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# Kentucky Antislavery Thought, 1830-1850

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KENTUCKY ANTISLAVERY THOUGHT,

1830-1850

by

J. Strassmaier

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

( There is undeniably a great negative element, in the history of the South in the thirty or so years preceding the Civil War, which prevented Southern society from realizing the promise of a native cultural greatness. It would be difficult to find in world history a society so intensely occupied with a single problem, such as that which dominated the mind of the ante-bellum South. And the magnitude of her problem had few antecedents; no historian attempting to see the problem of slavery through contemporary Southern eyes can help but be impressed by its dimensions. Even hindsight, ironically, opens up only a part of the solution, for the dilemma of slavery days has only been partially diminished, while our consciousness of its subtle complexity has expanded. Armed though he is with an abiding sympathy, however, the historian cannot escape the conclusion that the issue was failed, and that the reaction which succeeded stilled creative intellectual and cultural forces, disfiguring the monument of Southern achievement.) Thus Clement Eaton speaks of a retrogressive looking to a fictionalized romantic past compiled of fancy and tinged with Sir Walter Scott notions of feudalism--a sad contrast to the vitality of Northern culture with its welter of "isms," signs of intellectual ferment.<sup>1</sup> ( Ferment certainly marked the South at the same time, but it brought forth little that was positive.

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<sup>1</sup>Clement Eaton, "The Resistance of the South to Northern Radicalism," *New England Quarterly* (June 1935) 8:215-31, pp. 218-22.

Unlike transcendentalism, or the plainer reformism, the proslavery doctrine was not an achievement, but rather the lifeless residue of reaction.)

Our historicism has little use for classical analogy. There is no recourse in this instance to Sparta and Athens; for only too quickly the grand generalization that the ante-bellum South was an era of reaction, begins to break under the first strain of scrutiny. (The proslavery doctrine was not successfully imposed to stifle all independence of thought. It is important, of course, to understand the significance of the intellectual regimentation supposed to have been imposed by Calhouns and McDuffies; but it is equally necessary to recognize the appearance of dissent. Virginia tried the question of emancipation in 1832; Tennessee was on the verge of doing so in 1834.) Year after year in Maryland donations poured into the American Colonization Society in the hope that that organization held the answer to putting an end to slavery. (In the mountain regions of North Carolina and Virginia opposition to slavery was never silenced. Surpassing all was the spectacle of over twenty years of debate in Kentucky, where final acceptance of the existing situation was not rendered by outspoken independent minds until 1850.<sup>2</sup>)

The survival of independent thinking on the question of slavery in the Upper South was no doubt due to the fact that there the problem was not as great. It is a simple matter to understand why South Carolina and Mississippi could not begin to conceive of a solution to the 'Negro question.' Farther

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<sup>2</sup>Statistics on the number of free Negroes help considerably to explain the fate of antislavery movements in the various States of the Upper South. Virginia had 54,333 in 1850, Maryland 74,723, Tennessee 6,422 and Kentucky 10,011. J. G. Randall, The Civil War and Reconstruction (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., /c.1937/), 51. Virginia found the odds insuperable. Maryland, so overawed by her problem, clung to colonization with a desperate and irrational faith. Tennessee, independently of Virginia's example, still had the courage to raise the question of emancipation.

north, however, the number of Negroes was much smaller, and the dependence of the regional economy upon slavery was far from complete.

(A further reason why Kentuckians could think it possible to do without slavery was the potent example of her neighbor, Ohio: while Kentucky imported axe-handles, it was observed, Ohio was constructing steam engines.<sup>3</sup> Many believed that Kentucky could and ought to emulate Ohio. Such men were most likely to be Whigs, for the development of a healthy measure of commerce and industry was a major Whig design.<sup>4</sup>) Just how general the desire was to see Kentucky grow apace of her Northern sisters is illustrated by the passage, in the 1835-6 session of the Kentucky Legislature, of over eighty acts concerning the development of railroads, streams, and roads.<sup>5</sup> Governor Metcalfe gave this aspiration general definition in 1831: "It is believed to be a second maxim in political economy, that national wealth consists in the most enlarged and varied capacity to acquire the necessaries and comforts of life."<sup>6</sup> (The most common explanation of the disparity between the two states was the presence of slavery in Kentucky in contrast to free labor in Ohio. Slavery, then, could be considered a great economic evil, and the evidence indicates that it was widely thought so.)

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<sup>3</sup>Agricultural reform led by Edmund Ruffin of Virginia did bring a return to prosperity, culminating in the good years 1850 to 1860. But in comparison with the thriving Southern frontier areas, the Old South was still in relative stagnation. Reference to Northern economic energy could still have effect. Clement Eaton, Freedom of Thought in the Old South (New York: Peter Smith, 1951), 46.

<sup>4</sup>Kentucky proponents of a more diversified economy did not necessarily think of making their State over into a replica of industrial New England, for they could not escape the fact that Kentucky was bound to remain essentially an agricultural state. William E. Connelley and Ellis M. Coulter, History of Kentucky (5 vols., edited by Charles Kerr, Chicago: American Historical Society, 1922), 2:739.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 2:724.

<sup>6</sup>Niles Weekly Register, 41:253.

( Looking south, Kentucky appeared to enjoy all the disabilities of a slave state without any of the advantages. She had slaves, but might just as well do without them.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, identification with the South Carolina South was frequently resented. Adoption of the radical view of slavery would have been unnatural; the proslavery gospel had no audience in Kentucky. When radical South Carolina spoke of standing against the Union, this absence of a common interest inclined many Kentuckians to fear for the fate of the Union with genuine passion.)

( Remnants of the old Virginia liberalism held out west of the mountains throughout the ante-bellum period, sustained in part by reports of ruthless practices in the Deep South plantation regions. Slaveowners would take pride in the softness of the 'peculiar institution' farther north, and the contrast would be heightened by the occasional appearance of a south-bound coffle of slaves. Where slaves meant less as property, they would be thought of less as property; the humanity of the slave would be felt more in Kentucky than in Mississippi. The Notes on Virginia would not be neglected in Kentucky; Jefferson would become an authority for those concerned to define the character of a slaveholding society which was patently distinct from that of the Lower South.

These, then, were the bases of dissent in Kentucky: the relatively small number of slaves, the minority position of the slaveholding interest, evidences that slavery was unprofitable, the example of Ohio, a certain antagonism toward

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<sup>7</sup>Kentucky had 192,470 slaves in 1849, and they were concentrated mainly in eleven of the 96 counties in the State. Fifty five counties had a slave population of between 500 and 1,500. Observer and Reporter, January 24, 1849.

the Lower South, and humanitarian liberalism. These elements would help inspire and sustain a surprisingly tenacious opposition to slavery.)

(The Kentucky antislavery movement is the story of Kentuckians' awakening to the full dimensions of their dilemma. It is only when the inevitable consequences of emancipation are apprehended by the public that the movement is complete--for it is essentially the story of a movement toward greater consciousness. Hence it will be important to watch for a growing awareness of realities in the evidence that is laid out more or less chronologically in the following pages. The weight of this evidence has made it necessary to show in what ways the quality of Kentucky anti-slavery thought was not constant. The bases of dissent, sketched above, were indeed present from beginning to end.) For example, the matter of race, it will be noticed, was always in evidence. Here was, of course, the most important factor in the entire movement. But the relative prominence in the earlier years of philosophical and religious objection to slavery is practically demonstration enough that the race question had not matured. As it gradually dawned on Kentuckians just what emancipation would mean, the basis of discussion necessarily shifted to the more concrete question of economics. By the time the query 'What is to become of the freed People of Colour?' was raised in its full implications, the moral question was practically dead; when put to the vote, even the potent objection that slavery was retarding material prosperity could do little toward allaying the collapse of the antislavery impulse.

The respective roles of the ministry and of the colonization effort require special investigation. Church leadership was most promising in the



early years, for it offered a means for an organized campaign which could maintain standards of moral justice in the face of growing consciousness of hard realities. The churches could invoke a portion of courage (and in some instances heroism) from both individuals and from the public as a whole. But it would indeed be a treacherous path; too much or too little done or said by the ministers could do great damage to the cause. Hence the significance of the extremism of a James G. Birney, and of the enfeebling passivism which reaction to Birney forced upon such a man as John C. Young.

Just as important to this study of a public coming to know its problem will be the colonization movement. Here, for a change, little in the way of development will be apparent. From first to last, all demanded removal of emancipated Negroes. While the demand will grow no louder, however, it will attain new significance in the end when it comes to represent the decision of the community to avoid the crucial act of sacrifice which alone could have put an end to slavery. We must ask, then, in what way colonization contributed to the emancipation movement, and how it was a stifling influence, as Birney maintained. How did it serve to protect and promote discussion; how did it affect the public conscience?

The career of Cassius Clay forms a major subject of discussion in its own right. In his attempt to create an antislavery party, he stirred a wide public, for or against his ideas. We are concerned with the consequent democratization of antislavery thought. In the fateful year 1845 the public spoke out and continued to do so until the great and final test of the question of slavery in 1849. The discussion became elemental and highly practical; men spoke now

of emancipation in terms of dollars and cents, and people were shaken by the idea of the Negroes 'turned loose on the country.' There is virtue in realism; but what was the effect of the earlier idealism having gone silent? The narrative covering these years will of itself raise this last question. Clay almost alone will seem to understand the one practical way out which only idealism could indicate and concrete self-interest endow with conviction. His prevision of the racial adjustment, which historical hindsight shows was possible, if painful, was remarkable. Only, he could not communicate this to his audience, for, having concentrated on the economic argument, he had neglected higher aspects of the question until too late. And then must be appended something on Clay's personal motivations. This is required by a difference of interpretation: one says he was only out to promote Cassius Clay, while another believes that he was spurred on by virtue triumphant in a godly breast.

When the lesson was complete, or nearly so, i.e., in 1849 when the State went to the polls where the question of emancipation was up for a decision, an informed public delivered its conclusion. Kentucky antislavery thought had become common property through a process of change over some twenty years of exposure to discussion. What was superfluous was now discarded. Those elements which remained were arranged in a natural order which told the truth about the public's attitude; why slavery was so universally thought a curse; upon what conditions emancipation would be endured; just how far it was possible for a Kentuckian to understand the Negro as potentially his equal.

## CHAPTER II

ROBERT J. BRECKINRIDGE:

### THE OPENING OF THE EMANCIPATION DEBATE, 1830-1833

(Twenty years of direct criticism of slavery in Kentucky opened in 1830 against a background of general disaffection toward that institution. At the root of the critical attitude current in the early decades of the century lay a tradition of conscious paternalism; a benevolent disposition on the subject of slavery manifested itself in both private and public life.) The Western Luminary reminded Kentuckians in 1832 of the golden rule and other maxims of duty and honesty with regard to the treatment of their charges.<sup>1</sup> The same paper printed the story of a Kentucky lawyer, who, with the aid of Lyttleton, Coke, and Blackstone, had on one particular day decided to let a sleeping slave lie, out of regard for "Law, Religion /and/ Humanity." He had no right, he concluded after reflecting on the Declaration of Independence, to chastise the negligent slave.<sup>2</sup> (The grosser features of slavery were universally deplored,

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<sup>1</sup>The article, in the main a presentation of the economic evils of slavery, was signed "Woodford." Liberator, December 22, 1832, 2:203.

<sup>2</sup>"None of my law authorities established my right--they all gave me power to chastise my slave, but I was searching for the right to do so. I found that my law authorities would punish me for whipping my fellow man who was free; but my slave I might chastise at pleasure. Why? Because he was my slave. My next enquiry was, how did Jack become deprived of his freedom? Oh! he was born a slave.... And here my law authorities left me. When at College, I had read and always admired the principles of our Government, as developed in our Declaration of Independence, and the first paragraph of that noble instrument stared me 'flat i' the face:' 'all men are born free and equal.' I blushed for my folly, denounced slavery as inconsistent with Law, Religion or Humanity, and left Jack to his repose." Ibid., April 28, 1832, 2:63.

particularly the domestic slave trade. This was the subject of a petition from the Danville Masonic Lodge in 1827 and the object of a resolution of condemnation passed by the Kentucky Presbyterian Synod in 1834.<sup>3</sup> No sympathy was had for the likes of John Randolph of Roanoke, who would sell slaves when there seemed no necessity for it. "Old, cold, and withered....Negro breeder!" a correspondent to the Louisville Journal called him. "Negro-dealer was never an honored name," he continued; "of late years it has got so much below par, that no man undertakes it, except one who feels he can, after having made up his pack, retire well satisfied, 'infamous and contented,' upon wealth wrung from the unhappy."<sup>4</sup> The terms 'breeder' and 'dealer' may as well have been synonymous, considering the general aversion accorded the professional trader.<sup>5</sup>

(Perhaps one reason for the scandal created by mercenary public dealing in slaves was its relative infrequency. The traffic was not generally carried on for purely personal profit; financial trouble, getting rid of unruly slaves, and satisfying legal requirements, produced a local trade much greater, but less objectionable, than the interstate commerce.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps five hundred slaves

<sup>3</sup>Asa E. Martin, The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky, Prior to 1850 (Filson Club Publication, No. 29, Louisville: Standard Printing Co., 1918), 91.

<sup>4</sup>Liberator, March 10, 1832, 2:40.

<sup>5</sup>The editor of the Western Luminary, Thomas T. Skillman, was moved by "...scenes disgraceful, and altogether inconsistent with our character as a civilized and christian community" to accuse the heathenish drovers, and those who would deal with them, of sin-- "...a traffic so monstrous, that the morality of a heathen might well view it with horror!" The moral indictment was heightened by a reference to the abused slaves as "fellow creatures." Ibid., April 27, 1833, 3:67. Christianity weeps in vain over the traders, unfeeling monsters" whose crime was "so infinitely worse than murder," the editor of the Maysville Eagle, Richard H. Lee, declared. Maysville Eagle, July 12, 1831.

<sup>6</sup>William E. Connelley and Ellis M. Coulter, History of Kentucky (5 vols., edited by Charles Kerr, Chicago: American Historical Society, 1922), 2:797.

were sold in Kentucky yearly,<sup>7</sup> although this figure is disputed.<sup>8</sup> Kentuckians of the time had no secure standards of comparison; but what is more important, they regarded the trade as common.) One witness, James Love, a politician from Knox County, claimed that

In one instance he had known more than one hundred [slaves] pass through the little village where he dwelt, in one drove--for they are all called droves, Sir! many of them chained together; a very large portion of them less than fifteen years of age. It was on the sabbath, and as they entered the town, under the terrors of the scourge, although their hearts were bursting with grief, they were compelled to raise a hymn of thanksgiving to God.<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of how extensive they were, the more open abuses of the slavery system engendered considerable reflection on the condition of the slave. A member of the Kentucky Legislature, Ephraim M. Ewing of Logan County, defined the status of the bondsman as that of a son under age. The occasion for this was a debate on a proposal to abolish the compensating of masters by the State for slaves executed. The law providing this, enacted in 1811, had by 1830 cost the State some \$68,000, executions being fairly frequent, and was a natural subject of complaint.<sup>10</sup> Ewing, believing that many slaves were convicted of crimes simply because they were poorly defended in court, was anxious "...to take from the master this temptation to neglect his slave."<sup>11</sup> Repeal of the

<sup>7</sup>Martin, Anti-Slavery, 89.

<sup>8</sup>Ivan E. McDougale, "Slavery in Kentucky, 1792-1865," Journal of Negro History (July 1918) 3:211-328, p. 233. Robert Wickliffe claimed in 1840 that six thousand slaves were sold out of the State yearly. Thomas D. Clark, "The Slave Trade between Kentucky and the Cotton Kingdom," Mississippi Valley Historical Review (1934) 21:331-42, p. 333.

<sup>9</sup>Kentuckian, January 8, 1830.

<sup>10</sup>Niles Register, February 6, 1830, 37:399. 10,000 to 20,000 persons attended the execution of four slaves in Lexington in 1831. See further: African Repository, February 1830, 5:380. Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:809.

<sup>11</sup>Kentucky Reporter, January 12, 1831.

law of 1811, a colleague, Richard Rudd of Nelson County, agreed, would furthermore move the master to look to the morality of his slaves.<sup>12</sup> The bill for repeal failed, but had in the meantime succeeded in evoking serious reflection on the question of slavery.

( The prevailing benevolent attitude toward the slave showed also in several statutes in effect in the eighteen-thirties. The State was empowered by an act of 1830 to confiscate the slave property of masters accused of mistreating their charges (beating, failure to provide adequate food or clothing), although the proceeds from public sale were turned over to the original owner.<sup>13</sup> The use of county jails by slave dealers for storing their merchandise, a practice occasioning much abuse, was forbidden by legislation of 1831.<sup>14</sup> A law of 1834, which provided for sale into slavery of free Negroes convicted of serious offences (e.g., keeping a disorderly house, harboring runaways), required humane treatment by the new owners. Bond had to be given to assure the providing of proper diet, lodging and clothing.<sup>15</sup> )

In general, the decisions of the State courts were equally enlightened. Children of parents previously freed by will were accorded the same privilege, provided they emigrate to Liberia, for which purpose they were allowed ten years in which to earn their passage. Wills allowing slaves to choose new masters were upheld. Although the law provided that should a female slave

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> 38th General Assembly, January 28, 1830, Ch. CCCXXVI, Section 4, p. 124.

<sup>14</sup> Martin, Anti-Slavery, 93.

<sup>15</sup> 42nd General Assembly, February 24, 1834, Ch. 538, pp. 790-92.

bear children before the date of her emancipation, they would remain slaves, exceptions were made in 1831 and 1836 because of the extreme detestation of slavery expressed in wills liberating female slaves who subsequently became mothers.<sup>16</sup>

(Perhaps the historian should be surprised to note the existence of concern for the welfare of the slaves, when, relatively speaking, it was already an accomplished fact. Kentucky slaves were well-fed and clothed, and so contented, in fact, that rarely did one make an effort to buy his freedom even when he had accumulated the necessary money. There were, of course, instances of brutality, but they were exceptional.<sup>17</sup> The answer must be that awareness of the slave's humanity had by 1830 arrived at a fairly conscious stage. At this point exceptional physical violations of very basic human rights offended the public conscience. And, furthermore, this stage of consciousness bred reflection that tended to encompass a wider comprehension of the bondsman's humanity. In plainer terms, Kentuckians began to consider the matter of his moral welfare and to question the very idea of enforced servitude itself. The relation of events in the years 1830 to 1850 will show that in a particular instance and at a certain moment the natural rights of the Negro were not the primary consideration. Yet, as will be seen, this idea was elemental in nurturing the Kentucky antislavery movement.)

(Two decades of open debate on the question of slavery were initiated by an appeal "To the Freemen of the COUNTY OF FAYETTE" penned by Robert Wickliffe and published February 17, 1830 in the Kentucky Reporter.<sup>18</sup> The occasion for the

<sup>16</sup>Helen T. Catterall, ed., Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro (5 vols., Washington, D. C.: Carnegie Institute, 1926-1937), 1:276-9.

<sup>17</sup>McDougle, "Slavery in Kentucky," 283-4.

<sup>18</sup>Kentucky Reporter, February 17, 1830.

appeal was a movement on foot for the calling of a convention to revise the constitution. The terms of the reformers' program included the rendering of all State offices elective, limiting the terms of judges, and restricting the immigration of slaves into the State. Wickliffe, Kentucky's largest slaveholder, considered the last to be the more critical issue--alarmingly critical, for to his mind it represented an attempt to abolish slavery.) Sounding the alarm, he prophesied the eruption of a moral crusade to free the slave; native reformers would at once be joined by reformers in the North, whose propaganda would flow unhindered across Kentucky's three hundred miles of exposed northern border.) Slaveowners must look to their property rights, Wickliffe cautioned, for by allowing one step to be taken, inconclusive though a non-importation law might seem, they would leave themselves annually at the mercy of the polls.

(While acknowledging the strength of antislavery sentiment, especially among the clergy, Wickliffe also conceded the justice of that attitude. Asking himself whether he desired to render slavery perpetual,) he answered with an emphatic "no." But, he was just as strongly opposed to taking steps to terminate the institution of slavery. The State should not be disturbed by a controversy that was bound to be fruitless. Liberation, however undertaken, would leave the Negroes exposed to either the harsher conditions of slavery in States farther south, or to life in a free State made miserable by the loss of social intercourse and the absence of any compensating civil rights. If any emancipation were to be effected, it would have to include the whole South. Even then, there remained the immense social barriers. (Wickliffe saw only one solution that would satisfy both practical considerations and the dictates of



humanity: the natural obliteration of racial differences. By allowing time the initiative, the distinctive marks of color would eventually be diffused "....until the chain of slavery is worn out and not broken by sudden and convulsive measures." By leaving hands off, the problem would solve itself, for, as Wickliffe put it, "Providence will no doubt in time point out the means of effecting the liberation of the slaves....")

(Wickliffe's appeal was a challenge, as much for the vulnerability as for the strength of his reasoning. Several critics replied at once. An open letter to Robert Wickliffe by Judge John Green appeared in the Kentucky Reporter under the pseudonym "Philo C.", running in a series of installments from March 3 to April 14.<sup>19</sup> Five articles entitled "Hints on Slavery," written by Robert J. Breckinridge, son of Jefferson's Attorney General,<sup>20</sup> appeared in the same paper from April 21 to June 9.) In October the Western Luminary commenced republication of Green's letters.<sup>21</sup> In both of these men the spirit of the reformer ran deep; in their public declarations an element of moral revolution pervaded, which led them often and easily into philosophical and religious discussion.) Green identified himself as a participant in a world-wide historical process of enlightenment, it seeming plain to him that the

<sup>19</sup>They were reprinted in the Frankfort Commentator October 19 to November 16 of the same year under the title "On the Importation of Slaves." The first two installments were written before Green had seen Wickliffe's address. The third article, then, takes Wickliffe directly in hand. Commentator, October 19, 1830; Kentucky Reporter, March 3, 1830.

<sup>20</sup>John W. Coleman, Slavery Times in Kentucky (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 296. It might also be noted that Breckinridge was an uncle of Buchanan's Vice President, John Cabell Breckinridge. Dictionary of American Biography, 3:7.

<sup>21</sup>Martin, Anti-Slavery, 92. Martin neglects to note that the Green letters had already appeared once before October; altogether, then, three newspapers consented to run the series of essays.

civilized world was moving in the direction of Liberty, "...that everywhere the rights of man [were] daily being better understood, and (the aristocracy of Georgia always excepted) more appreciated." The Greek revolution, the fact of freedom in America, the first signs of response by European rulers to public opinion, the decline of the African slave trade, the propagation of the Gospel in Africa, England's movement toward emancipation in her colonies, the spectacle of an African nation arising in the West Indies under the approving eyes of the rest of the world--to Green these were unmistakable signs of progress.<sup>22</sup> From this standpoint, remaining passive was unacceptable; as with any reformer, the prospect of "final compensation two or three centuries hence" was no consolation to Green, and he furthermore believed that it ought not to be heartening to anyone truly concerned for the welfare of the State and society.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note the prominence in the antislavery literature of 1830 of theoretical analyses. Philosophizing carried Green and Breckinridge in the direction of a commanding ideal, and caused them in some instances, to think things the consequences of which even they would not accept. To Judge Green, slavery in the United States was a "black cloud" blotting out the "law of nature," not repealing, but only suspending that law. This suspension was a matter of degree; the liberty dictated by the ideal of the "natural state of mankind" had left different parts of society on varying levels of freedom.) In Virginia, for example, there were four distinct castes: the lordly free-holder, the non-free-holding white, the free man of color, and the slave.<sup>24</sup> This method

<sup>22</sup> Kentucky Reporter, March 3, 1830.

<sup>23</sup> Kentucky Reporter, April 14, 1830.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., March 10, 1830.

of viewing social phenomena in terms of graduated remoteness from a fixed standard, typical in the nineteenth century, led to a sense of purposeful evolution. (Despotism, as Green saw it, was passing like a cloud from over the heads of nations and individuals, exposing the truth that "all men without distinction of color are, by the law of nature, free; and as human beings, entitled to all the benefits of nature's great charter of the rights of man."<sup>25</sup>)

Applying the same line of thought specifically to the Negro, Green asserted: "...all around us proclaims the fact that a great moral revolution is going on in regard to the African race in America, and that a mighty change must soon take place in their condition!"<sup>26</sup> (Even more rhetorical was a similar pronouncement by Breckinridge, made upon arriving at the conclusion that slavery was contrary to the natural law, the principles of every social system, and the Declaration of Independence.

--Men will not always remain slaves. No kindness can soothe the spirit of a slave. No ignorance, however abject, can obliterate the indelible stamp of nature, whereby she decreed man free. No cruelty of bondage, however rigorous, can suppress forever the deep yearnings after freedom. No blighting of deferred and crushed hopes will root them from the heart, that when the sun shines and the showers fall, they will not rise up from their resting place and flourish.<sup>27</sup> )

Breckinridge's vision of the black race raising itself out of centuries of torpor to flourish was very precise. If the Negro was to prosper, it would have to be in seclusion. He took great pains to establish this point, arguing from the very practical to the theoretical. The condition of the free Negro, he

<sup>25</sup>Kentucky Reporter, March 10, 1830.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., March 3, 1830.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., May 12 and May 26, 1830.

believed, showed that contact with the white population had only a degrading influence. The liberation by amalgamation suggested by Wickliffe shocked him; strong prejudices in him worked to the contrary.<sup>28</sup>) If amalgamation were actually achieved, producing one race, uniform in color, Breckinridge speculated that a process of dis-amalgamation would then follow. But this was only loose thinking done under pressure--the occasion was the appearance in June 1836 before a quite hostile British audience; the whole idea was to him from the beginning "wild and intolerable." (Forty centuries of development represented the work of God, Providence molding the black race for the performance of a special role in the Divine scheme, and fostering a natural instinct in both races to keep apart. To promote attraction between them, then, was "...equally against the purposes of Providence, the convictions of reason, and the best impulses of nature."<sup>29</sup> Most instrumental in molding Breckinridge's ideas on the prospects of the Negro, ideas most essential to antislavery thought, was undoubtedly simple prejudice. But he himself insisted publicly that prejudice was not sinful.<sup>30</sup>) More important, prejudice was a matter of hard fact; and because it could not be wished away, Breckinridge strove to divorce the question of emancipation from that of color.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup>George Thompson and Robert J. Breckinridge, Discussion on American Slavery, in Dr. Wardlaw's Chapel, between Mr. George Thompson and the Rev. R. J. Breckinridge, of Baltimore, United States, on the Evenings of the 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th June, 1836 (Glasgow: George Gallie, 1836), 98.

<sup>29</sup>Thompson and Breckinridge, Discussion, 98, 101-3; African Repository, April 1831, 7:50; Kentucky Reporter, June 9, 1830.

<sup>30</sup>Thompson and Breckinridge, Discussion, 98.

<sup>31</sup>Concerning Breckinridge's prejudices, see further: Speech of Robert J. Breckinridge, Delivered...on the 12th Day of October, 1840...(Lexington: N. L. and J. W. Finnell, 1840), 24. Green's opinion on the subject of amalgamation was less rigid. "Believing that the human family have all descended

Breckinridge faced the question of equality just as directly. The Negro, he declared, was created in the image of God; but historical contingencies had marred the Divine handiwork. In spite of high advances in "civilization" after the time of Noah, the African experienced an equally marked progress in immorality and crime;<sup>32</sup> this was (apparently) because they were not touched by the blessings of Christianity.<sup>33</sup> Here was merely one more historical accident to which all portions of the human race were subject.<sup>34</sup> Finally, the present day witnessed the nadir of the black race in slavery, and, one step farther, in the wretched population of free Negroes, a "degraded caste" hanging onto society like gypsies.<sup>35</sup> In comparison, a free white race was superior "in all respects" to the black race, whether the latter be bond or free.<sup>36</sup> As Breckinridge pictured the matter, historical circumstance had reached a certain finality; in his present situation the Negro was doomed. Now, for their own

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from a common parentage, I make no objection to the philosophy of amalgamation; nor will I quarrel with your taste--for, you know, de gustibus non disputandum. --But I object to the morality of your plan, as tending to introduce a system, of which, vice, degradation, and misery, in their most disgusting and appalling forms, would be the inevitable consequences." "If then, we are to abandon our prejudices and amalgamate--let it not be by debasing ourselves, but by elevating them. Let them first be emancipated and left free to act for themselves...." He is addressing Wickliffe. Frankfort Commentator, November 16, 1830.

<sup>32</sup>African Repository, August 1831, 7:161-186.

<sup>33</sup>This part of the argument is interpolation, but seems justifiable.

<sup>34</sup>Robert J. Breckinridge, The Black Race: Some Reflections on Its Position and Destiny, as Connected with our American Dispensation. A Discourse Delivered before the Kentucky Colonization Society, at Frankfort, on the 6th Day of February, 1851 (Frankfort: A. G. Hodges & Co., 1851), 4-5.

<sup>35</sup>Kentucky Reporter, June 9, 1830.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., May 25, 1830.

sake, he concluded, "THE FREE PEOPLE OF COLOR MUST GO AWAY OR PERISH."<sup>37</sup>

Removal to Africa offered the most satisfying prospect of bringing the whole of the black continent into the fold of Christianity. In "benighted Africa" the Negro race, possessing at last the all-necessary Gospel, would be able to develop the complete civilization so long denied it.<sup>38</sup>)

Considering the prospect of the blacks remaining in America, Breckinridge lapsed into a surprisingly dark conservatism. They were to be left to their fate, which was bleak indeed. "We must take man as we find him," he explained.

Though we have neither the right nor the disposition to exterminate any race that God has created--neither are we called on, by any artificial condition of things to stimulate the productiveness of one that is degraded, in an unusual degree. The lessons of experience may be sometimes painful, though full of instruction.<sup>39</sup>

A compensating strength of principle showed itself, however, when he considered the possibility that the effort would not be made to colonize the Negroes; in that case reasons of self-interest and of humanitarianism dictated emancipation anyway and the enduring of the consequences, disagreeable though they were. The freedman made a poor citizen; but, Breckinridge countered, as a slave he constituted an even less satisfactory part of society.

...Is it better to have within our bosom, two hundred thousand free citizens attached to our political institutions, and ready to contend unto death in their defence; or an equal number of domestic foes--foes by birth, by injuries, by colour, by caste, by every circumstance of life, ready to take advantage of every emergency of the State to work our injury?<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Liberator, February 8, 1834, 4:22.

<sup>38</sup>There would occur what was already happening in Haiti, Santo Domingo and Negro communities in South America, Breckinridge believed. Kentucky Reporter, April 2, 1830.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., June 9, 1830.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., April 2, 1830.

With a little reflection this could be a potent consideration for a Southerner, even though the Nat Turner Rebellion was still in the future (August 1831). In 1830 there were some two million slaves, increasing at the rate of 500,000 per decade,<sup>41</sup> a fact that could not have remained unnoticed. Yet, at the same time, Breckinridge was undoubtedly affected by high considerations. The following statement is an indication of this.

However a sense of duty to ourselves may deter us from attempting a sudden and general emancipation while other and better hopes remain, it is little better than mockery to place our conduct then on the feeling of humanity to those from whom we withhold the highest enjoyments of nature. He who has lost his liberty has little else to lose over which humanity can weep.<sup>42</sup>

Questions of intention are congenitally impossible to determine satisfactorily. In the case of Breckinridge, one can only say that his motives were 'mixed'--a strange composite of pessimism, prejudice, and idealism.

Breckinridge's was not the most advanced expression of antislavery thinking that came forward in 1830; that distinction belonged to James Love of Barboursville, who declared in the Kentucky House of Representatives that slavery was a curse and a crime so abhorrent that

....should an opportunity ever be afforded him of expressing his opinion, it would be in favor of emancipation--unconditional emancipation. He would cast aside every prejudice, and would do justice for the sake of justice only, regardless of all consequences. Great fears were entertained, by some, of this description of population; when thrown upon society, they were represented as vicious, profligate and idle. He admitted, to a certain extent, they were so; and asked how it could be otherwise? The lights of science had not beamed upon them: moral instruction had been denied them: they had been treated as brutes: a change of masters seldom betters their condition: their whole lives is one of darkness and

<sup>41</sup>Dwight L. Dumond, Antislavery Origins of the Civil War (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1939), II.

<sup>42</sup>Kentucky Reporter, April 2, 1830.

misery. But, sir, make them free--give them an incentive to virtue --afford them moral instruction--render it possible for them to receive the light that education never fails to bestow on the most benighted mind, and you can scarcely conceive the mighty revolution it would produce in their circumstances.<sup>43</sup>

Ironically, there were indeed few who cared to imagine the "mighty revolution" Love had in mind, and for this reason he was, in terms of influence, a very minor figure in the antislavery movement. Only two other men were to arrive publicly at the same radical position: James G. Birney and Cassius Clay. Love left the State for Texas in 1836; had he remained, it is doubtful whether he would have gained any following for his ideas; the radicalism of Birney and Clay was effectively silenced by the prevailing sense of the community, and it is likely that the same thing would have happened to Love.<sup>44</sup>

The critics of 1830 were far from preoccupied with speculative argumentation; the great part of their writing was spent on scoring slavery's effect upon the welfare of white Kentuckians, and, secondly, on presenting a reasonable program for remedying the evil.

That slavery had a gravely adverse influence upon the society of the masters, fostering idleness, arrogance, marital irregularity and an aristocratic

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<sup>43</sup>Frankfort Kentuckian, January 8, 1830.

<sup>44</sup>Love was born in 1801 in Nelson County, Kentucky; he studied law in Bardstown and then settled in Barbourville; in 1829 he was elected to the State Legislature from Knox County; 1833-5 he served in Congress. William B. Allen, A History of Kentucky.... (Louisville: Bradley & Gilbert, 1872), 282. It is quite worth noting that Love did not find colonization incompatible with his extreme views on emancipation; he served as a State delegate to the American Colonization Society's Annual Meeting of 1835. 18th Annual Report, January 19, 1835. Martin fails to remark the significance of Love's advocacy of emancipation without removal. Martin, Anti-Slavery, 92.



temper, was a fairly current idea.<sup>45</sup> The critics of slavery were more specially concerned, however, to point out the social evils of slavery in economic terms. The victim of a failing system was the yeoman farmer and the independent artisan, who suffered from a particularly vicious process whereby the supporting of slaves drained the resources of the State, setting in motion economic stagnation. While the number of slaves multiplied, making the situation all the more acute, the laboring classes escaped in number from the retarding economy. The small holdings left behind by the emigrants were added to slave-cultivated plantations. While the "bone and sinew" of society thus abandoned the State, their place was taken by ever more burdensome numbers of blacks. As the price of slaves dropped, keen competition with the free labor of other States began to be felt. The pace would accelerate until the State was at last destitute, her over-abundant stock of Negroes valuable now only as an export commodity.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>The increase of the colored population, according to a petition to the General Assembly from "citizens of Kentucky," tended to "...retard both the moral and physical improvement of the country...." Frankfort Commentator, September 21, 1830. According to James Love, slavery "...encourages vice, idleness, and immorality...;" it was a crime of cruelty and oppression indulged in order that Kentuckians might raise their children "in idleness and extravagance." Frankfort Kentuckian, January 8, 1830.

<sup>46</sup>"Never was there a more fallacious idea than that slaves contributed any thing toward the permanent resources of a State," Breckinridge concluded; slavery was "...an ulcer, eating its way into the very heart of the State." Kentucky Reporter, May 5, 1830; African Repository, August 1831, 7:161-186. Both Breckinridge and Green were agreed that the excessive care lavished upon the slaves was at the expense of the "race of poor and laboring whites," the latter complaining of "...our laboring yeomanry...rooted out and sent off to the new States and Territories, to give place and range to the yearly droves of black cattle, with which our mother Virginia, in her Bounty, is supplying us...." Kentucky Reporter, May 26, 1830; Green's statement is from the Frankfort Commentator, October 26, 1830.

