a sense of duty, he said later, and of gratitude to that body for its having been so kind as to ask him. To his amazement, however, a committee waited on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For a history of Unitarianism in Philadelphia before the Civil War, see the unpublished doctoral dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 1958) of Elizabeth M. Geffen, "Philadelphia Unitarianism (1796–1861)," accepted for publication by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>3</sup> With the single exception of the Episcopal King's Chapel, Boston, American Unitarianism had evolved out of New England Congregationalism.

<sup>4</sup> When the orthodox Jedidiah Morse in 1815 attempted to fasten the name "Unitarian" upon the New England liberals the charge was indignantly refuted by William Ellery Channing, who declared that the liberals were Arians. Earl Morse Wilbur, A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England and America (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), 417-419.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> There is no full-length biography of Furness, the most extensive study of his life being that given in Geffen, "Philadelphia Unitarianism (1796–1861)."

him in September and offered him the pastorate of the church. He took the job.

The call to Philadelphia was actually a cry from the wilderness in terms of Boston Unitarianism, which was then in the first flush of its Golden Morning. Furness accepted with some misgivings, not much encouraged, one may imagine, by the fact that only after much persuasion had he been able to get the necessary number of his professional brethren to travel to Philadelphia to legalize his ordination in January. The journey from Massachusetts took two and a half days; the wintry winds were bitter and the roads were worse. Those who finally came left their young friend in no doubt as to the magnitude of their self-sacrifice on his account. Looking back from the vantage point of many years of happy association, Furness admitted:

This church in Philadelphia, composed almost exclusively of persons from the Old Country, . . . was looked upon pretty much as a settlement of a small company of Mahometans, an exotic, having no root in the soil. Even the liberally disposed in New England were shy of it, as going altogether too far.<sup>6</sup>

The Philadelphia church was, in fact, an outpost, theologically speaking, since Furness was the only minister of his denomination between New York and Baltimore.

Only seventeen men had signed the Society's application for an amended charter in 1824,7 and, while there was a much larger fellowship in attendance at the church, the Philadelphia Unitarians were distinctly a minority denomination. Their meetings were not even listed in the public press among the notices of church affairs, in which Philadelphians generally took a great interest. The city was a center of American Protestantism, where all of the regularly organized sects shared public favor. All, that is, save the Unitarians, who, Furness remarked, were "about as obscure and despised as any com-

<sup>6</sup> W. H. Furness, Recollections upon the Forty-Eighth Anniversary. . . . January 19th, 1873 (n.p., n.d.), 19.

<sup>7</sup> The Society had applied to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for a charter on Dec. 27, 1811, the charter being granted on Jan. 7, 1813. Laying of the Cornerstone of the Third Church Edifice of the First Unitarian Society of Philadelphia, on . . . March 25, 1885 . . . (Philadelphia, 1885), 26.

pany of Methodists or such like are in Boston." Joining the Society involved a conscious choice and a willingness to accept the burden of disfavor. The membership, though small, was accordingly highly selected, steadfast, and devoted to the cause of religious liberalism.

Although Furness had been preaching in various churches before he settled in Philadelphia, none of his early sermons has been preserved. It is reasonable to imagine that they may have been more or less tentative and noncommittal, for Furness was an amiable young man, with nothing of the controversialist in his nature. On the other hand, it is at least suspicious that this extremely personable young clergyman, with all of the proper family and educational connections, received no offer of settlement in more than a year after his graduation. The accepted leader of Boston Unitarianism in 1825 was William Ellery Channing, who at that time had developed his theological convictions to the point of Arianism, but no farther. From the beginning, however, Furness seems to have been a convinced humanitarian, believing Jesus to have been entirely human, the son of God just as all men are sons of God. This position was a good deal nearer to Priestley's Unitarianism than it was to Boston's, and was actually a whole generation in advance of New England Unitarian orthodoxy. Theoretically, at least, it brought Furness close to the theological position of the Philadelphia Society, whose predominantly English membership was the direct inheritor of Priestley's theology.

Furness was "the powerful excitement—and the eloquence" which Channing had once prescribed for Philadelphia Unitarianism. He was impressive in stature, graceful in bearing, with a handsome face and wonderfully winning smile. His disposition was warm and sunny, friendly and full of good humor. Best of all, he had a superb voice, rich and mellow and tremendously persuasive, which captivated all who heard him. What he had to say, fortunately, was always quite considerable, for to his winning personality was added substantial intellectual powers. His lifelong friend Ralph Waldo Emerson most

<sup>8</sup> Furness to Mary Jenks, Sept. 20, 1825, in Collected Correspondence, I, one of two binders of manuscript letters written by Furness to the Jenks family, now in the possession of Elizabeth M. Geffen, to whom they were given by Horace Howard Furness Jayne, great-grandson of Dr. Furness.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Channing to John Vaughan, one of the leaders of the Society, Aug. 12, 1816, in Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection, American Philosophical Society.

completely summed up the nature of his charm when he said that Furness had "a face like a benediction and a speech like a benefaction," while "his stories were more curative than the Philadelphia Faculty of Medicine." Under his leadership the Society began to grow and prosper, with an increasing influx of New Englanders soon outnumbering the new members from Old England and from the local Philadelphia area. Three years after his installation the Octagon Church gave way to a fine new Doric structure almost three times its size on the same site, " which was soon filled with eager listeners who came to hear the eloquent young preacher.

Furness devoted his entire ministry to the development of two themes, which a colleague described as the Man of Nazareth and the Man of Africa. The meaning of the life of Jesus was his first interest, and it was his last. In 1836 he published Remarks on the Four Gospels, the first of a series of twenty-two books which during his lifetime he was to devote to the exploration of the nature of Jesus and the explanation of the nature of the Gospels. Three years later, "impelled by a sense of duty that I could in no wise resist," he took up his work for the Man of Africa, which he carried on from the pulpit until 1865 and outside the pulpit for the rest of his life.

Furness admitted many years later that he had tried desperately to avoid the issue of abolitionism. Essentially a man of peace, he loved tranquillity and well knew the explosive nature of the antislavery agitation. As a citizen of Philadelphia he had had firsthand experience with the spirit of violence. He had seen mobs rioting at the polls on election day. He knew that wholesale attacks had been made on Negroes and that their homes had been destroyed. Pennsylvania Hall had been burned to the ground by a mob only a mile from his church. He was also well aware that his congregation wanted no part of any controversy. Long since grown prosperous, for the most part, and holding positions of prestige in the community, they desired only to observe the law themselves and have others do the same. But there were other forces abroad that worked on Furness even

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> H[orace] H[oward] Furness, ed., Records of a Lifelong Friendship, 1807-1882, Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Henry Furness (Boston, 1910), 132.

<sup>11</sup> The Octagon Church seated three hundred persons, the Doric church eight hundred.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel A. Eliot, ed., Heralds of a Liberal Faith (Boston, 1910), III, 137.

<sup>13</sup> W. H. Furness, A Discourse delivered January 5, 1851, . . . (n.p., n.d.), 4.

more powerfully than did his inborn aversion to violence and his desire to conform to the wishes of his people. It was an age of reform, when the desire to improve the conditions under which men lived was manifesting itself in a dozen different guises. For some it was the cause of women's rights which claimed their interest; for others it was temperance; for still others it was a desire to alleviate the misery of the blind, the insane, the fallen in virtue. For Furness the reform impulse of the 1830's finally expressed itself in the struggle against slavery.

It is difficult to understand how, in Philadelphia in the 1830's, Furness managed to avoid the antislavery issue as long as he did. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had had a long and honorable history in the development of Negro emancipation.<sup>14</sup> Although there had been slaves in the general area of the Delaware River as early as 1639, there had been strong opposition to slaveholding from the beginning, the first formal protest against slavery in the United States having been made in a memorial drawn up by a group of Germantown Quakers under the leadership of Pastorius in 1688. By 1780 this opposition had secured the passage of an act for the gradual abolition of slavery, the first state law of its kind to be adopted in the United States. This law provided that no child should thereafter be born into slavery in Pennsylvania and that all those then enslaved should be freed after they reached the age of twenty-eight. With the influence of the Quakers dominating the state's antislavery activity, the movement was nonviolent, dedicated to gradual measures, and tremendously successful. In November, 1819, a meeting of prominent Philadelphia citizens was held, with Jared Ingersoll as chairman, to adopt resolutions opposing the extension of slavery. Of the twentyfour antislavery conventions held in the United States from 1794 to 1828, twenty were held in Philadelphia.

