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Christopher Densmore

Friends Historical Library, cdensmo1@swarthmore.edu

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Forty-Seven Years Before The Woman's Bible: Elizabeth Cady Stanton And The Congregational Friends

Christopher Densmore

University Archives, State University of New York at Buffalo, and later Curator of the Friends Historical Library

Woman's Bible Centennial Conference, Seneca Falls, NY, November 4, 1885

In April 1856, Elizabeth Stanton wrote to her friend Martha Coffin Wright about a rumor that Stanton was an Episcopalian. "I have heard that infamous report," she wrote, "and feel about it very much as I had been accused of petty larceny." She was, she asserted "a member of Junius meeting."¹ By this statement, she declared her affiliation with the Friends of Human Progress, the group that met in the old Junius Quaker meeting house about four miles northwest of Waterloo, New York.²

The Friends of Human Progress, initially named the Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, and sometimes called Progressive Friends, had originated in a split in Genesee Yearly Meeting in June 1848. These radical Quakers were also actively involved in the organization of the first Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls in July 1848. In one of several accounts by Stanton, she identifies the "moving spirits" of the convention as Lucretia Mott, Martha Wright (Lucretia's sister), Mary Ann M'Clintock, Jane Hunt, James Mott, Thomas M'Clintock, Richard Hunt, two of the M'Clintock daughters, and

¹ ECS to Martha Coffin Wright, April 1856. Stanton Papers, Library of Congress. Unfortunately, the records of the Congregational or Progressive branch of Junius Monthly Meeting have not been located. It was the original intention of the Congregational Friends to maintain weekly meetings for worship, though it is unclear how long such meetings were kept up. There was such a meeting at Junius in the early 1850s and perhaps longer. If such a records exists, it might contain verification of Stanton's formal membership in the local meeting. Stanton did attend the yearly meetings of the Congregational Friends/Friends of Human Progress and served on yearly meeting committees.

² The Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, called the Friends of Human Progress after 1854, published proceedings of their annual meetings from 1849 to 1861, which document Stanton's participation in the annual meetings as a speaker or committee member in 1850–1852, 1855, 1857–58. Initially, the Congregational Friends held weekly meetings in the Junius Meeting House, though I have been unable to determine how long these meetings were kept up. It appears that Junius retained the minute book of the men's meeting of Junius Monthly Meeting, and therefore likely that this book would have been used to record minutes of the local meeting, however, I have been unable to locate the missing minutes. If located, this minute book might verify whether Stanton ever joined the Junius Meeting in addition to participating in the annual meeting. That the Congregational branch of Junius Meeting did have formal membership is confirmed by a controversy involving Oliver Johnson's status as a Friend on the basis of his joining Junius Monthly Meeting of Congregational Friends which is documented in the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, August 7, 1852.

Stanton herself.³ Of these ten individuals, six, the M'Clintocks and Hunts, were active Congregational or Progressive Friends; and two, the Motts, were sympathetic to the Congregational Friends.⁴ Thomas M'Clintock, a recorded Friends minister and the former clerk of Genesee Yearly Meeting, was considered the leading figure of the new organization and was credited by Lucretia Mott with being the author of its "Basis of Religious Association."⁵

Stanton worked closely with the Congregational Friends for a decade. Stanton's earliest lecture on woman's rights may have been delivered in the Junius meeting house.⁶ Stanton lectured on woman's rights at the Farmington, New York, Quaker meeting house in October 6, 1848, the day that the Quaker radicals met there to organize a new yearly meeting.⁷ I think it highly likely that Stanton participated with her colleagues, the M'Clintocks, in the formation of the Congregational Friends.

I need to take a moment to clarify the name of the meeting. When the Quaker meeting was established in 1806, the location of the meeting house was in Junius township. The meeting continued to be called Junius, although a later change in township boundaries meant that the meeting house was actually in Waterloo township. In contemporary usage, Junius and Waterloo are used interchangeably to refer to both the meeting house and the meetings held there.