In spite of the urgent, sometimes revolutionary tone of their writings, the two leading antislavery spokesmen of 1830 adopted a most cautious line of approach to the positive task of reforming the institution they so severely criticized. No irresponsible visionaries, they had no intention of turning the slaves loose on the country as Wickliffe had suggested. The law was to be respected, if not commended, and obeyed simply because it was the law;<sup>47</sup> society must be disturbed by the change as little as possible. Emancipation was therefore to be accomplished legally, and, secondly, it had to be accompanied by the colonization of those emancipated.)

(Analyzing the constitution of the State, Breckinridge was convinced that in its present form it was an adequate instrument for the accomplishment of emancipation. To begin with, the makers of the constitution, men of "a spirit of such wise forecast and vigilant humanity," could not have intended the creation of an instrument of wretched captivity.) He was no doubt thinking of the strong emancipation sentiment present in the two previous constitutional conventions. Reference to article seven of the constitution gave substance to his contention; it provided:

The General Assembly of Kentucky can never emancipate any slaves, gradually, contingently, or in any case whatever, except, first [ , ] with the owner's consent, or secondly, having previously paid for them a fair price in money.<sup>48</sup> )

Breckinridge felt justified, because of the absence of more careful terms in the statement, in interpreting it as an alternative injunction. Had Kentucky's constitutional fathers intended to render slavery unassailable, they would have

<sup>47</sup> Kentucky Reporter, May 19, 1830.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

been far more explicit. Hence, the General Assembly was given full power to emancipate slaves without their owners' consent, provided they first be paid for. The power of taxation, furthermore, allowed the State to finance in a regular manner an emancipation program, perhaps by a special tax on slave property. Finally, under the present constitution the Legislature had the power to render the offspring of slaves free at birth, according to the precedent of a law of 1800 providing that "No persons shall hereafter be slaves within this Commonwealth, except such as were so on the 17th day of October in the year 1785, and the descendents of the females of them." The law thus liberated descendents of free males at birth.<sup>49</sup>

(Emancipation was thus to be accomplished by ordinary legislation. For the present it was enough to make clear the fact that this was possible under the existing constitution.) The calling of a constitutional convention was advocated for another, distinct reason. Emancipation was to be a gradual process; the question in 1830 was what should be the first step. The logical answer, according to Breckinridge and his colleague, was to put an end to the trade in

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<sup>49</sup>Kentucky Reporter, May 12, 1830. "Atticus," another anonymous opponent of slavery, found similar arguments for demonstrating that the institution could be curtailed under the present laws. No person could be brought into the State as merchandise and held in bondage, according to existing statute. Simple recourse to writ of habeas corpus would automatically free them. "Municipal law" might suspend the "law of nature" by which "all men are free," he admitted, but such was not the case according to the constitutional statutes of Kentucky. The State constitution did not create slaves, and thus when a Negro was brought in from a neighboring State he was at once free. "...If a slave is brought from Virginia to Kentucky, it is evident that the law which compelled him to serve in Virginia ceases to operate as soon as he crosses the State line; and there being no law here to make a slave of him, he is free of course...." Frankfort Commentator, October 5, 1830.

slaves over the borders of the State.) Green explained: if slavery is an evil, "then refuse to add to that evil...by importing more slaves. Do you look forward to emancipation being commenced in the time of your children or your children's children?" he asked his public. "Then endeavor by every means in your power to diminish the number to be emancipated."<sup>50</sup> The constitution already provided specifically for the prevention by the Legislature of the commercial importation of slaves. The first enabling law withheld compensation to traders for slaves executed for crimes. An act of 1815 prohibited, under penalty of \$600 fine, the importing of slaves as merchandise; but the law remained a dead-letter almost from the outset; not one conviction had been obtained.<sup>51</sup> The law had to be made effective; this would best be done by a stronger constitutional prohibition. The public, sensitive to the abuses connected with the slave trade, was prepared; they had now to be informed of the wider implications of a non-importation law.

( The second major plank in the reformers' program called for the development of a system of colonization. Breckinridge viewed the scheme of transporting free Negroes to Liberia as not only a glorious Christian endeavor, but as a quick and cheap way to eradicate all the various evils attendant upon slavery. He was sanguine about success; if the federal government could be gotten to contribute to the work, Kentucky could be "...relieved of the curse of slavery in a manner cheap, certain and advantageous to both parties."<sup>52</sup> ) The prospect appeared all the more hopeful to him when he considered that the whole number emancipated would probably not have to be transported, for abandoned to their

<sup>50</sup> Kentucky Reporter, May 12, March 3, 1830.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., May 12, 1830.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

own devices and isolated from the rest of society by prejudice and the fear of amalgamation, many of the ex-slaves would succumb to severe hardships.

"....The female will give birth to only three or four puny children, not half of whom will be raised; and exposure, casualty, and feebler constitutions will cut off the survivors at half their former age." With many slaves sold out of the State on the advent of emancipation, perhaps one twentieth of the original number of Negroes would be left, he calculated.<sup>53</sup>

Three-fourths to nine-tenths of voting Kentuckians owned no slaves; every one of them, Breckinridge asserted, had a direct personal interest in putting an end to slavery in the State. Slaveowners were not even a majority in Fayette, the county having probably the largest number of slaves. In addition, of the slaveholders, one out of two favored emancipation, according to his estimate. Summing up, he declared: "....Not more than one in every twenty six whites, upon a full presentation of the question, could upon any reasonable calculation be supposed favorable to the indefinite continuance of slavery in this State."<sup>54</sup> It was now the task to acquaint the public with these facts, to make them aware of their true interest and confident in their ability to make their will effective in the politics of the State. No prohibition by constitution or Legislature would, in the last analysis, be respected, Green averred darkly; it was "....high time," he declared, "for the people to take the power into their own hands."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Kentucky Reporter, May 26, 1830. Green commended the A.C.S. highly, but submitted that Liberia was too small; it might be better, he thought, to send the blacks to the area between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi. Free lands and equal rights would be powerful incentives to emigrate. Frankfort Commentator, November 16, 1830.

<sup>54</sup>Kentucky Reporter, May 5, 1830; African Repository, April 1831, 7:50.

<sup>55</sup>Kentucky Reporter, March 3, 1830.

At the time the anonymous "Hints on Slavery" was written, the son of Jefferson's Attorney General was a candidate for the State Legislature. Breckinridge may have been looking forward to a long campaign, but his term as a political agent in the struggle for emancipation was abruptly terminated almost before it began. The "Hints" raised considerable adverse criticism and the authorship of the articles did not remain long in doubt. In answer to an open letter in the Kentucky Reporter enquiring whether he had written the anti-slavery pieces in question, Breckinridge admitted he had, lamely saying that he had "...no motive for concealing my opinions on any subject...."<sup>56</sup> The admission was so compromising that he was obliged to announce his retirement from Kentucky politics altogether. With a righteous blast he took leave of his constituents. "If my principles have overthrown me, I count it no shame to suffer in such a cause. They are true and necessary to your existence as a free people, and if God be not provoked to leave you to the government of your own blinded passions, they will surely prevail." He then turned to what promised to be a more open field, and in 1832 was licensed to preach by the Presbyterian Church, shortly after which he removed to Princeton in order to prepare himself for ministerial labors. Until 1847 he resided outside his home State, returning periodically only for visits.<sup>57</sup> According to Cassius Clay, kinsman of 'Harry of the West', "...the country lost a great statesman and orator in a poor preacher."<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup>Kentucky Reporter, June 16, 1830.

<sup>57</sup>The letter is dated August 3, 1830; Kentucky Reporter, August 4, 1830. Breckinridge reviewed the occasion of his leaving politics in his Speech of 1840, pp. 10, 11, and 11n.

<sup>58</sup>Cassius M. Clay. The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay. Memoirs, Writings and Speeches, Showing His Conduct in the Overthrow of American Slavery, the Salvation of the Union, and the Restoration of the Autonomy of the States. Written and Compiled by Himself (Cincinnati: J. F. Brennan & Co., 1886), 220. The proposed second volume did not appear.

Before leaving for the East, however, Breckinridge joined with John Green in an effort to put the antislavery effort on a regular footing by establishing an emancipation society whose members would voluntarily emancipate the future offspring of their slaves and urge this course upon their fellow citizens. The society, it was hoped, would eventually become the center of a wider movement, uniting every class of the citizenry who were opposed to slavery.<sup>59</sup> Due partly to the disapprobation of Henry Clay and to reluctance on the part of many, otherwise sympathetic with the plan, to part with valuable property, the society soon fell apart. Nevertheless, an example had been set which would be followed up a few years later.<sup>60</sup>

Although embittered by his setback, Breckinridge launched his new career armed with an unshakeable confidence in the righteousness of his crusade against a great evil and a faith in the inevitable triumph of his cause.

"Domestic slavery cannot exist forever," he forecast.

It cannot exist long quiet and unbroken, in any condition of society, or under any form of government. It may terminate in various ways; but terminate it must. It may end in revolution; bear witness San Domingo.

It may end in amalgamation--a base, spurious, degraded mixture hardly the least revolting method... Or it may be brought to a close by gradually supplanting the slaves with a free and more congenial race....<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup>African Repository, April 1831, 7:48, 49. Clark says that the collaboration on the emancipation society began in 1833. The name of Lewis Green occurs occasionally in connection with antislavery; he was a brother of the Judge and a President of Centre College. Thomas D. Clark, A History of Kentucky (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1937), 294. Maria Daviess (Thompson), History of Mercer and Boyle Counties (Harrodsburg, Kentucky: Harrodsburg Herald, 1924), 71.

<sup>60</sup>William Birney, James G. Birney and His Times (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1890), 133.

<sup>61</sup>Kentucky Reporter, June 9, 1830.

After three years of debate the non-importation bill was finally passed February 24, 1833.<sup>62</sup> From the emancipationists' point of view this was a definite antislavery victory.<sup>63</sup> Before anything else could be done, the increase of the slave population by importation from the outside had to be halted. Because they all agreed on the desirability of this measure, no disputes between the antislavery spokesmen arose. (The discussion was yet only in its infancy and differences in opinion were automatically minimized. And in each individual critique of slavery no rigid priority was assigned to any one consideration. Slavery was represented as a blight on the economy, a threat to the manners and morals of the community, a great danger to public security, an abrogation of the laws of nature, a crime against the unfortunate Negro, and an offense against divine justice. No one had yet made the moral aspect of the question the one predominant consideration, overshadowing all the other, contingent, charges against slavery. The sinfulness of slavery had not been brought to bear to lend the powerful force of a moral command to the antislavery arsenal. Nevertheless there was a definite tendency in this direction evident in the words of Breckinridge, Love and Green. Should all else fail, they were preparing themselves for the worst consequences of emancipation.) Their firm resolution that slavery should not be perpetuated derived not merely from their belief that the institution was inherently at odds with what they considered

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<sup>62</sup>Martin, Anti-Slavery, 94.

<sup>63</sup>"This law was not brought about by abolition sentiment, but rather by the desire of Kentuckians generally, to control the institution and prevent its growth into a more menacing problem." Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:809. Nonetheless, antislaveryites like Green who were instrumental in the passage of the measure also supported it for the same reason.



the dictates of justice and, ultimately, of morality. It will be noticed, in studying the literature of the Kentucky antislavery movement, that moral resolve, opposition to perpetual ('perpetual' meaning approximately in excess of a century), and active promotion of the antislavery cause were closely related qualities. These were the principles established during the three years of antislavery activity ending in 1833. In James G. Birney, who dominated the scene from 1833 through 1835, they acquired a new, dynamic significance.

### CHAPTER III

JAMES G. BIRNEY:

#### DISCUSSION OF THE MORALITY OF SLAVERY, 1833-1838

(It was left to another to realize the full radical consequences of a thorough antislavery philosophy such as that found in the principles and conclusions of John Green, James Love and Robert J. Breckinridge. First, an undefined concern over slavery; then, theory shot with moral consciousness; and finally, a determination to act carried James G. Birney from slaveholder to abolitionist.) Born in 1792 into the wealthy Kentucky aristocracy, Birney had the advantage of a Northern education at Princeton and returned to the South to a promising career in law, serving in the Kentucky General Assembly and participating in Alabama's first constitutional convention. By the age of forty the Huntsville, Alabama lawyer, having built up a respectable practice, had achieved a decent measure of success.<sup>1</sup>

(In 1829 Birney was precipitously converted from gaming and drinking to the Presbyterian faith, an experience so profound that he resolved to abandon his profession and devote his life to the "...cause of truth in some moral or religious enterprise."<sup>2</sup> Attracted to the work of alleviating the distress of

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<sup>1</sup>James G. Birney, Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857 (edited by Dwight L. Dumond, 2 vols., New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1938), xii.

<sup>2</sup>From the "Diary" of Benjamin Labaree, who preached in Huntsville, and had listened to Birney speak of his private affairs. Ibid., 242n. Similarly, Breckinridge's conversion had been followed shortly by a moral determination to combat slavery. Edmund A. Ware, "The Earlier Life of Robert J. Breckinridge, 1800-1845" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, June 1932), 56.

the Negro, he applied to the American Colonization Society, addressing Ralph R. Gurley, Corresponding Secretary of the organization.) Gurley's reply arrived "providentially" just as Birney was preparing to move with his wife and seven children to Illinois, away from the "...corrupting influences of slavery...."<sup>3</sup>

( Birney accepted a commission from the A.C.S. placing him in charge of the "South Western District," an enormous area that included Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and the Territory of Arkansas. Undismayed, he made "supplication to God for guidance" in knowing his duty, convinced that his "...commanding motive must be, to do good because it is the will of God..."<sup>4</sup> ) For some time he had questioned the morality of slavery. Perhaps a visit from the evangelist, Theodore D. Weld, in late 1831 was responsible for this.<sup>5</sup> It is more likely that the doubts he confided to Gurley were the product of his own thinking.

My mind is ill at ease upon the subject of retaining my fellow creatures in servitude. I cannot, nor do I believe any honest man, can reconcile the precept "love thy neighbors as thyself" with the

<sup>3</sup>Birney to Gurley, Huntsville, July 12, 1832; Birney, Letters, 9. Rev. David Rice, who had led the abolition forces in the constitutional convention of 1792 in Kentucky, was a frequent guest of the Birney family when Birney was young. William Birney, James G. Birney and His Times (New York, 1890), 17. Rice was considered the "Father" of the antislavery movement in Kentucky. J. Blanchard and N. L. Rice, A Debate on Slavery: Held in the City of Cincinnati, on the First, Second, Third, and Sixth Days of October, 1845, Upon the Question: Is Slave-Holding in Itself Sinful, and the Relation between Master and Slave, a Sinful Relation. Affirmative: Rev. J. Blanchard, Pastor of the Sixth Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati. Negative: N. L. Rice, D.D., Pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati (Cincinnati: W. H. Moore & Co., 1845), 299. The American Colonization Society will be henceforth referred to as the A.C.S.

<sup>4</sup>Birney to Gurley, July 12, 1832; Birney, Letters, 9, 19.

<sup>5</sup>Dumond convincingly contradicts Barnes on this point. Gilbert H. Barnes, The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844 (American Historical Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1957), 39; Birney, Letters, 12n.

purchase of the body of that neighbor and consigning him and his unoffending posterity to a slavery, a perpetual bondage degrading and debasing him in this world and almost excluding him from the happiness of that which is to come.<sup>6</sup>

Birney resolved to free his slaves at the first opportunity.<sup>7</sup> Gurley replied with reserve, but with enough sympathy to encourage what became a frank and rewarding exchange of views. Slavery, he agreed should be abolished, but slowly and voluntarily. For the time slaveholding was justified, not as a strict property right, but as a parental charge, an innocent jurisdiction while exercised according to Christian principles.<sup>8</sup> It is clear at this stage that the devotion of both men to the cause of colonization was closely associated with a concern over slavery.

From the outset of his new endeavor, Birney showed himself extremely anxious to become acquainted with every aspect of the Colonization Society's policy and program. Founded in 1816 by the Reverend Robert Finley of New Jersey, the A.C.S. purposed to 1) rid the country of an undesirable population, 2) establish a Christian colony in Africa that would evangelize that Dark Continent, and 3) place the free Negroes where they might flourish.<sup>9</sup> According to a fellow worker, George C. Light, colonization presented a "...field for much usefulness first to our Country[,] second to a degraded class of our population who by their very complexion are doomed to a hopeless inferiority from which they

<sup>6</sup>Birney to Gurley, Huntsville, January 24, 1833; Birney, Letters, 49-50.

<sup>7</sup>They numbered forty three in 1824. Ibid., 52n.

<sup>8</sup>Gurley to Birney, Washington D.C., February 26, 1833; Ibid., 56-7.

<sup>9</sup>The declaration of aims of the A.C.S. appears on the back cover of most issues of the African Repository.

never can rise while they tread American soil, but third the blessings their removal will be to the benighted regions of Africa are incalculable."<sup>10</sup>

Robert J. Breckinridge, one of the Society's staunchest supporters in Kentucky,<sup>11</sup> spoke to an audience of Kentucky colonizationists in 1831 of a political and intellectual regeneration of Africa which would create a great and cultivated nation there as dark superstition retreated before the leavening influence of Christianity. There the Negro might prosper. Questions of expense and the willingness of the Negroes to emigrate paled out of significance at this glorious prospect.<sup>12</sup> He considered the benefits of colonization to be so desirable, in fact, that he would override opposition wherever possible. In the heated exchange of 1836 in London with George Thompson, Breckinridge told the British abolitionist friend of Garrison and a hostile English audience that

...no man had even a right of bare residence of which the State might not justly and properly deprive him, upon sufficient reason. The State has the indisputable right to coerce emigration, whenever the public good required it; and when that public good coincided with the interest of the emigrating party--and that also of the land to which they went --to coerce such emigration might become a most sacred duty.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup>George C. Light to Birney, Lexington, February 7, 1833; Birney, Letters, 54.

<sup>11</sup>Early L. Fox, The American Colonization Society, 1817-1840 (Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, vol. 37, pp. 313-544, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1919), 167.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 169. No one yet thought to dispute the general belief that the Negro would be better off in Liberia. Reports on the colony that appeared frequently in the Kentucky papers were uniformly favorable. There were instances of dispatching Negroes to Liberia for the purposes of reporting on conditions there. Whatever adverse impressions they had were not reported. Eg., Commentator, June 20, 1838; Liberator, September 15, October 13, 1832, 2:147, 163.

<sup>13</sup>Thompson and Breckinridge, Discussion, 89.

He repeated these views in a speech of February 1851, suggesting means that might "...exceed the willingness of the free blacks to emigrate."<sup>14</sup> It should be remarked, however, that coercion was not widely advocated. Emphasizing the welfare and happiness of the free people of color, the Society took care to make clear they would be removed "with their own consent." This was simply good policy.<sup>15</sup>

The real center of most concern is more in evidence in a statement of 1845 on the free Negro problem by Governor Thomas Metcalfe of Kentucky. White laborers, close experience told him, could never be made to associate with the blacks, because of the ineradicable inferiority they shared with the Indian race of this country. Only colonization could solve the problem.<sup>16</sup> The widest support derived from much less disinterested motives. Every tolerably read Southerner was keenly aware of the source of trouble, real and potential, existing in the presence of an extensive body of blacks living beyond the confines of slavery.<sup>17</sup> Newspapers frequently reminded the public of their number, and reported outrages and insurrections against the whites. "...I need not apprise you," Governor James T. Morehead told the Kentucky Colonization Society in 1834, "of the destructible [sic] influence of their example, perhaps of their counsels, upon the habits and fidelity of the slave."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Breckinridge, Black Race, 16. See further Breckinridge's Literary and Religious Magazine, Baltimore, July 1838. The article is reported in the Liberator, July 27, 1838, 8:118, but the editing is questionable.

<sup>15</sup>Speech of Robert S. Finley at the January 20, 1833 Annual Meeting of the A.C.S.; ...Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States (Washington D.C.: James C. Dunn, 1833), Sixteenth Annual Report, xiv.

<sup>16</sup>Liberator, April 18, 1845, 15:60.

<sup>17</sup>Fox, Colonization Society, 44.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted Liberator, March 29, 1834, 4:49.

Regardless of whether colonization was looked to for ridding the country of a nuisance or for blessing Africa and the unfortunate free Negroes, it was frequently inseparable from emancipation sentiment, particularly in the Upper South. "...Whether we consider what is due from a Christian nation to the victims of its own avarice and oppression, or what is necessary in a wise people towards providing for their own security, and the peace of their own offspring," colonization was worthy of the highest efforts of the entire nation, Breckinridge advised.<sup>19</sup> In many states (although not in Kentucky) the A.C.S. afforded the only legal opportunity for private emancipation.<sup>20</sup> Few conscientious Southerners were willing to turn their slaves out in the cold of a community totally lacking social provision for them.<sup>21</sup> A Kentuckian whose recently manumitted slaves had failed to make connections with a Liberia expedition wrote despairingly to a friend: "I cannot be a slaveholder. I must get rid of my slaves in some way. To set them free in Kentucky I cannot and will not. I fear I shall have to adopt the revolting expedient of selling; I dread this but I must do something."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Breckinridge, Address of January 6, 1831, 171. Breckinridge and Birney did not work together, the former being away in Baltimore and other points East during Birney's stay in Kentucky. Breckinridge later accused Birney of having been in cahoots with salty old Wickliffe! Both, he thought, were amalgamationists! That explained "...the secret bond of sympathy, and the true source of Mr. Wickliffe's repeated and exalted praises of Mr. James G. Birney, the abolition candidate for the Presidency of the United States...." Breckinridge, Speech of October 12, 1840, 24.

<sup>20</sup>Birney, Letters, v.

<sup>21</sup>Fox, Colonization Society, 38. Charles Robinson, a visitor to Kentucky in 1846, pointed out that, although he observed a "...deep feeling in Kentucky against slavery...", he found that "they did not want to take and sell them to the Texans--that would be cruel, and they could not and would not permit them to remain in the State, if emancipated." Robinson, "Observations in the West and South," quoted Liberator, November 2, 1846, 16:185.

<sup>22</sup>The letter is dated January 16, 1846; Fox, Colonization Society, 39.

(The Colonization Society publicly encouraged those who looked to it for a means of ending slavery, though carefully disavowing any intention of violating property rights. The A.C.S., in the words of Breckinridge, had assumed that slavery was

....a great moral and political evil, and cherished the hope..., that the successful prosecution of its objects would offer powerful motives, and exert a persuasive influence in favor of emancipation. And it is from this indirect effect of the society, that the largest advantage is to result to America. It has shown us how we may be relieved of the curse of slavery, in a manner cheap, certain, and advantageous to both the parties.<sup>23</sup>

Birney saw the matter in the same light; that helps to explain the great enthusiasm he displayed in commencing his labors for the Society.) During the summer of 1833 he expended considerable energy addressing local meetings and contributing to the local press. In fifteen articles for the Huntsville Democrat<sup>24</sup> he stressed the benefits of colonization to the Negroes, and pointed out that unless the peaceable substitute of colonization were wholeheartedly adopted, forced emancipation was inevitable, for the tendency of slavery was to flood the South with Negroes while driving out the whites.<sup>25</sup> Emancipation thus became in Birney's hands more than a mere side-product of colonization. Much of his time was occupied in readying an expedition to Liberia for departure from New Orleans in the spring of 1833. As the brig Ajax embarked with its cargo of black immigrants for Liberia, Birney thought of "...Avarice dragging them to our shores, wringing from them cries of despair and tears of blood;--I now saw Benevolence (oh, that it were unmixed) conducting them to their own, their Father's land...."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Breckinridge, Address of January 6, 1831.

<sup>24</sup>Birney, Letters, xxvii; Damond has here provided a list of these articles.

<sup>25</sup>Birney, Letters, xii, xiii.

<sup>26</sup>Birney to Gurley, New Orleans, April 13, 1833; Ibid., 72.



But the time for unmixed benevolence was not at hand. It was extremely difficult in the Lower South to speak of slavery, no matter the context. Many slaveholders could be induced to support colonization, believing that removal of the free blacks would end a source of discontent and thus make property more secure; but evidence that colonization was cultivating a more liberal spirit brought a reaction. The progress of emancipation in the West Indies was strong example enough to turn many against the scheme.<sup>27</sup>

One agent, however, was completely oblivious to the antagonism that reference to emancipation created. The colonization society of Kentucky had in 1833 authorized Rev. Robert S. Finley, son of one of the founders of the Society, to announce publicly at the Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the A.C.S. that "....a prominent object of this Institution is to afford the means for a safe, gradual, and voluntary abolition of slavery. And it is this view of the subject that constitutes its chief glory in the eye of its slave-holding friends."<sup>28</sup> Convinced that even the Deep South was fairly advanced in this regard, Finley had confidently carried this same message there in 1831. He had publicly discussed emancipation all through the South, in the presence of numbers of slaves, on occasion hundreds of them, and with the general approval of his audience.<sup>29</sup> (Birney criticized Finley's attempt to separate the "advocates of perpetual despotism" from the "friends of human liberty" as a serious blunder. The moral indifference of slaveholders was far preferable to their open enmity.

<sup>27</sup>Nathan Green to Birney, Winchester, Tennessee, August 26, 1833; Ibid., 86.

<sup>28</sup>A.C.S., 16th Annual Report, xv. Finley was preaching the pernicious effects of slavery in Kentucky during the discussion of 1830, urging colonization as the only way to do justice to both whites and blacks. Maysville Eagle, December 7, 1830.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., xvi.

To call the slaveholders he elaborated --even that class of them who are willing to perpetuate the odious relation which my soul hates-- indeed to call any description of persons who may be opposed to us, enemies--to treat them as such--by hard names to push them into the ranks of an unrelenting opposition--is not....calculated to promote our success:--rather let us, as those are wont to do, who are conscious of having a good cause, try to convince opposers, by forbearance, and kindness, and sober argument, that they are wrong, and thus persuade them to be our friends and co-operators.

Self-interest, he believed, was the sole possible basis for any appeal in the South.<sup>30</sup> Above all, no popular association, unfounded or real, of colonization with abolition could be permitted. Colonization had to be held up as a defense against the abolitionists whose machinations threatened the progress of the South. "...Permit us to assure the abolitionist....in the spirit of friendship....that....he is doing his cause an injury, whose extent he cannot measure," Birney wrote in the Democrat.<sup>31</sup>) The threat to Southern society posed by the extreme measures demanded by some in the North justified maintaining in their severest form the bonds of slavery.<sup>32</sup> But should it be proposed that the Negro ("our race," Birney called them) be deprived of what were held to be ageless rights, then the matter acquired a new complexion, for no evil, not even that of unconditional abolition, could be as great as perpetual slavery.<sup>33</sup>

Already Birney's reflections displayed the feeling of impending crisis which was later to be so strong. His correspondence revealed an apprehension that

<sup>30</sup>Birney to Gurley, New Orleans, April 13, 1833; Birney, Letters, 71.

<sup>31</sup>"Colonization of the Free Colored People," Huntsville Democrat; reprinted in African Repository, January 1834, 9:343.

<sup>32</sup>"Colonization of the Free Colored People," Huntsville Democrat; Ibid., December 1833, 9:313.

<sup>33</sup>"Colonization of the Free Colored People," Huntsville Democrat; Ibid., January 1834, 9:342.

both the safety of the South and the integrity of the Union were at stake.<sup>34</sup> Convinced that applications to Congress for aid to colonization would only create resentment of federal interference, he urged that they be abandoned for the sake of an even greater concern than the success of colonization. Birney's words bear conviction. "Sir, this Union is precious to me--if it be destroyed, the world may mourn, for its liberty is lost."<sup>35</sup>

Gurley replied in a completely new voice. A tour of the North seems to have transformed his thinking; he had advanced nearly as far as Birney. The apathy of the South was too great already to encourage any further, he thought. Unless the South soon awakened, the rampant progress of radicals to the North would have created an unbridgeable chasm, a disastrous situation.

My own opinion is [he wrote], that the South must, if its own dearest interests are to be preserved, if the Union is to last, act with vastly more zeal and energy on this subject than has yet been manifested.

If it be once understood that the South designs to perpetuate Slavery, the whole North will be speedily organized into Anti Slavery Societies, and the whole land will be flooded with anti slavery publications. Thus far the Colonization Society has been able to keep in check the rising spirit of immediate emancipation. But without some clear evidences that the South does intend at some time, and that not very remote<sub>y</sub> to abolish slavery, our cause cannot [continue] as a barrier in the way of inconsiderate and fierce anti-slavery measures.<sup>36</sup>

Both men had arrived at the conclusion that colonization had no meaning except as it contributed to the work of ending slavery, a cause of the greatest dimensions.

<sup>34</sup>"May the Lord give me boldness and utterance with the people of the South, whose jealousy is so excitable on the subject of slavery, and enable me to convince them that, in the success of the Society is their safety, instead of any cause for uneasiness!" Birney to Gurley, Huntsville, October 13, 1832; Birney, Letters, 33.

<sup>35</sup>Birney to Gurley, Huntsville, June 29, 1833; Ibid., 79.

<sup>36</sup>Gurley to Birney, Washington D.C., December 17, 1833; Ibid., 110-11.

(Birney was inclined to agree that the situation was critical.) He was daily becoming more discouraged with the prospects of achieving anything in the lower South. As early as July 1832 he had complained to Gurley that the district in his charge was too large for one man to handle, and mentioned, in passing, the Tennessee valley, where "....consciences are too much awakened, again to sleep without some action," as a promising area.<sup>37</sup> He spoke of Tennessee again in a letter of December 27, pointing out that because slave values were low there and the State had more "professors of religion," it offered a far better atmosphere for the success of a benevolent enterprise.<sup>38</sup> Finally, on January 24, 1833, he informed Gurley of his intention to address Kentucky and Tennessee church groups to urge manumission and removal.<sup>39</sup> By the end of the year Birney was certain that nothing could be done farther South, where plantation slaveholders, recognizing the spirit of emancipation in colonization activity, had become obdurate.<sup>40</sup> (The only hope lay in expending all efforts in pressing emancipation and colonization in Maryland, Virginia and Kentucky. Failure here would be disastrous, for, he warned, "if Virg'a be not detached from the number of slaveholding States, the slavery-question must inevitably dissolve the Union, and that before very long."<sup>41</sup>)

(In October, 1833 Birney moved to Danville, partly to be near an aging father. The trip through Tennessee removed all indecision that may have remained. He was greatly encouraged at the number attending the November meeting

<sup>37</sup>Birney to Gurley, July 12, 1832, Huntsville; Birney, Letters, 12.

<sup>38</sup>Birney to Gurley, Mobile, December 27, 1832; Ibid., 49-50.

<sup>39</sup>Birney to Gurley, January 24, 1833, Huntsville; Ibid., 53.

<sup>40</sup>Birney to Gurley, Danville, December 3, 1833; Ibid., 97.

<sup>41</sup>Birney to Gurley, Huntsville, September 24, 1833; Ibid., 90.

of the Tennessee Colonization Society in the Representatives Hall of the Capitol, and overjoyed at being free to speak of eventual abolition.) Many attending were members of the Legislature. "My propositions were so much bolder than they had ever been elsewhere, that I was prepared to expect some complaint from the timid and the indolent lovers of Slavery. But there was none at all of which I have heard..." he reported. A few days later the Legislature took up a bill to expend \$500 annually on colonization. (Following the success at Nashville, at three addresses in Kentucky, one of them delivered to the Presbyterian Synod meeting in Gallatin, the same favorable attitude was encountered.<sup>42</sup> Here, Birney believed, was the best site in the country for taking a stand, and he took satisfaction in having "...an opportunity of using, to peculiar advantage, whatever of talent God had put into my keeping for his glory and the good of a large class of my neglected fellow-creatures.)<sup>43</sup>

There was good reason for Birney's optimism. The colonization movement was reasonably well established in Kentucky,) and the connection between emancipation and removal openly recognized, as Rev. Finley's memorial of 1833 indicated.<sup>44</sup>

In 1832 the State had thirty one local colonization auxiliaries, as compared

<sup>42</sup> Birney to Gurley, Huntsville, December 3, 1833; Birney, Letters, 96.

<sup>43</sup> Birney to Gerrit Smith, Danville, November 14, 1834; Ibid., 150.

<sup>44</sup> In 1829 an anonymous Kentuckian had written the A.C.S. that "almost all persons in Kentucky are nominally, at least, in favour of Colonization...." This correspondent was interested primarily in the removal of the free blacks, but another Kentuckian wrote: "...a large portion of us, who are even slave-holders ourselves, are looking forward with pleasing anticipations to that period when slavery shall no longer be a blot upon the escutcheon of our Republican Institutions." African Repository, August 1829, 5:173, 174.

with nineteen in Tennessee and thirty five in Virginia.<sup>45</sup> As early as 1830 some two hundred Kentuckians were members; Virginia had approximately 250, Tennessee one thousand.<sup>46</sup> (The parent society in Kentucky had been established in 1828;<sup>47</sup> at once the fledgling organization petitioned Congress for aid in alleviating "the miseries attendant upon slavery" in a manner constitutional and respectful of individual rights.) The memorial proceeded to represent these miseries with scarcely a mention of the plight of the slave. Children raised in the midst of slavery learned little control of their passions; they became despots. As the morals of the whites were destroyed, the slaves, for their part, lost all amor patriae. Jefferson, the memorial noted, had pointed out these great problems when the country contained only 700,000 blacks; today there were some two and a half million. Emancipation alone would "...but render our situation doubly deplorable;" only removal of the free blacks could stave off the realization of Jefferson's prophecies. The memorial referred to the Negroes as "...a mildew upon our fields, a scourge to our backs, and a stain upon our escutcheon;" but a broader note was struck in the conclusion. Congress had shown great favor to the Indian; they should also contribute to

<sup>45</sup>Stephen B. Weeks, "Anti-Slavery Sentiment in the South; with Unpublished Letters from John Stuart Mill and Mrs. Stowe, Publications of the Southern History Association (April 1898) 2:87-130, p. 93. Betty L. Fladeland, James Gillespie Birney: Slaveholder to Abolitionist (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1955/), 75.

<sup>46</sup>In Maryland, where the movement thrived, there were some five hundred locals. By 1838 only a few local societies were left--in Louisiana, Mississippi and North Carolina--but these soon disappeared. Weeks, "Antislavery," 89. Kentucky, as will be seen, is also an exception to the general picture of decline.

<sup>47</sup>A.C.S., 12th Annual Report, 39. An "Address" from the new society appeared African Repository, March 1829, 5:28-9. It contains no hint of antislavery.

the welfare of the Negro, who was of "equal dignity." "It may be said, perhaps, that the curse is forever to hang upon the devoted heads of the descendents of Ham: But woe to the agents by whom that curse is perpetrated."<sup>48</sup>

The General Assembly of Kentucky supported the petition by a joint resolution:

That our Senators and Representatives in Congress, be requested to use their best endeavours to procure an appropriation of money of Congress, to aid, so far as is consistent with the Constitution..., in Colonizing the Free People of Colour..., under the direction of the United States.

Copies of the resolution were sent to governors of the other states.<sup>49</sup> The following year only three legislators dissented in the vote to renew the resolution.<sup>50</sup> )

Not all thought the free Negroes to be so in need of escape from wretchedness to Africa. From one point of view, some believed they were better off materially than the slaves. According to information supplied by a Kentucky friend, a student at Andover (Massachusetts) Theological Seminary understood that they were better off than the slaves. Some had even acquired wealth and respectability; most enjoyed greater material comfort than the slaves.<sup>51</sup>

Birney, replying to a questionnaire on slavery from a group of Massachusetts Quakers, stated that he knew of no paupers among this supposedly wretched

<sup>48</sup> A.C.S., 13th Annual Report, 42-3.