The Negroes of Philadelphia, assured of civil liberty and encouraged by friendly public opinion, had made real progress in the improvement of their condition.<sup>15</sup> They practiced trades of all kinds, engaged in many types of small businesses, and in some enterprises,

<sup>14</sup> The best single-volume account of the development of the Negro's status in Pennsylvania is Edward Raymond Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania* (Washington, 1911).

<sup>15</sup> For the history of the Negro in Philadelphia, see William E. B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Philadelphia, 1899), and Turner, 121-142.

notably the catering business, actually enjoyed uncontested supremacy, amassing considerable private fortunes. In 1814 Negroes held about \$250,000 taxable city property, a figure which was to increase to \$350,000 by 1832. Five years later they were believed to own real estate and property worth more than \$1,000,000.

The Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery, for the relief of free Negroes, unlawfully held in Bondage, and for improving the Condition of the African Race, founded in Philadelphia in 1775, was the first antislavery society in the United States. It was the best of the state societies, working for protective legislation, assisting Negroes in law suits, giving them financial aid and helping them find employment, protecting them from the threat of kidnapping, checking violations of the law involving Negroes, distributing antislavery propaganda, and petitioning the Federal government for the abolition of slavery throughout the United States. Membership in the Abolition Society was highly respectable and the group was influential in both local and state affairs. It was united in purpose, persistent in activity, and it left no reasonable deed undone which might further the cause it served. 16 It is known that at least two members of the Philadelphia Unitarian Society belonged to this group, Joseph Todhunter being noted in the City Directory of 1829 as a member of the Electing Committee, and Joseph Sill being a member from 1833 on.17

Quiet, peaceable, unspectacular in method, but solid in its achievements, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society was unfortunately elbowed aside by the belligerent American Anti-Slavery Society, which was organized in Philadelphia in 1833. Its leading spirit, William Lloyd Garrison, demanded action, and Philadelphia's mobs obliged him, although not in the way he wished. The City of Brotherly Love had suffered many times, down through the years, from the unfraternal violence of her citizenry. Back in the days of the Revolution the mob had taken delight in breaking Quaker windows and sacking the homes of Tories. The followers of Citizen Genêt had threatened both the government and the person of President

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery, Minutes, Vol. 3 (1825–1847); Vol. 4 (1847–1916); Committee for the Improvement of Colored People, Minutes, 1837–1853, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Sill, Diary, IV, 106, HSP.

Washington himself for the official failure to appreciate the partisan efforts of the visiting Frenchman, while Washington's successor, Adams, felt that only a military patrol placed in front of his door by the state government had prevented the mob's pulling him out of his house at the time of the XYZ Treaty negotiations. 18 In 1819 a balloon which failed to ascend as scheduled was the cause of a riot at Vauxhall Gardens, in which a crowd of 35,000 persons rushed in upon the area, robbed the proprietors of \$800 and demolished and set fire to every building on the site. In August, 1828, "a riotous disposition was manifested in Kensington among some weavers,"19 as a result of which one person was killed and many injured. In between such spontaneous uprisings there were always the elections to fight over and none was allowed to pass without its quota of rioting, or there were fires to go to, or even to start, if necessary. By June, 1836, the destruction wrought by rioters had grown to such proportions that an act was passed by City Councils, providing city funds for the payment of damages to the victims of mob violence.20

As early as the 1820's the mobs had begun to turn toward Negroes as their victims. Situated on the main route of travel between North and South, the first large city north of the Mason and Dixon Line, Philadelphia was the natural goal of fugitives from southern slavery. Indeed, for many years she had been so kind to all classes of unfortunates and had set up so many charities for their care that she had come to enjoy a unique reputation among cities as "the emporium of beggars." To this attraction were added the operations of the Underground Railroad, which funneled escaping slaves into Philadelphia in ever-increasing numbers. Once in the Promised Land of Quakerdom, many of the fugitives stayed, most of them ignorant

<sup>18</sup> Charles Francis Adams, ed., The Works of John Adams (Boston, 1856), IX, 279.

<sup>19</sup> J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884 (Philadelphia, 1884), I, 623.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 639. Charles Godfrey Leland, in his Memoirs (New York, 1893), 216, said of this period: "Whoever shall write a history of Philadelphia from the Thirties to the end of the Fifties will record a popular period of turbulence and outrages so extensive as to now appear almost incredible."

<sup>21</sup> Agnes Repplier, Philadelphia, The Place and the People (New York, 1899), 324.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> The best account of the Underground Railroad in general is Wilbur H. Seibert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1898). For an excellent account of the activities of the Railroad by a Philadelphia participant, see Still, *The Underground Rail Road*.

field hands, penniless, friendless, unassimilable in their forlorn condition. With unemployment already widespread because of the depression accompanying Jackson's action against the Bank of the United States, they could find no work and sank back into hopeless squalor in slums of their own creation in the heart of the city. Idleness, poverty, and overcrowding inevitably produced lawlessness and crime, of which, current ignorance of social laws being what it was, the Negroes were said to be the cause rather than the victims. The situation was aggravated by the developing influx of foreign white immigrants, with the Irish, particularly, contending with the Negroes for the insufficient means of making a living.

In the middle 1820's there were frequent alarms of the kidnapping of Negro children for sale in the South, alarms so well substantiated that City Councils took cognizance of the matter in the passage of punitive legislation. In 1820 there were civic disturbances as the result of Fanny Wright's lectures on race equality. By the 1830's violent riots against Negroes became epidemic, and from then on such outbreaks made a constantly recurring pattern of disorder in the city's life. Negroes were assaulted in the street for no apparent reason; meetings of Negroes were broken up by rowdies; Negro property was defaced and their homes destroyed. In December, 1833, the furor attendant upon the organization of the American Anti-Slavery Society at the Adelphi Building on Fifth Street below Walnut took place only five blocks from the Unitarian Church, while riots against Negroes during 1833 and 1834 reached new extremes of violence and terror in the general area between Sixth and Seventh and Walnut and South streets, only four or five blocks away. Willis H. Blayney, a member of the Unitarian Society at this time and high constable of Philadelphia, played an important part in all this, his job requiring him to put down rioting. But the pastor of the Unitarian Church was silent on the subject in the pulpit.

William Ellery Channing, whom Furness venerated as the saintly leader of American Unitarianism, had first preached against slavery as early as 1830, and had declared himself for abolition in his book Slavery, published in Boston in 1835. It was at about the same time that simultaneous rioting broke out against abolitionists from Louisiana to Maine, a reign of terror which, according to Samuel J. May, another New England Unitarian clergyman, had been threat-

ened in advance by wealthy mercantile interests if the abolitionists did not cease their activities.23 May himself, "converted" to the antislavery cause in 1830, an ardent and active lecturer and agent, had been mobbed five times in Vermont in October, 1835, alone.24 And still there was no official comment from the Unitarian pulpit in Philadelphia. Lucretia Mott had written to James Miller McKim, a leading Philadelphia abolitionist, on May 8, 1834, that "our dear friend, Wm. H. Furness . . . is becoming increasingly interested in the Abolition cause, and we hope it will ere long be with him a pulpit theme."25 It was not until five years later, however, that Furness did finally burst forth from whatever scruples had been restraining him. Looking back in 1850 he declared: "One of the first things that drew me to the abolition movement was hearing Samuel May, Lucretia Mott and Garrison so violently denounced. I felt, knowing them as I did, that my honor as a gentleman, to say nothing of my profession as a Christian, required me to take their part."26

Though the masses shouted their defiance of civil rights in violent terms of broken heads and demolished dwellings, the "respectable" classes were as solidly opposed to the Garrisonians, though they kept their feelings under somewhat better control. Philadelphia's prosperous upper classes had the strongest possible ties of sympathy with the South, emanating both from the heart and from the purse. With the development of domestic trade necessitated by the stagnation of foreign commerce during the War of 1812 and with the growth of its manufacturing interests, Philadelphia looked to the South as its best customer. As a natural concomitant of trade, marital alliances followed, and many of Philadelphia's leading families were part of southern life by blood connections. They were accordingly little disposed to hear criticism of that life, implicit, even when not declared, in antislavery agitation. So zealous were they in defense of the South that the Charleston Patriot recommended that its readers trade with Philadelphia as "the only Northern city which has responded in a proper spirit to the call of the South on the North for energetic ac-

<sup>23</sup> Samuel J. May, Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict (Boston, 1869), 127-128. 24 Ibid., 153.

