

ABIGAIL KELLEY

1811-1887

AND STEPHEN SYMONDS FOSTER

1809-1881

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SIGNIFICANT FIGURES FROM AMERICAN history robs successive generations of models for moral and political responsibility. As a consequence married couples, among others who try to center their lives on justice issues, are seldom presented with flesh-and-blood examples of how to live their lives.

In some instances, men and women sacrifice their spouses in order to follow vocations for social justice. In others, one of them lives in the background, maintaining the family and caring for the children, while the other pursues a public life. In a few instances, however, husbands and wives successfully maintain two vocations, the one to the social order and the one to one another. This was particularly true of Abigail Kelley and Stephen Symonds Foster, both of whom appear in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, though Abby is generally regarded as the more famous of the two.

Both people, however, deserve a special place in the history of nonviolence, she as an abolitionist, feminist, and tax resister, he as a faithful apostle of nonviolence, abolitionist, and war resister. Their correspondence both before their marriage and during the years each stayed at home, while the other took to the circuit on behalf of abolitionism, is a remarkable record of a union that was oppressive to neither, that was liberating for both. That respect and love are reflected in a tribute Stephen wrote for Abby late in their lives: "O, how I wish

she could be young again, to thrill the very air with her fiery denunciations Her work, I fear, is nearly done on earth, but she has large investments in Heaven. In moral power I have never known her equal, and never shall."

Each of them came to marriage in 1845 with a dedication to social justice and something of a career based upon these concerns. Abby had advocated immediate abolition of slavery since the early 1830s, when she first heard William Lloyd Garrison speak, and Stephen had taken various risks in resisting slavery and militarism since his undergraduate days at Dartmouth College.

Born in Pelham, Massachusetts, on January 15, 1811, Abigail Kelley was the daughter of Irish Quakers. She attended schools in Worcester, Massachusetts, where her parents, prosperous farmers, moved soon after Abby was born, as well as the Friends School in Providence, Rhode Island. At the time she heard Garrison, she was teaching in Lynn, Massachusetts, and later headed a five-woman delegation to the National Female Anti-Slavery Society convention in New York. In 1839, she left teaching altogether in order to devote full-time to abolitionism, confessing to Theodore Weld at the time that she had "nothing to start upon, nothing to commend me to the notice or favor of any, no name, no reputation, no scrip, neither money in my purse."

Abby Kelley proved, nonetheless, to be an effective champion of the cause, traveling throughout New England, New York, and into the Midwest, speaking to large and appreciative audiences, and co-editing the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*. Frequently she was ridiculed for speaking to "promiscuous" audiences (that is, audiences of men and women), and for traveling about with men, both black and white. But she remained faithful to her motto: "Go where you are least wanted, for there you are most needed."

The very qualities that scandalized conventional souls were the ones that attracted Stephen Foster. As a vigorous and independent agitator for justice, he had long faced the kind of opposition that he occasionally provoked. Born in southern New Hampshire, on November 17, 1809, the ninth of twelve children, Stephen Symonds

Foster graduated from Dartmouth College in 1838 and went to study for a time at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He had been jailed in Hanover, New Hampshire, for refusing to perform military duty at college, and left Union when the administration refused permission for a room to hold an antiwar meeting. Later, as an itinerant preacher, he traveled New England, asking to speak to congregations, particularly if they had not endorsed abolitionism, and in 1843 he published a popular pamphlet entitled *The Brotherhood of Thieves; or, A True Picture of the American Church and Clergy*. It argued that any church that refused to condemn slavery was "more corrupt and profligate than any house of ill fame in the city of New York. . . ."

The 1850s were particularly hectic years for the Fosters, with Stephen and then Abby on speaking tours, while the other cared for their daughter, "Alla," born in 1847. That decade saw the first National Woman's Rights Conventions at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, and in Worcester, in 1850 and 1851, in which Abigail had an active part. During these years, particularly because of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, the Foster home in Worcester was a busy station on the underground railway. In 1854 an incident involving a federal marshal, who came to arrest a former slave, and the Worcester Vigilance Committee, which resisted him, tested Stephen's dedication to nonviolence. With two others, Foster escorted the arresting officer through a hostile crowd of abolitionists and onto a train back to Boston, to protect him from harm. In a letter to Abigail, Stephen described the conflict within himself; as an abolitionist, he opposed everything the officer stood for, but as a pacifist, he could not allow anyone to assault him.

I have often been myself the object of popular rage, as you well know, but never did I feel half the anxiety for my own life which I felt for his, or make half the effort to save it. There, I felt that the honor of our cause was at stake, and for the moment, my heart yearned almost with agony for a bloodless victory.

The Fosters were also tax resisters, maintaining that they owed no allegiance to a government which allowed Abigail no vote and little

voice in its proceedings. Only in old age, when Stephen was ill and Abigail was exhausted from a lifetime of agitation, did they finally pay the taxes to regain a title to their land. Stephen died in 1881 and Abigail in 1887, in Worcester; their home, near Tatnuck Square, is preserved and named on the National Register.

Wendell Phillips said of Stephen, who was noted for his resonant voice and his colorful denunciations of slaveholders, "It needed something to shake New England and stun it into listening. He was the man, and offered himself for the martyrdom." A writer for the *Woman's Journal* wrote, at the time of Abigail's death:

The women of this land owe this woman more than to any other human being, a debt of gratitude for the doors she opened for them to enter, for the paths she made smooth for them with her own bleeding feet, for the courage and conscientiousness and the faithfulness with which, amid persecution and reviling, she made the way clear for them to walk safely.

And best of all, their union was a happy one, both for the couple and for abolitionism, as Abigail wrote to a female friend:

I wish to congratulate the cause on the fact that since our marriage, meetings have been much more successful than heretofore. We realize that even in the anti-slavery cause a whole man and a whole woman are far better than a half-man and a half-woman.

BY STEPHEN SYMONDS FOSTER

The Brotherhood of Thieves, or a True Picture of the American Church and Clergy. New York: Arno Press, 1863, 1866 (1969).

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