<sup>49</sup> A.C.S., 12th Annual Report, 67.

<sup>50</sup> A.C.S., 13th Annual Report, 39.

<sup>51</sup> This anonymous correspondent of Garrison passes on notes from a friend engaged for several years in promoting Sabbath schools, "and other benevolent objects," in a Kentucky town having "four churches, a college and a theological seminary." Liberator, March 22, 1834, 4:45.

class, and few criminal proceedings had to be instituted against them. He pointed out that Kentucky had only five thousand free Negroes, a relatively small number.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, most colonizationists would have agreed with the memorialists of 1829 that a serious problem did exist, particularly with regard to the effect of the free Negro population upon the welfare of the whites. Newspapers kept the matter before the public by including in their reports of local population figures the number of free Negroes as well as slaves.<sup>53</sup> Periodically, articles favoring colonization appeared, such as that in the Commentator of August 24, 1830, reporting that Monrovia was thriving.<sup>54</sup> The next issue spoke of such progress in Liberia, "...as must gladden the heart of every philanthropist." The climate, though inimical to white constitutions, suited the colored people. There was full employment at high wages, schools for all, lovely dwellings, and a twelve hundred volume library, a press, and the most amenable soil--a paradise for passage fare of only twenty-five dollars.

The number of prominent Kentuckians associated with colonization (among them John Green, Robert Wickliffe, John J. Crittenden, Henry Clay, Squire Turner, Judge Adam Beatty, James Love, Thomas Underwood, Thomas Marshall, Cassius Clay; prominent editors George D. Prentice, A. G. Hodges, R. H. Lee, Richard Collins and Thomas T. Skillman; clergymen Robert Breckinridge,

<sup>52</sup>Liberator, July 4, 1835, 5:105.

<sup>53</sup>For example, the Frankfort Commentator of August 31, 1830 reports the number of whites, slaves, and free Negroes for the city of Lexington; similar statistics for Nashville, Tennessee are given September 7, 1830, and for Richmond, Virginia September 14, 1830.

<sup>54</sup>The Western Luminary was an ardent champion of "...that noble and much injured institution...." African Repository, July 1834, 10:148. The Kentucky Reporter, noting the formation of the State society, expressed satisfaction at the sight of "...distinguished men of all parties united with ardour in this work." Ibid., March 1829, 5:27.



Henry B. Bascom, John Young, A. M. Cowan, Stuart Robinson, and John D. Paxton; Governors Iredell, Charles Morehead, and Thomas Metcalfe) included almost all of any note. (It must be concluded that colonization had in effect near unanimous approval in the State. Here there was no fear that the A.C.S. program was calculated to disturb property rights; this was due in large part to a widespread desire to see emancipation someday effected in a safe, easy manner. Not only was the connection between colonization and emancipation understood and tolerated as perhaps harmless; it was generally approved.<sup>55</sup> In practice, then, the one directly stimulated the other. The majority of Kentucky Negroes sent to Liberia were manumitted for that purpose.<sup>56</sup> )

The churches provided the most important source of support. Clergymen were urged to preach on colonization at least once a year, and to take up collections for the A.C.S. every fourth of July.<sup>57</sup> The Kentucky Synod of September 1845, exhorted by Rev. Finley, voted, as had been done before, to recommend the collection to its members, and contributed \$500.<sup>58</sup>

There was room for considerable improvement, however, and a special agent, Rev. George C. Light, was appointed in late 1831 to stir up the State auxiliaries.<sup>59</sup> A running shortage of funds was a constant source of

<sup>55</sup>No single piece of evidence can adequately prove such a statement; but a thorough study of slavery literature in Kentucky, where no positive-good doctrine took root, even after 1850, compels us to adopt this conclusion. The author has collected a list of all Kentuckians who contributed to colonization --numbering several hundred persons--but there is no use in reproducing it here. What is important is the extent of colonization activity and the fact that opposition to colonization was virtually nonexistent.

<sup>56</sup>Fox (Colonization Society, 137) has recorded 3,300 cases of emancipation with the intention of removal in the years 1825-1835.

<sup>57</sup>Gurley to Birney, Washington D. C., July 7, 1832; Birney, Letters, 8.

<sup>58</sup>Liberator, October 24, 1845, 15:169.

<sup>59</sup>Commentator, December 13, 1831.

distress.<sup>60</sup> At one point, upon Birney's arrival in Kentucky, the executive board of the Kentucky Society had lost contact with the A.C.S. agent for three months and showed no interest in learning his whereabouts. It was hoped Birney would be able to draw the board out of its lethargy.<sup>61</sup> Breckinridge lamented at the A.C.S. Annual Meeting in Washington in 1834 that reluctance of free Negroes to emigrate--the work, he was sure, of abolitionists--had seriously compromised colonization efforts.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, colonization in Kentucky, if not flourishing prodigiously, was proceeding fairly, due to wide publicity of the Negro problem and of colonization aims, to encouragement and material aid from the churches and the Legislature, and to the support of outstanding public men.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup>George C. Light to Birney, Cynthiana, Kentucky, December 10, 1832; Birney, Letters, 45. December 1831 the managers of the A.C.S. reported little progress had been made for lack of funds, and complained of the "worse than useless" free blacks. Commentator, December 13, 1831. Evidently they were showing reluctance to emigrate. To combat this the Fayette County Colonization Society delegated a committee (including Robert Wickliffe) to assemble the free Negroes, speak to them on the glories of Liberia, and have them choose one of their number to go to Liberia to look things over. Further material on Light's work is available in the African Repository, August 1832, 8:191. In 1832 the Danville paper received news from a Negro manumitted by L. Green of Lincoln County, expressing marked satisfaction with the colony. Commentator, February 28, 1832. From February to mid-March \$500 was collected in Kentucky, \$200 by the Lexington Female Colonization Society, and \$50 by Breckinridge at a camp meeting on his farm, to which sum he added \$100 from his own pocket. African Repository, March 1832, 8:32.

<sup>61</sup>T. A. Mills to Birney, Frankfort, July 1, 1833; Birney, Letters, 80, 81. Mills too is critical of Finley's immoderate conduct.

<sup>62</sup>From the New York Evangelist; Liberator, February 8, 1834, 4:22.

<sup>63</sup>Robert Wickliffe presided at a Lexington colonization meet October 1831, at which it was proposed that a ten cent head tax on slaves be levied to raise removal funds. Maysville Eagle, October 4, 1831. Wickliffe washed his hands of the colonization movement in 1840 when Breckinridge caused him to believe it to be contaminated by antislavery designs. Martin, Anti-Slavery, 56.

(By the end of 1833 Birney had become almost exclusively interested in the cause of emancipation. Colonization might satisfy the needs of conscientious individuals desiring to confer freedom on their charges, but it could never accomplish the one object that dominated his attention. Colonization might yet be "...the mode under Divine providence of enlightening and christianizing robbed and spoiled AFRICA," but it could never be made to stir the South sufficiently "...to make it the means of ridding us of Slavery."<sup>64</sup> He was resolved to find a more direct path.)

In December of 1833 nine emancipationists, meeting in Lexington at the prompting of Birney,<sup>65</sup> formed the Kentucky Society for the Gradual Relief of the State from Slavery. The "Constitution and Address," written by Birney and signed by John Green, Secretary, boldly announced the object of the Society to be "the total abolition of slavery throughout the Commonwealth."<sup>66</sup> The proposition was, admittedly, revolutionary; yet it could be announced in view of the fact that many were sympathetic to it.<sup>67</sup> Three-fourths of Kentuckians were not slave-holders and thus, on the face of it, had no interest in the continuance of slavery.

<sup>64</sup>Birney to Gurley, Danville, December 11, 1833; Birney, Letters, 98.

<sup>65</sup>Before leaving Alabama he had contacted the men connected with the old private emancipation society, suggesting several resolutions which he had to abandon because they thought them too extreme. William Birney, Birney, 131-3. Birney unfortunately offers no details on this. The cholera epidemic of 1833 prevented organizing a year earlier. African Repository, April 1843, 10:43.

<sup>66</sup>Birney, Letters, 100. According to Dwight L. Dumond, Anti-slavery Origins of the Civil War (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1939), 26, the Address was "almost certainly written by Birney."

<sup>67</sup>Again reference to the mysterious antislavery majority in Kentucky. "We can take the non-slaveholders with us, and they constitute the majority," Green wrote to Breckinridge, September 17, 1832; quoted Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:800.

(Dominating Birney's essay was the belief that the advance of civilization had rendered slavery intolerable. The evil inaugurated by colonial ancestors was charged to "the vice of the times," rather than to any innate depravity. The "benighted" human mind, incapable of understanding the "rights of man," was unable to comprehend the enormity of its actions. But now "the sentence of condemnation has been passed upon [slavery] by the civilized world..." a judgment so universal that no respectable Kentuckian would controvert the decision.) It might seem to some that the former transgression should be condemned and the other absolved; but this was a delusion contrary to reason. Both violated the law of nature, whose author created no slaves, but ordained that every man enter the world unshackled.) How much greater, in fact was the evil of perpetuating slavery than had been its introduction.

The one [Birney elaborated] consisted of a few acts of heartrending oppression.... The other consists in innumerable wrongs inflicted on the slave and his posterity for a period of time already amounting to two hundred years, and extending an unknown length along the dark vista of futurity. --The first wrong was inflicted in an age, when as we have intimated, the rights of man were imperfectly understood; and when to be a heathen was deemed a sufficient reason for depriving the unhappy victim of all his personal rights as a human being, and cutting him off from all the charities of life. The second wrong (the unnecessary continuance of bondage) is perpetrated by us--enjoying the full blaze of that light which our own revolution and other similar events have thrown upon the principles of civil and religious liberty--by us who hold up our institutions as patterns from which the statesmen and patriots of other nations are invited to copy, and who boast our country to be the freest on the Globe, and an asylum for the oppressed of every other.<sup>68</sup>

(Yet, though the justification of slavery in the abstract may have been abandoned, there were those--the proslavery spokesmen--who defended the continuance of slavery by prophesying that enormous evils would attend

<sup>68</sup> "Constitution and Address;" Birney, Letters, 101-2.

emancipation. Along with opposition to slavery, they professed adherence to colonization, but declared in the same breath that removal would not succeed.) Emancipation, they declared, would then mean turning a degraded caste out on society, to pilfer and amalgamate. There was a portion of truth mingled with these unsound arguments, Birney conceded, and sympathy should be had for all those who, taking this superficial view of the matter, were appalled by the "army of difficulties" that harrassed the question. (But the slaveholders were speaking of the consequences of immediate emancipation. Their objections might be allayed because Birney and his associates contemplated only "immediate preparation for future emancipation." Recognizing that slavery was a great moral and political evil, unjustifiable the day it could be terminated, the resolve to reform outweighed every other consideration. Preparation for emancipation must presuppose the will to emancipate.

We are fully persuaded Birney affirmed that adequate preparation for that kind of future gradual emancipation, which will operate beneficially to both the master and slave, can be successfully commenced in no other way, than by deciding first, that slavery shall cease to exist--absolutely, unconditionally, and irrevocably. When that is settled, then, but not till then, the whole community (of whites) will feel a common interest, in making the best possible preparation for the event. --But so long as perpetual slavery remains engrafted on our constitution, there will be found a powerful and influential class of the community, interested, in opposing all attempts to bring the system to a termination.<sup>69</sup> )

Birney's faith in progress was again demonstrated in the resolution to leave the final work to the wise legislators of the future. The wisdom of his generation, he felt, would consist in taking in hand the necessary task of preparing the way. And that, as Birney saw it, was a most grave responsibility.

<sup>69</sup>"Constitution and Address;" Birney, Letters, 105.

Every person, who is the least observant of the progress of public opinion and of what is doing in the world, on the subject of domestic slavery, must be satisfied, that it cannot last very long in this country. Should we refuse to enter on the work of emancipation, our children will have to do it under circumstances much less favorable, than now exist. That which we might do as mere matter of justice, or favor, or expediency, they may be compelled to by necessity.<sup>70</sup>

As its contribution to this work of active preparation, the Society committed itself to private emancipation, each member being obliged to free any slave that would be born his property when that slave reached the age of twenty-five.<sup>71</sup> For a time the organization grew, attracting eleven more members in the next three years, but then collapsed from lack of support and from the reaction that occurred at the end of 1835.<sup>72</sup>

(Probably the most singular feature of the "Constitution and Address" was its contemplation of emancipation without removal. To be sure, homage was paid to colonization, which most members of the Society supported. But the failure of colonization--and "...it still remains uncertain, whether the American people will give to the colonization cause, that efficient aid which is necessary to insure success..." Birney stated--must not deter emancipation. What would happen to the Negro after emancipation was an open question to be handled in the future; nonetheless, individually members of the emancipation

<sup>70</sup>"Constitution and Address;" Birney, Letters, 108.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>72</sup>Coleman, Slavery Times, 298. Birney hoped to make John Boyle of the U.S. District Court in Kentucky president of the Society, but the Judge died in 1834. Allen, Kentucky, 277. He then tendered the same invitation, again unsuccessfully, to John J. Crittenden. Mixing politics with emancipation was a rare thing in the history of the antislavery movement in Kentucky. Anna M. Coleman, The Life of John J. Crittenden, with Selections from His Correspondence and Speeches (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1873), 86. Martin's estimate of the membership is higher--sixty or seventy members by the end of 1834. Martin, Anti-Slavery, 70.

Society had their own "...impressions as to some of the measures which should follow emancipation."<sup>73</sup> The measures Birney outlined--trade apprenticeship and basic education for the Negroes--were clearly aimed at preparing the colored people for freedom in the land of their birth, for they were presented as alternative to persecution and banishment. It is true that he felt the freedmen should be encouraged and assisted to emigrate, but, unlike Breckinridge, Birney would not consider forced removal.

(Only a few months later, in early May, Birney abandoned colonization entirely, and on July 15 issued an uncompromising attack on that enterprise which helped bring about the almost complete collapse of the A.C.S. in 1838.<sup>74</sup> The turnabout came as a great surprise to many,<sup>75</sup> but it is apparent that the change in Birney's thinking was not a dusk-to-dawn affair.) From the very beginning there is evidence that his allegiance to colonization was not without reservation. In view of the moral fervor punctuating all his works after the profound experience of his conversion, the idea of Birney compromising with slaveholders and timid emancipationists against his deepest sentiments and principles presents a not at all convincing picture. The evidence is conclusive that the compromise did exist in his mind, but it was a painful arrangement and could not last long. There is also some reason to believe that his faith in

<sup>73</sup>"Constitution and Address;" Birney, Letters, 106.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., xiv.

<sup>75</sup>January 1834 Birney was unwittingly elected Vice President of the K.C.S. African Repository, November 1834, 10:258. The public was not entirely unprepared, however, for word got out that Birney was trying to discourage Rev. B. O. Peers, a former President of Transylvania University, from starting a colonization paper. William Birney, Birney, 140-1. For notice of Peers' colonization activities, see A.C.S. 12th Annual Report, 496.

colonization was equivocal from the beginning. In a letter of July 26, 1832, Gurley had expressed great satisfaction that Birney had not

....decided the important question submitted to you, against us, and I can hardly doubt, that on more mature reflection, you will accept the proposed agency. It seems to me there will in such case be opened before you the widest and most interesting field of usefulness.

Two days earlier Weld had declared to Birney that he was greatly "...interested in your decision upon the great question which you have under consideration."<sup>76</sup>

Was Birney merely deciding whether or not to accept a commission from the A.C.S. or was he weighing the respective merits of colonization and abolition? What was the "great question" he resolved in favor of the Colonization Society?

Whatever the answer, it is clear that Birney had been drawing away from colonization almost from the start as a sense of impending crisis grew in his mind.<sup>77</sup>

(The "Letter on Colonization" represents the resolution of the conflict troubling Birney over the colonization platform's compromise with slaveholders.<sup>78</sup> For a time he had tolerated, even appealed to, selfish motives as useful aids in producing a benevolent attitude. But then he had come to recognize a total incongruity in this position; the two principles of

<sup>76</sup>Gurley to Birney, Washington D. C., July 26, 1832; Birney, Letters, 14; Weld to Birney, Maury County, Spring Hill, Tennessee, July 24, 1832; Ibid., 13.

<sup>77</sup>Shortly after the appearance of the "Constitution and Address" he spoke to a group of citizens assembled in the Mercer County courthouse of ominous events rolling over the horizon. He warmly commended colonization in the same breath, "...but gave it as his conviction that it could not relieve us of the black population." At best it was merely "a valuable auxiliary." African Repository, April 1834, 10:44. In view of the fact that these statements were printed by the A.C.S., Birney's defection should not have been a total surprise.

<sup>78</sup>Editors of the Lexington Intelligencer Clark and Bryant, who were colonization emancipationists aware of the weaknesses of colonization, published the "Letter" after it had been returned by the editor of the Western Luminary in June. Birney, Letters, 122n.



benevolence and self-interest, he believed, were diametrically opposed.<sup>79</sup>

Contradicting those believing (with some reason) that colonization provided a 'safe' outlet for antislavery sentiment,<sup>80</sup> long and discouraging experience had convinced Birney that colonization had "...done more to rock the conscience of the Slaveholder into slumber, and to make this slumber soft and peaceful, than all other causes united."<sup>81</sup> This inflating of false hopes would have to cease before any desire for emancipation, properly founded, could be productive.

"All great revolutions of sentiment in masses of men, calling, of course, for a corresponding change of action, must lay their foundations in some great principle...", Birney asserted.) Those of the A.C.S., a curious compound of truth and falsehood, he represented as: 1) slavery as it is, is justifiable; immediate emancipation is unthinkable; 2) the free Negroes are unhappy--and undesired; 3) they desire to be sent to Africa; 4) there they will Christianize and civilize the continent.<sup>83</sup> Such a credo, Birney insisted, could only paralyze "the power of the truth."<sup>84</sup> And, he added, cripple "the power of the ministry in the South." It was only proper, he felt, that the churches should

<sup>79</sup>James G. Birney, Letter on Colonization, Addressed to the Rev. Thornton J. Mills, Corresponding Secretary of the Kentucky Colonization Society (Boston: Garrison & Knapp, 1834), 5.

<sup>80</sup>J. D. Paxton, Letters on Slavery; Addressed to the Cumberland Congregation, Virginia. By J. D. Paxton, Their Former Pastor (Lexington; A. T. Skillman, 1833), 4. Paxton "...thinks that the Anti-Slavery Societies will do good by bringing the public mind to think on the subject" of colonization, yet explicitly declares that colonization will not abolish slavery. The Andover student already mentioned reports to Garrison, Liberator, March 22, 1834, 4:45. Paxton was thus halfway to abandoning colonization, but Birney could by no means accept such a position.

<sup>81</sup>Birney to Gerrit Smith, Danville, November 14, 1834; Birney, Letters, 150.

<sup>82</sup>Birney to Gerrit Smith, Danville, January 31, 1835; Ibid., 175.

<sup>83</sup>Birney, "Letter on Colonization," 10.

<sup>84</sup>Birney, "Letter on Colonization," 20.

be the agents of the great benevolent design of emancipation. Birney was deeply disturbed at the almost universal support given colonization by the various denominations. He was resolved to combat this allegiance and establish in its place an adherence to right principles.

The presbyterians were the most active denomination in criticizing slavery. As early as 1811 the Kentucky Synod had declared slaveholding to be morally evil, and obliged all who could not free their slaves to treat them as though they were free.<sup>85</sup> At the annual meeting of 1832 the Synod had approved the proposal: "That in the view of this Synod, Slavery as it exists within our bounds is a great moral evil, and inconsistent with the word of God." Members were advised to support the A.C.S. and all gradual voluntary emancipation measures. This gain for antislavery was partially nullified the following year, however, when the Synod declined to renew the resolution, adopting in its stead one postponing the subject indefinitely.<sup>86</sup>) The setback was highly resented by Rev. Robert J. Breckinridge, who felt that, though legal means of opposing slavery might often be lacking, moral means had always to be exercised. To demonstrate his opinion in the matter, he refused to sit in the Synod.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>85</sup>James B. Scouller, History of the United Presbyterian Church of North America (Anglican Church History Series, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 178.

<sup>86</sup>Fladeland, Birney, 98,99.

<sup>87</sup>"I Do believe....that slavery is a sin to him who in any way supports it. In support of this opinion, I did in 1830 stake and lose in Kentucky, whatever political influence years of previous and not unsuccessful effort had secured; and in 1833 I did solemnly and publicly refuse to sit as a corresponding member of the Synod of Kentucky, after that body refused to say that God's law condemned slavery," Breckinridge recapitulated. New-York Evangelist; in Liberator, March 1, 1834, 4:173.

(The next Synod was to meet in the town of Danville, which Birney had helped make the center of considerable antislavery activity.<sup>88</sup> Here was an opportunity to publish an appeal to the Synod to renew its stand of 1833.) There was considerable difficulty finding a publisher. Editor Coons of the Presbyterian Western Luminary, though sympathetic to the cause of emancipation, rejected the manuscript as "...too strong for the times--rather too high wrought a picture of the sin of slavery in the Presbyterian Church...." "...It could injure the cause which you wish to advance....," he advised.<sup>89</sup> Rev. John C. Young, son-in-law of John J. Crittenden and a nephew-in-law of Robert J. Breckinridge, had approved Birney's manuscript and attempted to intervene with Coons, but failed. The article was finally printed in the Cincinnati Journal.

(On September 17, 1834 the "Letter to the Ministers and Elders, on the Sin of Holding Slaves and the Duty of Immediate Emancipation" appeared and was distributed widely with great energy, reaching ministers of all denominations.<sup>90</sup> It opened with one of the most vitriolic indictments of slavery yet to appear in Kentucky antislavery literature.

Its effects upon its subjects are to stupify and benumb the mind, to vitiate the conscience, to multiply the sins of the grossest character, to exclude the knowledge of God and Christ, as well as of the necessity of any preparation for the world to come, and of course, to prepare them for hell.

<sup>88</sup>Birney's slaveholding brother-in-law informed him, with chagrin, that his work was "no doubt with effect about Danville." George C. Thompson to Birney, Shawanee Springs, Kentucky, October 18, 1834; Birney, Letters, 143.

<sup>89</sup>Abram T. Skillman conveys the message to Birney, August 25, 1834; Ibid., 123n.

<sup>90</sup>Weld to Birney, Cincinnati, September 10, 1834; Ibid., 133, 134. The letter was dated September 2. Martin (Anti-Slavery, 85n) has confused the Synod of 1834 with that of 1833.

Slavery was held responsible for "indolence, diabolical passions, deadness to the claims of justice and the calls of mercy, a worldly spirit, and contempt for a large portion of our fellow-creatures."<sup>91</sup>) Dramatically Birney asked whether Paul's admonition to servants to be loyal to their masters meant that the apostle would have countenanced such great evils. Would he have been obliged to consult the Phrygian slave code, to collate the laws and gather testimony as to "...the recognized and approved customs of oppression? Or would he have taken up the word of God, the perfect law of Liberty...?"<sup>92</sup> Cutting through the dilemma with a direct moral appeal, Birney would have none of either the Biblical or the constitutional arguments; he was aware of the consequences of his stand, but certain that it was both justified and necessary. "You may, it is true, be called madmen; but Sharp, Clarkson, and Wilberforce, were so baptized by the enemies of humanity...."<sup>93</sup> With this litany of the great names in British abolition, Birney proclaimed himself a revolutionary. All other considerations paled before that of the sinfulness of slavery.

(The "Letter to the Ministers" had considerable immediate effect upon the Synod, where Judge John Green, a close friend of Birney (who attended as a spectator), upheld the view that "...slavery as it exists among us, and as it is recognized by our laws and constitution, [is] sinful...."<sup>94</sup> The resolution finally adopted was not all Birney and Green had hoped for, but at least it was

<sup>91</sup> Birney, Letter to the Ministers, 2.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>94</sup> Birney, "Diary," October 7, 1834; Birney, Letters, 109n.

one step forward.<sup>95</sup> The "Declaration and Resolutions of the Synod of Kentucky concerning Slavery" commenced:

This Synod, believing that the system of absolute and hereditary domestic slavery, as it exists among the members of our communion, is repugnant to the principles of our holy religion, as revealed in the sacred Scriptures, and that the continuance of the system, any longer than is necessary to prepare for its safe and beneficial termination, is sinful, feel it their duty earnestly to recommend to all Presbyteries, church sessions, and people under their care, to commence immediate preparation for the termination of slavery among us; --so that this evil may cease to exist with the present generation; and the future offspring of our slaves may be free.<sup>96</sup> )

Slaves of the present generation were not to be disregarded, for many Presbyterians would find it to considerable advantage to emancipate them. Others, especially the young, should be prepared for emancipation. These injunctions were not made mandatory; it was thought better to leave them "...to the operation of the Christian law of love on the consciences of men." To further the work of preparing slaves for liberation a committee of ten, headed by John C. Young, was appointed to compose a plan "...for the moral and religious instruction of our slaves, and for their future emancipation..." to be submitted for the consideration of the individual Presbyteries.

(Preparing the slaves for emancipation could be approved by those who might believe emancipation without removal to be the only alternative. This was how Birney understood it, for he had declared that the races were already living together successfully, and that "the melioration of knowledge, science, and liberty" would dissipate what degradation and vice marred the relationship.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Birney to Gerrit Smith, Danville, November 14, 1834; Ibid., 148.

<sup>96</sup> "Declaration and Resolutions of the Synod;" Liberator, November 8, 1834, 4:178.

<sup>97</sup> Western Luminary, March 5, 1834.

Few others went so far. In order to placate the moderates, the Synod refrained from an unbending denouncement of the continuance of slavery as sinful. Even more conservative was the resolution:

That this Synod have unabated confidence in the scheme of African Colonization, and hope of its great usefulness: and that we look upon African Colonization as one interesting door of hope opened to us in the providence of God for doing a signal service of patriotism to our common country, an act of justice to the unfortunate African race among us, and for spreading the blessings of civilization and the everlasting gospel in the interior of Africa.

The resolutions were adopted by a vote of fifty six to eight, with seven abstentions.) By a subsequent motion it was directed that the "Declaration and Resolutions" be printed in the Western Luminary and read to each congregation.<sup>98</sup>

(The measure was a compromise capable of embracing a wide variety of opinions. Some thought the Church should not interfere in the matter. Others hesitated advancing too far ahead of public opinion. The majority were evidently still loyal to colonization; but those who were not could be satisfied with the qualifying phrase "...Colonization as one interesting door of hope...." in the article on removal. The debate and private interchange disclosed eight abolitionists.<sup>99</sup> Rev. William L. Breckinridge, brother of Robert Breckinridge, described the resolutions as "as strong meat as our babes can bear," even though they might not be satisfactory to all.<sup>100</sup> Robert Breckinridge declared that the Synod's statement was the most suited to his

<sup>98</sup>It was reprinted in full in the Liberator, November 8, 1834, 4:178.

<sup>99</sup>Peter Vanarsdall to Birney, New Providence, Kentucky, January 22, 1835; Birney, Letters, 169-70. Manuscript Inclosures, Ibid., 219-20.

<sup>100</sup>William L. Breckinridge to Joshua L. Wilson, Danville, October 18, 1834; Joshua L. Wilson papers, p. 702; Durrett Collection Mss.

ideas that he had heard.<sup>101</sup> Birney too was pleased that as much as was possible had been done. It comes as a surprise, then, that Birney found the compromise in John Young's position, when expressed more fully in a subsequent speech, so intolerable. Young's "Address to the Presbyterians of Kentucky, Proposing a Plan for the Instruction and Emancipation of their Slaves," in Birney's opinion, administered a powerful anodyne, putting to sleep earnest and persevering minds, and revealed its author as useless to the cause.<sup>102</sup>

A look at Young's "Adress" makes Birney's attitude seem rather surprising. The minister opened with the direct proposition that slavery was a violation of God's law, natural and revealed. It transgressed man's right to the proceeds of his labor, to individual liberty, and to personal security. Young was proceeding firmly toward the same doctrine of the sinfulness of slavery which, ironically, Birney held to be of the highest importance. The exclamations that punctuate Young's admonition are significant. Though suspended, he argued, the laws of nature could never be superseded by earthly statutes; they remained to impose a grave moral burden upon all who contributed in any way to the perpetuation of slavery. "And do we not participate in its criminality if we uphold it?" Cruelty, degradation, and oppression are inherent in the very system itself. "And can any man believe that such a thing as this is not sinful--that it is not hated by God--and ought not to be abhorred and abolished by man?" All natural motivation is dulled by the whip, while that education by which the slave would raise himself out of his miserable condition is denied,

<sup>101</sup>Thompson and Breckinridge, Discussion, 116.

<sup>102</sup>Birney to Gerrit Smith, Danville, January 31, 1835; Birney, Letters, 174, 175. Young had shown his "Address" to Birney before publication; Birney took open exception, but was unable to persuade Young to reconsider. Birney's surprising attitude is discussed in the following pages.

and he is abandoned to founder in that state of license where no decent family life can survive. "Can this system be tolerated without sin?"<sup>103</sup> Unconditional emancipation, abolition, was the logical answer; but circumstances would not permit it. The Negro needed restraint and time for moral and intellectual improvement. But this must not be allowed to disguise an attempt to put off the final reckoning. Following through in one concentrated sweep to the very same enlightened stand Birney had adopted, Young concluded on the foreboding apocalyptic note that is found in all Kentucky antislaveryites who finally reached the determination that the work of emancipation must be commenced out of obedience to a trenchant moral imperative.

The groans of millions do not arise forever unheard, before the throne of the Almighty. The hour of doom must soon arrive--the storm must soon gather--the bolt of destruction must soon be hurled--and the guilty must soon be dashed in pieces.<sup>104</sup>

Not once did Young mention removal, whereas the resolutions of the Synod, which Birney had approved with reservation, very explicitly commended it. Apparently Birney's ideas were congealing very rapidly. (By the end of 1834 further fluctuation in his opinions was unlikely. Convinced that slavery, because of its utter sinfulness, must be eradicated--moral demands cancelling out all practical considerations--he set out to abolitionize Kentucky.)

(In June 1834 Birney began working as a secret agent for the Tappan-Wald American Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>105</sup> On March 18, 1835 the Kentucky Anti-Slavery

<sup>103</sup>John C. Young and John Brown, Address to the Presbyterians of Kentucky, Proposing a Plan for the Instruction and Emancipation of Their Slaves (Newburyport, Massachusetts: Charles Whipple, 1836), 2, 4, 11, 17.

<sup>104</sup>Young, Address, 24.

<sup>105</sup>Barnes, using the Minutes of the A.A.S. Agency Committee, gives the date as April 18, but the Birney-Wald correspondence indicates that the commission was not accepted until two months later. Weld to Birney, Lane Seminary (Cincinnati), June 19, 1834; Birney, Letters, 121.



Society, an auxiliary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, was founded at Danville.<sup>106</sup> James M. Buchanan of Centre College was elected President, Dr. Luke Mansell, previously an active colonization supporter,<sup>107</sup> Corresponding Secretary. Birney, who had organized the Society, was placed last in a list of five Vice Presidents.<sup>108</sup> The proposal that the Society associate itself with the A.A.S. was offered to the members hesitantly, but was well-supported, and Birney was chosen to be a delegate to the A.A.S. Anniversary meeting in May 1835.<sup>109</sup> In compliance with instructions from Birney, the notice of the event appearing in the New York Emancipator, the A.A.S. organ, was factual and brief. Yet it did not fail to note that the members of the Kentucky Antislavery Society had not reached unanimity on one very important point. "Our meeting," the new Society reported, "was conducted with the sweetest harmony, there being scarcely any difference of opinion, except as to the 6th resolution, the substance of which, is that 'moral, temperate, and industrious' colonists taken from our free colored people will not Christianize Africa...."<sup>110</sup> A number of members evidently retained a measure of sympathy for the more benevolent aspects of colonization.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>106</sup>The New York Emancipator gives the date as March 19. Liberator, April 4, 1835, 5:55. This date is used by Martin (Anti-Slavery, 26). Dumond (Antislavery Origins, 32) agrees that it was March 18.

<sup>107</sup>A.C.S. 12 Annual Report, 74; Commentator, December 13, 1831. While president of the Danville Deaf and Dumb Asylum he had worked closely with his fellow Presbyterian Birney. Dumond, Antislavery Origins, 28; 1839 he moved to Indiana where he managed the antislavery society of that State. Birney, Letters, 187n.

<sup>108</sup>Liberator, May 16, 1835, 5:77.

<sup>109</sup>Birney to Lewis Tappan, Danville, March 19, 1835; Birney, Letters, 186-7.

<sup>110</sup>Quoted Liberator, April 4, 1835, 5:55.

<sup>111</sup>Mansell had been an active supporter of the K.C.S. in Frankfort. A.C.S., 12th Annual Report, 74.

(In May the prospectus of the Philanthropist, and Advocate of Emancipation appeared, the publication of which was to commence the first week in August. A note of great urgency prevailed, coupled with the most uncompromising moral insistence. Unless the great evil of slavery be at once blotted out, it would in a short time grow beyond the pale of all human remedy, becoming in the end overwhelming.) All the social evils of the system were once more arraigned-- the fostering of an aristocratic spirit contrary to republican principles, the levelling and extinction of the honest laboring classes, the obstruction of the advance of universal education.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, slavery was declared opposed to "...the foundation principle of our government, that 'all men are created equal' and have an 'inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'." But these articles were clearly subordinated to moral considerations (Of several reasons which Birney gave to demonstrate the necessity of the principle of immediate action, the first three and the last underscored the moral evil of slavery.

1. Slavery is utterly opposed to the Christian Religion as taught in the Bible. Injustice being an unavoidable ingredient of Slavery--its continuance, whatever modifications it may be made to assume, must also be opposed to the Christian Religion.

2. It is the mighty barrier--resisting the progress of pure religion in the slaveholding States.

3. It threatens to corrupt Christianity throughout our country-- by ingrafting upon it the error, that the apprehension of social inconveniences following emancipation makes the sin of slaveholding no longer sin.

9. Because Slavery, the institution of man/,/ is opposed to Liberty, the institution of God. In a contest with the Almighty we must be overthrown. 'Who hath hardened himself against Him and hath prospered?/'. )

<sup>112</sup>This last article paid tribute to the education reform movement then gaining ground in the State. Francis B. Simkins, A History of the South (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1953), 176.

Above all, then, slavery must be destroyed because it was sinful. Only when that sin were rooted out would the attendant evils cease, and the "land...be blessed of God." (Thus the Philanthropist prospectus announced a policy of immediate emancipation which subordinated all considerations to that of a religious obligation so pressing that it had to be made a part of public policy in order that the people might be relieved of their burden of guilt. )

Believing that the evils of Slavery, like all others of the same nature, have their origin and continuance in sin, and that the only way of terminating them, is, to desist from the sin, with which they are indissolubly connected,--the 'Philanthropist' will maintain immediate emancipation, not only as the religious duty of every man, who holds his brother in bondage, but as the policy best calculated to advance the interests of the community to their highest condition of prosperity.

The very unique suggestion of a causal connection between righteousness and prosperity remained undeveloped, for Birney's work in Kentucky was drawing near a dramatic close.