<sup>25</sup> Anna Davis Hallowell, ed., James and Lucretia Mott, Life and Letters (Boston, 1884), 119. 26 Furness to Mary Jenks, June 23, 1850, in Collected Correspondence, II.

tion" against the abolitionists.<sup>27</sup> The Commonwealth's backsliding took legal form in 1837 when the "Reform Convention" inserted the word "white" in the qualifications for electors in the state constitution, thus depriving Pennsylvania's Negroes of rights which had been theirs, theoretically at least, from the inception of the colony. The Philadelphia Unitarian Society provided one member of this convention in the person of Pierce Butler.<sup>28</sup>

By this time the antislavery cause had aroused such public disfavor among all classes that the very name "abolitionist" had become an insulting epithet. Charles Godfrey Leland, whose family were members of the Philadelphia Unitarian Society at this time, declared that "there was hardly a soul whom I knew, except my mother, to whom an Abolitionist was not simply the same thing as a disgraceful, discreditable malefactor. Even my father, when angry with me one day, could think of nothing bitterer than to tell me that I knew I was an Abolitionist."<sup>29</sup>

The climax of the spiraling impulse to violence came in the middle of May, 1838, when a mob burned down Pennsylvania Hall, which had been built by the antislavery forces for the holding of their meetings and had been dedicated only four days before. One wonders whether the pastor of the Unitarian Society finally "saw the light" by the flames of that conflagration. He did not say so in a sermon preached the following Sunday, which dwelt upon the evils of mob action in general rather than upon the issue of slavery. He admitted, however, that the torch that menaces often awakens men from "the sleep of the soul." This may have been intended as a personal confession, for shortly thereafter Furness definitely declared himself on the subject of slavery and once he had taken up the issue he never dropped it until victory had been won. He often referred regretfully to his lateness in taking the field, calling himself "an eleventh hour man," but having taken a place in the antislavery ranks, he became

<sup>27</sup> Albert Bushnell Hart, Slavery and Abolition, 1831-1841 (New York, 1906), 237, quoting from Niles' Register, XLIX, 74.

<sup>28</sup> Frances Ann Kemble, Records of Later Life (New York, 1883), 71.

<sup>29</sup> Leland, 136.

<sup>30 [</sup>W. H. Furness], A Sermon occasioned by the Destruction of Pennsylvania Hall, and delivered . . . May 20, 1838 . . . (Philadelphia, 1838).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>32</sup> Obituary notice by John W. Chadwick in The Christian Register, Feb. 6, 1896.

an indefatigable fighter for the cause. One anecdote of the time declared that for twenty-five years not a Sunday passed when Furness did not in sermon or prayer make some reference to slavery.<sup>33</sup> Furness himself said in 1845 that he had never actually preached a sermon on slavery but had mentioned it only "incidentally."<sup>34</sup> This was surely the understatement of his career, but he did attempt to accomplish much more than the mere abolition of slavery. His emphasis was upon the brotherhood of all men, and for him slavery was only one of the many sins committed by men which alienated them from God. But it was, admittedly, the sin with which he was most concerned from 1839 to 1865.

Like all Gaul, and indeed all other human communities, Furness' congregation was divided into three parts upon this issue. There were those who completely approved of the course he had taken in espousing the antislavery cause. On the opposite extreme were those who as definitely disapproved, and, in the middle, there were those who did not much care, one way or another. It was the extremes, of course, who made their feelings known and who struggled between themselves for the decisive leadership of the church.

As has already been noted, at least one member of the Society, Joseph Todhunter, had been active in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society as early as 1829. The Trustees of the church had looked with favor upon the American Colonization Society and on May 31, 1831, had authorized the taking up of a collection in aid of that project.<sup>35</sup> This represented a decided departure from the church's usual proceedings, the congregation generally being "averse to any direct appeal to their charity, and [preferring] to be spoken to in general terms." Joseph Sill, a Trustee of the church from 1831 until his death twenty-three years later, was, as has been mentioned, a mem-

<sup>33</sup> The manuscript diary of Joseph Sill in ten quarto volumes at the HSP provides an invaluable commentary on the nature of these sermons from 1831 to 1854. Sill, a Trustee of the church during this entire period and a close personal friend of Furness, attended services with the utmost regularity and recorded in his diary the text of each sermon, its general character, and the reactions thereto by the congregation. Only a fraction of Furness' sermons has survived, and there is no record of his selection of prayers.

<sup>34</sup> Sill, Diary, VI, 79.

<sup>35</sup> Minutes of Trustees, Vol. 3, at the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, an unpaged manuscript journal.

<sup>36</sup> Sill, Diary, II, 45.

ber of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society from 1833 onward, but he definitely disapproved of the program of immediatism preached by George Thompson, the English abolitionist brought to the United States by Garrison to lecture for the American Anti-Slavery Society. He had listened to Thompson for two hours on March 18, 1835, and concluded that his inflexible insistence upon immediate, total emancipation was "unreasonable, and at variance with all the reformations that have ever been effected throughout the whole history of the World."37 In October of the same year Sill commented that "there is one subject which cannot at present be spoken of, or even hinted at in these U. States, where liberty of speech and act are of the very essence of the Government, without exposing yourself to suspicion and odium."38 John Sartain, another member of the congregation, declared in 1892 that he had been an abolitionist in 1835,39 and Mrs. Pierce Butler had gone so far as to write an antislavery article in that year, although she declared that she had not dared to publish it in the face of overwhelming public opinion, "lest our fellow-citizens should tear our house down, and make a bonfire of our furniture—a favorite mode of remonstrance in these parts with those who advocate the rights of the unhappy blacks."40

When Furness declared himself in 1839, however, there is little doubt that his action was generally viewed with alarm by his congregation, who had had a long struggle against a hostile public opinion on theological grounds and were finally achieving a measure of community prestige. Furness accurately gauged their reaction to his program. "I was regarded as endangering the interests of Unitarian Christianity, which, it was pleaded, had as much as it could do to bear the odium of the Unitarian name without having the added burthen of Abolitionism." In addition, many of the mercantile

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., I, 397.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 423.

<sup>39</sup> John Sartain, The Reminiscences of a Very Old Man, 1809-1897 (New York, 1899), 229.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to Harriet St. Leger, June 27, 1835, in Kemble, 22. In 1838 she recorded her horror of the institution of slavery as she had seen it on a visit to her husband's plantation, but out of deference to her husband's wishes did not publish it at this time. The *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-39* was published in New York in 1863, chiefly as an effort to convert British public opinion to the northern cause.

<sup>41</sup> W. H. Furness, Robert Collyer and His Church. A Discourse delivered . . . November 12, 1871 (Philadelphia, n.d.), 6.

members of the Society, who constituted its dominant element, opposed the provocation of a quarrel with the South. One outstanding member, Pierce Butler, drew his ample fortune from the extensive rice and cotton plantations in Georgia which he had inherited from his grandfather, Senator Pierce Butler of South Carolina.