In the summer of 1848, Stanton and Elizabeth M'Clintock, the daughter of Thomas and Mary Ann, Sr., co-authored defenses of woman's rights which appeared in the Seneca Falls Courier.⁸ It was in these articles that they wrote that "... the Bible is the great Charter of human rights, when it is taken in its true spiritual meaning..." but also that "No reform has ever been started but the Bible, falsely interpreted, has opposed it."⁹ To show scriptural support for woman's rights, Stanton and M'Clintock quote the Biblical

³ *Woman's Journal* 27 (Nov. 21, 1896), 373. I have used the "M'Clintock" spelling of the family name, which is the form used in all of Thomas M'Clintock's published writings and in the published proceedings of the Friends of Human Progress. Stanton, and later members of the M'Clintock family use the more modern "McClintock" spelling of the family name.

⁴ Martha Coffin Wright had been disowned from the Society of Friends a number of years earlier. Though she was part of the reform network in central New York, I have not found her name among those who participated in the annual meetings of the Friends of Human Progress.

⁵ Anna Davis Hallowell, ed. *James and Lucretia Mott: Life and Letters* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1884), 308.

⁶ A note on a manuscript address by Stanton in the Stanton-Anthony Papers describes it as "The first address made by Elizabeth Cady Stanton after the Seneca Falls, N.Y. first convention.... It was given at the Junius Friends Meeting—The Waterloo Meeting—soon after the Convention...." However, the note goes on to state that the manuscript does not appear to be that address, but another given at Seneca Falls.

⁷ *Diary of Benjamin F. Gue in Rural New York and Pioneer Iowa, 1847–1856*. Edited by Earle D. Ross. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1962), p. 40.

⁸ For Stanton's recollections of her collaboration with Elizabeth M'Clintock (later Elizabeth McClintock Phillips), see *Eighty Years and More* (NY: Schocken, 1975), 152–53; the *Revolution* 2 (Sept. 17, 1868), 161–62; and her obituary Elizabeth McClintock Phillips in the *Woman's Journal* 27 (Nov. 21, 1896), 373.

⁹ Stanton and M'Clintock in the Seneca Falls Semi-Weekly Courier, [1848?], in *The Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony* [microfilm], Reel 6:779–881.

passage that states "neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond or free, but all are one in Christ Jesus" (Ga. 3:28; Col. 3:11) and Biblical examples of women who preached, prophesied, or acted with authority, from Miriam and Judith to the four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9).

As my primary research interest is in Quaker history, I was intrigued by the possible implications of the M'Clintock side of this collaboration. Thomas M'Clintock, Elizabeth's father, was well versed in theology and had written articles and pamphlets on sabbatarianism and Biblical authority, and was an editor of the eight volume *Works* (1831) of George Fox. The M'Clintocks would have been familiar with the traditional Quaker defenses of "women's preaching."¹⁰ As the Vermont Quaker, Refine Weekes, had versified thirty years earlier:

In Jesus Christ, are male and female one,
When she is sent, pray let woman run:
When rightly call'd and qualified to preach:
Let her the gospel of glad tidings preach:
'Tis not for man the Spirit to control,
Nor stop the heav'nly bodies when they roll.¹¹

The traditional Quaker defense of women's preaching was focused on women's role in the church, and did not necessarily infer a similar role in secular society. However, contemporary observers did note Quaker women's independence within the family and community. Lydia M. Child, who lived with the Quaker Hoppers and Carpenters in the 1830s, observed that Quaker women

"were superior to women in general in habits of reflection and independent modes of thinking.... This staid and self-relying character in Quaker women I attribute to the fact that they share equally with men in the management of all business of the society. Frivolous pursuits make frivolous characters."¹²

The Biblical justification for women speaking had been invoked in the 1830s during the debate over the role of women in the abolitionist movement, and the arguments from that debate had been refreshed at the Woman's Rights Convention in Rochester in August 1848.¹³ Where the connection between women's spiritual and churchly authority and her secular position may have been inherent in Quaker doctrine, it was the

¹⁰ See the classic statement of Robert Barclay's *Apology*, first published in 1675, Proposition 10, Section 27.