(The prospects for any sort of success were getting steadily poorer. The Kentucky Synod's compromise on the matter of colonization soon outweighed in Birney's mind what had for a moment seemed plausible gains.) In January 1835 he journeyed to Frankfort to hear the views on slavery elicited in the debate over calling a constitutional convention. He heard enough discussion of emancipation, but extreme demands for compensating slaveholders caused him uneasiness. Not once did he hear an appeal to the rights of the slave. In fact, a bill was introduced in the Senate on January 7 which would prohibit private emancipation without removal within six months. Negroes found within the State beyond that period would be liable to seizure without warrant, and

to sale into slavery for life by any citizen of Kentucky.<sup>113</sup> (The public temper showed itself even more plainly in response to Birney's announced plan to publish an antislavery newspaper. From Barren County a friend reported that the local citizens were not prepared for the Philanthropist, which project suggested to them the possibility of social upheaval.<sup>114</sup>) At Shelbyville a public discussion of whether a constitutional convention should be called to settle the question of emancipation resulted in several resolutions that deprecated slavery, but at the same time emphatically opposed any settlement that would leave the blacks within the State.<sup>115</sup> (Finally, Birney's own attitude magnified the unfavorableness of the situation. Unmistakable signs of just how the great majority of people felt, rather than having a discouraging effect upon his ambitions, merely drove him on to a more extreme position. As he saw

<sup>113</sup>"Feelings almost of dismay came over me, when I heard and considered, that this language came from the summit of the great mass yet to be penetrated by the truth....," Birney wrote to Gerrit Smith on January 31. Birney, Letters, 174, 176n.

<sup>114</sup>John Jones to Birney, Glasgow, July 25, 1835; Ibid., 223.

<sup>115</sup>These citizens very plainly condemned slavery on both moral and political grounds--"....a violation of the natural rights of man," they concluded. Furthermore they believed emancipation would so profit the State economically as to compensate well the immediate losses sustained. But, much as they deprecated slavery, they would not tolerate the social disruption Birney appeared to them to be advocating. "Resolved, That no system of emancipation will meet our approbation, unless COLONIZATION be inseparably connected with it, and that any scheme of emancipation which will leave the blacks within our borders, is more to be deprecated than SLAVERY ITSELF. Liberator, July 11, 1839, 5:109. Coulter mistakenly places the Shelby meet after Birney's departure for Ohio. Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:80.

it, an impasse had been reached. Gradualism had proven itself bankrupt.<sup>116</sup>

The remaining alternative, one most suited to Birney's moral intensity, was the application of the full truth. The principal effect of recent disheartening experiences had been to drive Birney to a position quite beyond that of any of his antislavery colleagues. No practical objection would now alter his insistence that the Negro must be awarded civil rights at once. Social rights would follow of their own accord.<sup>117</sup> He rejected outright any title of the slaveholder to compensation.<sup>118</sup> Perhaps most alarming was his defense of interference by other states. (Attending the A.A.S. Anniversary in New York, he proposed:

That, for the permanent safety of the Union, it is indispensable that the whole moral power of the free States should be concentrated and brought into action for the extermination of slavery among us.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>116</sup>The conciliators, the "quacks" who preached gradualism, did not contribute to the progress of emancipation. They only salved the consciences of those who had to slavery "...in the abstract a hatred that is perfect," making them content with "the enormities of slavery in practice." Birney to Lewis Tappan, Danville, February 3, 1835; Birney, Letters, 179. Only the presentation of abolition as an immediate moral obligation could stimulate the progress so lacking. "It is the total failure of gradualism to lay hold of men's consciences, that must ever render it ineffectual for the extermination of Slavery in our country." "Of this I feel confident, that nothing but the most tremendous mental shock--nothing short of the fear of Hell will make the slaveholder resign his hold," Birney declared. Birney to Gerrit Smith, Danville, November 14, 1834; Ibid., 148; Birney to Lewis Tappan, Danville, February 3, 1835; Ibid., 179.

<sup>117</sup>Wald to Birney, Cincinnati, August 7, 1834; Ibid., 127-8.

<sup>118</sup>Birney told a Quaker delegation from Massachusetts that he believed in no right to compensation for relinquishing that which was never rightly held. The sinful character of slavery was enough to negate any idea of compensation. Liberator, July 4, 1835, 5:105.

<sup>119</sup>From New York he proceeded to lecture engagements in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. July 10 he was home again, summoned by urgent letters. William Birney, Birney, 179.

It is my firm conviction, that if Ohio would rise as one man, in the dignity of her great moral and intellectual power, and declare to the slaveholders of Kentucky--'YOU ARE WRONG--your oppression is condemned by God, and shall meet with no favor from us' that the death-blow would be given to slavery, not only in Kentucky, but through the whole South. No chains could withstand the concentrated radiance of such virtuous action.<sup>120</sup>

According to E. Merton Coulter, here was "...a brand of slavery opposition which was new to Kentuckians; no half-way measures.... Emancipation, immediate and complete, obtained by fair means or foul (for the cause hallowed the means), was now the battle cry."<sup>121</sup> The radicalism of Birney's antislavery must be emphasized; but care has to be taken to determine exactly what "foul means" the cause hallowed for him. Advocating immediate emancipation did not necessarily exclude recourse to constitutional channels. The appeal to the North to bring the South to abolish slavery called for moral suasion--"...only through the power of the truth applied to the understanding and conscience of slaveholders...."--not for pikes and cannon.<sup>122</sup> That Birney was ready to forego granting compensation to slaveholders is evidence enough of his revolutionary stand; but he had not reached the last stages of extremism. Birney was not, and never became, a Garrison abolitionist.)

On July 25 Birney got his first rough taste of the storm of opposition gathering around his head when thirty citizens of the Danville area drafted a

<sup>120</sup>Quoted Liberator, May 9, 1835, 5:75. "If any thing can save the South....from the judgments....it must be the accumulated... sympathy of all good men in the North with the slave in his sufferings, and the same kind of condemnation, unmitigated and unyielding, of the oppressor, till he repents." Birney to Gerrit Smith, Danville, July 14, 1835; Birney, Letters, 202.

<sup>121</sup>Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:801.

<sup>122</sup>James G. Birney, Vindication of Abolitionists. Reply to Resolutions of a Body of Alabama Citizens, December 9, 1835 (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1836), 15. "We abolitionists are "...opposed to violence and war, even for the attainment of rights," Birney declared. Ibid., 32.

protest against his abolition schemes, an experiment, they declared, "...which no American Slaveholding community has found itself able to bear." Beware, they advised, for, in the absence of laws adequate to protect the community from incendiaries, individual citizens had "the right of immediate resistance." ) Following this thinly concealed threat, however, the letter concluded with an advertent declaration of antislavery sympathy.

We would here remark, that we are not men who would see slavery perpetuated, if it can be remedied rightfully. Some of us are willing to see a state convention called, and a selection of the best remedy submitted to their deliberate judgment. Many of us have been members and warm supporters of the Colonization Society. All of us believe slavery a moral and political evil. But whilst they are amongst us--whilst their own happiness and good treatment depends upon their fidelity and contentment--whilst a respectable portion of the community, to whom the laws secure them, choose to keep them; and a temporary necessity thus keeps them amongst us; we would see them so kept and treated as to make them most happy and contented and society most quiet.<sup>123</sup>

Birney refused to be intimidated by the severe protest, and replied at once with marked firmness. Nothing in his prospectus, he insisted, was calculated or able to stir up the slaves. Such a development he himself deprecated as injurious to the progress of emancipation. "The action I contemplate is upon the master, by arguments addressed to his understanding and his conscience," he affirmed, and accused his adversaries of being the ones guilty of stirring up trouble. The rash expressions came from their side, not his.<sup>124</sup> ) In a fine

<sup>123</sup>F. T. Taylor and Others to Birney, Danville, July 12, 1835; Birney, Letters, 199,200.

<sup>124</sup>"Is it not the incessant chatter of thoughtless slaveholders about the increasing indolence and insolence of their slaves--the everlasting ding dong of inconsiderate and, very often severe masters, about the growing unruliness of their negroes--the gossiping about the neighborhood of a hundred silly stories and idle remarks....well calculated to produce in the mind and conduct of the slaves the very state of things you so earnestly deprecate?" Birney charged his assailants. Birney, Letters, 207.

display of rhetorical ability Birney cleverly held over the heads of his opponents the appellation "un-American." Freedom of the press, one of the "most precious" rights of an American, could never for a moment be surrendered. Furthermore, those who contributed in any way to the perpetuation of slavery were ranging themselves on the side of aristocracy, for "...the slave holding spirit produces the aristocratic spirit...." They were abetting slavery and with it aristocracy, who, like the thirty Danville citizens, obstructed the spread of ideas. Those who would have slavery ended must see the need for open discussion. "The sooner this is begun, the sooner the trash and brushwood of opposition to it is removed, the sooner the wisest heads and the most philanthropic hearts are summoned to aid with their counsel, the more certainly and earlier will we attain a deliberate and wholesome conclusion," Birney asserted.<sup>125</sup>

These words of defense, however, went unheeded; instead, steps were taken to silence this disturber of the peace who threatened "the comfortable smugness of the status quo."<sup>126</sup> In answer to a handbill calling for sympathizers to meet on July 25 to register support of Birney's actions, the opposition gathered a far larger crowd on the same night at the Danville Baptist church.<sup>127</sup> Major James Barbour, president of the Branch Bank of Kentucky and treasurer of

<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 209.

<sup>126</sup>Fladeland, Birney, 90.

<sup>127</sup>Birney to F. T. Taylor and Others, Danville, July 22, 1835; Birney, Letters, 211. The charges and Birney's reply appeared in the Frankfort Commonwealth, August 8, 1835, and in the Danville Olive Branch. The handbill of Birney's supporters bore nineteen signatures. Hardly the sedative the situation required, it promised Birney's adversaries "trouble for their pains." This was a challenge around which the community could be rallied. In the last few months Birney had encountered great trouble renting a hall to speak. William Birney, Birney, 184.



Centre College, presided.<sup>128</sup> Outstanding among those speaking out against Birney was Rev. James K. Burch, who had been a member of the 1834 Synod committee on emancipation and slave education.<sup>129</sup> The resolutions adopted by the assembly of four or five hundred persons called for censure. (Birney's abolition plans were condemned as visionary, incendiary, destructive of domestic relations, and unconstitutional. Nine-tenths of the citizens of Danville, it was declared, deplored his schemes; he was petitioned to abandon them.<sup>130</sup> Danville had achieved a united front.) Four days later a mob appeared before the office of the Olive Branch where the Philanthropist was to be published. A certain Dismukes, whom Birney had engaged as printer, defected. The mob dispersed on the appearance of a former owner of the paper, himself a pro-slaveryite.<sup>131</sup> But the demonstration, orderly as it was, proved sufficient to persuade Birney that the effort had to be dropped. (The experiment had ended fatally; all hope dissipated, Birney finally uttered the conclusion long nascent in his mind: the South was closed to abolition. In 1833 he had looked to Kentucky as the last hope for emancipation. Now, in sharp contrast, he declared: "The Spirit of Slavery is the same every where--it is the same in Kentucky as in

<sup>128</sup>Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 3:587.

<sup>129</sup>Martin, Anti-Slavery, 85. Burch was moderator of the Kentucky Presbyterian Synod. Dumond, Antislavery Origins, 33.

<sup>130</sup>Birney, Letters, 212n; Lexington Intelligencer, August 1, 1833 [sic]. John G. Miller, Charles H. Talbot, John Kincaid, J. Barbour, R. Tilford were also prominent in the proceedings. Frankfort Commonwealth, August 8, 1835.

<sup>131</sup>The former owner was J. J. Polk who quit his interest in the paper in 1833. He bought Dismuke's interest on this occasion. Peter Dunn and Others to Birney, Danville, August 6, 1835; Birney, Letters, 230.

Louisiana."<sup>132</sup> Nevertheless his work was not concluded; the assault on slavery had now to be carried to the North.<sup>133</sup> )

Birney was not the only white fugitive, voluntary or otherwise, from slavery in Kentucky. It is impossible to estimate the number who, abhorring the institution, left without entering the struggle against slavery, but the evidence suggests a considerable number.<sup>134</sup> "I can no longer bear the remonstrations of my conscience on the subject of holding slaves, and I cannot live in this State without them," James Elythe wrote to Rev. Joshua L. Wilson, a former Kentuckian and an open opponent of slavery. Elythe declared his intention to follow Wilson to Ohio.<sup>135</sup> John Rankin, the famous Ohio anti-slaveryite, had abandoned his Kentucky pastorate for one in Ripley on the north bank of the River, and by 1830 nearly his whole congregation had followed.<sup>136</sup> At a meeting of ministers of the three major denominations in Cincinnati in 1848 a Baptist told of the great difficulties he had encountered when he attempted "....to resist the damning influence of slavery...." Finally, when his proposal to turn slaveholders out of the church was rejected, he had packed up and left for the freer air to the north.<sup>137</sup> The Reverend Harvey Woods

<sup>132</sup> Birney to Joseph Healy, near Danville, October 2, 1835; Ibid., 250.

<sup>133</sup> "....God will avenge himself of a Nation like this. And yet it is not time for us to sit down and do nothing. It is as much as all the patriotism in our country can do, to keep alive the spirit of liberty in the free states." Birney to Gerrit Smith, Danville, September 13, 1835; Ibid., 243.

<sup>134</sup> Weeks, "Anti-Slavery," 284.

<sup>135</sup> Elythe to Wilson, Lexington, April 12, 1832; Joshua L. Wilson Papers, p. 558, Durrett Collection Mss.

<sup>136</sup> William Birney, Birney, 170. Rankin then devoted himself to aiding Negroes, some of them fugitives, in Ohio. Wilbur H. Siebert, The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom (London: The Macmillan Company, 1899), 306. Another case is related in a letter from Joseph Harrison to Joshua Wilson, November 4, 1835; Joshua L. Wilson Papers, p. 769, Durrett Collection Mss.

<sup>137</sup> Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher (edited by W. P. Strickland, New York: Carlton & Porter, /c.1856/), 411.

of Glasgow, who had helped circulate the "Letter to the Ministers," also hoped to move to Ohio. "To go to a free state has been my wish for years," he wrote Birney in September 1834. "And no consideration could induce me to stay[, /] only a hope of doing something to remedy the great evil."<sup>138</sup>

(Birney did not retreat; it is more correct to say he was expelled, for had he been allowed his way he would have carried on in Kentucky. He was obliged to leave because of his extreme views, which appeared all the more radical to the public because they coincided with a far more potent cause of alarm. Just as the antislavery debate reached a peak, the first wave in a series of servile insurrection panics struck, culminating in the Vicksburg murders and similar disturbances.<sup>139</sup>) As rumor swam into rumor, men wanted an accounting for what seemed one concerted phenomenon. The Northern abolitionist, popularly identified as rabid William Lloyd Garrison, was presented as the scapegoat. This is why Birney's open association with the American Antislavery Society has to be regarded as highly impolitic; the revolt scares had not yet commenced, but he should have realized the possibility. Kentuckians were totally ignorant of the subtle distinctions propounded in 'New York abolitionism;'

<sup>138</sup> Hervey Woods to Birney, Glasgow, September 30, 1834; Birney, Letters, 136. He remained, however, taking a teaching position at Glasgow Seminary. Woods to Birney, Glasgow, October 19, 1836; Ibid., 368. "But here we are forced to be silent. It is hard. I am unhappy about it," he complained.

<sup>139</sup> Herbert Aptheker, Negro Slave Revolts in the United States, 1526-1860 (New York: International Publishers, /c.1939/), 52-3.

Weld was thus considered a pure Garrison man, and with him, Birney.<sup>140</sup> The close association with Weld was of long standing and intimate. He and his Lane Seminary colleagues worked feverishly to distribute the letters on colonization and to the ministers, and Weld was busy through the summer of 1835 building an impressive circulation, North and South, for the Philanthropist.<sup>141</sup> After all the precautions the two took in meeting, it is strange that Birney would write that adverse association with abolitionism would be easily dissipated.<sup>142</sup> This was certainly a serious miscalculation. An excess of idealistic enthusiasm, though noble in a way and to an extent necessary to the progress of the anti-slavery movement, had blunted his powers of realistic judgment.

( July 25, 1835 is to be regarded as a major event in the history of the struggle against slavery south of the Mason-Dixon line. "That day," Dumond asserts, "marked the end of the organized antislavery movement in Kentucky."<sup>143</sup>

<sup>140</sup>December 1835, Birney published his defense of the abolitionists as sincere and upright citizens. Birney, Vindication, 14. Birney had been fairly warned about trucking with these people. Will H. Richardson wrote in December 1834: Your plan "...is one however so delicate and explosive in its tendency as to require on the part of its advocates their caution, prudence and judgment in its accomplishment. An injudicious or illtimed movement would prostrate the individuals concerned and add new pangs to the sufferings and privations of the slave." Lexington, December 4, 1834; Birney, Letters, 153. At the same time Weld was advising that any violence produced by adopting a radical position would have a beneficial effect on reasonable men. Weld to Birney, Cincinnati, August 7, 1834; Ibid., 128. Birney exercised a degree of caution, obviously aware of the risk. He and Weld met clandestinely, for Weld was known in Kentucky. Weld to Birney, Cincinnati, June 19, 1834; Ibid., 121.

<sup>141</sup>Weld to Birney, Cincinnati, June 19, 1834; Ibid.

<sup>142</sup>Birney to Gerrit Smith, Danville, December 30, 1834; Birney, Letters, 162.

<sup>143</sup>Dumond, Antislavery Origins, 33.

It is true that the organized movement depended entirely on Birney at the time; but the cataclysm of July 25 removed only the head from a numerous body of anti-slavery-minded Kentuckians, ardent to serve the cause in some way, at some time, even if silenced for the moment. Their final effort, in 1849, was far better organized than the private affair of 1835.)

What of the years in between? Pressure from the reaction to abolitionism continued, waxing in intensity. The threat from slave-stealers seemed daily present; the practice was not as frequent as people believed, but several flagrant instances served to create an exaggerated impression. Calvin Fairbank and Delia Webster managed to spirit away a few slaves from central Kentucky. A certain John Fairfield supposedly smuggled out a band of twenty eight in one fell swoop.<sup>144</sup> According to report, a certain ex-slave by name of John Mason returned home from Canada to enable some 1,300 Kentucky brethren to share in the blessings of freedom.<sup>145</sup> This unwarranted interference was bitterly resented; especially in these days was the myth of a great conspiracy alive in the popular imagination. Kentucky knew her own problems and would handle them as she alone saw best. The evils of slavery were to Kentuckians "a matter of daily reflections," the Frankfort Commonwealth protested; but "it is a question for them to deliberate upon and for them to decide." Abolitionist outrages were calculated only to engender violence, for force would be met in kind once the

<sup>144</sup> Levi Coffin, Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the Reputed President of the Underground Railroad (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke & Co., 1880), 304-5.

<sup>145</sup> The account is surely exaggerated. Henrietta Buckmaster, Let My People Go: The Story of the Underground Railroad and the Growth of the Abolition Movement (Boston: Beacon Press, /c.1959/), 76. Van Zandt, another antislavery emigre, who established himself just north of Cincinnati, was prosecuted in Kentucky for stealing nine slaves in a wagon in April 1842. Siebert, Underground Railroad, 274.

domestic security of the State was at hazard.<sup>146</sup> Again and again it was recognized that the whole future of the Union was at stake in this matter. "The day for taking sides is near," as abolition becomes "...the one great political idea which is to occupy and agitate the nation." "...The anger of Kentucky is waxing warm," the Commonwealth warned.<sup>147</sup> Governor James Clark's message to the General Assembly on December 4, 1838 reflected this same sense of emergency. "Greatly I fear, that this happy land is on the brink of a fearful convulsion." The Governor called for capital punishment for slave stealing and severe restriction of antislavery literature, which, he maintained, was directed to the slave under the guise of an appeal to the slaveholder.<sup>148</sup> The Assembly dispatched firm resolutions to Ohio, but they were ignored. Then the apprehension of Asa T. Mahan in the act of abducting slaves brought public excitement to a climax.<sup>149</sup> Finally, a special executive commission of James T. Morehead and John S. Smith persuaded the Ohio Legislature to pass a strong law (1839) against slave stealing. Nevertheless, the practice continued, and it has been estimated that some \$200,000 was lost yearly to Kentuckians in this fashion.<sup>150</sup>

<sup>146</sup>Frankfort Commonwealth, August 29, 1835.

<sup>147</sup>Ibid., November 28, 1838.

<sup>148</sup>Frankfort Commonwealth, December 5, 1838. The bounty for capturing fugitives was at once raised from the \$10-\$30 (depending on circumstances of capture) set in 1835 to a maximum of \$100. 43rd General Assembly, February 28, 1835, Ch. 835, p. 282; 45th General Assembly, December Session 1837, Ch. 752, p. 158. Existing law already provided stiff punishment for abducting slaves (imprisonment for two to twenty years, fine of \$50 to \$500, and compensation to the owner). 38th General Assembly, January 28, 1830, Ch. 326, Sec. 1, 2, 3, pp. 173-4. A law of 1840 prescribed whipping (a maximum of 39 lashes). 47th General Assembly, December Session 1839, Ch. 194, p. 123.

<sup>149</sup>Frankfort Commonwealth, December 26, 1838.

<sup>150</sup>Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:807.

Alarm subsided without having produced any legislation to restrict freedom of expression,<sup>151</sup> but from then on no discussion of slavery would be tolerated for long which smacked of any association with Northern extremism. Antislavery-ites would have to tread with greatest circumspection, avoiding any suggestion of an intention to impose a change in the structure of society.<sup>152</sup> The public only too easily associated emancipation with abolition and it would be highly essential to speak in most careful terms.

(The first years of the intervening period (1835-1849) were definitely years of decline. Many vocal advocates of gradual emancipation became lukewarm or abandoned their views entirely. Under the pressure of events Kentucky came nearer to adopting a proslavery position in the late 1830s than at any other time before 1850.<sup>153</sup> But by no means must it be thought that the stauncher advocates of emancipation were stopped in their tracks.) In fact, the impulse initiated in 1830 was not completely stayed until after 1837 when, for a moment, the question of emancipation came near reaching a political test. The issue was more a matter of whether the time were propitious for discussion than whether the great slavery problem should be settled.

The debate in the General Assembly was preoccupied with the abolition threat. Discussion ranged loosely over all the general evils of slavery--that

<sup>151</sup>Clement Eaton, Freedom of Thought in the Old South (New York: Peter Smith, 1951), 177, 178. Prentice alone judged Birney rightly. William Birney, Birney, 183.

<sup>152</sup>The Louisville Advertiser included even Breckinridge with Birney and Garrison as insurrectionists. Even those who talked of gradual emancipation--Clay, Craddock, Crenshaw, Marshall, Hardin, Davidson, Ballinger, etc.--were suspect. Quoted Liberator, April 16, 1841, 11:61. Prentice was a 'filthy blackguard.' Ibid., April 23, 1841, 11:66 (the pagination here is faulty).

<sup>153</sup>Coulter speaks of the years 1830-1840 as a period of decline; but this ignores the success of 1833 (non-importation) and the call for constitutional revision, though unsuccessful, in 1834. The term 'decline' is applicable to the period 1838-ca. 1843, but it is too strong to properly characterize the preceding five years. Connolly and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:805.

it created class enmity; caused idleness and effeminacy, "recklessness, deception, and discontent; exhausted the soil and drove away the yeomanry."<sup>154</sup> John Helm, one of the few members of the Legislature in favor of a convention, argued for as thorough an emancipation plan as could be devised, providing for immediate removal. Now, he thought, was as good a time as any other.<sup>155</sup> But few agreed. The fact that Kentucky was being publicized in the North as the great battleground of abolition was too much resented.<sup>156</sup> No doubt some believed the warning of James T. Morehead that the abolitionists were only waiting for Kentucky's decision to emancipate in order to throw a firebrand into the State. Homes, towns, whole cities, he declared, were about to be levelled in ashes.<sup>157</sup> One-fourth of the voting population cast their ballots for a convention.<sup>158</sup> Under the circumstances this was an impressive figure; the defeat, however, was nonetheless complete. The antislaveryites had worked up a great deal of sentiment for emancipation, but along with it had come a sense of alarm which affected all, regardless of their stand on the question. Henry Clay's interpretation of the anticlimactic failure of 1838 is no doubt correct. "The apprehension of the danger of abolition was the leading consideration amongst the People for opposing the call."<sup>159</sup>

<sup>154</sup>A Paris, Kentucky slaveholder (ten slaves), signing himself "C." Frankfort Commonwealth, July 18, 1838.

<sup>155</sup>Helm, too, was a slaveholder. Ibid., April 11, 1838.

<sup>156</sup>Frankfort Commonwealth, April 11, 1838.

<sup>157</sup>Ibid., April 4, 1838.

<sup>158</sup>The vote, county by county, is recorded. Ibid., December 5, 1838.

<sup>159</sup>Speech in the U. S. Senate; quoted Ibid., February 27, 1843. The same is reported in a letter to Birney in late 1837; this is not found in the Dumond edition of Birney letters, however. See Clement Eaton, Henry Clay and the Art of American Politics (edited by Oscar Handlin, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., /c.1957/), 128.



There is plentiful evidence of continued antislavery sentiment after the reversal of 1838. Birney's Philanthropist penetrated the State from nearby Cincinnati.<sup>160</sup> A Southerner, writing from Kentucky, informed the Cincinnati Journal in 1838 that "the principles of abolition are taking root in the South, not in the large cities, but in the smaller towns and open country.) In the town in which I live," he reported, "and in the next nearest town, more Philanthropists than Heralds Breckinridge's Western Presbyterian Herald are taken. Mr. B. don't know this...."<sup>161</sup> Danville would be just such a small town as that referred to. In 1841 the Danville Reporter asked: "Is it not better that this fierce controversy, with regard to the moral and political sin of slavery, be brought to an end, either by its final abolition, or by fixing it upon the immovable basis of constitutional law?"<sup>162</sup> (In the same year the Bardstown Catholic Telegraph is found declaring that slavery is doomed. "We cannot prevent the development, nor can we resist the consequences of the principle which we have ourselves proclaimed, that 'all men are born free.'" ) Leaving aside religion and the power of the non-slaveholding population, self-interest was a sufficient agent in itself. The abolitionists, "...though they quickened the sluggish, and pointed the arrows of conscience, were not necessary."<sup>163</sup>

<sup>160</sup>Opposition to the Philanthropist had cooled, John Jones informed Birney. Buchanan sent Birney a list of ten Danville subscribers in January 1836. Jones to Birney, Glasgow, April 30, 1836; Birney, Letters, 322. James M. Buchanan to Birney, Danville, January 12, 1836; Ibid., 299.

<sup>161</sup>Quoted Liberator, September 7, 1838, 8:144. This anonymous correspondent appears from subsequent remarks to be from Tennessee.

<sup>162</sup>Quoted Ibid., May 7, 1841, 11:73.

<sup>163</sup>Quoted Ibid., May 14, 1841, 11:77-8.

Most significant was the attitude of the Protestant denominations. The churches were hardest pressed by the upheaval of abolitionism, which was always intimately associated with religious leaders in the North. The Methodists shrank from the issue, resolving in 1836 to "...wholly disclaim any right, wish or intention, to interfere in the civil and political relation between master and slave...."<sup>164</sup> Disavowals of abolitionism came also from the Presbyterian Synods of Missouri, Tennessee, and Virginia, in the same year.<sup>165</sup> Many Northern brethren strove to break this compromise with slaveholders by abolitionizing their respective denominations.<sup>166</sup> Rev. Henry B. Bascom of Kentucky, a prominent colonizationist, was one of a number who tried to calm the troubles engendered by the slavery disputes; he would have the Methodist General Conference adopt a rule of silence on the question of slavery. The appointment of a slaveholder to a bishopric, however, made this impossible. When in May 1845 Bishop Andrew was requested to resign, most of the Southern members withdrew

<sup>164</sup>The Annual General Conference at Cincinnati, voted 120-14 against modern abolition. Liberator, June 11, 1836, 6:101. "...The only safe, Scriptural, and prudent way for us, both as ministers and people, to take, is wholly to abstain from this agitating subject." Quoted George Peck, Slavery and the Episcopacy: Being an Examination of Dr. Bascom's Review of the Reply of the Majority to the Protest of the Minority of the Late General Conference of the M.E. Church, in the Case of Bishop Andrew (New York: G. Lane & C. B. Tippet, 1845), 31. Attention was directed to proselytizing. Statistics suggest a certain success; by 1845 the Church had 150,200 Negro adherents, most of them in the South. J. C. Hartzell, "Methodism and the Negro in the United States," Journal of Negro History (July 1923) 8:301-15, p. 306. This is a somewhat uncritical essay. The question remains, what was the substance of the religion brought to the slaves, and what were its effects?

<sup>165</sup>Liberator, January 9, 1836, 6:5, and November 14, 1835, 5:181.

<sup>166</sup>Birney was urging that the slaveholding clergy of the South be ostracized from the orthodox communion. Birney to Gerrit Smith, Danville, July 14, 1835; Birney, Letters, 203.

from the Conference. The measure Bascom had supported then became the rule for the new Southern conference of Methodist schismatics.<sup>167</sup> But even then no total unity of opinion was achieved, particularly in the case of Kentucky clergymen who had long been outspoken against slavery. Rev. N. Tomlinson, President of Augusta College, was typical of those who refused to heed the sharp trend toward a rigid 'slavery or abolition' division. At the Methodist General Conference of 1848 he roundly condemned the Church South for its domination by proslavery-ites. He himself still looked for the glorious day of "peaceful, constitutional" emancipation, feeling that slavery, "in the light of the nineteenth century," was a "scandal to human nature."<sup>168</sup>

(The Presbyterians in particular continued to stand against the spirit of the times. Fortunately, division did not force upon the communion the harsh alternatives that rent the other denominations; pressure in that direction continued to be felt, yet there remained open ground for maintaining a moderate position which enabled a continued interchange of views. Consequently, as the Baptists and Methodists fell generally silent on the great question, Presbyterians continued openly to assert their opposition to slavery. The Presbytery in Bennington, Kentucky announced in 1842 five vigorously antislavery resolutions. Commerce in slaves for gain was denounced as "a heinous sin and scandal." Slaveholders were denied membership in the church; no known

<sup>167</sup>Peck, Slavery, 10-15, 50. Five out of 151 ministers attending the September 1845 Kentucky Annual Conference stayed with the Northern Confederation. Maysville Eagle, September 27, 1845. A Rev. Harrison, of a northern border county, continued as "an advocate for the rights of the slaveholder and an emancipator." Ibid., May 17, 1845. Peter Cartwright helped slaves to escape, hated abolitionism, and promoted colonization. Cartwright, Autobiography, 316, 419-20.

<sup>168</sup>Liberator, August 11, 1848, 18:126.

slaveholder would be allowed to preach there. Anyone attempting to justify slavery by Scripture was to be disciplined. It was further resolved "...to use all lawful endeavors to abolish slavery."<sup>169</sup> ) Caution, however, was the watchword. The "frenzy of religious fanaticism," possible in Kentucky as well as in Ohio, was to be shunned.<sup>170</sup> From the northern bank of the Ohio Rev. Joshua L. Wilson, who maintained considerable influence among the Kentucky clergy, also urged moderation in presenting antislavery views.<sup>171</sup> Slavery must, he said, be tolerated for the same reason that God countenanced war. Existing institutions must be respected, property rights upheld. Achieving the abolition of "national sins" was the proper work of the Gospel, not of the American Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>172</sup> These were the views most generally held by those Presbyterian clergymen in Kentucky who refused to give up hope for emancipation. There were some, however, ready to accept sterner commands. Rev. Joseph C. Harrison of Boone, Kentucky, anxious to rise to the "claims of Conscience," wrote Wilson of his plans to free his twelve slaves gradually. "Will all this be right--what God will approve?--Will it satisfy my brethren?..

<sup>169</sup>The resolutions were published in the Protestant and Herald of Bardstown, Kentucky, an 'Old School' paper. Quoted Liberator, July 15, 1842, 12:107.

<sup>170</sup>Though long an ardent friend of the slave, Wilson later became more conservative; but it does not seem likely he turned into a proslaveryite as has been said. Walter B. Posey, "The Slavery Question in the Presbyterian Church in the Old Southwest," Journal of Southern History (1949) 15:311-24, p. 320.

<sup>171</sup>Breckinridge, Black Race, 15.

<sup>172</sup>Wilson's dictum that "Men cannot be prepared for freedom while kept in bondage," casts a different light on the limits of his moderatism. Furthermore, Wilson was an opponent of colonization. Joshua L. Wilson to Miss Rebecca C. Clopper!/, Cincinnati, July /18/, 1839; Wilson Papers, p. 875, Durrett Collection Mss. Wilson to Belamy Storer, Cincinnati, January 21, 1836; Ibid., pp. 780-2. The latter document presents the fuller exposition of his ideas.

If this be not the thing; what will be?--Immediateism [sic]?--Very well. If you deem this my duty, say so; & say so boldly, and fully."<sup>173</sup>

Convictions thus vigorous required an outlet. Because they would not accede to perpetual slavery these ministers could only be satisfied while engaged in some work that ensured progress toward the goal of emancipation. This was provided by the project, outlined by John Young for the Kentucky Synod, of educating the slaves, and by colonization work. Slave education was not entirely free from opposition, for there was always in some quarters the feeling that an intelligent, self-conscious slave was a potential rebel. An attempt to establish a Negro college in Connecticut in 1831 had been condemned by the Kentucky Reporter as a scheme intended to send Negroes into the South to stir up illegal and dangerous machinations.<sup>174</sup> In one town, "...where there is probably more attention paid to the education of the blacks than in any other town in the State..., even holding Sabbath school was found difficult. Too many believed education would make their charges unmanageable and refused to send them."<sup>175</sup>

Yet the work continued, though no doubt on a limited scale. Acting on a communication from the Georgia Presbytery, encouraging moral and religious improvement of slaves, the Kentucky Synod resolved in 1844 to inaugurate

<sup>173</sup> Joseph C. Harrison to Joshua L. Wilson, Boone, Kentucky, November 4, 1835; Wilson Papers, p. 719. Durrett Collection Mss. Harrison attended the Convention of "The Friends of Emancipation" in Frankfort, April 1849.

<sup>174</sup> Kentucky Reporter, October 5, 1831. The editor refers to the institution as "...the most exceptionable, the most dangerous, and most deserving of reprobation."

<sup>175</sup> Liberator, March 22, 1834, 4:45. This is the 'Andover Report' referred to above.

"some permanent plan" for the purpose.<sup>176</sup> It is evident, of course, that such action did not in itself amount to antislavery activity, but such was far more likely in Kentucky, where numerous ministers adhered to the cause of emancipation, than in Georgia, where slavery was accepted with all good grace. It is, of course, difficult to determine where elevating the condition of the slave was part of an attitude of opposition to slavery. The position of Rev. Young of Danville in this regard became increasingly equivocal. In August 1837 he wrote to Birney that: "...everything is going as I could wish it here except emancipation--and even on that subject some good is done, thus, persons formerly hostile to instruction and emancipation are taking the first steps in the work."<sup>177</sup> Danville, he reported with pride some ten years later, was "...looked upon by slaveholders as a place where slaves are spoiled." This was partly his own work, he pointed out with evident self-satisfaction. "Some emancipation papers said, that if practiced these duties would soon issue in the emancipation of slaves."<sup>178</sup> The question is whether just the opposite effect was produced.

An examination of Young's sermon, "Scriptural Duties of Masters," yields a different impression than Young perhaps intended. Quite unlike his concise, telling documents for the Synod, this rambling exhortation lacked the old abrasive excoriation of slavery. What Young hoped would advance the cause of emancipation was, in fact, not an antislavery document at all. The master was

<sup>176</sup>Liberator, January 17, 1845; 15:9.

<sup>177</sup>John C. Young to Birney, Danville, August 4, 1837; Birney, Letters, 403. Birney was urging both education and religious training to prepare slaves for freedom, lamenting the while that agitation and violence made this work impossible even in Ohio. Birney, Vindication, 32.