It was not until 1841 that the smoldering resentment of the party in opposition to Furness' antislavery preaching burst out in open rebellion against him. On Sunday, January 3, Furness preached an anniversary sermon, as was his custom, commenting on the completion of another year of service to the Society. He then spoke of slavery and, according to Sill, "His opinions were very just, & strongly and independently enforced—and I hope will prove satisfactory to his hearers generally, altho' some have dissented therefrom." Sill's worst fears were realized the following week. "The ideas he so boldly utter'd last Sunday relative to Slavery did not please a certain old Member of our Church, who, a day or two afterwards, wrote Mr. Furness a note, in an arrogant tone, demanding to know how far he purposed to go with his obnoxious doctrines, and protesting solemnly against them."43

Furness consulted with his friends, who "counsell'd him to be passive—non-militant—not to make Slavery a leading question, but an incidental," but at the same time to preserve his independence.44 He agreed to think over this advice and subsequently wrote a very temperate reply to the "old Friend" who had written him, who was undoubtedly Iames Taylor, one of the original founders of the Society. That gentleman was not to be pacified so easily. He flatly refused to listen to any antislavery preaching and demanded that Furness notify the congregation in advance when he intended to preach on that subject so that those who did not wish to listen could stay away. Furness refused both to desist from his antislavery preaching and to notify the congregation in advance of what he intended to say. Actually, his program was at this time decidedly moderate. He did not recommend overt action to help the slave, but simply wanted both North and South to acknowledge that a great wrong was being done; he believed that the remedying of the wrong

<sup>42</sup> Sill, Diary, II, 326.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 334.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 335.

would inevitably follow the recognition of its existence. In a sermon delivered on May 14, 1841, on the occasion of the National Fast recommended by the President, he declared: "They who are pleading for the slave, propose no plan of abolition. If they did, they might well be accused of improper interference. They aim only to assert the principle of freedom and justice." His profound belief in the essential nobility of all men survived even the ignoble demonstrations to which he was daily exposed in Philadelphia.

Many of Furness' people began visiting him to plead for a cessation of his antislavery preaching. They conceded that slavery was a great national wrong; they hated slavery in the abstract; they were willing to listen to antislavery lectures at other places and at other times; but, when it came to the Unitarian church services in Philadelphia, their plea was "Not here and not now." Sill took issue with this viewpoint.

... I thought that both the place & time were appropriate, and that Mr. Furness never exhibited pure Christianity more forcibly nor more fittingly than when he advocated the cause of the poor Slave . . .; but it is hard to convince people who are determined not to listen, and in this situation are to be found not only a majority of our Church, but a large majority of the people of this Community;—it seems to me that they will not listen to the slightest whisper on the subject.<sup>47</sup>

More and more members threatened and actually began giving up their pews, but Furness continued his course, with Sill applauding his courage, and, what was even more to the point, fighting Furness' battle in the closed sessions of the Trustees' meetings.

On July 3, 1842, Furness announced that he would make the approach of Independence Day the occasion for pointing out the inconsistency of Americans who professed to love Liberty and Freedom while holding three million human beings in slavery. "Several, perhaps 5 or 6, of the Congregation suddenly arose, and left the Church." The next day, although it was the Fourth of July, was

<sup>45</sup> W. H. Furness, A Sermon delivered May 14, 1841, on the Occasion of the National Fast Recommended by the President (Philadelphia, 1841), 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Sill's diary for this period is filled with specific references to persons who talked to him and with reports of their conversations.

<sup>47</sup> Sill, Diary, III, 51.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., IV, 32.

not much of a holiday for Sill, for he "was beset with persons to talk and argue on the subject of the 'Abolition Sermon' of yesterday."49 Almost everyone who talked to him objected violently to the pastor's course, ten making objections to one who approved, and many suggested that this might be the cause of the dissolution of the Society. The following day a report reached Sill that the disaffected members of the church were getting up a Memorial addressed to the pastor or to the Trustees, demanding that Furness stop his antislavery preaching. On July 9, at a meeting of the Trustees, Joshua Tevis, one of their number, presented both a resolution censuring Furness and his own resignation as a Trustee. 50 Sill parried the resolution by reading from the ninth section of Article 2 of the By-Laws of the Society, which declared that the Trustees "shall have no power to control or interfere with the Minister in relation to his official duties," and Tevis withdrew his proposal. His resignation was tabled and all seemed to be well.

In the first week of August another series of anti-Negro riots broke out in Philadelphia, and Garrison stated that "the only Philadelphia clergyman who made this shocking outbreak the subject of a discourse was the Unitarian William H. Furness."51 That same week Tevis called on Sill and asked him for a complete list of church members, which Sill, as secretary of the Trustees, gave him, although he suspected that Tevis was up to no good. Furness began to grow restive as he waited for the opposition to act. He knew that Tevis and others were quietly going about mustering support, but he did not know who was lending that support and the suspense wore on his nerves. At one point he admitted to actual illness as a result of this undercover campaign, but his ultimate reaction was a fighting one. He gave Sill to understand that he was on the point of resigning his charge, but Sill pleaded with him to consider his duty to his friends and all the unnumbered hundreds who would relapse into infidelity were Furness to leave Philadelphia. Furness waited, but while waiting continued to fire thunderbolts from the pulpit, though often his tone was more one of sorrow than of anger. He told his people in

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>50</sup> Minutes of the Trustees, Vol. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, eds., William Lloyd Garrison, 1805–1879 (Boston, 1885), III, 45.

August, 1842, "When I feel myself bound, as I do, to utter ungracious truth, to speak what it offends and pains you to hear, it is one of the very hardest duties that I have ever undertaken to perform." 52

Sill became the target for attack at this time. Appointed a juror to serve in the case of the damage suit being brought by the proprietors of Pennsylvania Hall, he had doubted the propriety of his serving, since he was a member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and might well be challenged for prejudice against the defendants. He was persuaded by Quaker acquaintances to accept the appointment, however, and await further developments. The developments came in the form of an article in *The Spirit of the Times*, which violently objected to Sill's serving as a juror, calling him "one of the most ardent disturbers of the peace of the South and the whole Country, in this matter. His views are known to all, we presume, who attend Mr. Furness' Church; and he is represented to be the strongest supporter of the Abolition discourses delivered by that Gentleman." 53

Sill was horrified that public attention was thus drawn to Furness and the church in such critical terms, because he feared that it might mark them for future outrage at the hands of the mob. He immediately resigned as a juror, informing Furness of his action and explaining his regret for the incident. He was greatly relieved to find his friend undisturbed about it, but in further conversation, in which Mrs. Furness took part, he was pained to find that that lady disagreed with her husband on this important topic. He confided to his diary, sadly, "He [Furness] has trials, it seems, at home, and abroad; and needs all the support and sympathy of his friends to invigorate his convictions of truth and duty."54 As a matter of fact, Mrs. Furness had told her sister that she wished Furness would give up his church and take a small farm in New England,55 while her family, agreeing with her as to the dangers implicit in Furness' activities, repeatedly urged him, in correspondence, to give up his abolitionist program.

<sup>52</sup> W. H. Furness, A Discourse delivered on the Occasion of the Erection in the Church of Tablets in Memory of John Vaughan, Ralph Eddowes, and William Y. Birch, August 20th, 1842 (Philadelphia, n.d.), 11.

<sup>53</sup> Sill, Diary, IV, 108.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>55</sup> Letter to Mary Jenks, Sept. 2, 1842, in Collected Correspondence, II.