¹¹ Refine Weekes, *Poems, on Religious and Historical Subjects*. (New York: Mahlon Day, 1823), p.67.

¹² *Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817–1880*. Edited by Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), p. 470.

¹³ Stanton et. al. *History of Woman Suffrage*. (1881, reprint ed. New York: Arno, 1969), Vol. 1, pp. 80–82.

experience of women in the abolitionist movement that explicitly applied the religious doctrine to secular society.¹⁴

By Stanton's account in her autobiography, she and Elizabeth "were compelled to study canon and civil law, constitutions, Bibles, science, philosophy, and history, sacred and profane" to prepare their articles for the press.¹⁵ However, this original research was probably made easier by the ready accessibility of Quaker and abolitionist literature in the M'Clintock household.

But Stanton and M'Clintock's appeal was not solely to scriptural authority. Though they cited texts, their reliance on the Bible was qualified by an emphasis on its "true spiritual meaning" and the dangers of "false interpretation." Here I think it is worth exploring the attitude toward the Bible of Thomas M'Clintock and the more radical Quakers. In 1837, Thomas had published a pamphlet as part of a controversy among Quakers about the relative authority of Scripture and the immediate revelation of the spirit. Thomas wrote that Quakers "have ever believed, the testimony of the spirit in the heart is to be the rule... and the testimony of the scriptures, and all external testimony whatever, they believe to be but collateral and confirmatory" and that "inward and immediate revelation is the only means of certainty in religion..."¹⁶ In support of his argument, M'Clintock quoted the seventeenth century Quaker theologian, Robert Barclay, who stated that "the Spirit, not the scriptures, is the rule."¹⁷

In Barclay, and for later generations of Quakers, the scriptures were authoritative. It was simply that they could not be understood without the guidance of the spirit. In this viewpoint, direct revelation could not contradict scripture. When the Congregational Friends separated from Genesee Yearly Meeting, they took the older critique of the scriptures a step or two further. The scriptures were not only subordinate to the spirit, but the scriptures were at best an imperfect historical record.

"God is the Primal Cause, the Fountain of Truth; the Bible and all other human records, whatever their excellence, [are] but the secondary effect. To give any of these precedence over the law written immediately in your own minds, is to be infidel to God..."¹⁸

The Congregational Friends supported woman's rights as part of the great sisterhood of reforms which also encompassed abolition, temperance and peace. Woman was to

¹⁴ Many Quakers of the 1840s were anti-political, and reluctant to involve themselves in worldly affairs, even in causes such as temperance and abolition. Nancy Hewitt in "The Fragmentation of Friends" in *Witnesses for Change: Quaker Women Over Three Centuries*, edited by Elisabeth Potts Brown and Susan Mosher Stuard. Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 1989, 93–119, investigates the implication of the secularization of Quaker concerns in the ante-bellum reform movements.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More* (1898, reprint ed. NY: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 152.

¹⁶ Thomas M'Clintock, *Observations on the Articles Published in the Episcopal Recorder* (NY: Isaac T. Hopper, 1837), pp. 35–36, 62.

¹⁷ Barclay, Prop. 3, Sec. 2.

¹⁸ Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, *Proceedings* (Auburn: Oliphant's Press, 1849), pp. 23–24.

be restored her "inalienable rights." However, the justification of these rights no longer required scriptural authority:

"The identity of human nature, is the impregnable basis of the equality of human rights. If human nature be the same, then interest, capabilities, responsibilities, rights are the common inheritance of all, from the common Parent."¹⁹

This quotation and many similar sentiments repeated at Junius, contains two key elements. First, an optimistic and progressive view of human nature. Secondly, God is no longer the source of immediate revelation, but a "Parent" who is largely removed from direct involvement in human affairs.