<sup>178</sup>John C. Young to Birney, Danville, May 29, 1847; Birney, Letters, 1075.

urged to regard his "servants" (not slaves') as "brethren of the same great family with himself," to cease treating them as property, to exercise kindness and patience, to look to their religious education (he does not mention secular education), and watch over their moral character. One provision--"a reasonable and fair compensation for their labor"--was intended to promote gradual evolution toward independence. But the possible change in the relationship between master and slave was only implied, not openly stated. What Young was actually proposing was a new relationship of 'servitude' (or 'benevolent slavery'), which was more or less already characteristic of much of Kentucky slaveholding.<sup>179</sup> Young no doubt saw the possibility of an educated slave population gradually edging toward eventual freedom. Theoretically this was a fascinating idea; but it had serious practical weaknesses. No provision was made for secular education, and the plan was not explicitly directed toward emancipation.

In proposing the elevation of the slave it remained highly imperative to avoid the imputation of preparing him for a place in Southern society; but he could be prepared for Liberia. Hence, advocacy of colonization was neatly related to the program of education, and was actively supported by the churches. The Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky, October 12, 1836, advised "liberal patronage"

<sup>179</sup> John C. Young, Scriptural Duties of Masters. A Sermon Preached in Danville, Kentucky, in 1846, and Then Published at the Unanimous Request of the Church and Congregation (Boston: American Tract Society, 1846), 43, 44, 54. The Southern church, i.e., the Presbyterians of the Lower South, seemed headed in the same direction. The South Carolina and Georgia Synods had stressed the same obligations to "our servants," especially that of religious instruction. African Repository, August 1834, 10:174ff.

of colonization and again recommended the 4th of July collections.<sup>180</sup> Meeting at Harrodsburg in September 1845, the Synod responded to the exhortations of Rev. Robert S. Finley and pledged \$500 towards purchasing a New Orleans to Liberia packet. The Synod once more approved the special collections and appointed a committee to preach to the Negroes (evidently on the benefits of emigrating) and to "...endeavor to arouse the churches and ministry to increased exertion on this subject."<sup>181</sup> In the same year Southern Methodists publicly commended colonization, a stand largely responsible for their subsequent schism.<sup>182</sup> Throughout the period numerous Kentucky clergymen served as officers of the various colonization locals in the State.<sup>183</sup> The Rev. A. M. Cowan established in Frankfort a publication devoted to that enterprise, by contributing articles to the local papers and then gathering them into a pamphlet at the end of the year.<sup>184</sup>

Clearly Birney had dealt no coup de grace to the colonization movement in Kentucky. Activity reached a new peak in 1845. "In Kentucky the cause has assumed an entirely new aspect," the parent society reported at its Annual Meeting in January 1845.<sup>185</sup> Nearly \$5,000 in cash had been collected the

<sup>180</sup>African Repository, January 1837, 13:38. "So much benevolence in a single package proved irresistible," Charles I. Foster remarks in his able article, "The Colonization of Free Negroes in Liberia, 1816-1835," Journal of Negro History (January 1953) 38:41-66, p. 46.

<sup>181</sup>Presbyterian Herald; quoted Liberator, October 24, 1845, 15:169.

<sup>182</sup>Fox, Colonization Society, 164.

<sup>183</sup>Evidence of this is at hand in nearly every issue of the African Repository.

<sup>184</sup>A.C.S., 30th Annual Report, 15.

<sup>185</sup>The Maysville Eagle, reporting a colonization meeting in the Presbyterian church in Maysville to organize the Maysville and Mason County Colonization Society, remarked: "Kentucky, and particularly this region of Kentucky, has been asleep on this subject, and it is time we should awake to our own interests, as well as the true interests of the free colored population." September 10, 1845.



previous year, with an equal amount pledged. The money was to go to the purchase of land in Liberia intended exclusively for Kentucky emigres. The 'Kentucky in Liberia' idea achieved considerable popularity. The same Annual Report recorded the addition of eighteen Kentuckians, mostly from Lexington, to the roster of Life Members of the A.C.S. Among them was Cassius M. Clay, a second cousin of Henry Clay. Rev. Cowan, the new agent for Kentucky, renewed pressure for contributions from the Legislature.<sup>186</sup> Concrete results no doubt enhanced the rising fortunes of the movement. Twenty-one Kentucky Negroes had debarked for Liberia in November 1844; some two hundred were enrolled for an expedition in the following year. In January 1846 the Rothschild left New Orleans with a group of thirty four.<sup>187</sup>

But the enthusiasm of 1845 cooled. First, securing adequate funds to carry out the ambitious plans proposed was difficult. The \$10,000 raised in 1845, even if it did materialize, was no better than a decent beginning. Furthermore, year by year it had become increasingly difficult to enlist free Negroes to emigrate. Of the sixty Cowan had persuaded to leave for Liberia, only three showed up at Louisville at the appointed time (December 1846). He suspected they had been "wheeled away" by abolitionists.<sup>188</sup> Colonization had in fact accomplished very little in Kentucky, for by 1853 only 255 Negroes had been

<sup>186</sup> A.C.S., 29th Annual Report, 10, 11, 42.

<sup>187</sup> A.C.S., 34th Annual Report, 84; Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:799.

<sup>188</sup> A.C.S., 30th Annual Report, 7, 8.

removed from that State and planted in Africa.<sup>189</sup>) The support it did continue to evoke must be regarded as a phenomenon attributable only to the anxious hope that colonization would relieve the State of the Negro problem. That hope was hardly justified by what had thus far been accomplished.

Clearly the antislavery movement needed rejuvenating. The churches, thus far the leaders of the cause, had been forced to retire by the defeat of 1835, and they turned to the inoffensive work of ameliorating the lot of the slave, thus preparing him for colonization. This was the only alternative to following Birney toward unconditional emancipation. The remarkable distance which they accompanied him in this direction is more than adequate evidence of a firm opposition to slavery which, no matter what form it took, would not easily subside. To be effective, however, this spirit of opposition required new leadership. The moral appeal had failed. The new appeal would be basically secular.

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<sup>189</sup>This figure may be compared with 244 from Tennessee, ca. 1200 from Maryland, 2,258 from Virginia, 846 from North Carolina, 344 from South Carolina, 511 from Georgia, 46 from Alabama, 505 from Mississippi, 177 from Louisiana, and 45 from Ohio in the same period. A.C.S., 35th Annual Report, 49.

## CHAPTER IV

### CASSIUS M. CLAY: SLAVERY AND THE ECONOMIC WELFARE OF THE STATE,

1841-1846

(Where an exposition of the moral evils of slavery easily drew suspicion and disapproval, criticism on economic grounds alone was subject to a minimum of restraint. The complaint that the institution was a bane to the prosperity of the State came from ministers as well as from farmers, editors and legislators, from colonizationists, Whigs and abolitionists; it was, in short, nearly universal, and was heard throughout the years of antislavery debate in Kentucky.

Although it was not entirely of his own making, the economic argument is best represented in the words of Cassius M. Clay,<sup>1</sup> who urged upon all Kentuckians the one consideration that "Kentucky will be richer in dollars and cents by emancipation...", a consideration enhanced by its freedom from "all 'fanaticism and enthusiasm'."<sup>2</sup> ) To illustrate his economic thesis, Clay pictured a dramatic contrast between the slave and the free State. While the South, Kentucky in particular, displayed the most destitute population in the

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<sup>1</sup>According to Smiley, the economic argument against slavery was properly Clay's contribution to the antislavery arsenal; it should be qualified, however, that earlier antislavery figures said a great deal on the same subject and to their criticism Clay added little that was actually new. David L. Smiley, "Lion of White Hall: The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay of Kentucky" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1953), 76.

<sup>2</sup>"....and slaveholders will be wealthier by the change," the statement concludes. C. Clay, "To the People of Kentucky," Lexington, January 1845; quoted (in full) Liberator, February 21, 1845, 15:30.

country, north of the Ohio steam-powered machinery rendered man "...godlike, in his evidencing almost creative power," and through him struck the land with prosperity. New England flourished as Virginia went to seed. Ohio, shining example for many before and after Clay, was bounding ahead of her elder sister, Kentucky. The former State would soon have thirty Congressmen, while Kentucky would probably be reduced to twelve, Clay surmised. While the free states supplied ships and "steam cars" for the whole world, Kentucky was importing axe handles! The poor wretch who arrived with "puny wagon, a thin visaged wife, ragged children and his gun" to seek his fortune, was victim of the rivalry between slave and free labor. With her yeomanry thus depressed by the competition of slaves, Kentucky could not share in Ohio's glorious advance.<sup>3)</sup>

This proponent of a balanced economy, native industry, internal improvements, and a strong national bank, was very personally involved in his program. He invested in the Lexington-Richmond Road Company, a saw mill, a grist mill, a salt mine, bridge building, and the construction of a dam. For a short time he served as a commissioner in a Richmond, Kentucky bank. Rather than plant tobacco, he raised beef cattle, becoming a national authority on the breeding of short-horns.<sup>4</sup> Private interest added fresh incentive to Clay's political career, and was probably largely responsible for his concentrating, in the opening years of his attack on slavery, on the economic rather than the social or moral aspects of the question.

But it would be difficult to say that Clay was motivated only by narrow personal interest. The key to his success fitted the lock that opened Kentucky

<sup>3</sup>Clay to the New-York Tribune, November 1843; quoted Liberator, December 15, 1843, 13:198; Ibid., January 26, 1844, 14:13.

<sup>4</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 51, 52, 56, 57.

to the prosperous advance of her sister States to the north. And, moreover, there is reason to believe that he disliked slavery for reasons other than economic. It is likely that often "...advocates of the mill...posed as humanitarian liberals whose sole interest was justice to black as well as to white," as Clay's biographer says;<sup>5</sup> but Clay is not so readily put in this category. The history of his intellectual development shows contradictions so pronounced that one may with reason refrain from resolving them, or from assigning to one element exclusive priority over another.

A personal introduction to Cassius Clay raises certain open contrasts. According to David Smiley he was "...a humanitarian with predatory instincts, and a champion of the common man with the personality of an untamed bully."

[He]....wielded a mighty knife with which he disembowelled his political opponents and carved off ears and excavated eyes in rough-and-tumble fights. He was a faithless husband and a promiscuous lover who even in his eighties boasted of his virility--and sought to prove it by marrying a fifteen-year-old girl.<sup>6</sup>

He was also a thinker of sorts--not an original one, but at least he was aware of some of the more provoking literature of his day, and on occasion mentions such writers as Montesquieu, Locke, Fourier, Malthus, etc. The predatory instincts of an untamed bully were somehow combined with intelligence and a certain depth of vision. In handling the question of motivation this must be taken into account along with driving personal ambition and more primitive qualities.

<sup>5</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 67.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., ii, iii. "A thoroughly honorable and deeply moral nature....," is A. E. Martin's rather contrasting judgment. Martin, Anti-Slavery, 112.

Depending on the veracity of later statements, Clay was converted to anti-slavery at a very early age. "...I early began to study the system, or, rather, began to feel its wrongs," the old man related, vividly recalling stately mulatto Mary (her eyes "flashed as the lightning through a cloud"), who killed one of the Clay overseers for insulting her and, his whole family joining the fray, for attempting to beat her to death. She was saved from an aroused neighborhood by Cassius' father, Green Clay, whose influence got her acquitted. The girl was nevertheless sent South to make an example for the other slaves.<sup>7</sup>

The return of an elder brother, Sidney, from Princeton as a Presbyterian minister and an emancipationist, and the antislavery ideas of his second cousin, Henry Clay, of which he claimed he had become familiar by 1824 (at age fourteen), must have further affected his views.<sup>8</sup> As a result, he claimed, "...I entered Yale, with my soul full of hatred to slavery..." even before having heard the preachments of the Northern liberals.<sup>9</sup> The conversion cannot safely be dated before 1830, however, due to a remark made in 1845 that as a youth he never thought to question slavery, but that the public discussion of the subject in 1830 raised "pleasant emotions" in his bosom, just as it had done with "most persons at the time." It can be assumed that the earlier

<sup>7</sup>Cassius M. Clay, The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay. Memoirs, Writings and Speeches, Showing His Conduct in the Overthrow of American Slavery, the Salvation of the Union, and the Restoration of the Autonomy of the States. "Quorum - pars ful." In Two Volumes, Written and Compiled by Himself, and Illustrated with Engravings on Steel (2 vols., Cincinnati: J. F. Brennan & Co., 1886), 26, 27.

<sup>8</sup>Clay, Life, 35.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 55.

experiences had some effect, but it is certain that this last was quite definite, for Clay shortly afterward subscribed to a newly-formed Mercer County emancipation society.<sup>10</sup>

The real change in Clay's thinking came in the following year. Leaving Transylvania University (where he had heard R. J. Breckinridge and Robert Wickliffe orate), he journeyed to the East to study politicians. He interrupted his travels--during which he had met Daniel Webster, Whittier, Julia Ward Howe, John A. Andrew (later a Civil War governor of Massachusetts), and Edward Everett--to enroll at Yale.<sup>11</sup> Here he experienced a double revelation: New England life and William Lloyd Garrison. Purged of an old prejudice that New England was "a land of wooden nutmegs and leather pumpkin seed," he discovered that, instead, here was "a land of sterility without paupers."<sup>12</sup> Secondly, and of equal significance, he was exposed to the explosive philosophy of abolitionism. "...Garrison dragged out the monster from all his citadels, and left him stabbed to the vitals, and dying at the feet of every logical and honest mind." Clay in 1885 recalled being extremely agitated, too much so to speak out to Garrison.<sup>13</sup> It was this experience which finally sealed the resolution that had been a number of years in forming. For the first time he declared his opinions on slavery in public, in a Washington's Birthday address of 1832. "....Are there none afar off, cast down and sorrowful, who dare not approach

<sup>10</sup>"To the People of Kentucky," Lexington, January 1845; quoted (in full) Liberator, February 21, 1845, 15:30.

<sup>11</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 21.

<sup>12</sup>"To the People of Kentucky," Lexington, January 1845; quoted Liberator, February 21, 1845, 15:30.

<sup>13</sup>Clay, Life, 56, 57.

the common altar; who cannot put their hands to their hearts and say 'Oh, Washington, what art thou to us? Are we not also freemen?'" he implored.<sup>14</sup> The same moral ring is heard in his later writing and oratory. "....Impelled by a sense of self-respect, love and justice, and the highest expediency, I shall ever maintain that liberty is our only safety," he told a private correspondent in 1845.<sup>15</sup> It may be said that Clay adopted a stand against slavery because the New England experience led him to believe that this was a potent issue from which his political career in Kentucky would greatly profit.<sup>16</sup> But, by not taking into account the other part of Clay's New England experience, the statement is inadequate.

In 1832 Clay returned to Transylvania for studies in law; three years later he was elected to the State Legislature.<sup>17</sup> For the time being he exercised marked discretion on the subject of slavery. On the question of calling a convention, he concurred in the prevailing attitude. Addressing the House of Representatives he asked:

Is this a time, when a horde of fanatical incendiaries are springing up in the North, threatening to spread fire and blood through our once secure and happy homes...to deliberately dispose of a question which involves the political rights of master and slave...?<sup>18</sup>

Another term two years later, however, found him somewhat more outspoken,

<sup>14</sup>Cassius M. Clay, The Writings of Cassius Marcellus Clay: Including Speeches and Addresses (Horace Greeley, editor, New York: Harper & Bros., 1848), 40-1.

<sup>15</sup>Clay to T. B. Stevenson, Frankfort, January 8, 1845; reprinted from the Frankfort Commonwealth in the Liberator, January 31, 1845, 15:18.

<sup>16</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 27.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 29, 41.

<sup>18</sup>Clay, Writings, 45.



possibly in part because the economic troubles of 1837, which had affected him personally, had stealed his resolution.<sup>19</sup> But he was not yet ready to propose any way of intervening to abolish the source of the evil.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, he was gaining prominence. In 1838, to be closer to the center of political happenings, he moved to Lexington. That year he was chosen a delegate to the national Whig convention. In 1841, however, he suffered a political setback that helped precipitate the adoption of a more resolute course. In the next two years he began attacking slavery in earnest, openly calling for emancipation.<sup>21</sup>

Reversing the stand taken in 1837 required care. First Clay had to anticipate the charge of abolition. In a speech at White Sulphur Springs on December 20, 1843 he attempted to show that the danger from the North was exaggerated. Those favoring violent abolition formed only a small, abhorrent group. The Liberty Party, on the other hand, favored recourse to that artificial creature of the law, the ballot box. The most numerous group consisted of those opposed to slavery, but wary of bringing on new, greater evils.<sup>22</sup> As for Clay himself, he was no insurrectionist; but "still, sir," he exclaimed, "I am an abolitionist."<sup>23</sup>

As Clay began to present his critique a forward appeal to plain material interest came out most strongly. His forecast breathed urgency. "....Our free

<sup>19</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 62, 63. The panic of 1837 did not strike Kentucky in full force for several years. Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:734.

<sup>20</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 49.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 110.

<sup>22</sup>Quoted (in full) Liberator, February 2, 1844, 14:17.

<sup>23</sup>The subject of the speech was the admission of Texas. Clay, Writings, 5.

white laborers are to be driven out; our cities are to crumble down, our rice fields are to grow sterile, our frequented places to be deserted...." Playing on an even more basic interest he warned:

....Our morals /are/ to be still more corrupted, more universal debauchery to exist among our male whites, more mulattoes to stand as external curses before the lovely eyes of our wives, our daughters, our mothers....

Saxon blood is to be diluted by those whom "...we will not aspire to the common name of men." Anger and tyranny will always "...disfigure the bright faces of our little ones...." Education will perish. The rich will stew in idleness and passion while "...poverty and contempt for labor degrade the poor...." Kentucky will cease to have any national importance.<sup>24</sup> Then, hard after this attention to all the economic and social evils of slavery, there followed a philosophical and religious tack. In the name of "advancing civilization, in the name of the men of 1776, and in the name of Him who has made man in his likeness..," slavery, he declared, was wrong. It was against the stern mandates of religion that three million Negroes were deprived of liberty, "the best gift of God to man." Highly aroused, Clay then trailed off into a thick welter of allegory and classical allusion.<sup>25</sup> Recourse to the Age of Chivalry, to Athenian trumpeters, Thermopylae and the Cimmerian Regions does not inspire wholehearted conviction in the reader, but under these effusions, one may suspect, did lie a degree of sincerity.

<sup>24</sup> Lexington Intelligencer, March 1843; quoted (in full) Liberator, May 5, 1843, 13:69.

<sup>25</sup> Lexington Intelligencer, March 1843; quoted (in full) Liberator, May 5, 1843, 13:69. Clay to the New-York Tribune, November 1843; quoted Liberator, December 15, 1843, 13:198.

When in 1840 Clay went before the people as the candidate of the oppressed laborer, the opposition inadvertantly obliged him by publicly expressing scorn for the immigrant "Goths and Vandals" with their "wenches" unattended by "murky maids." Clay sported into the breach, protesting his preference for "rosy cheek, the bright eye, the glossy locks, the buoyant and well-developed form of health and modest industry" over "pickle-eating complexions and attenuated persons of milliner-made graces...and French tournures of the apish aristocracy...."<sup>26</sup> In thus becoming a champion of the free laborer Clay deliberately arrayed himself against the slavery interest and at the same time made the institution of slavery his central point of attack, alienating in the process a considerable number of slaveholding Whigs.<sup>27</sup>

(The problem was to find a secure point on which to base an offensive against slave economy. Defending the 'Negro Law' of 1833, far from a minority issue, served this purpose well. The prohibition of the further importation of slaves was not expected to vanquish slavery, but it was always considered by antislaveryites an essential preliminary. Being comparatively free of any taint of radicalism it was the one positive step they could take in the direction of their goal without fear of a great outcry of protest.<sup>28</sup> The innocuous character of non-importation as a political issue is not long

<sup>26</sup>Quoted Smiley, "Clay," 81-2. Clay is answering old Robert Wickliffe, his opponent's father.

<sup>27</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 56, 81. This is, in effect, Smiley's explanation of the genesis of Clay's opposition to slavery, a contention considered below.

<sup>28</sup>The elder Wickliffe attempted to identify non-importation with abolition, but with questionable success. Ibid., 71.

paradoxical when other factors are considered. That the measure prevented the State from being flooded with an undesired population was enough; but further, in the views of those concerned for the prosperity of Kentucky, just such an inundation of blacks would retard trade.<sup>29</sup>) To a man of instinctive democratic sentiments such as Jesse T. Craddock, a self-made individual who had raised himself from illiteracy to the Kentucky Senate,<sup>30</sup> free commercial importation spelled the doom of the struggling yeoman.<sup>31</sup> Farther removed from the question of slavery was the attitude of a considerable bloc of slaveholders. In the Bluegrass counties, where there was an actual surplus of slaves, men found that the absence of outside competition in the Kentucky slave markets kept the value of their slave property artificially high.<sup>32</sup>

As the campaign progressed, Robert Wickliffe, Sr. attempted to reduce the issue to a division between the conservers of the present order and abolitionists by terming the 'Negro law' an "abolition tinder-box," compromising Kentucky's chances of sharing in the economic advances of the Southern community of states.<sup>33</sup> The younger Wickliffe, Clay's opponent, was given the most difficult alternative of either endorsing his father's impolitic views, or of

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<sup>29</sup>"The great increase of the slave population will of itself operate oppressively upon the trade of the State, and will tend proportionately to diminish the white population," the Green River Gazette contended. Quoted Liberator, January 22, 1841, 11:14.

<sup>30</sup>Craddock spent one term in the Kentucky Senate and several in the House. He had the curious distinction of being the heaviest man in Kentucky politics in his time--a three hundred pounder. William B. Allen, A History of Kentucky.. (Louisville: Bradley & Gilbert, 1872), 367.

<sup>31</sup>"Fill up this land with slaves, and the poor man has no place left but the grave," he declared in the Legislature. Is it not strange that we see old men ...encouraging a course of conduct that must crush the poor; that must forever break the chain between the rich and the poor...?" Quoted Liberator, February 19, 1841, 11:25.

<sup>32</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 69.

<sup>33</sup>Would South Carolina send a railroad to Kentucky in view of the latter's

repudiating them, thereby giving the appearance of conceding the whole point to his adversary. His evading the subject gave Clay a special advantage, especially as it allowed him to concentrate on a safe issue in approaching the question of slavery. His less acceptable opinions, even though the public might be aware of them, could be relegated to the background.<sup>34</sup>

The record of Clay's electioneering success came to an end, however, in the following year. In 1835 and 1837 he had stood on internal improvements. The closer he came to the question of slavery, the narrower were the prospects of getting elected. However apparent this should have been to him, Clay in 1841 ignored the advice of his illustrious kinsman to look for safer ground in campaigning for office, and, in consequence, we may suppose, lost the election.<sup>35</sup> This setback seems only to have encouraged him to speak his mind more candidly. With his Rubicon behind, Clay began to air views of an increasingly more independent nature. (In the address at White Sulphur Springs (December 20, 1843) mentioned above, which concerned the annexation of Texas, Clay spoke for his party, the Whigs, but he argued from his own principles. Slavery, he maintained, was the creation of the States--but of the States as sovereign entities. This sovereignty they enjoyed only prior to the making of

toleration of an abolitionist enterprise? he asked. Robert J. Breckinridge, Speech...Delivered...at Lexington, Ky. On the 12th Day of October, 1840.... (Lexington: N. L. & J. W. Finnell, 1840), 18. As a full citation of this pamphlet indicates, Breckinridge openly associated non-importation with eventual emancipation.

<sup>34</sup>R. J. Breckinridge, returned briefly to Kentucky from Jefferson College in Pennsylvania (Dictionary of American Biography, 3:11), was more outspoken than Clay, judging from the content of the Speech of 1840 in which he called down the justice of God upon Wickliffe, Sr.

<sup>35</sup>Dictionary of American Biography, 4:169.

the constitutional compact. By this act sovereignty was spread, so to speak, between Federal Union and the individual State; in consequence neither possessed the authority to exercise the full independent sovereignty required for either creating or unmaking slavery. If a contrary interpretation of the constitution were to be forced by the creation of a new slave state--Texas--then by the same right Congress might interfere with slavery where it already existed, Clay warned, choosing to ignore the precedent of the previous admission of slave states. And, he added significantly, if Congress be allowed this right, the higher law of nature required that it be exercised to purge the whole Union of slavery.<sup>36</sup> Writing to the New-York Tribune a month earlier Clay declared that to beg some higher law in discussing slavery only served to open the question to endless dispute. Better to stand upon regular ground, upon the Constitutional command that Congress may not act to perpetuate slavery, seeing in it by implication the injunction that "the United States are morally bound, by all means consistent with the Constitution, to extinguish slavery." Radical as all this might sound to his audience, Clay nevertheless felt that he held a middle position between two extremes. He could not "...join the North in violation of the Constitution...", but neither could he "....stand by the South in asking the moral sanction of the North...." for her perpetuation of slavery.<sup>37)</sup>

The following year, in a gesture of determination and sincerity, Clay made provisions for emancipating his slaves. Along with two thousand acres of land he had inherited a considerable number of slaves, at least half of which could

<sup>36</sup>Quoted Liberator, February 2, 1844, 14:17.

<sup>37</sup>Clay to the editor of the New-York Tribune, Lexington, November 1843; quoted Liberator, December 15, 1843, 13:198.

not be freed on account of certain provisions in the will. These, numbering twenty-five, were to receive "equitable wages" in lieu of freedom. Those freed<sup>38</sup> were offered hire by their former master. The original purchase value of the latter amounted to about \$6,000.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to this act of magnanimity was another of quite a different character. Clay, deeply embroiled in local politics, was again tilting with his arch-enemy, the Wickliffe clan. In a perfectly stupid brawl with a Wickliffe adherent (this was in the summer of 1843), resulting from a petty offense to Clay in the middle of a public debate, the champion of freedom pointlessly, but handily, disembowelled his man. Tried for mayhem (of which, if nothing else, he was assuredly guilty) he was defended by his ever-popular kinsman, Henry Clay. This, and possibly the fact that he had himself been wounded in the fray, accounts for Clay's acquittal.<sup>40</sup> Such conduct undoubtedly caused some to distrust Clay as rather a vicious hothead. But he did not show himself aware of any change in the situation and continued to work on plans for establishing a third party in Kentucky. Mid-July 1845 he announced the inauguration of the Emancipation Party and called for a fourth of July convention to be held the following year.<sup>41</sup>

Most important in promoting the new party was the establishing (in June 1845) of the True American at Lexington under the editorship of Cassius Clay. The

<sup>38</sup>Smiley ("Clay," 12) says there were seventeen, probably including those that were emancipated later. Nine were manumitted in 1844, according to a report published in the Liberator, August 2, 1844, 14:122.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., July 12, 1844, 14:110.

<sup>40</sup>Coleman, Slavery Times, 305-6.

<sup>41</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 185.

public was naturally well aware of his background and his intentions were by no means secret; from the beginning of the paper's two-month career a considerable amount of attention, including a good measure of criticism, was directed toward Clay.) The Frankfort Commonwealth, however, spoke out against premature judgment, noting that the first issue had by no means been abolitionist, (Clay promising that there would be no revolution, that the constitution had to be preserved. "Far be it from us to wound unnecessarily, [our countrymen's] sensibilities, or to run wantonly counter to their rooted prejudices...", he had asserted.<sup>42</sup>) The editor of the Commonwealth admitted that Clay was indeed rash and intemperate "when assailed," but he was not "insane" or "wicked." This did not seem the time to reopen discussion of slavery, but Clay was within his rights as a free citizen and ought to be heard.<sup>43</sup> The editor of the Kentucky Compiler, insisting that the True American articles revealed the hand of a "midnight incendiary," was "...astonished that some of the leading papers in the State seem to connive at the principles avowed in this paper." The new paper should be suppressed by the Legislature, lest it bring on events that would "fill the land with mourning."<sup>44</sup> The Georgetown, Kentucky Christian Intelligencer, a Methodist paper, convinced of Clay's moderation, openly endorsed the True American's program of gradual and constitutional emancipation.<sup>45</sup> Subscriptions to the

<sup>42</sup>True American, June 3, 1845; in Clay, Writings, 217.

<sup>43</sup>Quoted Maysville Eagle, June 14, 1845.

<sup>44</sup>Quoted Liberator, August 29, 1845, 15:138.

<sup>45</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 184; Clement Eaton, Freedom of Thought in the Old South (New York: Peter Smith, 1951), 186.



Clay paper rose to some five hundred from Kentucky and around 2,200 from other states.<sup>46</sup> Friends projected another emancipation newspaper for Louisville, where a candidate for the State Legislature openly adopted the program of the Emancipation Party.<sup>47</sup>

Moderation in principle, however, did not keep the yeasty editor of the True American from libelously taunting his personal enemies. His prime critic, Robert Wickliffe, was named "coward," "cream-faced loon," "fiend and robber" in that order.<sup>48</sup> Garrison took the precaution of referring his readers to the Sermon on the Mount as he treated them to Clay's attack on that old "assassin-sire of assassins." This variety of journalizing was common enough, but certainly it was of questionable utility. "When a citizen of Fayette was poisoned by that degraded population which he would make perpetual among us...", Clay charged, Wickliffe "covertly and insidiously" got her pardoned by the Governor.<sup>49</sup> If nothing else, Clay was at least making better enemies.

(The storm broke on August 12 over a most indiscreet article in which those who "dwell in marble palaces" were reminded that "...there are strong arms and fiery hearts, and iron pikes in the streets, and panes of glass only between them and the silver plate on the board and smooth skin woman on the ottoman....  
 ....Tremble for the day of retribution is at hand--and the masses will be

<sup>46</sup>This is taking the mean of Smiley's estimates of 300 to 700 and 1700 to 2700. Smiley, "Clay," 183. Eaton accepts the higher figures, Eaton, Freedom, 186.

<sup>47</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 184.

<sup>48</sup>True American, June 3, 1845; in Clay, Writings, 215.

<sup>49</sup>Quoted Liberator, June 20, 1845, 15:99.

avenged."<sup>50</sup> In another passage it was argued that once slavery had died of natural economic causes the Negroes would be eligible for citizenship. By way of preparation, the present free Negro population should be given political rights. ) This, as will be seen, was all quite in keeping with Clay's present thinking, but he fought to dissociate himself from the articles, pointing out that he had been sick and that he had not even seen them before they were printed.<sup>51</sup> ( His answer to the demand that he abandon the True American was a protest that the suppression committee was taking advantage of a sick man-- a "base and dishonorable act."<sup>52</sup> An "Extra" came out August 15 calling for 600,000 free white Kentuckians to take a manly stand with Clay in the "battle for liberty and slavery." This only served to harden the opposition, who could now point to further instigation to violence. August 18 Clay was still demanding his rights--"....my constitutional rights I shall never abandon," he declared--but he promised that no more slavery articles would be published until he was well enough to direct the paper in person.<sup>53</sup> The struggle was to no avail, however, for already a solid state-wide reaction had been set in motion. The True American press was neatly boxed and dispatched to Cincinnati.))

The violence suggested by the "white skin woman" clause, Clay explained, referred to whites, not blacks.<sup>54</sup> It is most probable that this was the original meaning; certainly it was a natural interpretation for Clay, who did not think

<sup>50</sup>Clay, Writings, 289.

<sup>51</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 188.

<sup>52</sup>Clay, Writings, 290, 291.

<sup>53</sup>Clay, Writings, 300; Maysville Eagle, August 23, 1845.

<sup>54</sup>New York Journal of Commerce; quoted Liberator, August 29, 1845, 15:138.

of the Negroes as an active group capable of assuming any initiative. But any interpretation the public desired was possible. "...The masses will be avenged," a correspondent of the Eagle quoted. "What masses? Why certainly the negroes in Lexington particularly, and in all the South generally! My God! is it possible!"<sup>55</sup> The appeal to the free laborers was turned by the Lexington Vigilance Committee that directed the action taken against Clay into an attempt at "...rallying free laborers and negro slaves under his standard...."<sup>56</sup> The case against Clay was easy to prepare and to the majority it was probably convincing. In Mason County 456 signatures were gained for a resolution approving the suppression. Meetings held throughout the State repeated the charge that the True American had been a menace to public safety.

The solid front presented by the reaction against Clay should not be exaggerated, however. Contrary to first report, the Christian Intelligencer was not forced to close. In fact the publicity had created "...a patronage which places its future publication upon a permanent basis."<sup>56</sup> The Mason County public meeting of November 10 was called in response to another public gathering at Washington, Kentucky, which had vindicated Clay.<sup>59</sup> A number of prominent individuals at the second meeting, although critical of Clay, were opposed to slavery, among them local notables such as John McClung, Judge Beatty, Elijah Phister, and F. T. Chambers, who could not approve the action taken by the

<sup>55</sup>Maysville Eagle, August 20, 1845.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., August 23, 1845.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., November 4, 1845.

<sup>58</sup>Maysville Eagle, August 27, 1845; Liberator, September 12, 1845, 15:145.

<sup>59</sup>Maysville Eagle, November 4, 1845.

Lexington citizens; the latter, they believed, "...had violated the laws and constitution of the country...."<sup>60</sup> McClung spoke for a "third party," as distinct from the abolitionists who saw slavery as a sin (which McClung did not) as from the perpetualism of Calhoun, McDuffie and Wickliffe. This medial position rested on a combination of colonization and emancipation, for, McClung posited, "the God of nature has adapted [Kentucky's] climate and soil for the abode of the white man, and the presence of the slave alone paralyzes her growth." An even more significant feature of McClung's stand was a belief in the inevitable passing of slavery. His opposition to slavery, then was directly at odds with any plan of direct action which would leave the blacks in the State.<sup>61</sup> The Louisville Journal was outraged by the brutality of a Lexington mob numbering some 150 "Black Indians," as they styled themselves, who "...made a loud noise through the streets of Lexington, maltreated many negroes, and besides tarring and feathering several in the public square, broke the ribs of one man, the hands of another, and so injured the eye of a third that the poor fellow will lose it."<sup>62</sup> Finally, there were those who criticized the editor of the True American for a careless indiscretion that would, they felt, "...retard how long we cannot tell, the progress of gradual emancipation."<sup>63</sup> Judging from

<sup>60</sup>Maysville Eagle, November 15, 1845.

<sup>61</sup>McClung's vision of the future, similar in many respects with that of Cassius Clay, is significant. "Whites would pour in as the blacks receded. Our plains would be crowded with an active, energetic population, and our cities would spring forward in the career of prosperity, like the young giants of the North." Maysville Eagle, December 27, 1845.

<sup>62</sup>Louisville Journal, September 1, 1845; quoted Liberator, September 5, 1845, 15:142.

<sup>63</sup>Lewis Collins editorial, Maysville Eagle, August 25, 1845.

these evidences of a high variety of opinion, then, the excitement Clay aroused cannot by any means be considered a solid proslavery reaction.

Within six weeks the True American was back in circulation, date-lined Lexington, but printed in Cincinnati. It was no longer to be the instrument for founding a party. Native optimism could not keep Clay from seeing how strong the obstacles were. Now, however, he shifted his hopes to the mountain counties, where, he thought, lay the real opposition to slavery.<sup>64</sup>

A most decisive moment in the history of the Kentucky anti-slavery movement was the strong recurrence, in January 1845, of the idea of non-removal, for it always appeared when the discussion became vital, when criticism and debate were cutting through to the real issues. In 1833 an economic antislaveryite had written to the Western Luminary, under the name "Rockcastlean," that he thought the slaves should be freed because they would provide cheaper labor as hired hands than as property that required constant upkeep.<sup>65</sup> Two years later Birney addressed himself to the moral aspect of the slavery question, concluding that conscience obliged the South to accept all the consequences of immediate emancipation, among them that of freeing the slaves without removing them. But he did not anticipate for his audience the actual details of such consequences, leaving that to their own imagination. Finally, (August 16, 1845, to answer charges that he was an abolitionist, Cassius Clay presented to the public, in a special broadside, a plan of legal and gradual emancipation that contained no provision for colonization, outlining in the process the detailed picture of the new society which Birney had failed to portray.