It was Sill who finally broke under the suspense of waiting for the Memorial to be delivered, and on September 14, 1842, he, John Scholefield, president of the Board of Trustees, and Jacob Snider, Jr., decided to draw up a Counter-Paper, or Declaration, in defense of the pastor's right of freedom of speech and thought. This smoked out the opposition, and on September 23 the Protest was submitted to Furness with thirty-nine signatures attached.<sup>56</sup>

The opposition had been working on the Protest for six weeks, but the best they had been able to muster was but a small minority of the congregation. They were a potent minority, to be sure, in terms of wealth. The anonymous Wealth and Biography of the Wealthy Citizens of Philadelphia, published in Philadelphia in 1845, listed Evans Rogers as one of the city's seven millionaires, Tams at \$200,000, Mellon at \$100,000, and Crissy, Elliott, and Tevis at \$50,000 each. The Counter-Paper, however, after only a few days, bore almost fifty signatures, which, by November, had been increased to seventy-eight. The committee decided that this exact doubling of the number of names on the original Protest was a neat point at which to stop, and their document was presented to the pastor as reassurance that he still had the support of the majority of his flock. The wording of the Protest was actually very mild:

We whose names are hereunto subscribed, being pew-holders, renters of pews, & occupants of portions of pews in the First Unitarian Church in the City of Philadelphia,—sincerely desirous of maintaining harmony in said Church would respectfully represent our deliberate opinion, before Mr. Furness & the Congregation, and we hereby declare it our conscientious conviction that in the occasional lectures by the Pastor on the subject of Abolition of Slavery in the South we perceive no good, present or remote, but on the contrary it sows the seeds of disunion and if continued, we earnestly believe it will greatly injure the Society as a body of Christians, creating

56 Those who signed were James Allen, William V. Anderson, William H. Bernard, S. H. Carpenter, E. W. Clark, E. L. Colcord, Thomas Cook, Charles S. Cope, James Crissy, George F. Croft, Edward Dodge, Isaac Elliott, Hugh English, James English, William H. Evans, Samuel C. Ford, Isaac Heylin, David Hill, William T. Howell, M. L. Hurlbut, Charles Leland, Z. Lathrop, Robert McGregor, Thomas Mellon, R. B. Parkinson, Algernon S. Roberts, Evans Rogers, William E. Rogers, Thomas Sully, Sampson Tams, Joshua Tevis, Charles J. Thomas, Jacob Thomas, Joseph M. Thomas, Charles Toppan, John Towne, Daniel C. Wharton, George W. A. Williams, John Yarrow.

<sup>57</sup> The Counter-Paper has unfortunately not been preserved, but the Protest is extant among the papers of the church.

hostile parties, where the holier bands of brotherhood should exist—And we do moreover conscientiously believe, that in the course referred to, no good can result to that portion of human beings for whom our sympathies are so earnestly required.

Although there is no complete record of losses in membership suffered by the Society during this period, it is definitely known that Taylor left the Church in 1841, never to return. In a letter to John Vaughan, another of the early leaders of the Society, he stated his disapproval of

the introduction of any political matter into the pulpit of a Christian Church. . . . I retire from an attendance on Mr. Furness's ministry with sincere and earnest wishes that the Church may be built up a *spiritual* house; and as my stated attendance in a church of a different faith and worship might be misconstrued, it is not my intention to frequent any other church.<sup>58</sup>

Samuel Vaughan Merrick, a very influential member of the Society, had been noted among the absentees on May 16, 1841, together with the Taylors, the Tevises, and the Townes, 59 and since Merrick did not sign the Protest a year later it is probable that he did not return. Furness continued to preach on the evils of slavery, and members of his congregation continued to protest. Sampson Tams ordered Sill to sell his pew in January, 1846, using "some very improper & vulgar language about Mr. Furness,"60 but even the loyal Scholefield confided to Sill that he was beginning to be a bit wearied by Furness' "constant reiteration of Abolition sentiments."61 It was suggested that Furness was so much involved in antislavery preaching that he was becoming negligent of his other pastoral duties, and there was some talk of having a public meeting of protest, but nothing came of this. Still, old members continued to absent themselves from the services. Oddly enough, however, the church continued to be filled, as more and more people were drawn to hear its pastor.

On September 1, 1846, the Unitarian church in New Bedford, Massachusetts, one of the wealthiest and most cultivated congregations in New England, wrote to the Philadelphia Society and to its

<sup>58</sup> Taylor to Vaughan, May 20, 1841, Manuscripts of the American Philosophical Society.

<sup>59</sup> Sill, Diary, III, 52.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., VI, 469.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 346.

pastor, separately, offering Furness its pastorate. This was a most unusual procedure. It was customary to approach only the minister being offered the new charge in the beginning of negotiations, and the New Bedford church's action indicated an awareness of the struggle going on in the Philadelphia church. Although Furness openly declared that he preferred to stay in Philadelphia, he presented the choice to the Society, which held a general meeting to consider the matter on September 28. Sill, as secretary of the Trustees, handled the meeting like a general planning a campaign, but while he and his friends frantically conferred and organized the proceedings in the pastor's behalf, Furness preached a fiery sermon on slavery on the same day he announced the coming meeting, making several members of the congregation so angry that they decided not to attend the meeting at all. When it did take place, the final vote was three hundred to three in favor of Furness' retention. 62 His triumph was complete. The following Sunday he expressed from the pulpit his thanks to his congregation, but stated that he felt they were still not convinced of the necessity for the abolition of slavery and that he must therefore continue to preach on such themes. According to Sill, "the congregation was almost breathless in their attention."63 The New Bedford episode was the last serious questioning of Furness' antislavery preaching. Many of the dissident faction still remained in the congregation, and as Furness became even more outspoken in his service to the abolition cause, many more were added to the ranks of the disaffected. But officially the Society had had its opportunity to free itself of its pastor if it wished to do so, and it had decided in the negative. From this point on, Furness' tenure in office was assured.

Furness never joined any antislavery society. He was temperamentally opposed to joining any organization, even those of his own denomination. Maria West Chapman said of him that he had come at last "into practical fellowship with the American abolitionists," and this was all that he would do.<sup>64</sup> He declared that "as pastor of a Christian Church, I felt myself ex officio the presiding officer of an

<sup>62</sup> Proceedings of a Meeting of the Members and Pew-Holders . . . Held on the 28th September, 1846 . . . (Philadelphia, 1846).

<sup>63</sup> Sill, Diary, VII, 188.

<sup>64</sup> Obituary notice in The Nation, Feb. 6, 1896.

anti-slavery society."65 There was nothing startlingly original about his antislavery arguments, which can be summed up under four headings. First of all, as a Christian, he found slavery contrary to Divine Law. Since God had created all men equal, any attempt to circumvent God's plan by maintaining one race in perpetual inferiority to another was sinful and no human considerations could make it otherwise. Secondly, from a humanitarian viewpoint, slavery was evil because of its cruelty and barbarity to those enslaved. This was argued not merely on the basis of physical excesses perpetrated against the slave, but upon spiritual grounds, because of the demoralizing and destructive effect it had upon the mind and soul of the slave. Thirdly, slaveholding was degrading to those who practiced it and to those who tolerated its practice by others. Defiance of God's law eventually produced mental and moral blindness, and both North and South were suffering from the results of this spiritual sickness. Finally, the presence of slavery in the United States was discrediting the nation in the eves of the world. Americans were irretrievably committed to the cause of freedom by the Declaration of Independence and this pledge had to be redeemed. The story of American slavery was being told throughout the world and the nation was being exposed to ridicule and shame. Slavery convicted the United States of national hypocrisy and deceit. It branded democracy a fraud, discouraging the downtrodden all over the world who were striving to cast off their chains and who looked to the United States as a pattern for freedom. A regular development may be traced in Furness' antislavery preaching, from an early optimism, which led him to believe that emancipation could be quickly and peacefully achieved by moral suasion, through a gradual disillusionment, to a final, sober conviction that freedom for the slave could be won only by force of arms.

Furness was closely identified with the Garrisonian group of antislavery crusaders. The papers of Garrison contain many evidences of the closeness between them, in letters exchanged between the two men and in Garrison's editorial comments in *The Liberator* upon Furness' activities. For Furness, Garrison was one of those leaders "with large and fiery hearts" who sometimes come to lead men on to

<sup>65</sup> Sermons, Addresses and Essays delivered at the Celebration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Foundation of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1896), 31.