Stanton's involvement with the annual meetings of the Congregational Friends was focused entirely on woman's issues. In 1850, she helped prepare—and was probably the principal author—of "An Address to the Women of New York State." In 1857, she prepared a "Paper on Marriage" which included comments on the religious bondage of women and the shortcoming of "Christian nations" and in 1858 offered a resolution on marriage, which was adopted. The 1858 resolution says, in part, that "it is a sin against God, for any woman to consent to be the wife of an habitual drunkard." Despite occasional references to the deity, all of Stanton's arguments and resolutions at the annual meetings of the Friends of Human Progress are essentially based on natural rights, rather than on appeals to divine justice. There is certainly no appeal to clerical or scriptural authority as was the case in the articles written by Stanton and Elizabeth M'Clintock in 1848.²⁰

I sense a division within the Congregational Friends between those, like Stanton, who had an essentially secular and natural rights vision of reform, and those like Thomas M'Clintock who retained a theocentric, if radical, basis for judging human activity. In 1856, Lucretia Mott, who had been a strong supporter of the Congregational Friends since their inception, delivered some "remarks" at the yearly meeting. She decried "priestcraft and superstition." "Skepticism, she said, "will be a religious duty, and well will it be for human progress if there shall be a faithful utterance of this unbelief." But where Stanton saw religion as an impediment to achieving natural and inalienable human rights, Mott saw "priestcraft" as standing in the way of "walking in the light" and reaching the "kingdom of God."²¹

Thomas M'Clintock, in a letter prepared for the annual meeting in 1857, was even more explicitly theological. Like Stanton, he has an optimistic view of human abilities. In 1837, Thomas stressed the "inward revelation" but in 1857, he stressed the reliance of the mind "on its own powers," specifically reason, rather than an "External Standard, in the form of ancient writings" claimed as the "word of God." Reason becomes the

¹⁹ Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, *Proceedings* (Auburn: Oliphant's Press, 1849), pp.20–21.

²⁰ Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, *Proceedings* (Auburn: Henry Oliphant, 1850), pp. 4, 13–18; Friends of Human Progress, *Proceedings* (Rochester: Curtis, Butts & Col, 1857), pp. 21–24; Friends of Human Progress, *Proceedings* (Auburn: P.J. Becker, 1858), pp. 6, 11.

²¹ Friends of Human Progress, *Proceedings* (Syracuse: J.G.K. Truair, 1856), pp. 17–19.

mechanism by which humans can follow the will of God, and God holds humanity "accountable for its use." "To renounce thy reason... is to be infidel to God and thyself." The clerical doctrine that immediate revelation had ceased was "infidel" as it denied "God's present and continuous action in the world of the mind."²² This was hardly traditional Quakerism, which held that mere human reason, however useful, was no more able to advance man to salvation than the mere text of the scriptures.²³

In the 1850s, Stanton used the annual meetings at Junius to develop her ideas on woman's rights, and later on education, marriage and divorce. In June 1850, she was the first named member of the committee appointed at the Junius meeting to prepare "An Address to the Women of the State of New York."²⁴ That October, at the first national woman's rights convention at Worcester, Massachusetts, two of the three New Yorkers on the Central Committee, Pliny Sexton of Palmyra and Joseph C. Hathaway of Farmington, were active participants with Stanton in the Junius meetings. All of the other New York participants at the meeting, including Stanton, Lucy N. Colman, Frederick Douglass, Gerrit Smith and Sarah H. Hallock, were associated with the Congregational Friends.²⁵ The controversial position taken by Stanton on divorce at the Woman's Rights Convention in 1860, had been worked out by her in papers and in discussion at Junius in 1857 and 1858.²⁶

The Friends of Human Progress continued to meet at the Junius meeting house until the 1880s. However, I do not find Stanton's name mentioned in the accounts of the meetings after 1858. This may in part be because of the lack of documentation-- the proceedings of the annual meeting were evidently not published after 1861, and I have had to rely on incomplete newspaper accounts.²⁷ Still, Stanton is not mentioned in those accounts. Her attentions were elsewhere.