<sup>64</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 211.

<sup>65</sup>Quoted Liberator, January 19, 1833, 3:10.

The idea had been growing on Clay for some time. A letter of November 1843 to the New-York Tribune presented a clear view of the alternatives in the slavery question: 1) continuance of the slave-master relationship, 2) extermination of the blacks, 3) annihilation of the whites, or 4) either emancipation with removal or "...emancipation and a community of interests between the races." The first was impossible simply because of the increase of the blacks in number, intelligence, industry and strength.<sup>66</sup> The second and third were obviously out of the question.<sup>67</sup> By implication the fourth was the only acceptable solution. Already Clay was considering emancipation without deportation; the term "racial community" indicates a less-than-exclusive faith in colonization.) It is true that he became a Life Member of the A.C.S. in 1845.<sup>68</sup> This was not only because it would have been impolitic to refuse a request that he subscribe to the organization, but also because Clay, like most Southerners, could approve of the Society for its benevolent scheme to civilize Africa.<sup>69</sup> To many the Colonization Society was appealing because it was harmless; to Clay the A.C.S. possessed virtue only in spite of the fact that it was ineffectual.

<sup>66</sup>Liberator, December 15, 1843, 13:198. Jefferson was right when "he reduced the subject to the certain elements: the master must liberate the slave, or the slave will exterminate the master."

<sup>67</sup>"...I take issue with the opinion...that the question is 'whether the whites shall rule the blacks, or the blacks shall rule the whites.' Such an issue is false in theory..., practice..., and experience. It is derogatory to human nature, and blasphemy against God himself." White Sulphur Springs address; in Liberator, February 2, 1844. 14:17.

<sup>68</sup>A.C.S. 29th Annual Report, 42. True American, June 17, 1845: in Clay, Writings, 235.

<sup>69</sup>"...Colonization, with a view merely of getting clear of a free colored class, who are 'a thorn in the King's side,' has none of my sympathy!" Clay wrote to Daniel Webster in a letter criticizing that statesman's recent speech on slavery in the Senate. Clay, Life, 204.

In debate during his first term in the Legislature he had spoken of "...the lame and feeble effort of the Colonization Society striking off one hydra's head, whilst a thousand spring up in its stead...."<sup>70</sup> (In June 1845 Clay rejected colonization outright as a hopeless scheme.<sup>71</sup>) If Kentuckians would rouse themselves to make removal possible, then it would not be objectionable. But Clay made it clear that only under those circumstances--if deportation were carried out effectively--did he approve of removal. His personal objections (not those of the Emancipation Party, he qualified) were two-fold. First, it was inexpedient. The great loss of private investment in slaves would be overburdening enough without adding to it the cost of compensation and then of colonization.<sup>72</sup> Secondly, "because it is unjust." This he did not elaborate very clearly, except to castigate those "friends of perpetual thralldom," who stirred up prejudice to prevent emancipation. They enjoyed a great sense of security hiding behind the harmless banner of colonization. "I am as much in favor of liberty as you," they said, "if you will send the blacks to the moon...."<sup>73</sup> (In the next issue of the True American Clay's position was stated

<sup>70</sup>Clay, Writings, 46.

<sup>71</sup>True American, June 17, 1845; in Clay, Writings, 235. See further the article, "What is to become of the Slaves in the United States?"; quoted Liberator, September 5, 1845, 15:141. In the first article Clay replies to a letter of Thomas Metcalfe, dated February 14, 1845 and published shortly thereafter, in which the ex-Governor met him halfway. Color constituted, he believed, no real superiority. But emancipation would never come because prejudice would always prevail among the non-slaveholders. There was one dim hope, however, and that was colonization, which, though a "slow process," offered the only solution. Quoted Maysville Eagle, February 22, 1845.

<sup>72</sup>As for compensating ex-slaveholders, Clay was in favor of amending the State constitution to allow abolition without reimbursement. Smiley, "Clay," 115.

<sup>73</sup>True American, June 17, 1845; Clay, Writings, 232, 233.

yet more forcefully: free the slaves, he declared, and they will be indebted to us; keep them in slavery and they will free themselves.<sup>74</sup>

With the possible alternatives thus reduced to one, it remained to demonstrate the feasibility of freeing the slaves without shipping them out of the country. In a letter "To the People of Kentucky," dated Lexington, January 1845, Clay predicted that the black race would be swallowed up by the influx of European immigration. But not necessarily by amalgamation; racial mixing was far less frequent in the free states. To Clay this fact was accountable a priori; informal miscegenation might appeal to some, but not the burdens that would go with racial intermarriage.<sup>75</sup> Industrious and capable slaves would be employed by their "quondam masters" without competing with white industrial laborers;<sup>76</sup> the rest would suffer "the consequences of their folly." Greater vigilance and stricter penalties would automatically prevent the stealing many feared. The greater excess of blacks would already have been taken farther south by slaveholders opposed to emancipation.<sup>77</sup> These ideas resulted from no sudden turn of mind. In the letter to the New-York Tribune of November 1843 Clay had pointed out that the country had already adjusted to the presence of 386,265 free coloreds, almost one-sixth of the total Negro population. "....Emancipation is entirely safe," he concluded.<sup>78</sup> No less outspoken before a home audience (at White Sulphur Springs, December 1843), he insisted that the natural process of self-advancement, produced by individual motivation rather

<sup>74</sup>True American, June 24, 1845; Ibid., 248.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 235.

<sup>76</sup>"Slaves would not manufacture if they could; and could not if they would." Quoted Smiley, "Clay," 75.

<sup>77</sup>Quoted Liberator, February 21, 1845, 15:30.

<sup>78</sup>Quoted Liberator, December 15, 1843, 13:198.



than by racial determination, was what mattered, and openly suggested that in this way members of the black race would one day meet on the same level with whites.<sup>79</sup>

(Since the dilemma had to be bared and Southerners made to face it, the first task of the reformer was to make clear the prospects of unqualified emancipation before he could stir the public out of its false hopes that the slave problem would one day solve itself or gradually be erased by colonization. The events of August 1845 forced him to the realization that he must take an even clearer public stand on the issue. This he did immediately in a momentous proclamation entitled "What is to Become of the Slaves in the United States?" Slaveowners, he opened,

....must make up their minds to rid themselves of all those prejudices that run against the free negro, and sacrifice them to the good of their country. They must see the necessity of having the free negroes on the soil of their nativity; and also, as a matter of course, the necessity of regarding them as citizens and a part of this nation. To make this easy and just sacrifice, or to have no country, is the only question in the case. When time shall free them, and they be planted as the majorities in four or five States, they must be citizens, and come in, if at all, under the broad principles of the Constitution, and be an integral part of this nation. The sacrifice of our prejudices is not only necessary, but a just and small matter, compared to the existence of a dear country.<sup>80</sup>)

Pure necessity thus demanded sacrifice (though it was only the lesser of two evils) and positive action. The slaveholder must discuss honestly and quietly, avoiding collision with the McDuffies in Congress; he must recognize the abolitionists' sincerity, in spite of their imprudent enthusiasm, and not stir them to injustice; he must give his slaves as much religion as possible and

<sup>79</sup>Quoted Liberator, February 2, 1844, 14:17.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., September 5, 1845, 15:141.

educate them; he must voluntarily participate in the "progress of the times" by ameliorating where possible the lot of his slaves, hailing "the progress of public opinion" by raising them out of hovels, vermin and filth to decent "and comfortable" living--from degradation to self-esteem and useful citizenship.<sup>81</sup>

(Proceeding to an analysis of the comparative conditions of slaves and freedmen, Clay ranged into a remarkable prognosis. Unlike the ancient Greek or Roman slave, who could enter the society of his master, the American slave was doomed, because of his race, to a permanent inferior status where he was allowed to accumulate no wealth, gain no education. Should philanthropy or some display of merit result in his freedom, the stigma of race bore even harder upon him, for he now entered a no-man's land, "...more sunk in the scale of humanity, than when in slavery.

From his previous state, he is ignorant, poor, and low-spirited by habit; in his new state, he still stands marked by nature's God with an everlasting and distinctive brand, and remains degraded, both he and his offspring, by the conventions of man. He brings with him no wealth from the low and degraded level where he has wrought as a slave; the lights of science have never shone upon his benighted and excluded existence--nor has any aspiration of ambition ever stirred his heart and lifted him up to dignity and usefulness. He goes forth into freedom a marked and degraded being.

The free Negro had no political rights, nor for that matter, the slightest political experience. With social equality impossible, he remained a cap-in-hand menial. He was, in fact, the poorest of menials, excluded from factories, even from public works, for the lowest whites shunned him.

When free, he must carry himself humbler and more bowed down than when a slave; for he has to conciliate all the lords of creation, from the nabob to the drunken bestial, to avoid mobs, stripes, and a summary chastisement, for which no court opens to give him redress.

<sup>81</sup>Quoted Liberator, September 5, 1845, 15:114. This last brings to mind John Young's belief that the slave should be provided not only "...the bare necessities, but the comforts of life." Young, Duties of Masters, 55.

He is forbid [den] to travel or trade--to remain in the State where all his attachments are.... He then goes to some free State, supposing that there he would find a home and an abiding place; but, no! thence too he is driven by laws unjust and unrelenting.... With no abiding place, no home, no information, no rights, political or social, no wealth, he is a wanderer on the face of the earth, and like Cain marked of God, but not for murder or vice. Is it to be wondered at that he should be poor, and mean, and ignorant, and even vicious and immoral, without any character cherished in him, to lift him above meanness, idleness and vice?<sup>82</sup>

In conjunction with the plea that deeply-founded prejudices be abandoned--an absolutely necessary prerequisite--and that the highest motives be adopted in order "...to discharge slavery, to disarm the freed negroes of all those characteristic vices, and lift them up to usefulness and citizenship," (Clay outlined in two broad points a plan of emancipation. First, gradual abolition by State legislation, with education to prepare the slaves for that event. The old slaves, who were unfit for freedom, might be left in slavery. If necessary, State and federal compensation would be applied.<sup>83</sup> Second, he proposed to grant the Negroes the right to hold office and to stand on juries. Social problems should be left to work themselves out--which they would, for political rights would stimulate ambition and self-respect, without which nothing could ever be expected from the Negro.<sup>84</sup> )

<sup>82</sup>"What is to become of the Slaves in the United States?"; quoted Liberator, September 15, 1845, 15:141. Clay's understanding of a "closed" social system is comparable to that of Elkins in Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

<sup>83</sup>Every female slave would be freed at age twenty-one, beginning in a certain year (1860 or perhaps 1900). Emancipation would result from the fact that children would follow the status of the mother.

<sup>84</sup>Liberator, September 5, 1845, 15:141. Suffrage would not be granted until it could be exercised properly, Clay stated in a plan he outlined for issuing to the public August 16, 1845.

It is impossible to fully understand Clay's program for emancipation, which spelled out momentous social changes, without regarding still more closely its author's ideas on the matter of race. He by no means had any illusions about the Negro. First, though nominally a Baptist, he was not in any ordinary sense a religious man. After 1845 he talked about the sinfulness of slavery, but this was partly a calculated attempt to widen his appeal.<sup>85</sup> Being a Southerner, he knew that the Negroes as a whole were often indolent, unskilled and ignorant,<sup>86</sup> and genially he ridiculed the notion that he was a special friend of these creatures. The True American of February 11, 1845 reported a toast, supposedly made at a "'darkee' celebration down South," to "Massa Kasmus M. Klay--de friend of 'de kullud poppylashum:--aldough he hab a wite skin, he hab also a berry brack heart: which 'titles him to the universal 'steam ob dis 'sembly."<sup>87</sup> In a letter of the editor of the New York World, February 19, 1861, marked "Confidential," Clay declared, "They lack self-reliance--we can make nothing out of them. God has made them for the sun and the banana!"<sup>88</sup>

On the theoretical level these realistic observations and prejudices did modify Clay's thinking. All races, he felt, were capable of achieving the same degree of civilization, but at present the Negro was far behind the white, who, member of an historically superior race, had a better and larger brain, a more beautiful form, and more exquisite structure.<sup>89</sup> The highest link in the

<sup>85</sup>True American, December 9, 1845; in Clay, Writings, 360, 376. Smiley, "Clay," 215.

<sup>86</sup>True American, June 10, 1845; in Clay, Writings, 224.

<sup>87</sup>Quoted Smiley, "Clay," 104.

<sup>88</sup>Quoted Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>89</sup>Address before the Methodist Board of Home Missions, Philadelphia, January 14, 1845; Clay, Writings, 531.

"chain of humanity" might be subject to the same fate of the lowest--certainly  
 "...God has given rights which are marked as clearly on the most dusky face...."  
 --but nevertheless the well-being of the Anglo-Saxon race was first in import-  
 ance.<sup>90</sup> These were the people destined by their state of perfection to possess  
 this country.<sup>91</sup>

The biological inferiority Clay suggested was not a permanent condition,  
 but one of historical origin. This dynamic racial theory allowed for progress  
 under the general "law of fitness," which applied no rule of color to its  
 subjects. "That the black is inferior to the white, I readily allow," Clay  
 said; "but that vice may depress the one, and virtue by successive generations  
 elevate the other, till the two races meet on one common level, I am also firmly  
 convinced."<sup>92</sup>

All this has had to be gone over in considerable detail to prepare for the  
 objection that "...the end [Clay] sought was economic prosperity for the white  
 man, and not liberty or equality for the Negro."<sup>93</sup> As far as it goes, this  
 interpretation is quite reasonable. Clay's writings abound in declarations that  
 he is concerned only secondarily--even only incidentally--with the fate of the  
 Negro. "...Whilst I would be just to the Black," he stated, "I am free to con-  
 fess that every feeling of association, and instinctive sentiment of self-

<sup>90</sup>New York address of January 13, 1846; quoted Liberator, January 23, 1846,  
 16:13.

<sup>91</sup>"God has not designed this most favored land to be occupied by an inferior  
 race." "To the People of Kentucky," Lexington, January 1845; quoted Liberator,  
 February 21, 1845, 15:30.

<sup>92</sup>White Sulphur Springs address, December 20, 1843; quoted Liberator,  
 February 2, 1844, 14:17.

<sup>93</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 207. The conclusion that Clay, willing to present the  
 interests of any group, was moved exclusively by a fierce desire for personal  
 success, is not satisfactory in spite of all the egotism in the man's personal  
 make-up that can easily be pointed out. Ibid., 87.

elevation, leads me to seek the welfare of the White, whatever may be the consequences of liberation to the African."<sup>94</sup> There is no doubt that Clay's first interest was the economic revival and progress of his native State--an interest that coincided with that of his own private business affairs. But what is of much greater significance, he was able to accept the fullest logical consequences of freeing the slaves and leaving them in the country of their birth, a move absolutely prerequisite to the desired economic objective. Something more than a recognition of the dictates of economic necessity, however, caused him to think of the Negro as abused and oppressed by the circumstances of his servile status and by prejudice, and as capable of raising himself to eventually participate in American society;<sup>95</sup> and at the same time moved him to speak of "justice" for the Negro.<sup>96</sup> All these 'nobler' sentiments must be

<sup>94</sup>"To the People of Kentucky," Lexington, January 1845; quoted Liberator, February 21, 1845, 15:30. See further: Frankfort Commonwealth, February 16, 1841; Smiley, "Clay," 104, 105; Clay to James S. Davis, October 8, 1857, in Clay, Life, 235. Clay told Davis that "...if such issue as extermination should ever threaten either race, I am for my own, the white race, against all other races on earth." The similarity of Breckinridge's views in this matter is close. "...No question touching the black race in this country, should be allowed for a moment to compromise the far higher and more important interests of the white race in it, and of the country itself. I desire the prosperity of every nation in the world; but, above all, I passionately desire the glory of my own. I earnestly invoke God's blessing upon every race of men; but, above them all, I cherish with devotion and with hope, the advancement of my own." Here in one piece, easy to comprehend, is a parallel to Clay's scattered, seemingly irresolvable position. R. J. Breckinridge, Black Race, 10.

<sup>95</sup>Clay insisted in one place that the blacks (with some of the best blood of the South in their veins) were citizens, and the Constitution allowed the Federal Government to step in to uphold this status, just as it would do were Jews deprived of citizenship by the State of Kentucky. True American, March 25, 1846; in Clay, Writings, 413-4.

<sup>96</sup>"We go for the abolition of slavery, not because the slave is black or white--not because we love the black man best, for we do not love him as well, we confess we are full of prejudice,--but because it is just...." True American, February 18, 1846; in Ibid., 382.

qualified before they can be accepted in some form; but they cannot be dismissed. Only by a strain of higher motivation out of somewhere could Clay have produced as he did so clear and revolutionary a vision of a new order.<sup>97</sup> )

The suppression of the True American made its editor a national figure, an abolitionists' idol, and an object of spite to Southern nationalists. The new prominence was not distasteful to Clay, who dreamt of a career in national politics. A triumphant speech in New York January 13, 1846, followed by another in Boston, further whetted his appetite.<sup>98</sup> Perpetually before him was the inspiring career of Henry Clay, a Southerner with Northern ideas who was thereby equipped to command a wide audience drawn from all sections of the country. The difference between the two was that Cassius Clay believed it necessary to break the slavery interest on its home ground, for he considered that form of proprietorship to be a dead weight on the economy of the State, and hence incompatible with an expanding economy. Where Henry Clay believed in the utility of compromise, the less statesmanlike Cassius Clay was anxious to see the issue joined. If Kentucky could be weaned away from the South, the example of her consequent prosperity would attract her sister states of the Upper South. Cassius Clay would remain in Kentucky, but, if his plans bore fruit, he would be free from the restrictions of a proslavery constituency to attain rank in the field of national politics.

Just the opposite trend was in process through the two decades after 1830, however, as Kentucky gradually drew closer into the community of slaveholding

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<sup>97</sup>According to Smiley, Clay "...became so involved in his denunciations of slavery that he forgot why he had begun that fight in the first place." Smiley, "Clay," iv.

<sup>98</sup>Liberator, January 23, 1846, 16:13.

states, her leadership becoming yearly more closely identified with the leadership of the South.<sup>99</sup> Kentucky in 1830 had been estranged from South Carolina by the nullification doctrine, which was generally repudiated in Kentucky, regardless of party. The solid Southern vote against the Maysville Road bill in 1830 further intensified Kentucky's feeling of separateness. South Carolinians in return began to talk of boycotting Kentucky goods.<sup>100</sup> It was to the interest of Kentucky antislaveryites that this situation be perpetuated. Robert J. Breckinridge, while in England in 1836, had taken great care to distinguish between "States that are now struggling to find...a safe and happy deliverance from slavery," and those "which are nearly unanimous in favor of its eternal existence."<sup>101</sup> But to maintain the distinction required continual vigilance and effort. Speaking out in 1840 against repeal of the Non-Importation Act, Breckinridge urged his audience to see in the move an attempt to draw Kentucky out of her natural alliance with the Upper South and make her over into "a satellite of South Carolina: a faubourg of the lower Mississippi." By yielding her independence of the Deep South Kentucky would "...take...a mighty step in advance against the white race, and in favor of eternal slavery."<sup>102</sup> Clay went a step farther. He too criticized the South as represented by South Carolina, a figure of oppression and of an "aristocracy of the basest kind."<sup>103</sup> But in addition he advised that Kentucky must abandon the

<sup>99</sup>Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:804.

<sup>100</sup>Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:706-8, 697.

<sup>101</sup>Quoted Liberator, August 13, 1836, 6:131.

<sup>102</sup>R. J. Breckinridge, Speech of October 12, 1840, 16. These views were of long-standing, having been suggested in "Hints on Slavery," Kentucky Reporter, May 5, 1830.

<sup>103</sup>Letter of July 11, 1844, Lexington; quoted Liberator, September 13, 1844, 14:146.



South entirely. The State had contrived to fall between two stools; she must be made to see that her position was untenable.<sup>104</sup>

The prospect of Kentucky's entering the orbit of the Northern states, however, involved far-reaching problems only too directly connected with the slavery question. The State's freedom to handle her own domestic affairs would be impaired and her internal security would be threatened. A show of sympathy toward the North would draw in abolitionists and possibly result in insurrection--at least this was what was widely believed.<sup>105</sup> Thus Clay could argue with effect when he kept strictly to economic matters, especially when he drew upon the example of Ohio; but when his audience thought of Ohio the haven of slave-stealers and incendiaries the lesson had a different import. When, under pressure, Clay began to sound out other grounds on which to argue, suggesting that emancipation was dictated by religion,<sup>106</sup> he was forcing his appeal into a treacherous channel. Dark, radical words proceeded from him, hinting at precipitate measures that would leave open the doors to civil disruption and amalgamation--evils from which the general public recoiled with "shuddering and dismay."<sup>107</sup>

<sup>104</sup>The the People of Kentucky," Lexington, January 1845; quoted Liberator, February 21, 1845, 15:30.

<sup>105</sup>Realistic or not, a sleeping fear of insurrection was always present in many minds, capable in moments of excitement of erupting into panic. Eaton, Freedom, 116-7.

<sup>106</sup>True American, December 9, 1845; in Clay, Writings, 358-60.

<sup>107</sup>James T. Morehead, address before the Kentucky Colonization Society; quoted Liberator, March 29, 1834, 4:49. Morehead became Governor of the State in 1834 and served in the U. S. Senate, 1841-7. Allen, Kentucky, 103. Martin (Anti-Slavery, 68n) and McDougale ("Slavery," 327) identify him as a leading opponent of slavery, but his views were moderate in the extreme and he played no part in the actual antislavery movement.

One of Clay's greatest mistakes was to allow himself to be so thoroughly associated before the Kentucky public with Northerners, including abolitionists.<sup>108</sup> His partner, William C. Bell, while travelling East to gather subscribers for the True American, had stopped at a session of the American Anti-slavery Convention in New York (now a Garrison organization), where he listened to an anti-union speech by a female, a certain Miss Hitchcock. "....She don't begin to describe the misery of crime and cruelty...." of slavery, he commented. At once the editor of the Maysville Eagle advised Clay to dissolve his association with this fanatical Mr. Bell. Clay complied, but damage had no doubt been done.<sup>109</sup> Even more compromising were Clay's later dealings with the abolitionist John G. Fee, a product of Lane Seminary. Fee took charge of an 'integrated' college at Berea, Kentucky, which Clay had founded and which was supported by Northern contributions.<sup>110</sup> Not oblivious to the dangers of the tenuous course he followed, Clay struggled to make it clear that he was a Kentuckian who believed that his State should be allowed to solve her own problems. "They who bear none of the consequences of action, shall never, by my consent, act at all," he declared.<sup>111</sup>

Ultimately, the Union was at stake; Kentuckians who would not tolerate a dictated settlement of their domestic dilemma, either by the North or by the

<sup>108</sup>These latter only too sanguinely believed Clay to be one of their own. Liberator, August 2, 1844, 14:122.

<sup>109</sup>Maysville Eagle, May 28, June 14, 1845.

<sup>110</sup>Coleman, Slavery Times, 321, 322. Smiley, "Clay," 294. Integration was Fee's idea, "....and could not have been foreseen, but has always had my hearty approbation," Clay recalled. The statement is curious. Clay, Life, 212.

<sup>111</sup>Clay, Writings, 130.

South, had recognized this for some time. Most placed high their concern for the fate of the whole nation.<sup>112</sup> Birney, sensing a threat of cataclysm, had

urged forbearance, declaring: "Sir, this Union is precious to me--if it be destroyed, the world may mourn, for its liberty is lost." Yet, should the South fail to move, the North would have to appeal directly to the Southern conscience.<sup>113</sup> Breckinridge believed Congress had the power to regulate the

internal slave trade and could thus deal a death blow to slavery, but, repeating Birney's sentiments, he held that this "engine of vast potency" was not to be employed "...until the good sense and piety and humanity of the nation shall

call it forth."<sup>114</sup> "The question is, let negro slavery be as bad as any man makes it out to be, whether it had better continue to exist, or the Union be abolished--that's the question--," a friend of Joel T. Hart wrote to the

sculptor.<sup>115</sup> Associating approaching calamity with the problem of slavery, a problem which they did not know how to meet, produced in these men a sense of futility and sharp pessimism. The dire consequences of slavery were approaching, an anonymous person warned in the Frankfort Commonwealth of July 18, 1838.

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<sup>112</sup>"Slavery is a vast evil, and a tremendous sin," a friend wrote to Joshua Wilson, "--And is not God preparing to visit it with His judgments. Look! The Northern abolitionists, & the Southern spirits of violence! are they not, together, hastening on a crisis, the most tremendous? --May will not the very move of your Synod hasten on the reign of blood in the South? "Separation! Separation!" This fearful note is already being sounded by the Northern Section of the Church. --Where is this thing to end? --Would we not do well--to be off--even though we leave both friends and the bones of our ancestors?" Joshua L. Wilson Papers, p. 769; Durrett Collection Mss.

<sup>113</sup>"...For some years, at least [,]the north should forbear...", Birney qualified in a letter to Gurley, Huntsville, Alabama, September 24, 1833; Birney, Letters, 90.

<sup>114</sup>Quoted Liberator, February 8, 1834, 4:22.

<sup>115</sup>Joel T. Hart Papers, 2:264; Durrett Collection Mss.

We see it in the fanatical abolitionism of the north; and in the reckless nullification of the south. On either side, we know by the smoke and dust that fill the atmosphere, that a storm is gathering, which threatens to burst with all its horrors, upon this ill-fated land.

We would gladly avert the impending danger and threatened ruin, but we know not how to go about it.

The same gloomy forecasts are echoed in Clay's writings;<sup>116</sup> in 1831 he had predicted civil war within fifty years.<sup>117</sup> But greater caution and moderation did not follow--on the contrary, Clay, a man cowed no more in thought than he was in deed, was incited by the general direction of events to greater extremes. When the South took with a minimum of protest the repeal of the Gag Law he taunted, "They roar as gently as any sucking dove."<sup>118</sup> At the same time, he uttered statements of doubtful constitutional orthodoxy.<sup>119</sup> If it came to a choice between slaveholders and liberty, he declared in June 1845, then the abolitionists were the truest friends of the Constitution.<sup>120</sup> A year later, while discussing the question of the government upholding the civil rights of Negro citizens, he was heard to say that "...when this Union shall fail in this first purpose of its creation, by playing the slave of Tyrants, we say let it perish!"<sup>121</sup> These statements contradicted Clay's declaration that Kentucky must be left to handle her own problems unmolested. Such impolitic words might suggest that, caring nought for his reputation among Kentuckians, he was

<sup>116</sup>"To the People of Kentucky," Lexington, January 1845; quoted Liberator, February 21, 15:30.

<sup>117</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 27.

<sup>118</sup>True American; quoted Liberator, December 26, 1845, 15:206.

<sup>119</sup>Clay was, however, hardly as unorthodox as Fee, whom he chastized in 1857 for declaring slavery to be invalid according to "higher law." Clay to James S. Davis, October 8, 1857; in Clay, Life, 234.

<sup>120</sup>True American, June 17, 1845; in Clay, Writings, 230.

<sup>121</sup>True American, March 25, 1846; in Ibid., 414.

thinking of taking his political services to the North. But this he did not do. He still insisted that the South must understand the great exigencies of her situation and move toward emancipation. He spoke daily in more urgent terms, no doubt aware that they were distasteful, because the question of slavery was becoming just that much more crucial in his own mind.

Appeal to 'higher law,' calling on the religious convictions and conscience of Kentuckians, and hobnobbing with abolitionists were offensive enough in themselves, but they were only contributing factors in the suppression of 1845, and by no means did the reaction they engendered end Clay's public career. The real substance of the reaction was a reply to an emancipation program which excluded colonization, a response so spontaneous and positive that no antislavery leader would in the near future be likely to repeat the mistake. Clay himself did not.

In an effort to regain some of the ground he had lost in Kentucky, Clay went off to Mexico and covered himself with a modicum of military glory. Having failed to influence the policy of Kentucky Whigs, on his return he determined to ruin them by undermining their non-slaveholding support. His campaign for governor in 1851 accomplished that aim, he claimed on the basis that, in addition to five thousand who had voted for him, thirty thousand had stayed away from the polls on his account.<sup>122</sup> But his activities now covered a much larger field as he campaigned for Free-soilism in Northern states as well as Kentucky.<sup>123</sup> Well on his way to entering the ranks of the Republican Party (which he did in 1854), Clay was rapidly adopting a thoroughly 'un-Kentuckian' approach to the problem of slavery in his State. "I am for no Union without Liberty..." he told new

<sup>122</sup>Clay, Life, 212-13.

<sup>123</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 293.

listeners.<sup>124</sup> Back on Yankee soil the Garrison in him had again emerged, making--no one can say how much--hypocrisy out of his Kentucky antislavery years. Meanwhile, the Legislature having failed to place any but quite minor restrictions on the press,<sup>125</sup> public discussion of slavery had continued unabated through 1849.

The last act in the Kentucky antislavery debate is yet to be told; it remains here only to relate an incident that indicates the new direction that debate was assuming. Clay's attorney, his brother Brutus, terminated the True American in the fall of 1846; but a successor publication, the Examiner, took over at Louisville June 19, 1847 under the editorship of John C. Vaughan. Clay expressed surprise at his brother's action; but it is unlikely he had remained very enthusiastic about a project he was not directing in person, and surprising that such action would have been taken without his knowledge.<sup>126</sup> Vaughan's subsequent success was due to his moderation. Those who would endeavor to "...change old and time-worn habits and laws..," he said, "must understand prejudices and pay proper regard to them; know all perils, and ward them off; weigh each interest and be just; and violate no right in removing a wrong." Insolence, harshness, bigotry, overhearing, rabid and one-sided manners made poor allies.<sup>127</sup> This was a pledge that there would be no return to Clay's alarming advocacy of unconditional emancipation. The pledge, as will be seen, was also a prediction; the pledge was kept, and the forecast was accurate.

<sup>124</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 296.

<sup>125</sup>Liberator, March 20k, 1846, 16:46.

<sup>126</sup>Liberator, November 13, 1846, 16:182. Vaughan was originally from South Carolina. Martin, Anti-Slavery, 118.

<sup>127</sup>Even Garrison seemed moved by these sentiments; though insisting upon firm adherence to principle, he expressed himself "...aware that great caution is needed in such a position...." Here is more evidence requiring that we qualify the standard view of the rabid 'liberator.' Examiner, Quoted Liberator, July 2, 1847, 17:106.

## CHAPTER V

### THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION OF 1849:

#### CONCLUSION OF THE SLAVERY DEBATE

In 1843 the second round of antislavery activity began in Kentucky. This time, however, the movement quickly gained strength enough to survive any such setback as occurred in September 1845. Criticism was not stayed by cries of "abolitionism" and "insurrection" as it had been when Birney carried his discussion of slavery beyond accepted bounds. The press was open. The public had been exposed to all aspects of the question and could face the problem with relatively less apprehension. The dreadful promise of abolition and insurrection had not materialized, and these terms, more familiar now, were less ominous.<sup>1</sup> And, finally, with the body of antislavery literature now complete, Kentuckians understood more fully the magnitude of their problem. What had once been only of private humanitarian or moral concern to a number of individuals was now undeniably a public matter. More than just the economy of county or State was felt to be at stake; many recognized that the slavery question had come to involve the fate even of the Union. A spirit of urgency pervaded the events leading to the constitutional convention in Frankfort of 1849.

There was some justification for reformers to be optimistic. From Lewis County came a report of spirited discussion going on there and in adjacent

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<sup>1</sup>Martin, Anti-Slavery, 111.

counties. Another correspondent of the True American wrote that in Methodist circles there was much disaffection over membership in the Southern branch of the Church.<sup>2</sup> When Clay handed the True American property over to Vaughan, along with his stock of material and subscription list, there was, the new editor reported, no difficulty in carrying on an antislavery paper in Kentucky.<sup>3</sup>

In this situation, Vaughan thought, revolution was out of place; with the public awake and virtue alive, change could be directed by the regular means of persuasion.<sup>4</sup> If the keynote of the new campaign were to be moderation, no outside influence could be tolerated, either from the Calhoun South or Garrison's North. Kentucky must be free of the Nullifiers who were trying to draw her under their wing by playing on "pride, passion, sectional prejudice, avarice, and fears," and indirectly by abetting the rise of fanaticism at the North. "The stormier it becomes, the brighter and surer their political prospects," Vaughan declared. "They have done as much to extend abolitionism by their excess....as has been done any other way."<sup>5</sup>

Vaughan's method was calculated to promote reform by constitutional change. Pressure for a convention was rapidly mounting. Dr. Ruffner, a leading figure in the movement in the non-slaveholding counties of western Virginia, addressed the Franklin Society of Lexington on the economic and political evils of slavery,

<sup>2</sup>True American; quoted Liberator, April 17, 1846, 16:61.

<sup>3</sup>Clay, Life, 175.

<sup>4</sup>"Society.., when stagnant, needs a whirlwind blast to purify it... But where there is virtue and intelligence enough to hear and consider truth, the ruder anger of the storm without will only enkindle a ruder anger within. Violence, invariably, begets violence, and all that the best of us can do, at such times, is to watch the excitement as it wears away; and then to labor and wait." Louisville Examiner; quoted Liberator, July 2, 1847, 17:106.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.



familiarizing his audience with the well-organized efforts against the institution being conducted across the border.<sup>6</sup> "Have we such an organization in Kentucky?" the Examiner commented, "May we not have it?" "Let us take courage from this example of the Old Dominion.... Let us...organize now."<sup>7</sup> The Louisville Journal, the most influential paper in the State, had previously (October 8, 1846) declared that the time was not yet ripe for raising the question of emancipation, and advised delay until the public demanded its settlement.<sup>8</sup> Editor Prentice's opposition to slavery, however, was a public fact,<sup>9</sup> and, though he advised against a convention, he did help to publicize the issue.

The call for a constitutional convention was heard as early as January 1846. The antislaveryites were joined by proslavery opponents who thought them too weak to successfully alter the constitution in their favor. The measure was blocked for the time in the Senate by a narrow two votes, but was passed early the following year. The first plebiscite, held in August, approved the convention by a thirty thousand vote majority; the second popular vote was roughly the same.<sup>10</sup> According to the Louisville Courier the dominant issue was the question of slavery.<sup>11</sup> Interest was strong in the non-slaveholding eastern mountain counties and on the northern river border, particularly in Louisville.

<sup>6</sup>Weeks, "Anti-Slavery," 100. They were, as a matter of fact established by Larry Gara, hardly organized at all. Larry Gara, The Liberty Line (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1961).

<sup>7</sup>Quoted Liberator, December 3, 1847, 17:194.

<sup>8</sup>Eaton, Freedom, 192, 193.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted Liberator, April 16, 1841, 11:61.

<sup>10</sup>Martin, Anti-Slavery, 120, 121.

<sup>11</sup>Maysville Eagle, August 9, 1847.

In spite of the general sense of agreement among opponents of slavery, there were serious matters of contention that would require settlement on some higher level. To meet the need for cohesion, in January 1849 Cassius Clay issued a call for an antislavery convention to be held April 25 in the Capital.<sup>12</sup> Immediately a measure of order was injected into the movement; numerous local meetings were held throughout the State to select delegates, and at these gatherings the subject of slavery was debated. Before the delegates met in Frankfort, the principle points of dispute had been clarified, if not resolved, and the general attitude of those opposed to perpetual slavery had been aired, making it possible for these delegates to proceed more realistically on the question of emancipation.