Right.<sup>66</sup> The Unitarians as a denomination, however, regretted the overzealousness of the Garrisonians, for the Unitarians were by temperament and conviction holders of the middle ground, believers in the law of reason and given to the ways of reasonableness. "Enthusiasm" of any sort they drew back from with distaste. There were many illustrious exceptions, such clergymen as Samuel J. May, Charles Follen, William Ellery Channing, Henry Ware, Jr., and such laymen as Ellis Gray Loring, Edmund Quincy, H. I. Bowditch, Lydia M. Child, and Maria West Chapman, to name only a few. But for the most part the denomination for many years took a negative stand on the subject of antislavery agitation. 67 Furness, on the other hand, felt that if the Garrisonians were guilty of excesses of speech in their attacks upon slavery, they had been driven to such extremes by the callous indifference with which their efforts had been met, that is, when they were not actually subjected to brutal physical violence. Garrison had once been criticized by Samuel J. May for being "all on fire," and had retorted that he had to be on fire because he had mountains of ice to melt. 68 For Furness, Garrison had the right approach. "We may ridicule and despise enthusiasm and call it by all sorts of disparaging names, yet it is the life and hope of mankind, the central and moving power."69 Furness followed the Garrisonian line in his emphasis upon the Declaration of Independence as the basic document of evidence in the antislavery campaign, but he did not follow him to the point of advocating anarchy, nor did he ever find it necessary to indulge in invective. As a minister of the Gospel, he obviously parted company from Garrison when that gentleman decided that the only way to make progress was by scrapping religion altogether.

Furness relied upon the moral regeneration of the nation for the ultimate solution of the slavery problem. He deplored the use of force, for to try to force a man to change his opinions was to "inspire him with a superhuman, divine strength" and drive him to still greater extravagances of behavior. He saw abolitionism as "a pro-

<sup>66</sup> W. H. Furness, The Moving Power. A Discourse delivered . . . February 9, 1851, after the Occurrences of a Fugitive Slave Case (Philadelphia, 1851), 7.

<sup>67</sup> May, iv, 335-337.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>69</sup> Furness, The Moving Power, 7.

<sup>70</sup> W. H. Furness, A Sermon occasioned by the Destruction of Pennsylvania Hall . . . delivered . . . May 20, 1838 . . . (Philadelphia, 1838), 9.

foundly religious movement,"71 yet his emphasis upon religious conversion to the antislavery cause never identified him with the Theodore Weld school of abolitionists. In 1863 Furness said that he had once listened to Weld "with the greatest delight" and considered him "a high style of man," but there is no record that they ever had any other contact,78 and it is certain that Furness was vehement in his dislike for the revivalistic spirit which Weld personified. Preaching on the subject of revivalism in April, 1858, when Philadelphia was gripped by the evangelical outburst sponsored by the newly founded Young Men's Christian Association, Furness voiced his distaste unequivocally, stating that it looked to him "like a spasmodic effort of the old religious way of thinking, to recover the hold which, through the rapid progress of things it has been so steadily losing for the last half century upon the minds of men."74 Furthermore, Furness opposed Weld's program of political action as thoroughly as he objected to his revivalistic religion, for it was his conviction that "Legislation in this country can do little or nothing, if the governing spirit among all classes is hostile to it."75 Because of this conviction, in 1844 he refused to become a member of the Central Committee of the Liberty Party then being organized in Pennsylvania. He directed his efforts rather toward the creation of a public opinion favorable to emancipation. This he believed to be the program of the Garrisonians and on this he based his support of their cause.

It was true of Furness, as it was true of the Garrisonians generally, that he preached most often to the already converted. Garrison had said that to try to prepare the slave for emancipation in advance was like trying to teach a child to walk while holding him in one's arms. Furness reasoned similarly that slaveholders could not be won from error unless they were first convinced that they were wrong. This

<sup>71</sup> W. H. Furness, A Discourse Occasioned by the Boston Fugitive Slave Case. Delivered . . . April 13, 1851 (Philadelphia, 1851), 13.

<sup>72</sup> Furness to Lucy Osgood, Oct. 10, 1863, in Osgood Correspondence, a manuscript collection given to Elizabeth M. Geffen by Horace Howard Furness Jayne.

<sup>73</sup> There is no reference to Furness in Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké, 1822-1844 (New York, 1934), ed. by Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond.

<sup>74</sup> W. H. Furness, The Revivals. A Discourse delivered . . . April 11, 1858 (Philadelphia, 1858), 7.

<sup>75</sup> W. H. Furness, A Discourse delivered . . . January 19, 1840 . . . Occasioned by the Loss of the Lexington (Philadelphia, 1840), 5.

work of conviction was what he attempted to do, although, even as he made the attempt, he must have realized that conviction by remote control had its difficulties. No one held slaves in Pennsylvania after 1850, yet there were many members of Furness' congregation who were willing to partake of the "conspiracy of silence" which gave tacit consent to the activities of the slaveholders of the South, many who made their living from trade based on the productions of slave labor. It was these people, as well as actual slaveholders, whom Furness tried to reach, but most of them, unfortunately, were the first to absent themselves from church when the pastor's preaching struck too close. One of them, Evans Rogers, stood firm, however, and took the weekly drubbing with Christian fortitude. He was apparently an exception so notable that a tablet to his memory was gratefully erected in the church by Furness' son Horace because Rogers had, "in the dark days of slavery and with ties binding him to the South, steadfastly upheld the unrestricted Liberty of Speech in the Pulpit, whereby a moral support of rare value was afforded to the Minister,"76

In summary, one must conclude that in spite of their differences in philosophy and approach, Furness was more like Weld than like Garrison. Garrison had a genius for alienating people, and so bitter was his disappointment in friends thus estranged that his subsequent comments usually made the separation a permanent one. Furness, like Weld, made friends naturally and irresistibly, many times in the face of initial disapproval, and kept them through whatever upheavals followed. He was to become one of Philadelphia's most beloved citizens, in spite of his antislavery preaching, which actually became a point in his favor after the outbreak of the Civil War, and in spite of his Unitarianism, which never shared his tremendous popularity.

Furness became increasingly disgusted with the political maneuvering that went on behind the scenes of government. The 1840's were for him "days of political degeneracy," and for the professional politicians he found it impossible to say a good word. Believing that

<sup>76</sup> Church Memorials (Philadelphia, n.d.), 6. Horace Howard Furness had married Rogers' daughter Helen Kate on June 12, 1860.

<sup>77</sup> W. H. Furness, The Memory of the Just. A Discourse delivered . . . February 27, 1848 (Philadelphia, 1849), 9.

corrupt politics was responsible for hurling the nation into the Mexican War, "that abyss of blood and wrong," he was delighted when the smooth working of the political machinery was halted by "a little dust" thrown into the gears by the Free Soilers in 1849. That the operation of the national government was at a standstill because of the inability of the House of Representatives to choose a Speaker meant to him simply that "a right principle has become strong enough in its councils to prevent [the government's] moving any longer in a wrong direction." <sup>779</sup>

On December 19, 1849, Furness made his first speech to an antislavery meeting, addressing the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society during the annual Anti-Slavery Fair in Philadelphia. In May, 1850, he attended the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York and as one of the scheduled speakers shared the platform with such leaders of the abolitionist cause as Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Edmund Quincy, Isaac Hopper, Francis Jackson, and Frederick Douglass. Furness looked back upon this meeting as the most memorable and moving of his antislavery experiences. The newspapers were hostile and garbled the account of what took place, making the participants look like fools, but Furness considered this "a cheap price to pay for the privilege of witnessing such a triumph. . . . I had shared in the smile of Freedom, the belle and beauty of the world."80 His congregation back in Philadelphia took a somewhat different view of the matter, however, and there was "some thought of calling an indignation meeting of the church to express the mortification felt at my going and mixing myself up with such people," but he "had hardly given a thought to the effect at home, so full was I of the interest and glory of the occasion."81

By 1850 Furness was so completely involved in the antislavery cause that the visiting Swedish novelist Fredrika Bremer, occupying a cottage next to his at Cape May, New Jersey, during the summer, was moved to say of him:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> W. H. Furness, An Address delivered before a Meeting of the Members and Friends of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society During the Annual Fair, December 19, 1849 (Philadelphia, 1850), 15.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>80</sup> W. H. Furness, Discourse delivered . . . January 10, 1875, on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of His Ordination (Philadelphia, 1875), 29.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 35.