In 1895, the *Free Thought Magazine*, carried both approving articles on the *Woman's Bible* and a nostalgic recollection of the annual meetings of the Friends of Human Progress. These meetings were characterized by editor H.L. Green, who had began attending them in 1856, as "the first Freethought gatherings that assembled in this

²² *Proceedings*, 1857, 28–29; Thomas M'Clintock would continue to hold similar views. See his response to "The Modern Principles: A Synopsis of Free Religion" in the *Index*, Feb. 4, 1871, 38–39.

²³ Barclay, Prop. 5, section 16.

²⁴ Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, *Proceedings* (Auburn: Henry Oliphant, 1850), pp. 4, 13–18. The "Address" is signed by Thomas M'Clintock and Rhoda DeGarmo in their role as clerks of the meeting, but Stanton, as the first named member of the committee appointed to draft the address is likely the principal author.

²⁵ *Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention, Held at Worcester, October 23d & 24th, 1850* (Boston: Prentiss & Sawyer, 1851). Hathaway, Sexton, Douglass, Hallock and Colman all participated in the annual meetings at Junius during the 1850s and Hathaway had been on the committee with Stanton that issued the 1850 "Appeal." Gerrit Smith sent letters to the annual meetings in 1859 and 1861.

²⁶ For the debate on divorce at the 1860 convention, see Stanton, *History of Woman's Suffrage*, I: 716–37; compare Stanton's position in 1860, with the positions advanced by her at the 1857 and 1858 meetings of the Friends of Human Progress cited above.

²⁷ The *National Anti-Slavery Standard* carried reports of the meetings through 1871.

country."²⁸ Elizabeth Stanton, Lucy N. Colman, Giles Stebbins and other reformers added their recollections. For Stanton, "the Quaker meeting-house at Junius, N.Y., was at one time the great centre and rallying point for all those interested in reforms of the day in both church and state." In her remarks, Stanton identified Henry Bonnell of Junius, as the man who responded to one of her first speeches on woman's rights with the observation, "All I have to say is, if a hen can crow, let her crow."²⁹

I titled this paper "Forty-seven Years before the *Woman's Bible*" and frankly had expected to see some development or at least continuity of Stanton's position on biblical authority documented in the proceedings of the Friends of Human Progress. What I seem to have found instead is that while some of the Congregational Friends, particularly those with strong Quaker backgrounds such as Thomas M'Clintock and Lucretia Mott, continued to focus on the spiritual basis of reform, others, like Stanton, took a natural rights and essentially secular view. The two groups shared an anti-clericalism, and an anti-biblicism that had Quaker roots, but went considerably further than traditional Quakerism. For some participants, the Congregational Friends were part of a trajectory away from orthodox Christianity to free thought and, as at least one participant put it, "infidelity."³⁰ Stanton, in the 1850s, seems to have been little interested in exploring the theological issues that continued to engage Lucretia Mott and Thomas M'Clintock. She shared their anti-clericalism, and their skepticism, but not their theocentric view of accountability to God.

²⁸ "Henry Bonnell and the Waterloo Meeting of the Friends of Human Progress," *Free Thought Magazine* 13 (1895), 39–53; quote is from page 45.

²⁹ *Freethinkers Magazine* 6 (1888), 42. In *Eighty Years and More*, 151, Stanton relates this story, but does not identify by name "the Quaker" and places the incident at the Farmington meeting house rather than Junius.

³⁰ *Freethinker's Magazine and Freethought Directory* 1 (1883), 203–4.