First in importance, antislavery leaders had to agree on what general type of constitutional provision was desirable. The sources show a considerable diversity of opinion, but in general they exhibit a pervading spirit of moderation. For one reason, it was widely feared in antislavery circles that to ask too much by way of constitutional alteration would result in a final setback to the cause--a prospect well recognized by many proslaveryites as well. Furthermore, there was strong opposition to injecting the slavery issue into a movement for constitutional reform. Many who felt this way were themselves critical of slavery, and it would therefore be a serious mistake to alienate this potential source of support by advancing extreme proposals. Prentice is a case in point. He approved the extremely moderate character of the emancipation proposals then current, considering it above all a virtue that "the plan

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<sup>12</sup>Observer and Reporter, January 20, 1849.

which has received general countenance...rests upon no postulate of the equality of man or the commands of God." But, while he felt that great value was to be derived from discussion based on such practical premises, he held resolutely to the position that candidates should not be run for the convention on any such scheme. The only active measure he would advocate was constitutional non-importation.<sup>13</sup> Others were of the same mind. "Hundreds" signed a call for a meeting to be held at the March County court house to support the proposition that the convention should not consider the question of slavery. Prominent figures such as George Robertson of Lexington, General Richard Collins, Henry Waller, and George Prentice signed the petition, declaring themselves "....opposed to agitating Emancipation Now! with a view to inserting it directly in the coming Constitution."<sup>14</sup> Chief Justice Robinson, considered by some the real leader of emancipationists, would not have the State attempt a settlement of the slavery problem because he felt that all emancipation schemes were "....either impracticable, unjust, or unphilanthropic."<sup>15</sup>

Those who did desire to make slavery an issue in the coming convention were opposed to making a final settlement. The most advanced proposal asked for a constitutional provision enabling the Legislature to consider the question of slavery in the future. The Lexington Atlas expressed satisfaction with things as they were, but, should the slavery issue be forced in the convention,

<sup>13</sup>Quoted Maysville Eagle, February 24, 1849.

<sup>14</sup>An article signed "A Slaveholder"; Maysville Eagle, February 24, 1849.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Y. Payne to the editors of the Maysville Herald and the Kentucky Flag, Maysville, February 27, 1849; quoted Maysville Eagle, March 1, 1849.

the decisions of the present generation should not bind later generations. The new constitution should provide for a renewal every ten or twenty years of the question of emancipation.<sup>16</sup> Public resolutions in Woodford and Boyle Counties followed much the same line of reasoning.<sup>17</sup>

In criticism of slavery, as well as in the concrete proposals for reform, the test of acceptability was practicality. In this pragmatic spirit the Louisville Examiner took pains to demonstrate how slavery had retarded education, stifling the promising movement for common schools. "No system of universal education," Vaughan declared, "can live in a slave State." "Slavery knows no sympathy with the mass of men...."<sup>18</sup> Far more attention was given, however, to economic and certain social aspects of slavery than to any moral-humanitarian considerations.<sup>19</sup> Reversing the 'Northern wealth and Southern profits' formula the Examiner demonstrated with a rash of statistics how far the South had fallen behind the North in economic development.<sup>20</sup> In the same manner William Breckinridge, brother of Robert J. Breckinridge and a fellow Presbyterian minister, pastor in Louisville, wrote in the pages of the Louisville Democrat of slavery as a sort of killing fungus, Negroes slave and free weighing down

<sup>16</sup>Maysville Eagle, March 31, 1849. The resolutions adopted by Mason County Antislaveryites are similar in this respect. It was "...not their intention to disturb the relationship which exists between master and servant, but rather than put the whole machinery and form of government in commotion, or hazard it, for the purpose of a single error pointed out by experience, it would be better to submit a proposition for amendment, to be first considered by one or two Legislatures, and then submitted once or twice to the people, as may be thought advisable for their ratification." Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., March 27, 1849.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted Observer and Reporter, January 13, 1849.

<sup>19</sup>T. D. Clark ("Slave Trade," 333) is correct in remarking the absence of criticism of slave trading in the years 1840 to 1848. Had more powerful issues not occupied the scene, however, more concern over the matter would probably have been forthcoming.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted Liberator, April 27, 1849, 19:65.

the economy in such states as Kentucky, Virginia, and Delaware by their "already fearful" numbers.<sup>21</sup> In county after county where antislavery meetings were held, the institution was accounted "a great social, political and economic evil."<sup>22</sup> There were exceptions to the general trend of thinking. A public assemblage at Lexington, April 14, 1849, subscribed, under the influence of Robert J. Breckinridge, to propositions that referred in part to certain moral considerations.

....hereditary slavery as it exists among us,

- I. Is contrary to the natural rights of mankind;
  - II. Is inconsistent with the state of sound morality;
  - III. Is hostile to the prosperity of the commonwealth.
- We are therefore of opinion, that it ought not to be made perpetual, and that the convention....affords a proper occasion, on which steps should be taken to ameliorate the condition of slavery, in such a way as shall be found practicable in itself, just as it regards the masters of slaves, and beneficial to the slaves themselves.<sup>23</sup>

These resolutions, however, stand out as something of a rarity. The movement had acquired a much broader base, had become popularized, and as a result was marked by a more practical and almost entirely untheoretical spirit. Natural rights and sin, so important in 1830 and 1835, were replaced by considerations of the economic welfare of the State, of the material welfare of artisans, small farmers and aspiring local capitalists, and of certain more or less specific

<sup>21</sup>Quoted Ibid., April 20, 1849, 19:61. William Breckinridge is erroneously accounted a proslaveryite by Irving S. Kull, "Presbyterian Attitudes Toward Slavery," Church History (January 1938) 7:101-14, p. 109.

<sup>22</sup>Lewis County, April 14, 1849, Maysville Eagle, April 21, 1849. See further reports of meetings in Mason, Fayette, and Boyle Counties: Maysville Eagle, April 10, 1849; Observer and Reporter, January 13, 1849, Maysville Eagle, March 27, 1849.

<sup>23</sup>Robert J. Breckinridge, "The Question of Negro Slavery and the New Constitution of Kentucky," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review (October 1849) 21:582-608, p. 583. There is a slightly different version of the same statement in the Maysville Eagle, April 19, 1849.

'social' disadvantages. A sharp expression of the new spirit appeared anonymously in the Lexington Observer and Reporter January 13, 1849.

It was some years since warmly contended that slavery was a sin, a crime of the darkest hue to the slaveholder; that slaves had souls, (and who did not know this,) and according to the law of God and man ought to be free, ought to possess and exercise all the inalienable rights civil, religious and political, that the white man does, and the object of the emancipator then was to elevate the black race, even at the dear expense of amalgamation.

Driven from this by "sound argument" they now proposed to end slavery "...for the purpose they now declare of elevating the white race," and aver that they "...care not a damn what becomes of the negroes amongst us...." Christ, it gave them pleasure to note, "...never meddled with private rights...."<sup>24</sup>

Of widest interest was the problem of what was to be done with the slaves after emancipation. Here insurrection alarmism did not obscure the issue as it had done ten years before. For a moment, when it was discovered that funds were being solicited in Ohio for the antislavery campaign in Louisville, the cry of abolition interference was raised; but correspondents to the Maysville Eagle pooh-poohed the charge and were supported by the editor, whose moderatism was above question.<sup>25</sup> The editor of the Observer and Reporter,

D. C. Wickliffe, agreed that few Kentuckians could be said to be in sympathy with Northern extremists.<sup>26</sup> The air was more or less cleared for openly treating the question of whether after emancipation the some seventy thousand

<sup>24</sup>The letter, dated Fayette County, January 10, is signed "H". Observer and Reporter, January 13, 1849.

<sup>25</sup>Maysville Eagle, March 29, 1849. August 5, 1848 seventy five slaves, freed by a young student from Central College (Doyle), armed with guns and primitive weapons, made a break from Fayette County for the border. In October forty Woodford County slaves were caught planning a similar attempt. Aptheker, Slave Revolts, 38. Aptheker is overly credulous and places too great an emphasis on events that were of only slight significance at the time.

<sup>26</sup>Observer and Reporter, May 9, 1849.

freed Negroes would remain. The Emancipator usually supported colonization; but in an editorial of January 1849 something else was suggested.

The Negroes may be inferior in vigor, activity and comprehensiveness of intellect, but, in regard to other traits, fidelity, humanity and hospitality, we doubt whether they will shrink from comparison with the white race.

The Negro may be indolent, but will soon learn to adjust when toil means advance in...comfort and happiness. No one will regard an industrious free black as a nuisance.<sup>27</sup>

But this survival of Cassius Clay's advanced views was entirely exceptional. In almost all the antislavery literature of the years 1847 to 1850 removal is the sine qua non of emancipation. The grand scheme of colonization was once again widely praised. One day, it was hoped, state and federal support would be attracted. "It will then lead by general consent to the triumph of the great principle of emancipation..."<sup>28</sup> Opening his paper in December 1848 to discussion of slavery, he had clearly given it as his opinion that if colonization were not attached to emancipation, he would prefer slavery.<sup>29</sup> "...We are utterly opposed to any system which shall not result in the final removal of the Black race from Kentucky," it was resolved at a Mason County public assemblage. "...The healthful climate, the exuberent soil and the high temperate latitude of Kentucky, point her out as the destined abode of the free white race."<sup>30</sup> A similar meeting in Frankfort resolved:

<sup>27</sup>Quoted Observer and Reporter, January 13, 1849. For Vaughan's views on colonization see Observer and Reporter, March 10, 1849 where the response to the Pindall Letter is recorded.

<sup>28</sup>Maysville Eagle, March 27, 1849.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., December 5, 1848; see also April 10, 1849.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., February 13, 1849.

That we have no objection for a proper provision for colonizing the present free blacks, and those who shall hereafter be set free, but protest against abolition or emancipation without the consent of the owner, unless upon full compensation and colonization.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, some refused to join the emancipationists because of a lack of faith in colonization. Calculating that the scheme would require another ten to twenty million dollars in addition to the sixty million necessary for the compensation of slaveholders, Thomas Payne believed that, aside from the matter of its desirability, colonization was "...a phantom,--the creation of a disordered imagination."<sup>32</sup> According to another pessimistic estimate, made by an anonymous proslaveryite, colonization would cost \$30,000,000, an impossible sum. He was answered by an emancipationist that Kentucky's 190,000 Negroes could be colonized for \$30 a head; by taking into account the number of slaves that would be sold out of the State on the approach of emancipation he reduced Payne's figure to \$5,700,000.<sup>33</sup> The fact that the antislavery movement did not grind to a standstill when the great cost of emancipation was revealed--even when so prominent an antislavery figure as Cassius Clay had declared it to be absolutely prohibitive--shows the strength and the relative blindness of the faith placed in colonization. On the other hand, one may wonder how many of those were reduced to silence who had lost, or who never had, any hopes that compensation

<sup>31</sup>Maysville Eagle, February 10, 1849. Few shared Cassius Clay's readiness at times to ignore property rights. The resolutions of the Bowling Green emancipation meet are a good example; 24 of the 40 signers were slaveholders. Clement Eaton, ed., "Minutes and Resolutions of an Emancipation Meeting in Kentucky in 1849," Journal of Southern History (November 1948) 14:545.

<sup>32</sup>Thomas Y. Payne to the editors of the Maysville Herald and the Kentucky Flag; quoted Maysville Eagle, February 27, 1849.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., February 24, 1849, a letter signed "Bracken;" the second letter, over the signature "A Slaveholder," appeared Ibid., March 1, 1849.



and, more especially, removal, was feasible. The number of potential emancipationists buried by the practical requirements of the problem must remain a mystery.

The most dramatic response to the 1847-1849 antislavery impulse came February 17, 1849 when Kentucky's 'first citizen,' Henry Clay, long-silent foe of slavery and a founder of the American System, entered the lists on the side of the enemies of perpetual slavery. Throughout his long public career Clay remained a true model of the Kentuckian who disapproved of slavery. This is seen in the moderation and practicality of his views, even in the relative silence on the subject he maintained between 1799, the year of the second State constitutional convention, and 1849 when he issued a public statement of his personal thoughts concerning emancipation. It is represented as well by his work for the American Colonization Society in the intermediate years. The demands made by the role of great political prominence he played are also part of the picture.

There is little evidence that Clay was moved to oppose slavery by any abstract considerations. Emphasis upon moral aspects of slavery tended to make critics inflexible and extreme in their demands; but this was never true of Clay. Although he might at times show a benevolent condescension toward the slave,<sup>34</sup> political necessity, public and private, determined most of his actions. In 1820 while discussing the Missouri question with a delegate from

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<sup>34</sup>There is, for example, the case of John Bear, a Maryland slave, who claimed that Clay, thinking him a bright lad, advised him to go to a free state and get himself with education. John W. Bear, The Life and Travels of John W. Bear, "The Buckeye Blacksmith" (Baltimore: D. Hinswanger & Co., 1873), 9.

that Territory, he advised the man to "Go home....and exert yourself to establish gradual emancipation...." To judge from the reaction of some who heard him, however, Clay delivered in Congress something akin to the 'positive good' argument.<sup>35</sup> Higher eminence in later years made it even more impossible to take any open stand against slavery. Clay could not afford being associated with abolitionism, radical or temperate, national or local. This was brought out clearly in 1844 when Whig opponents in Kentucky (perennial political enemies the Wickliffes and Thomas F. Marshall) attempted to read abolitionism into his stand against the annexation of Texas. Repudiating the charge, Clay alienated a number of antislavery Whigs (notably distant kinsman Cassius Clay, whose indiscretions had occasioned the attack); but the sacrifice was necessary.<sup>36</sup> A Southerner standing for national office had also to be wary of offending Northern sensibilities. The Lexington Intelligencer took the trouble to answer an accusation originating in New York in 1842 that Henry Clay was "swearer, gambler, duellist, thief, robber, man-stealer, slave-holder," and that he

<sup>35</sup>Carl Schurz, Life of Henry Clay (2 vols., Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1888), 1:179. George Dangerfield, Era of Good Feelings (New York: 1952), 218ff. in his analysis of the Southern position on slavery in the debates makes nothing of the sort out of Clay's remarks. Clement Eaton, Henry Clay and the Art of American Politics (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., c.1957), 122.

<sup>36</sup>George R. Poage, Henry Clay and the Whig Party (Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 140. Trouble had soon turned out of Cassius Clay's sortie as a Clay Whig into the North to attract Birneyites. His presenting his second cousin as an emancipationist drew a quick repudiation from Henry Clay. "Mr. C. M. Clay's letter was written without my knowledge, without any consultation with me, and without any authority from me...he has entirely misconceived my feelings." But he regretted having to do this--for fear of losing four slave states--and said so in a letter to Joshua Giddings. He was caught in the old Whig 'bind' which "Cash" Clay would so willingly bare to the Northern public. The trip was in fact largely a failure; abolitionists would not swallow his economic antislavery and his insistence that what was legally property had to be treated as such. Smiley, "Clay," 150, 160.

mistreated his slaves. Concerning the last, possibly more heinous, crimes, the editor carefully detailed the healthy diet enjoyed by Clay's fifty some slaves, a number of whom were pure charity cases. Hemp workers received up to a dollar a day wages during 'breaking season.' This benevolent master had never purchased a slave unwilling to come with him, and he had emancipated five slaves (1830, 1834 and 1840). The editor took the trouble to reproduce the deeds of emancipation.<sup>37</sup>

In a Southern state the path a politician had to tread was even narrower; no one was more conscious of this than Clay. In an interview with Birney in 1834 he pointed out for the abolitionist's edification how R. J. Breckinridge and John Green had ruined themselves politically by their antislavery activities.<sup>38</sup> The most that could be safely done was to promote colonization, and this Clay did with great constancy. It is not suggested, however, that the colonization work he undertook served as a cover for particularly advanced ideas. Clay believed in colonization, and when he expressed himself most freely on the subject, in 1849, he did not introduce any innovations incommensurate with the ordinary policy of the A.C.S. In a speech before that organization in 1827 Clay gave as his opinion that the annual increase of slaves, an estimated 52,000, could be deported at a cost of \$1,040,000.<sup>39</sup> This trust in the ultimate practicability of the colonization scheme never deserted him, in spite of the

<sup>37</sup>Quoted Liberator, September 2, 1842, 12:137. See further, Eaton, Clay, 119ff.

<sup>38</sup>Birney, "Diary," September 17, 1834; Birney, Letters, 135n.

<sup>39</sup>At this time Clay tossed out the suggestion that free Negroes might be colonized west of the Rockies. Charles I. Foster, "The Colonization of Free Negroes in Liberia, 1816-1835," Journal of Negro History (January 1953)

38:41-66, p. 41.

reverses the Society underwent. Private enterprise alone, he pointed out at the Annual Meeting of January 18, 1848, set thousands of European immigrants--several times the annual increase of slaves--ashore at New York every year.<sup>40</sup>

In keeping with his relatively liberal conception of the function of the federal government, he hoped that eventually Washington would contribute to colonization.<sup>41</sup> For years after severe decline had befallen the Colonization Society,

Clay remained a persevering supporter of the A.C.S.

Birney found Clay unaffected by the more radical currents of opinion present in Kentucky in the mid-thirties. He came away from the interview of September 1834 with a distinctly unfavorable impression. "I found him, according to my conceptions, altogether wrong--and that he had gone very little beyond the standard of vulgar reflection on the subject," he recorded in his diary. "The impression made upon me, by this interview was that Mr. C. had no conscience about the matter, and therefore, that he would swim with the popular current."<sup>42</sup>

Clay was not for converting. His ideas, conditioned by what he felt to be the dictates of political expediency, were fixed. Birney's primary objection, however, was that Clay took a generally passive position. Kentucky slavery was so mild, he said, that an outright assault upon the institution was not required. Property interests were too powerful to oppose, and, besides, they were legitimate. "...The case was hopeless by any direct effort, and was to be left to

<sup>40</sup>A.C.S. 31st Annual Report, January 18, 1845, 23.

<sup>41</sup>March 28, 1832 he presented a memorial to Congress urging the government to assist colonization. Liberator, April 14, 1832, 2:60.

<sup>42</sup>Birney, "Diary," September 17, 1834; Birney, Letters, 135n. Dumond dates the meeting September 16; this appears to be mistaken.

the influence of liberal principles as they should pervade our land."<sup>43</sup> What Birney meant by "vulgar reflection" is not detailed in the "Diary" entry of September 17, but it is clear from other sources that Clay's conservatism was based on several very ordinary presuppositions. Slavery was indeed "...a great evil, a wrong, for the present, I fear an irremediable wrong, to its unfortunate victims."<sup>44</sup> But much more important in Clay's thinking was his basic attitude toward the black race. The Negroes, especially the "True Coloreds," were a debased lot, addicted to crime and vice. This was because of their condition--whites in the same position would be just as degraded and vicious.<sup>45</sup> But this was definitely not meant to suggest that such a condition might be alleviated and Negroes be allowed to progress alongside whites. God had deemed otherwise.

...Elevating themselves to a sublime but impracticable philosophy, the abolitionists would teach us to eradicate all the repugnances of our nature, and to take to our bosoms and our boards the black man as we do the white, on the same footing of equal social condition. Do they not perceive that in thus confounding all the distinctions which God himself has made, they arraign the wisdom and goodness of Providence itself. It has been His divine pleasure to make the black man black and the white man white, and to distinguish them by other repulsive constitutional differences.

What God had thus marked separate should not be brought together by any process of unnatural amalgamation.<sup>46</sup> Besides the factors of deep prejudice and

<sup>43</sup>Birney, "Diary," September 17, 1834; Birney, Letters, 135n.

<sup>44</sup>Resolutions presented November 13, 1847, censuring the Mexican War; quoted Liberator, December 3, 1847, 17:193.

<sup>45</sup>A.C.S. 34th Annual Report, January 23, 1851, 38.

<sup>46</sup>Frankfort Commonwealth, February 27, 1839. See further: A.C.S. 34th Annual Report, January 23, 1851, 39; A.C.S. 31st Annual Report, January 18, 1845, 231. Clay even suggests that the two races may even have antithetical moral constitutions; this makes it difficult to trust his statements on the perfectibility of the Negro race in Africa.

'Providential design' there was an even more urgent consideration which forbade heading the abolitionists. That was the great question of racial domination. To free the Negroes would result in the most terrible fate for the one or the other race.

In the slave States the alternative is, that the white man must govern the black, or the black govern the white. In several of these States the number of slaves is greater than that of the white population. An immediate abolition of slavery in them, as these ultra-abolitionists propose, would be followed by a desperate struggle for immediate ascendancy of the black race over the white race, or rather it would be followed by instantaneous collisions between the two races, which would break out into a civil war that would end in the extermination or subjugation of the one race or the other.<sup>47</sup>

These are most likely the vulgar reflections which determined Clay's thinking on slavery, and which Birney instinctively labelled as "altogether wrong." Furthermore, they explain why Clay held so tenaciously to colonization. Because of the prospect of an inevitable struggle for racial ascendancy, Clay opposed any program of emancipation, no matter how gradual, wherever the proportion of blacks was high. Colonization, racial separation--these were the fundamentals of his antislavery thinking.<sup>48</sup>

The Pindall Letter is to be regarded as the act of a conscientious statesman, who, freed from private political considerations, took the opportunity to deliver himself of long-established and sincere thoughts on the subject most

<sup>47</sup>African Repository, 15:29. More convenient reference to Clay's Senate speech on abolition may be found in Henry Clay, The Works of Henry Clay, Comprising His Life, Correspondence and Speeches (edited by Calvin Colton, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904). See further the report on Clay's resolutions censuring the Mexican War in Liberator, December 3, 1847, 17:193. Eaton shows that the idea of black ascendancy was constantly in the back of Clay's mind. Eaton, Clay, 130.

<sup>48</sup>Senate speech of February 7, 1839; quoted Frankfort Commonwealth, February 27, 1839.

crucial to his native State.<sup>49</sup> The content of the letter presents nothing that had not appeared before in the Senator's speeches. But Clay's decision to join the proponents of bringing the question of slavery to an open test was a new departure, reflecting at once his sense of the urgency of the matter, the strength of the antislavery movement, and Clay's own personal courage.

He treated the debate as closed; all sides had been heard; few maintained the 'positive good' defense of slavery. Further agitation would only produce reaction; what was now required was a clean plebiscite for or against slavery. Rather than revive contention, Clay restricted his remarks to a description of the benefits to accrue from emancipation. Again he appeared both the practical-minded Whig and a humanitarian.

We shall remove from among us the contaminating influences of a servile and degraded race of a different color. We shall enjoy the proud and conscious satisfaction of placing the race where they can enjoy the great blessings of liberty, and civil, political and social equality; we shall acquire the advantage of the diligence, the fidelity, and the consistency of free labor, instead of the carelessness, infidelity, and the unsteadiness of slave labor; we shall elevate the social condition of the white laborer; augment the value of our lands, improve the agriculture of the State, attract capital from abroad to all the pursuits of commerce, manufactures and agriculture; redress, as far and as fast as we prudently could, any wrongs which the descendants of Africa have suffered at our hands, and we should demonstrate the sincerity with which we pay indiscriminate homage to the great cause of the liberty of the human race.<sup>50</sup>

Emancipation, accompanied by colonization, was necessary to the welfare of both races. The 190,000 Negroes in Kentucky could never successfully live beside the white population; "peace, harmony and equality" would never be established

<sup>49</sup>"....I suppose that my letter [to Pindell] will bring on me some odium," Clay wrote to his son. "I nevertheless wish it to be published. I owe that to the cause, and to myself, and to posterity." Clay to James Clay, New Orleans, March 3, 1849; Henry Clay, Works, 5:585.

<sup>50</sup>The Pindell Letter is quoted in full, Liberator, March 16, 1849, 19:42.

because of an ineradicable racial prejudice working perpetually to their detriment. One had only to regard the plight of the free Negroes in the Northern states. Besides this primary requirement, any emancipation plan, to be worth considering, had to be slow and cautious so as not to disturb the present social equilibrium. Thirdly, to render the scheme operable, slave labor under the management of the State ought to be utilized to finance removal. Clay specifically proposed that all slaves born after 1855 (or 1860) be freed upon reaching the age of twenty five, when they would be hired out by the State for a maximum period of three years. In 1889 the system would go into effect, and that year some five thousand ex-slaves would be transported to Africa and supported there for six months at a cost of \$250,000. By his calculations, these emigrants would have earned three times that amount.

Returning again to the question of the racial inferiority of the Negro, Clay showed himself still undecided on this critical subject. Nonetheless, he insisted with great force that the Negro's intellectual inferiority, which was perhaps a fact, could not be used as a defense for slavery, for it could as well be used to justify one white nation placing another, less advanced nation in bondage. "Nay, further, if the principle of subjugation, founded upon intellectual superiority, be true, and be applicable to races and to nations, what is to prevent its being applied to individuals?" Whatever the actual truth of the matter, there existed a transcendent obligation.

If, indeed, we possess this intellectual superiority, profoundly grateful and thankful to Him who has bestowed it, we ought to fulfill /sic/ all the duties and obligations which it imposes; and these would require us not to subjugate or deal unjustly by our fellow-men who are less blessed than we are, but to instruct, to improve, and to enlighten them.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup>Henry Clay to Richard Pindell, New Orleans, February 17, 1849; quoted Liberator, March 16, 1849, 1902



The situation by the end of February 1849 was highly favorable to the anti-slavery campaign. The Pindell Letter added a measure of moral force to the cause and helped the antislaveryites, by its moderation and by its author's great prestige, to gain a fair hearing.<sup>52</sup> But it did not succeed in breaking the reluctance of the politicians to join the movement. A Democratic convention held February 5, 1849 in Frankfort contributed much to making the issue politically taboo. There a very deliberate attempt was made to identify emancipation with Whiggery and then to tie to that party odious tags of fanaticism and abolition. One conscientious Democrat protested to the editor of the Kentucky Flag that emancipation was not a party matter. But most of the force of his argument evaporated when he began to speak in terms of Whig economics, shortly making evident that, because of the incompatibility of slavery and a diversified economy, emancipation was indeed a political issue. This Democrat with Whig notions berated the alarmists who had been so active at the February 5 convention.

Let them [the friends of slavery] give up that everlasting wolf-cry of Abolitionism; it has become ridiculous in their mouths. Let them come out and show that it is for the advantage of Kentucky that she should banish the white laborer from her borders. Had it not been for slavery, she might now have been the third or fourth State in the Union for wealth and population; let them prove that it is for her interest to go backward, while other states are advancing till the present noble race of Kentucky is exchanged for an enfeebled race of na- /bobs/.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup>Cassius Clay delivered at Lawrenceburg, Kentucky the first emancipation speech ever heard in Anderson County on the western border, after which he moved north into Lewis County. Maysville Eagle, May 24, 1849.

<sup>53</sup>The letter, signed "A Convention Democrat," was refused by the Kentucky Flag, a Democrat paper, and so the author sent it to the Whig Maysville Eagle where it was printed February 17, 1849.

Nevertheless, politics had been injected into the issue, and whatever the effect of this, the fact is certain that leading political figures kept clear of the emancipation platform. When Richard Collins and Thomas Henderson were nominated to the constitutional convention as emancipation candidates, they declined, even though both had approved the stand just adopted at Frankfort by the Friends of Emancipation.<sup>54</sup> Thomas Y. Payne turned down a similar nomination made by citizens of Mason County, because, as he explained, the public meeting of February 12 had declared in favor of making slavery a constitutional issue, a position he could not in conscience support.<sup>55</sup> Richard Collins was highly impressed by the support given the emancipation effort by a number of leading public figures, including Henry Clay, Thomas F. Marshall, Adam Beatty, S. S. Nicholas, William L. Breckinridge, Senator Underwood and John A. McClung-- "....a cause sustained by such men can never die," he commented.<sup>56</sup> But, as was pointed out in the closeted discussions at the Frankfort emancipation convention by J. F. Holloway, who represented Boyle County, as many other prominent politicians, sympathetic in one way or another to emancipation, were equally conspicuous by their absence. "We have against us the devil, the politicians, and George D. Prentice besides." Both parties have "....wheeled into line against us," Robert J. Breckinridge told the Convention.<sup>57</sup> Transcendentalist Kentuckian John Freeman Clarke was convinced that the balance between the two

<sup>54</sup>Thomas Henderson to Lewis Collins, Lewis County, April 25, 1849; Maysville Eagle, April 28, 1849.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., March 1, 1849.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., April 10, 1849. At the Frankfort emancipation convention Clay, Breckinridge and Nicholas were present; but I have found no evidence that the others named here participated. Joel T. Hart Papers, 2:162; Durrett Collection.

<sup>57</sup>Observer and Reporter, May 5, 1849.

parties in 1849 caused both to tread warily away from an issue that might destroy a delicate political equilibrium. He inferred that had the Whig party been dominant, they would have acted to abolish slavery.<sup>58</sup> Also to be taken into account is the fact that many of those chosen in the numerous county meetings as representatives to the emancipation convention appear not to have attended. By April 10 such meetings had been held in some thirty counties.<sup>59</sup> According to the convention register, representatives from only twenty-three counties were present on April 25.<sup>60</sup> Nearby Fayette County chose twenty-nine delegates, only twenty-one of whom were enrolled at the opening session. Of seventy delegates named in Madison County,<sup>61</sup> but three were present when the opening attendance was taken.<sup>62</sup> In Lewis County eight men had figured prominently in emancipation meetings on April 14 and 16. None of them put in an appearance at Frankfort on April 25.<sup>63</sup> Political considerations and, perhaps in some cases, personal circumstances (such as distance or travel expenses) thus materially affected the composition of the antislavery leadership and reduced membership to an appreciable extent. In view of the extreme conservatism of several who participated in the emancipation convention, notably Judge Nicholas, there was

<sup>58</sup>James F. Clarke, Anti-Slavery Days. A Sketch of the Struggle Which Ended in the Abolition of Slavery in the United States (New York: J. W. Lavell Co., [c1883]), 26. "I think I know something of our public men, and I tell you they are for doing nothing," John Green had commented in 1836. In Cassius Clay, "Appeal to the People of Kentucky," Lexington, September 25, 1845; Clay, Writings, 319.

<sup>59</sup>Maysville Eagle, April 10, 1849.

<sup>60</sup>Roll taken at the opening session of the "Convention of the Friends of Emancipation in Kentucky," published in one page; Joel T. Hart Papers, 2:162, Durrett Collection. About one-fourth of the counties did send delegates. Smiley, "Clay," 266.

<sup>61</sup>Observer and Reporter, April 7, 1849.

<sup>62</sup>Joel T. Hart Papers, 2:162; Durrett Collection.

<sup>63</sup>The eight were Samuel D. Ireland, William J. Tully, Rev. George Harding, Richard Nash, U. R. McKellup, Eli Nash, William Norwood, and notably

certainly room for many more prominent figures who at least considered slavery to be, for one reason or another, a detriment to the health of the Kentucky economy, to the moral welfare of its citizens, to the safety of the community, or to the slave himself. Among the deterrents to active participation in the 1849 emancipation movement, the belief that the moment was not opportune and the political dangers of getting involved in so thorny a subject were undoubtedly prime factors. But ultimately of greatest importance was the fact that, in spite of long years of airing the pros and cons of the question, no solution had been worked out that might attract wide and spirited support. Twenty years of debate had not, in the minds of an untold number of Kentuckians, shown emancipation to be at least remotely feasible. This was the foremost task facing the courageous minority of Kentucky's public leaders in the convention of April 25.

The central committee, composed of one member from each county,<sup>64</sup> returned agreed on the following resolutions: 1) absolute prohibition of the importation of slaves, and 2) the establishment of "...complete power in the people of Kentucky to enforce and perfect under the new Constitution, whenever

Francis T. Hord. The last was to speak at the second meeting, but did not attend, for what reason is not given. Maysville Eagle, April 3, April 21, 1849.

<sup>64</sup>Register of the "Grand Committee":

|                                  |                                |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| William Garnett (Barren Co.)     | C. M. Clay (Madison Co.)       |
| George M. Bedinger (Boone Co.)   | F. Ballinger (Mercer Co.)      |
| W. M. O. Smith (Bourbon Co.)     | A. W. Hynes (Nelson Co.)       |
| John C. Young (Boyle Co.)        | A. M. Blair (Nicholas Co.)     |
| R. J. Breckinridge (Fayette Co.) | J. S. Crutchfield (Oldham Co.) |
| Ben. Monroe (Franklin Co.)       | H. P. Thomson (Pulaski Co.)    |
| George F. Sartain (Garrard Co.)  | Evan Stevenson (Scott Co.)     |
| E. C. Drane (Henry Co.)          | Mark Hardin (Shelby Co.)       |
| W. P. Thomasson (Jefferson Co.)  | J. M. Pendleton (Warren Co.)   |
| J. G. Fee (Lewis Co.)            | Samuel D. Fishback (Owen Co.)  |
| Henry Owsley (Lincoln Co.)       | Will Poynter (Bath Co.)        |
| W. L. Breckinridge (Louisville)  | Jesse Butner (Spencer Co.)     |

Observer and Reporter, May 5, 1849.

they desire it, a system of gradual prospective emancipation of slaves."<sup>65</sup> The subsequent debate revealed wide differences. The 'stalwarts' asked for a decisive contest. William L. Breckinridge presented their case in a motion to make emancipation a direct issue in the coming constitutional convention, thus in effect holding to Henry Clay's call for an immediate decision on emancipation. Breckinridge and his Louisville and Jefferson County colleagues were in a difficult position, for it would be accounted something of a defeat for them to return with a watered-down platform to their constituents, who were the most advanced on the slavery question of any Kentuckians. G. M. Bedinger of Boone County agreed, declaring: "I believe our boldest plan is our safest." The idea behind this seems to have been that in the form of an ultimatum the question would have a sobering effect most calculated to bring out intelligent consideration. According to W. M. O. Smith of Bourbon County, little time would be necessary to convince the public. "Men now-a-days think, write and act, as if by steam," he explained. Fayette County delegate Samuel Shy took a more moderate position, approximately that expressed in the second resolution presented by the committee. As he saw it, to place the question in the hands of the people was the best solution; to leave it to the Legislature would mean "unceasing agitation." To this a spokesman for the radicals, Evan Stevenson of Scott County, responded: "I go for agitation--constant earnest agitation." George F. Sartain of Garrard County had ruder terms for the same sentiment: "...I go for the whole hog or none!"

The problem of agitation was a sore point to the conservatives, especially to the most conservative figure in the convention, Judge Samuel S. Nicholas,

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<sup>65</sup>Maysville Eagle, April 28, 1849.

who, though he approved the committee's regulations, insisted that discussion should not be allowed to begin until some future date. Rev. John C. Young approved of Rev. William Breckinridge's amendment, but counseled caution. A breach in the wall had to be made now, but it must be a modest step, because many of the delegates enjoyed only weak followings in their respective counties. The antislavery platform must represent the fact that the convention was in a minority position. With some seventy five counties not even represented, the adoption of rash aims would be entirely unrealistic. "If we raise our banner too high, or undertake to do too much, I fear we will do nothing," Judge Benjamin Monroe of Franklin County agreed.

The stand finally adopted was not a medial position, for it was based on the measure submitted by the central committee, which, as Robert Breckinridge pointed out, represented the minimal demands acceptable to all. Before the antislavery cause could gain ground, he explained, the non-slaveholders had to be weaned away from the slavholders by a studied propaganda effort. Until this was done, the demands of the Friends of Emancipation must be moderate and must command the support of all antislaveryites. Cassius Clay was reluctant to compromise his own views and those of members of the 'liberal' River counties. But he saw the wisdom of Breckinridge's argument. "We fanatics are willing to take your compromise," he declared. "We think it too moderate, and I have been reproached by some because I have yielded." Far better to compromise than to retrogress in following the advice of Judge Nicholas. William Breckinridge withdrew his

amendment and the Nicholas motion was tabled.<sup>66</sup> The resolutions adopted by the convention read:

This convention, composed of citizens of the commonwealth of Kentucky, and representing the opinions and wishes of a large number of our fellow-citizens throughout the commonwealth, met in the capitol on the 25th of April, 1849, to consider what course it becomes those who are opposed to the increase and to the perpetuity of slavery in this State to pursue in the approaching canvass for members of the Convention, called to amend the Constitution, adopts the propositions which follow, as expressing its judgment in the premises:

1. Believing that involuntary hereditary slavery, as it exists by law in this State, is injurious to the prosperity of the Commonwealth, inconsistent with the fundamental principles of free government, contrary to the natural rights of mankind, and injurious to a pure state of morals, we are of opinion that it ought not to be increased, and that it ought not to be perpetuated in this commonwealth.