Mr. F. . . . is the minister of a Unitarian congregation in Philadelphia, one of the noblest, purest human beings whom God ever created, true, fervent, and full of love, but so absorbed by his anti-slavery feelings that his life and mind suffer in consequence, and I believe that he would with the greatest pleasure suffer death if by that means slavery could be abolished.<sup>82</sup>

For Furness all other causes were paling into insignificance beside the slavery issue. The agitation against Sunday travel, for one, he felt was ridiculous, finding it hard to respect the tender consciences of those who would not travel on the Sabbath but who would tolerate slavery.<sup>83</sup> It was the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, however, which roused him to fighting fury. On September 29, 1850, his whole sermon was preached on that subject, and he was "listened to with deep attention," making a tremendous impression upon those still unconvinced among the congregation.<sup>84</sup> The following Sunday he announced from the pulpit his intention to oppose the law, regardless of what happened to him as a result, and called on all Christians to do the same.<sup>85</sup> This sermon gave offense to many, and there were new absences from the congregation the next Sunday.

Philadelphia had long been one of the main centers for the operation of the Underground Railroad. William Still, the corresponding secretary of the Vigilance Committee of that organization and chairman of its active subcommittee, said of Furness' services: "In the operations of the Vigilance Committee he took the liveliest interest. Though not in form a member he was one of its chief co-laborers. He brought it material aid continually, and was one of its main reliances for outside support." In Seibert's directory of Underground Railroad operators, in his *Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*, Furness is listed as one of the operators for Philadelphia County. In direct proportion to the volume of its "business" on the Railroad, Philadelphia was hard hit by the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act. The seizure of alleged fugitives upon the streets of the city seemed to become almost a daily occurrence, and the trials which followed were the occasion for much excitement. The antislavery

<sup>82</sup> Fredrika Bremer, The Homes of the New World (New York, 1854), I, 529-530.

<sup>83</sup> W. H. Furness, Sunday Travel. A Discourse delivered . . . April 28, 1850 . . . (Philadelphia, 1850), 14.

<sup>84</sup> Sill, Diary, IX, 212.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>86</sup> Still, 659.

workers of the area attended the trials in full force and among them Furness seems to have been a familiar figure. He carried his impressions of the proceedings to his congregation, trying to win them by his own vehemence to a like opposition to the act. He saw "the sacred soil of this Free State of Pennsylvania turned into a very Guinea coast, a hunting-ground, where human beings are the game," and as each new case developed he expressed his growing agitation to his congregation, though it was "hard to speak to unsympathetic hearers, knowing that many, if not most, of those who listen to you, regard you, even in their charity, as the victim of a blind and narrow zeal." It was plain to him that the South's price for staying in the Union was to be that the North become its slave-keepers.

On November 21, 1850, the extent of the opposition to Furness' crusade in Philadelphia was made tumultuously clear at a "Great Union Meeting" held in the large salon of the Chinese Museum "under a call signed by upwards of 5,000 citizens." John Sergeant, president of the meeting, was followed by George M. Dallas, Josiah Randall, Joseph R. Ingersoll, Richard Rush, James Page, and Isaac Hazlehurst, with letters read from such absent leaders as Clay, Webster, Buchanan, and Cass, all asking for support of the Compromise of 1850. Among the signers of the call were at least seven of Unitarian connection: George Fales, Isaac Elliott, Jr., Charles Desilver, George W. Fairman, Kay & Brother, Sampson Tams, and Jacob Snider, Jr.

Furness now felt so driven by the demands of the times that he gladly accepted the charge of being "political" in his sermons. "What if I am political?" he demanded. "What if every pulpit in the land should be ringing in these days with political events? God knows there is need."<sup>90</sup> It was no longer possible to remain aloof. "Though we will not meddle with public affairs, who shall answer for it that public affairs will not meddle with us?"<sup>91</sup> On August 25, 1852, he was

<sup>87</sup> Furness, The Moving Power, 11.

<sup>88</sup> Furness, Discourse . . . April 13, 1851, 3.

<sup>89</sup> Proceedings of the Great Union Meeting, held . . . 21st of November, 1850 (Philadelphia, 1850).

<sup>90</sup> W. H. Furness, A Discourse for the Time. Delivered January 4, 1852 (Philadelphia, 1852), 14.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

one of the "eminent divines" who wrote his congratulations to Charles Sumner for his speech in the Senate against the Fugitive Slave Act. 92 On October 31 he was bitterly criticized in his native Boston when, exchanging pulpits with the Reverend Mr. Frothingham, he preached at the Brattle Street Church and failed to perform the expected obeisance to the memory of Daniel Webster, who had died the week before. 93

In February, 1854, Sill remarked on the fact that many strangers seemed to be coming to church on Sundays. The pews were always well filled and the newcomers listened raptly to what Furness had to say. 94 It is highly probable that he was preaching abolition more and more to the already converted, the violent dissenters and even the moderately irritated having left the church entirely or simply absented themselves frequently. Events were hurrying to a climax on the national scene, and Furness was drawn into the larger picture when his friend Charles Sumner, attacked on the floor of the Senate by Preston Brooks in May, 1856, came to Furness' home in Philadelphia on July 7 to recuperate. 95 His physician was Dr. Caspar Wister, 96 who had married Furness' daughter Annis in June, 1854. Sumner's injuries did not heal and in August a trip to the seashore was advised. It was to the house of the pastor's brother James at Cape May that the Senator went, there to spend several weeks, vainly seeking an improvement in health. 97 The seashore air not helping either, he went, on his physician's advice, to Cresson in the Allegheny Mountains, and there Furness visited him. Writing to Sumner from Philadelphia on August 15, Furness implored him to stay in the mountains and avoid the frightful heat of Philadelphia.98 It was not until September that Sumner returned, this time staying with the James Furnesses on Pine Street. He left only in late October, returning to Boston to cast his vote in the fall elections. According to the pastor's sister-in-law, after Sumner's departure "The little library

<sup>92</sup> Edward L. Pierce, ed., *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner* (Boston, 1894), III, 309. 93 Sill, Diary, X, 161-162.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>95</sup> Pierce, III

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 505, 507.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., IV, 336.

1958

was like an empty chapel, and the old friendly sofa had a monumental air." It should be noted to the credit of the Philadelphia Unitarians that their pastor was permitted to lend aid and comfort to Sumner without any interference from his congregation. In this he was more fortunate than another Philadelphia clergyman, the Reverend Dudley Atkins Tyng, rector of the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany, whose resignation was requested by the Vestry and upheld by a plebescite of the members of the church, when he preached an antislavery sermon following Brooks's attack on Sumner. 100

It was during this period, while Furness was actively urging defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act and doing everything short of armed violence to defeat the law, that his conduct became the object of Federal scrutiny. According to his son Horace, there had been a discussion in President Buchanan's Cabinet as to whether or not the Federal Grand Jury should indict Furness for treason because of this activity, and it was only because of the strong disapproval of John K. Kane, United States District Judge of Pennsylvania, to whom the matter was referred, that the project was abandoned. This same judge had been an especially close friend of Furness' in the preabolition days, but had turned from him and refused even to speak to him after the controversy had begun. Still, such was the tie of old friendship, as well as the uprightness of the judge, that he protected Furness against a Federal indictment.<sup>101</sup>

In December, 1859, it was Mayor Alexander Henry of Philadelphia who protected Furness when he was again drawn into the national picture by events surrounding the execution of John Brown for the raid on Harper's Ferry. On Sunday morning, November 27, 1859, Furness had informed his congregation that he would receive contributions for Brown's family. On Friday morning, December 2, at the moment of Brown's execution, a public meeting was held in National Hall in Philadelphia, called by "the friends of impartial freedom," at which Furness shared the platform with James and

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., III, 507.

<sup>100</sup> Russell E. Francis, "The Religious Revival of 1858 in Philadelphia," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXX (1946), 56.

<sup>101</sup> Horace Howard Furness, Historical Address delivered in Connection with the Installation of the Reverend Charles E. St. John as Minister of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, 12th of January, 1908 (Philadelphia, 1908), 12.

<sup>102</sup> North American and United States Gazette, Nov. 28, 1859.

Lucretia Mott, Mary Grew, Theodore Tilton, and Robert Purvis. 103 Meanwhile, in Virginia, fear of mob action was so great that Brown's body was hurried out of town immediately after his execution, without any preparation for burial. The train which bore it northward entered Philadelphia at Broad and Prime streets. A large crowd had gathered at the station long before the train was due, including many Negroes, abolitionists both black and white, and the large group of southern medical students who had come to be a familiar feature of every antislavery disturbance in the city. 104 By order of the city authorities, everyone was barred from the train platform but Miller McKim, the abolitionist leader, the mayor and the chief of police, and Furness and his son Horace, who left an account of the proceedings. 105 The train was more than an hour late, and as the crowd waited, tension mounted. It was finally decided that control was too uncertain to risk preparing the body in Philadelphia for burial, as had been planned. To lure the crowd away from the station, a box filled with carpenters' tools, simulating the coffin, was taken from the train when it arrived and placed on a cart, which was then driven off with the crowd following. When the way was clear, the body was placed in a wagon and quickly taken down to the Walnut Street wharf and ferried over to New Jersey, whence it was taken to Brown's home at North Elba, New York. 106 The 1861 annual report of the American Anti-Slavery Society stated that "one of the noblest men that [Philadelphia] holds, Rev. Wm. H. Furness," protested in the public press against the mayor's action in not allowing Brown's body to rest for a few hours in the city, for Furness believed that the whole city should have been at the station, headed by civil, ecclesiastical, and military authorities, to do honor to Brown. He felt that the mayor had exceeded his authority in ordering the body moved on immediately.107

<sup>103</sup> Scharf and Westcott, I, 732.

<sup>104</sup> On the eve of the Civil War approximately 200 out of 454 students at the Medical School of the University of Pennsylvania were southerners, while nearly 400 out of 630 at Jefferson Medical College came from the South. Frederick P. Henry, ed., Standard History of the Medical Profession of Philadelphia (Chicago, 1897), 219.

<sup>105</sup> H. H. Furness, 16-18.

<sup>106</sup> North American and United States Gazette, Dec. 5, 1859.

<sup>107</sup> The Anti-Slavery History of the John Brown-Year. The Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society (New York, 1861), 130.

The newspapers for several days were filled with accounts of every incident connected with Brown's raid, his trial, and execution, and Furness' name appeared somewhere on every page, the only clergyman, apparently, to be thus active in the case. He was singled out for particular mention at the "Great Union Meeting" held on December 7, 1859, to "rebuke" the "recent fanatical demonstration at National Hall." The printed account of the proceedings stated that "Our patriotic and conservative citizens were even more alarmed than their Southern brethren at such a display of fanaticism" and wanted to set the record straight. The reason for their concern was made clear.

Philadelphia has always been loyal to the Union. Her business relations with all sections of the country are such as to interweave her interests with those of the South as well as the North. Her prosperity is dependent upon domestic peace and harmony.<sup>110</sup>

The meeting place, Jayne's Hall, on Chestnut Street below Seventh, was filled early, more than 6,000 persons attending. All classes were represented, but the businessmen were most strongly in evidence. There were several speakers, some of them almost hysterically violent, but it was the Honorable Josiah Randall who directly mentioned Furness, admitting that "the people at large . . . have no power to prevent the Rev. Mr. Furness and Mrs. Lucretia Mott from disseminating their sceptical disunion doctrines; but they have no part nor lot with them." Furness replied to this attack some months later, when he referred in a sermon to the actions of "persons from whose education and position better things were to be expected." 112

Furness was again involved in riotous proceedings on December 15, 1859, when George William Curtis arrived to give an address at National Hall on "The Present Aspect of the Slavery Question." <sup>113</sup>

```
108 Great Union Meeting, Philadelphia, December 7, 1859 (Philadelphia, n.d.).
```

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>112</sup> W. H. Furness, Put Up Thy Sword. A Discourse delivered . . . March 11, 1860 (Boston, 1860), 16.

<sup>113</sup> This and the following incident were related by Isaac H. Clothier in an article in the Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, Dec. 14, 1902, entitled "Philadelphia in Slavery Days." He was chairman of the committee on arrangements.

As the hour for the lecture approached, great crowds began to gather around National Hall and the mayor called out six hundred police to protect the meeting. The committee in charge of the arrangements went to Furness' house to escort Curtis to the hall, but before they left, "a prominent citizen" called and asked Curtis not to keep his engagement, for if he did, violence would almost surely occur. Curtis asked Furness' advice and Furness replied: "If it costs the lives of all of us, we must go on." Curtis agreed, and they left for National Hall. Curtis lectured for an hour, while brickbats were thrown through the windows by the mob outside, but the police finally seized the ringleaders and confined them in the cellar of the hall, warning the mob that if they fired the building their friends would die first. The meeting then proceeded to a natural close. A year later the same group invited Curtis to speak again, but the lessee of Concert Hall refused to allow its use for that purpose. Even the mayor was opposed to the undertaking, for with the election of Lincoln and the growing threat of secession by the southern states, public opinion in Philadelphia had become inflamed to fever pitch.

Because of Furness' activities, it was generally feared that he and his church would be the first target for attack should an armed conflict finally break out between the North and the South. Furness himself had anticipated such an attack and had declared that he would never fight back, but his congregation were not all so nonresistant. Many of them began coming to church armed to protect their pastor and themselves from the threat of imminent violence which hovered over the Society in the last moments before the outbreak of the war. 114 On December 16, 1860, Furness preached a powerful sermon, full of prophetic warnings and grim with forebodings. It was published in the Evening Bulletin and made a great impression on the whole city. On April 26, 1861, after the firing upon Fort Sumter, when Furness mounted his pulpit, his church was crowded to capacity with people of all denominations who had come to hear his words. William Still later recorded the indelible impression made upon him on that occasion: "None can ever forget the long-drawn breath with which the sermon began: 'The long agony is over!' It was the 'Te Deum' of a life-time."115

<sup>114</sup> H. H. Furness, 11-12; Still, 663. 115 Ibid., 665.

Furness continued preaching against slavery all through the war years, but, whereas his prewar attacks upon American toleration of slavery had fallen with equal weight upon both North and South, he gradually decided in the course of the conflict that the North had all along been imperceptibly imbibing a love of justice and freedom which would inevitably bring it victory. That the North had for many years upheld southern slavery he had to admit, especially since he had made this accusation the subject of many of his sermons, but this he now explained by declaring that the northern mind had been drugged with the poison of too-close association with the South and had suffered a moral and mental blindness as a result. 116 He went even further and charged that this had not been accidental: the Slave Power had been active for three-quarters of a century "in depraying the moral sense of the nation."117 This "southern conspiracy" theme continued to be expressed in his sermons, and as late as 1864 he described the prewar years as a period "when the wisdom of the land was always toiling to make peace, while one section, as we have at last been made to believe at a most bloody cost, was steadily plotting to make war on the other."118 By 1865, however, he saw in the war more than a political revolution. He finally came to believe that it was also a theological and religious revolution, in which a rising spirit of humanity would eventually wipe away all denominational distinctions and men would at long last become brothers.119

The year 1865, marking the end of the Civil War, also brought to a victorious close Furness' antislavery preaching. From that day in 1839 when he had first publicly espoused the cause of abolitionism he had never rested, carrying on his fight for freedom against formidable opposition at every level, and he had the gratifying experience of living to see his views prevail. Actually, he was very much a man of his time. The middle third of the nineteenth century was truly the age of "Freedom's Ferment," and the antislavery crusade was only one of

<sup>116</sup> W. H. Furness, Our American Institutions. A Thanksgiving Discourse delivered . . . August 6, 1863 (Philadelphia, 1863), 13.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> W. H. Furness, A Voice of the Hour. A Discourse . . . January 10, 1864 (Philadelphia, n.d.), 8.

<sup>119</sup> W. H. Furness, The Fountain of Christian Truth. Discourse . . . March 5, 1865 (Philadelphia, 1865), 15.

the many campaigns being fought for human freedom and the betterment of all mankind. Abolitionism was, in fact, a world-wide movement when Furness joined the ranks, and the United States was the last great nation to achieve emancipation. Domestically, the development of American industrialism was inevitably leading toward the end of the servile labor system, and though Philadelphia and the Unitarian Society opposed Furness at the start and for many years afterward, he had a more powerful ally. History was on his side.

University of Pennsylvania

ELIZABETH M. GEFFEN