2. That any scheme of emancipation ought to be prospective, operating exclusively upon negroes born after the adoption of the scheme, and connected with colonization.

3. That we recommend the following points as those to be insisted on in the new Constitution, and that candidates to be run in every county in the State, favorable to these or similar constitutional provisions. 1. The absolute prohibition of the importation of any more slaves to Kentucky. 2. The complete power in the people of Kentucky to enforce and perfect in or under the New Constitution, a system of gradual pro prospective emancipation of slaves. 3. This Convention confines its recommendation to the question of negro slavery, and makes no expression of opinion on any other topic.<sup>67</sup>

The moral appeal contained in the resolutions is explained largely by the composition of the assembly. One-seventh of the members were ministers, headed by Robert J. Breckinridge, who figured beside Cassius Clay as the most prominent voice at the convention.<sup>68</sup> The same sentiments had occurred during the debate,

Thomas M. Smith of Louisville, for one, declaring in the Observer and Reporter

<sup>66</sup>Observer and Reporter, May 5 and May 9, 1849. The official report of the proceedings was probably edited pretty carefully; otherwise we should certainly have heard from Rev. Fee, who certainly must have spoken out in the debate.

<sup>67</sup>Maysville Eagle, May 1, 1849. For more convenient reference, see Breckinridge, "Question of Negro Slavery," 584.

<sup>68</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 266.

that "No man has a moral right to the service of his slave."<sup>69</sup> But the majority, though they did not openly object to such sentiments, were more practical-minded; most of them were Whigs with something more concrete in mind.<sup>70</sup> There was one protest, from William P. Boone of Jefferson County, who declared he wanted a fight on something besides "...the merest abstractions." It is hard to tell to whom he may have been replying, for in the course of debate no really trenchant stand on moral principle seems to have been taken by anyone. James M. Todd of Shelby County closed a series of curious statements with the threat that should the State fail to abolish slavery, "...we shall be guilty of the sin of its continuance." He had opened with the charge that slavery was retarding "...the onward, upward march of this great State," following which he had begun to complain how slaves nowadays were so pampered. Formerly, he elaborated, one went to the block to hire his slaves, but now one looks out a prospective servant and mildly inquires, "My good boy will you come and live with me?" It had gotten so that they demanded so many privileges that a poorer man couldn't afford to own them at all. And then they ran off at the first flogging. J. F. Holloway of Boyle County, who had the floor just before Smith, had more faithfully expressed the sense of the convention at the beginning of the debate by unfurling the banner "...for the glory, honor and prosperity of the white man..."<sup>71</sup> This cannot be taken to indicate any rejection of the 'nobler' sentiments aired in the discussion. The fact is that no one took issue, for or against, the moral indictment of slavery which found its place in the final resolutions.

<sup>69</sup>Observer and Reporter, May 5, 1849.

<sup>70</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 266.

<sup>71</sup>Observer and Reporter, May 5, 1849.



This was a matter of secondary interest, and some significance may be attached to the order in which the charges against slavery are presented. The "prosperity of the Commonwealth" preceded all other considerations, while "the natural rights of mankind" and the "state of morals" came at the end.<sup>72</sup>

The Friends of Emancipation engaged in a vigorous state-wide campaign for non-importation and an open slavery clause in the new constitution. Candidates were chosen in county meetings and speakers appointed to take the stump for emancipation.<sup>73</sup> Rev. Young debated a proslaveryite three evenings in succession at Danville.<sup>74</sup> In the process of a wide tour Cassius Clay delivered the first emancipation speech ever heard in Anderson County.<sup>75</sup> All this activity was heartening, but it was not always effective. An editorial in the Milennial Harbinger by Alexander Campbell, author of the 1829 Cambellite Baptist schism in Kentucky,<sup>76</sup> was long-winded and diffuse. Campbell confined his remarks in the first of two articles to a laborious presentation of the familiar economic argument, illustrated by the standard comparison of Kentucky with Ohio.<sup>77</sup> In the second he concentrated on the duties of Christians to treat their slaves humanely and to educate them in matters "spiritual, divine and eternal." Readers were reminded that slaves were a bad influence on children because of

<sup>72</sup>R. J. Breckinridge, "Question of Negro Slavery," 584.

<sup>73</sup>For activity in Bourbon and Scott Counties, where Whig Col. Henry Clay and E. W. Horton were chosen candidates for the former and Rev. Evan Stevenson for the latter, see Maysville Eagle, May 19, 1849.

<sup>74</sup>Unfortunately the Danville Tribune did not report the substance or outcome of the debate. Ibid., May 22, 1849.

<sup>75</sup>Maysville Eagle, May 22 and May 24, 1849.

<sup>76</sup>The Campbellites had gained considerable strength, numbering some 65,000 adherents, attended by 460 odd ministers by 1842. Allen, Kentucky, 178-9.

<sup>77</sup>Maysville Eagle, May 26, 1849.

the "inferiority and comparative dullness of the negro race...", characteristics due both to nature and to slavery. At the close of the article Campbell asserted that "the genius of the age is against Slavery," and urged that "it is emancipation now or Slavery for ever."<sup>78</sup> These words no doubt found a receptive audience among the Campbellite congregation, but this was not the effective propaganda piece that would very readily make new converts.

A dampening contribution to the debate, which continued to hinge largely on the economic argument, came from the pen of the most influential journalist in the State, George D. Prentice, who insisted there was no economic crisis to justify the sense of emergency the emancipationists were trying to foster. "...Kentucky is eminently prosperous and her social condition highly satisfactory," he asserted. Though the population would grow more rapidly without slavery, there was no real economic plight, and thus no justification for upsetting the economy by the difficult and dangerous expedient of displacing 200,000 slaves with free white laborers. The conviction was taking hold of great numbers, previously inclined to active emancipation,

....that a social revolution so vast cannot be advantageously or safely brought about by any of the proposed schemes of gradual emancipation. There is a growing disposition with this class to leave the slavery problem to be worked out in the slow and gentle course of events.

If there was a crisis, it consisted in the rapid increase in the number of the blacks.<sup>79</sup>

The emancipation party could expect a certain amount of ineffectiveness in campaigning and a good measure of opposition. But no one had calculated on

<sup>78</sup>Maysville Eagle, May 24, 1849.

<sup>79</sup>Louisville Journal, quoted Maysville Eagle, May 1, 1849.

Cassius Clay's gutting Cyrus Turner in a stupidly vicious brawl at a Madison County election debate. Clay had lost his head at being called a liar ("You lie, Sir!") by his debating opponent. He was critically wounded himself, but his opponent died. Clay was unable convincingly to read heroism into the nasty affair and as a result Madison County rejected the emancipation candidate by 3,700 votes to 688.<sup>80</sup>

The constitutional convention, convened October 1, 1849, contained not a single emancipation candidate, in spite of the fact that the Friends of Emancipation had polled thousands of votes.<sup>81</sup> The Democrats, generally speaking the slavery party, held a majority of seats in the convention, but the Whigs, who had engaged in coalitions with their enemies during the elections because they had been alarmed by the vigor of the emancipation crusade, readily fell in with the Democrats on the question of slavery, which occupied one-fourth of the entire debate.<sup>82</sup> The new laws implementing the Constitution of 1849 represented a total proslavery victory. The Convention had exhibited "practical unanimity" in favor of perpetuating slavery, and the members were resolute in their determination to put an end to emancipation movements.<sup>83</sup> Non-importation was not adopted, in spite of the efforts of a proslaveryite, Squire Turner.<sup>84</sup> An act was passed providing that "no slave shall be imported into this state as

<sup>80</sup>Smiley, "Clay," 276. For a vividly detailed account of the fray, see Coleman, Slavery Times, 314-5.

<sup>81</sup>Coleman, Slavery Times, 317.

<sup>82</sup>Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:815-6. James P. Gregory, Jr., "The Question of Slavery in the Kentucky Constitutional Convention of 1849," Filson Club History Quarterly (April 1849), 23:89-110, p. 94.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 93, 99-100.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 98.

merchandise, or for the purpose of sale or barter, in or out of this state...;" but this was hardly a satisfactory substitute.<sup>85</sup> Article Ten provided that "the General Assembly shall have no power to pass laws for the emancipation of slaves without the consent of their owners, or without paying their owners....a full equivalent..., and providing for their removal from the State."<sup>86</sup> Otherwise, the old slave code was simply readopted with only minor changes. The only substantial gain for the slaves was "the privilege of an impartial trial by a petit jury."<sup>87</sup> The recent controversy was best reflected in the exclusion of the clergy from politics--definitely a slap at the recent leaders of the antislavery movement, notably Robert J. Breckinridge. A memorial against the proposed measure, drafted by Rev. Stuart Robinson and Rev. George W. Brush,<sup>88</sup> had been presented in the Convention, but was without decisive influence.<sup>89</sup>

Some emancipation activity was continued after 1850 by John G. Fee, Robert J. Breckinridge, a New England school-teacher, J. Brady, and a Newport machinist, William S. Bailey, but not effectively. Breckinridge, the most important of these figures, had accepted the finality of the new Constitution. "Having proved myself faithful to my convictions," he explained, "I shall now prove myself faithful to the Commonwealth."<sup>90</sup> Forced to bow to a fait accompli

<sup>85</sup>Acts of the General Assembly of Kentucky, November Session, 1850, Vol. 1, Ch. 617, p. 293. The official record of this Session concludes with a reading of the new Constitution.

<sup>86</sup>Journal and Proceedings of the Convention of the State of Kentucky (Frankfort: A. G. Hodges & Co., 1849), 498.

<sup>87</sup>Quoted Gregory, "Question of Slavery," 90.

<sup>88</sup>Both had represented Franklin County in the emancipation convention. Robinson's antislavery career is traceable as far back as 1834 when he stood for the Presbyterian Synod's advanced stand on slavery of that year. Liberator, November 8, 1834, 4:178.

<sup>89</sup>Journal and Proceedings of the Convention of the State of Kentucky (Frankfort: A. G. Hodges & Co., 1849), 192-5. The memorial was read on November 23. See further Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:817-8.

<sup>90</sup>Quoted Swiley, "Clay," 277.

the urgency went out of his voice.

....Slavery in America is in a process of amelioration; and that it affords the means to such as choose to use them in that manner, of a further and real--though possibly slight and incidental--yet if men so please, illimitable amelioration,

he wrote in 1851.<sup>91</sup> The words were reminiscent of Rev. Young. Fee, Brady and Bailey were voices crying in the wilderness; no longer protected by the least shred of public sympathy, they were harried constantly by mobs.<sup>92</sup> The Kentucky antislavery movement had run its course, the sense of urgency had given way to patience; nevertheless, consciousness of the burden of slavery was not dead. Time alone could lift the weight, for it had just been demonstrated to all that the direct ministrations of the community were necessarily of no avail. Prentice best reveals the general resignation in the air at the climax of the antislavery movement.

The sentiment of Kentucky we believe to be, that slavery is an evil which must be borne with patience, simply because there is no known plan for its rapid extinction which would not produce incalculable sacrifices and appalling risks. At the same time we think the people of Kentucky are not inclined to increase the evil, but are inclined to favor its gradual emancipation with colonization. These measures they believe, taken in connection with the known tendency in widening circles to substitute free for slave labor, will hasten the social revolution in question as fast as it can be carried out with safety to the commonwealth or with benefit to the colonized negro.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>91</sup>Breckinridge, Black Race, 12.

<sup>92</sup>Coleman, Slavery Times, 319-21. Clay's abandoning Fee is a pertinent illustration. The best work on antislavery activity after 1850 is Connalley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:816ff. See also Eaton, Freedom, 191-3, and Smiley, "Clay," 275ff.

<sup>93</sup>Quoted Gregory, "Question of Slavery," 93-4.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

For two decades Kentucky weighed arguments for and against emancipation with earnest thoroughness, and then finally put to a vote the momentous issue of whether slavery could and should be terminated. The answer was a decisive 'no,' and Kentucky consequently took her place with the rest of the South on the matter of slavery. The reason for this decision is not to be found in the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of 1849. Nor does the pre-convention debate, for all its thoroughness, provide a full answer. One cannot leave out of consideration the years of experience and discussion which preceded the events of 1849-1850. The constants in the antislavery discussion are most legitimately considered in connection with this decisive latter period; but if the Kentucky slavery debate is to be seen as a movement, the development and variety of ideas are even more pertinent. Wide differences in the thinking of Robert Wickliffe, John Green, Robert J. Breckenridge, James G. Birney, John C. Young, Cassius Clay, Henry Clay, and George D. Prentice, to name only the more prominent figures, precluded any real unanimity, but, on the other hand, produced the fullest possible review of the question, ranging from abolitionism to passive complaint. The public was given a full catalog--from humanitarian and moral to social and economic--of the evils of slavery. The response to each indictment of involuntary servitude and proposal for its alleviation must be chronicled before an attempt can be made to determine why the State rejected emancipation.

The first phase commenced in 1830 and terminated in 1838. R. J. Breckinridge, stepping into the political arena, took up the Wickliffe passive anti-slavery declaration, insisting that the institution was subject to direct intervention, that the problem could be solved by political action. Hence he concentrated on the constitutional aspects of the question, concluding that the fundamental laws of the State permitted altering the relationship between slave and master, provided property interests were not violated. To begin the work Breckinridge and Judge John Green pressed for a halt to the further introduction of slaves into Kentucky. The proposal was not radical enough to alienate the public, and in 1833 the adoption of non-importation was a signal victory for the emancipationists' cause, according to which it was an indispensable preliminary to securing the final goal. Efforts were now turned to securing a local following, for which purpose an emancipation society was organized, whose example would serve to inspire others to take up the work of emancipation. Not yet countenanced was a political organization which would press for a legislative solution; the object of the early reformers was to prepare public opinion.

One of the most outstanding results of the first phase of the movement was the impetus given colonization activity. The Kentucky auxiliaries grew in number and membership, and several expeditions were sent to Liberia carrying Kentucky freedmen. At this point James G. Birney entered upon the scene as one of the most eminent representatives of the American Colonization Society in the West. A heightened moral sensitivity, however, led him to see, first, that colonization was not materially aiding the cause of emancipation, and secondly, that it was instead doing real harm by draining off antislavery sentiment into a barren channel. To redirect this statement, Birney believed it essential that

the Churches replace the A.C.S. as the moving agent in the cause against slavery. The Presbyterian Synod's resolutions on slavery in 1834 was the second unqualified victory of the antislavery movement in Kentucky.

Once abandoning colonization, however--which he did openly in August, 1834 --Birney at once alienated himself from the community. The enlightened resolutions of the Synod occurred after the "Letter on Colonization" had been published, but the Synod would not abandon colonization, and shortly afterward Birney began to see that it was he who had been abandoned by the ministers. He did not stop to regain their allegiance, but plunged ahead to follow out every logical conclusion implicit in his moral antislavery stand, finally arriving at the utter extreme of urging the sinfulness of slave-holding.

At this point the Northern antislavery movement opened full upon the South, and in Kentucky Birney, now directly allied with the Tappan-Weld wing of abolitionism, was its official emissary. The public, alerted to abolitionism by the establishment in the State of a branch of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and, alarmed by the rash of actual and rumored slave revolts sweeping the Mississippi River South, expelled the one prominent exponent of abolition in the State. The suppression of the "Philanthropist" marks the first great failure of the antislavery cause. The rejection of a constitutional convention in 1838 was only the aftermath of a reaction which had set in two years before.

The period of intermission between 1838 and Cassius Clay's rise to prominence after 1841 witnessed the churches settling into silence. The great schisms of the Baptists and the Methodists were patent evidence of the disruptive potency of antislavery agitation. The only safe field for the clergy to labor in was the amelioration of the lot of the slaves, the weakest form of



antislavery. Masters were exhorted to be humane; colonization was promoted to rescue the freedman from his plight. Education of slaves was advocated, but it is most significant to observe that this education was limited to religious instruction. There is no direct evidence of fear that full education would make for dissatisfaction among the slaves, but this is a possibility that merits consideration.

The panic of 1837 did not seriously affect Kentucky until after 1841. It was then that Cassius Clay began to address himself publicly to the economic problems of a slave economy, maintaining that Kentucky, in contrast to flourishing Ohio, was retarded, because of the stagnating influence of static slave property. His platform of a diversified economy coincided in many particulars with the program of the Whig party, of which he was a member. But the Whig platform had no room for the slavery controversy, which was and remained political anathema in the State. Clay was obliged to break from the party, hoping to divert as much Whig allegiance to his new 'antislavery-Whig' program as possible, thus creating a third party in Kentucky. Success would have amounted to a moment of revolution in the history of American antislavery, for a new party, committed to the very definite program Clay was formulating, would have institutionalized the largely unchanneled fund of antislavery sentiment.<sup>1</sup> The projected schism was a failure, but Clay found enough encouragement in the readiness to listen of the 'masses' of laborers and the non-slaveholding population in general. These elements, not rigidly bound by party

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<sup>1</sup>Without recourse to regular channels, to some sort of institution devoted to the purpose, the same tendency toward abstraction dominant in the North was observable in Kentucky. Stanley M. Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 171, 173.

attachments, could be moved into the antislavery camp by an appeal to their immediate interest.

The exact dimensions of the response to Cassius Clay's new Whigism would be difficult to calculate, but the subscription list of his True American was impressive enough to indicate that a decent beginning had been made. Whatever success Clay's economic antislavery movement may have promised, however, was dispelled by the "soft skin woman" article of August 12, 1845. Under the press of circumstances in the fall and winter of that year, Clay came out with all of his ideas on slavery, moving to a position as openly extreme as that of Birney nine years earlier. Where Birney had turned against the scheme of removal for moral reasons, Clay resorted to arguments of economic expediency to show that the freed slaves should not be removed. But he also addressed himself to 'loftier' interests, endeavoring to convince his waning audience that colonization was not only impracticable, but also unfair to the Negroes, and that Southern society could adjust to the presence of a free black race. It does not matter how morally sincere he was in this; what is important is that Clay carried his ideas to their full logical extension, the most impolitic thing he could have done--impolitic, perhaps, but as much courageous as miscalculated or misguided. Nevertheless, for all his courage, Clay had rendered himself objectionable to the public, and thus ineffectual. He was run out of the State, and though he continued his appeals and personal self-defense from across the River, he had temporarily disqualified himself, a fact demonstrated by the many anti-True American conventions throughout the State. The third strophe of the Kentucky antislavery movement terminated as Clay went off to war.

The fourth phase opened more hopefully--or, more correctly, it did not 'open,' but was continued under new auspices, this time being more diffuse and not bound up so tightly with a single personality, to whose whims and aberrative behavior it would be disadvantageously subject. The anti-Clay meetings had not, by any means, been intended to stifle the antislavery cause. One resolution after another affirmed opposition to slavery. It was upon this continuing opposition that Vaughan, Collins, Breckinridge and others built to press the issue to a full test. As the cause gained momentum, the press opened its columns to full discussion. Henry Clay's Pindell Letter, announcing the adherence of the great and popular statesman to the movement for emancipation, was a major contribution, especially as the Senator's moderation and sense of practicality was most calculated to appeal to the public. Clay advocated no revolution; what he felt to be the true interest of the State would be served without violating property rights or offending the prejudices of the community. This time there was no Birney to urge the moral necessity of abolition and no Cassius Clay to indulge in any rampant extremism; the anti-slavery argument rested on the general welfare of the State, interpreted in economic, and, secondarily, in social terms. What few notes of moralism that did occur were lost in the background.

Under the guidance of Cassius Clay and Robert J. Breckinridge the anti-slavery movement was finally organized on a regular basis. The meeting of delegates from all parts of the State in an emancipation convention April 25, 1849 made possible the widest sounding of antislavery sentiment. With the movement thus democratized it is possible to determine the ultimate basis of opposition to slavery in Kentucky, for the measure adopted by the convention

were deliberately intended to embody those points on which all could agree. Non-importation, the resolve that slavery not be made perpetual, and the removal of all slaves that might be emancipated were then, as before, the most representative features of the Kentucky antislavery program. They had been obscured at times by antislavery figures who advanced beyond the consensus of opinion, notably Birney and Cassius Clay; but in 1849 they finally emerged unchallenged.

There is really very little mystery involved in the Kentucky antislavery movement. In the last analysis two broad facts persist as dominant. First, slavery was to all purposes considered in Kentucky to be an evil. There seems to be no need to make this point cautiously.<sup>2</sup> Over and over it was asserted by Kentuckians of all views on the subject of emancipation,<sup>3</sup> and the assertion was not challenged. Secondly, no matter how much desired, emancipation was not possible without effecting a major revolution in public sentiment or in the attitude of the political bodies. This Breckinridge saw with great clarity when he said,

I know that abolition without the consent of the states holding the slaves is impossible; that to obtain this consent on any terms is very difficult; that to obtain it without the prospect of extensive removal by colonization, is impossible; that to obtain it instantly on any terms is the dream of ignorance; that to expect it, instantly with subsequent

<sup>2</sup>Birney, Letters, "Introduction."

<sup>3</sup>For pieces of evidence, see: Thompson and Breckinridge, Discussion, 17; Connelley and Coulter, Kentucky, 2:797, 810; William Birney to Birney, April 29, 1843, Birney, Letters, 738; Ibid., 100; Frankfort Commonwealth, January 12, 1841; Liberator, December 22, 1832, 2:203; Maysville Eagle, May 3, 1849; James G. Birney and F.H. Elmore, Correspondence Between the Hon. F.H. Elmore, One of the Southern Delegates in Congress, and James G. Birney, One of the Secretaries of the American Anti-Slavery Society (New York: S.W. Benedict & Co., 1838), 36-7; Samuel Steel to Joshua L. Wilson, Hillsboro, August 14, 1838, Joshua L. Wilson Papers, p. 843, Durrett Collection Mss.

equality is frantic nonsense; and that to demand it, as an instant right, irrespective of consequences, and to be followed by amalgamation, at the option of the parties, is reckless wickedness!<sup>4</sup>

When in 1851 he confessed the failure of colonization, he automatically wrote off the lesser of the only two alternatives; when he continued to hope for emancipation even after the profound setback of 1849, only the other, far more demanding alternative remained: the public would have to be prepared for the shock of a social revolution. But by that time it was too late. The best summary of the situation in 1849 is found in the carefully weighed statement of Richard Collins, editor of the Maysville Eagle.

So far as we are informed there is not a citizen of Kentucky, who, if this were a State in which slavery had never existed, would desire its establishment here. Nay, further, we believe there are none, who would not even now, if some just, humane, constitutional and entirely unexceptionable plan for gradual emancipation accompanied with deportation was presented, unite in supporting it as calculated to relieve the State from an institution which, if it is not a great evil, all admit will be the source of serious trouble to the people of the Commonwealth hereafter.<sup>5</sup>

No such unexceptionable plan was possible. Once more the basic alternatives were either removal or social revolution.<sup>6</sup> The latter entailing all of the repugnant prospects of coping with a shiftless mass of Negroes rooted out of their carefully supervised place in plantation society.<sup>7</sup> When excitement over

<sup>4</sup>New York Evangelist; quoted Liberator, November 1, 1834, 4:173.

<sup>5</sup>Maysville Eagle, February 22, 1849

<sup>6</sup>This, of course, was the message preached by Dew in Virginia. Jenkins, Pro-Slavery, 87-8.

<sup>7</sup>"Slavery as a matter of social control was...always the vital consideration," according to J. G. Randall, The Civil War and Reconstruction (Boston: D. C. Heath & Company, [c. 1937]), 73. The consequences of emancipation, it should be remembered, were magnified in the minds of concerned Kentuckians because of the threat posed by abolition to the whole Union, not merely to Southern society. This was the sense of Charles T. Morehead's address before the Kentucky Colonization Society in 1834. Liberator, March 29, 1834, 4:49.

antislavery agitation was highest, the threatened social revolution meant amalgamation. Applicable here is Phillips' contention that the underlying motive in Southern history with regard to the slavery question was the determination to preserve white supremacy.<sup>8</sup> But though this motive was current in ante-bellum Kentucky, it must be remembered that, because that State had a relatively small Negro population for a Southern State, the effects would be different.<sup>9</sup> Hence it was that antislavery activity was able to persist as strongly and openly as it did. Race fears, though always present, were not so dominant as to crush all discussion of the subject and enforce a rigid pro-slavery view. As a result, full review of the evils of slavery made possible progress toward the new view of the prospects of emancipation. In time men might be led away from placing trust in removal schemes that were bound to crush all hope should they be forced to a test.

Just how responsible Northern abolitionism was for the failure of the Southern antislavery movement cannot be said very definitely. Dumond, thinking too exclusively in terms of Birney, says that "the latent opposition to slavery in the slave states at length was smothered under the execrations of an outraged public sentiment. Men who had been disposed to talk about its evils, and to speculate upon possible remedies, in the end were silenced or forced to seek refuge at the North."<sup>10</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp has argued more convincingly that

<sup>8</sup>The South, Phillips says, is above all a people resolved that their country "...shall be and remain a White Man's country." Ulrich B. Phillips, The Course of the South to Secession; an Interpretation (edited by E.M. Coulter, Gloucester: Standard Printing Co., 1918), 152. For terse commentary on Phillips' theses see Kenneth M. Stampp, "The Fate of the Southern Antislavery Movement," Journal of Negro History (1949) 15:311-24, p.11.

<sup>9</sup>Randall (Civil War and Reconstruction, 61) provides helpful statistics on slaveholding.

<sup>10</sup>Birney, Letters, vi.

...it is doubtful whether the Abolitionists caused many Southern opponents of slavery to reconsider their position. Nor can justification be found for the contention that the antislavery elements in the South were entirely hostile to the Northern antislavery movement.<sup>11</sup>

Abolitionism did cause Kentuckians to walk with greater circumspection--certainly a favorable effect--but it did not put antislaveryites out of commission. The reaction to Birney, because it occurred at the time of the insurrections, was nearly complete; but abolition interference did not prevent the rapid growth of antislavery activity after 1841. It was only one of several coinciding factors which brought to an end the movement for emancipation: the power of the interested minority, fear of insurrection, the problem of the free Negro population, Northern extremism, the threat of the slavery question to political careers.

Race fear, whether inspired by the prospect of servile insurrection, or by the possibility of ultimate black supremacy, or by disagreeable forecasts of a host of Negroes running loose on the country,<sup>12</sup> underlay the one great constant of the whole movement; adherence to colonization. No emancipation scheme can be considered representative of Kentucky antislavery thought that did not embody provision for removal. The irony of the situation was that Birney and Clay were right in seeing colonization as the greatest obstacle to effecting the revolution they so ardently desired. Colonization was a sheer

<sup>11</sup>"...Conclusive evidence that the Garrisonians drove the Southern emancipationists to espouse the cause of proslaveryism is singularly lacking." Stamp, "Antislavery Movement," 11, 22.

<sup>12</sup>The attempt at emancipation in Virginia, begun in 1831, was aborted by these same factors; Kentucky's attempt in 1849 offers a uniquely close parallel to the Virginia experience. Joseph C. Robert, The Road from Monticello: A Study of the Virginia Slave Debate of 1832 (Historical Papers of the Trinity College Historical Society, series XXIV, Durham: Duke University Press, 1941), 110-12.

panacea, a dead end.<sup>13</sup> Even if it had been feasible, as Fox is inclined to argue, the prospects of actual achievement were extremely remote.<sup>14</sup> No genuine antislavery enthusiasm could be kept up when the State seemed disinclined to proffer more than token support of that enterprise, and the Federal Government would scarcely even consider such a proposal as the underwriting of the deportation of the blacks. That colonization as the solution to the problem of slavery was but wishful thinking seems to have been the sense of the constitutional convention of 1849,<sup>15</sup> and the same may have been felt at least dimly by the supporters of emancipation.<sup>16</sup> In view of this critical point of weakness in emancipation schemes it may with reason be maintained that the only way out of the dilemma was that advocated by Birney and Cassius Clay, the one playing on the sin of slaveholding, the other projecting a remarkable vision of Kentucky society in which the freed Negro, by his own efforts alone, would have a place. These ideas proved too extreme, however, and the reaction

<sup>13</sup>Phillips' judgment that "practically colonization seems to have appealed only to the squeamish among the whites..." manifestly does not apply to Kentucky. U. B. Phillips, Course of the South, 94.

<sup>14</sup>"The amount of money necessary was many times larger than could ever have been raised, even had all slave-owners been willing to free their slaves without compensation--which was, of course, never the case." The whole movement in nineteen years removed only 9½ days worth of natural increase! Carl R. Fish, The Rise of the Common Man, 1830-1850 (A History of American Life, Vol. VI, New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), 164. In the period 1829-1859, only 658 Negroes were established in Liberia. Eaton, ed., "Minutes and Resolutions," 541.

<sup>15</sup>Gregory, "Question of Slavery," 109n.

<sup>16</sup>As Breckinridge put it, in February 1851, "That there is any serious probability...that the number of slaves in this country will ever be considerably reduced, by means of foreign colonization, or upon such motives alone as arise from that quarter, is not, I presume, believed by many well informed persons. I have never entertained the opinion that slavery, as an institution, could be shaken by any considerations except those great and absorbing ones which control the human conscience, or dictate with the power of irresistible necessity to the human will." R. J. Breckinridge, Black Race, 11. Kentucky contributions to the A.C.S. continued to pour in, \$3,957 in 1853 and \$2,916 in 1854. A.C.S., 37 Annual Report, 5; 38 Annual Report, 6.



they provoked destroyed their effectiveness. But it is regrettable that they were abandoned entirely, for they offered the only means of undoing the Gordian knot. It is true, as Clement Eaton says, that the moral antislavery of the idealists "...blunted the militant edge of the crusade against the great evil,"<sup>17</sup> but that same idealism was essential if Kentuckians were to rise toward that degree of sacrifice required by an otherwise insuperable problem. The extremists were easily driven off, but no moderate idealists succeeded in taking their place.

There is evidence that a number of moderate idealists remained in Kentucky; but they were not able to impress their ideas upon religious societies having, as Stanley M. Elkins points out, a generally non-institutional character.<sup>18</sup> Hence, in the resolutions they periodically issued, the regional synods and conferences as a rule struggled to evade direct confrontation of the real issues, failing in the long run to register and uphold the real sense of the ministerial community. Kentucky ministers continued their antislavery effort after the setback of 1835, but they were on their own. They participated in the convention of the "Friends of Emancipation" in 1849, but they did not bring the same action in their own denominational assemblies. The success of moderate idealism required a regular institutional outlet; but this was seriously wanting.

<sup>17</sup>Eaton, Freedom, 195

<sup>18</sup>The vitality of the denominations, Elkins recognizes very rightly, is not called into question; on the contrary, "...religion was so dynamic that it needed no church..." "...But that vitality lay primarily in demands for individual satisfaction which took inevitable and repeated priority over institutional needs." Elkins, Slavery, 32, 28.

In contrast with the proslavery Gospel sweeping the rest of the South, Kentucky produced almost nothing in the way of a 'positive good' doctrine.<sup>19</sup> At least in part this was attributable to the work of those who criticized the institution of slavery. The Negro was presented as in theory fully human; those who noted his debasement almost always explained it in terms of circumstantial causes. If the black race was inferior, that was of historical origin, and the Negro was yet capable of being the bearer of civilization to Africa where the race would rise to new heights, bearing into those benighted regions the light of Christianity and progress. Kentuckians read with pleasure frequent reports of the successes of the Liberians in education, religion and general prosperity. But without the full ministrations of that moderate idealism which outspoken as well as timid antislaveryites failed to supply, the concept of the full humanity of the Negro remained but half-defined. When it came to educating the slaves, the ministers thought only of imparting such knowledge as was "spiritual, divine and eternal."<sup>20</sup> The promising idea of the nature of the black race that the opponents of slavery developed was not potent enough to produce an unqualified belief in Negro perfectibility. Even Cassius Clay, who far outstripped his colleagues on this point, might wonder if the Negro would ever get beyond his bananas and sun.

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<sup>19</sup>It is significant that the Bible Defence of Slavery of Rev. Josiah Priest appeared three years after the Convention of 1849. Jenkins, Pro-Slavery, 325.

<sup>20</sup>Alexander Campbell in the Milennial Harbinger; quoted Maysville Eagle, May 24, 1849.

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The main body of source material upon which this paper is based consists of the correspondence of James G. Birney, the writings of Cassius Clay, Garrison's Liberator, the publications of the American Colonization Society, the Harper Library (University of Chicago) collection of Kentucky newspapers, and various related pamphlets. Dumond's editing of the Birney letters, though not infallible, is excellent; he provides most useful biographical sketches of lesser figures. Other biographical data has been taken from William Allen, History of Kentucky, the Dictionary of American Biography, and Connelley and Coulter, History of Kentucky. The Clay writings, edited by Horace Greeley and the author himself, are deliberately calculated to produce a favorable public image of their subject. Less agreeable facts about Clay are to be found in evidence not included in these collections and by reading between the lines. The Liberator is something of an encyclopedia of abolitionism, valuable for the purposes of this study because of Garrison's special, though definitely not uncritical, interest in the work of Cassius Clay. I have found Garrison's transcriptions of articles from Kentucky papers to be generally trustworthy--except where he splices material for editorial effect; in such cases the distortion is obvious. It should also be remarked that the Boston 'liberator' frequently cites in full points of view contrary to his own--sometimes without even appending any comment. Colonization activity in Kentucky is reported periodically in the African Repository, official publication of the American Colonization Society, giving names of contributors and recording the number of slaves freed and sent to Liberia. The newspapers listed above followed the

slavery question reluctantly but dutifully. Other editors either avoided the subject altogether, or attacked the critics of slavery without doing justice to their views. The Durrett manuscript collections were found to have a disappointingly small amount of pertinent material, although the Wilson correspondence with several of his fellow clergymen in Kentucky, who were dissatisfied with the attitude of the churches toward slavery, proved revealing. For a very comprehensive bibliography of sources in Kentucky, see the invaluable work of John W. Coleman, Jr., A Bibliography of Kentucky History (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1949).

Of the several histories of Kentucky, none matches the fine work of E. Merton Coulter in conjunction with William E. Connelley (Coulter has done the major share of the work). But for the truly indispensable element of color, John W. Coleman's Slavery Times is a necessary supplement. The Kentucky antislavery movement has been studied closely by Asa E. Martin, but his analysis cannot be considered final, as, for example, Dumond shows by his judgment on the deleterious aspects of colonization. The Antislavery Origins of the latter, the first part of which plays on the significance of the "Danville (Kentucky) Lane Seminary (Ohio) Axis," in turn suffers from post-1865 abolitionism. Betty Fladeland works on aspects of the same subject with respectable skill, drawing an imposing person of Birney which helps one account for the respect paid him by his neighbors and associates. The Martin treatment of Birney is not comparable. Smiley has contributed to this unconscious revision of Martin by challenging the heroic nineteenth century portrait of Cassius Clay which Martin only too happily took in. Smiley's interpretation, however, depends too heavily upon economic factors in fathoming the "Lion of Whitehall."

APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by J. Strassmaier has been read and approved by three members of the Department of History.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

1/26/63  
Date

Herbert M. Johnson  
Signature of Adviser