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LYDIA MARIA CHILD:  
AUTHOR, ACTIVIST, ABOLITIONIST

By

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## ABSTRACT

During the nineteenth century, Lydia Maria Child was widely recognized for her contributions to American non-fiction, literature and journalism during a career that spanned six decades. She was an activist, abolitionist, and champion of equal rights for all. Today, Child's accomplishments are known to few but the most ardent scholars of the period, yet her enlightened approaches to issues of race, gender and cultural equality are as vital in our time as they were when she penned them. Much of what Child wrote nearly two centuries ago can be directly applied to the social challenges of the twenty-first century. For this reason, she is the object of study for this thesis, which this author fervently hopes will help to reacquaint the American reading public with messages from another time that must also be heeded in our own.

## INTRODUCTION

“We then write because we cannot help it - the mind is a full fountain that *will* overflow - and if the waters sparkle as they fall, it is from their own impetuous abundance...”

Lydia Maria Child (Karcher, *First* 101)

During much of the nineteenth century, the name Lydia Maria Child was widely known - to men and women, school children and scholars, slaves and statesmen, poets and plowmen, frontiersmen and philosophers, natives and immigrants, in the American North and South and across the sea. She and her readers lived in a rapidly industrializing society, and Child, who believed in the natural rights of all people and the wisdom of the “common man,” was their interpreter (Meltzer *Lydia* xi). Despite the wide recognition and influence she experienced in her own time, however, few today know of her. This is unfortunate, since the social battles she waged throughout much of the nineteenth century, the causes she championed, and the tenet she held most dear, equal rights for all, are as vital in our time as they were when she fought for them.

Today, again, there is a need to study Child’s writings on individual dignity, basic equality, and simple humanity, what she knew intuitively and supported fearlessly. We can benefit from the raw courage, deep understanding of human nature, and strong sense of personal accountability of this extraordinarily far-sighted woman. This thesis will address the social philosophies and literary contributions of Lydia Maria Child, who, unfortunately, if she walked onto our stage today, 125 years after her death, would find it necessary to repeat the messages she worked diligently to share so long ago.

## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

The first chapter of this thesis explores the personal history and development of Lydia Maria Child, including the familial, regional, educational, societal, and experiential factors that narrowed the personal and professional options available to her. The path she chose to follow was unique. All lives are the accumulations of decisions made, but Child's accomplishments were inordinately influenced not only by the social restrictions of her age, which she experienced with many women of her time, but also by the unusually diverse groups of people with whom she came in contact. This diversity was her salvation; despite the fact that her early social contacts were limited, Child's innate curiosity and determination helped her make the most of opportunities that came to her or that she created.

Throughout her adulthood, Child struggled to cultivate a life of the mind, particularly when she was finally forced to admit that her other dreams - of a marriage of mind and body, of having children, of reaching financial security - would not be realized. She championed equal rights for all long before it was fashionable because she had personally experienced, and been deeply disappointed by, a cruel and unyielding double standard. Because she had been stereotyped and denied an education equal to her inquiring mind, she urged people in all walks of life to pursue learning individually, as she had, so they could know the joys of intellectual stimulation she had found and gain the skills they needed to obtain economic stability. She encouraged spiritual exploration because she knew the misery of a frustrated soul. Through her craft, Child worked to secure for others what she herself yearned for. She fought tirelessly for, and shared timeless and universal messages with, those of many age levels, genders, and races.

Lydia Francis began life in an inauspicious way. When she first opened her eyes to the world of Medford, Massachusetts, on the cold, new day of February 11, 1802, few would have guessed she would become one of the most influential women of the nineteenth century. She was born into a man's world, in which the widening chasms that separated rich and poor, master and slave, and employer and worker also characterized a

deepening division between the sexes (Clifford *Crusader* 3). Yet, during her lifetime, she rose above these limitations to become widely respected as a writer, editor, political activist, and fearless abolitionist who *acted* on her beliefs and convictions when many others offered theirs from the safety of the pulpit or fashionable salon. For many decades, she pledged her energies and talents to furthering the civil, intellectual, and political rights of the oppressed. Today, however, this remarkable woman, a member of the literati of her time and a champion of human rights across time, is remembered only for writing a holiday poem, “The New-England Boy’s Song About Thanksgiving Day” or “Over the River, and Through the Wood,” composed in remembrance of her family preparing food to share with those less fortunate (Child, *New*; Osborne *Lydia* 17).

The last of six children to be born to David Convers and Susannah Rand Francis, Lydia passed her early years in a largely comfortless atmosphere. Little is known of her oldest brother James or sister Susannah, of whom she was particularly fond. Convers and Mary, however, were prominent influences during her adolescence (Clifford *Crusader* 8). In 1847, Lydia wrote to a lifelong friend and Medford resident, “Cold, shaded, and uncongenial was my childhood and youth. Whenever reminiscences ...rise up before me, I turn my back on them as quickly as possible” (Meltzer *Lydia* 1). She had few pleasant memories of her youth. Nevertheless, the very experiences that saddened and frustrated her throughout her childhood, particularly as they related to the lack of opportunity for education, were key to forming the character and professional goals of the woman she became.

Child’s ancestors had been among the first settlers of this country, Richard Francis having come to Massachusetts from England in 1636. Her paternal grandfather, a weaver, fought at Concord (Higginson *Contemporaries* 109). Her father, Convers Francis, was a successful baker and businessman whose “anti-slavery convictions were peculiarly zealous” and who had become an abolitionist at the time of the Fugitive Slave Act, which allowed slaves to be seized in free states and denied them the right to trial by jury (Mercer *Lydia*, Higginson *Contemporaries* 109). He was said to have “an uncommon love of reading,” although this did not move him to encourage his daughter’s education. Any influence Susannah might have had on her youngest child’s intellectual development ended when she became an invalid after contracting tuberculosis in 1811

(Higginson *Contemporaries* 109).

Lydia soon realized that although literacy among women was encouraged, academic learning was not (Clifford *Crusader* 13). When she was nine, Convers left for Harvard College, later becoming a professor of the Harvard Divinity School. For his daughter's education, Francis followed his stern Calvinist traditions and sent her briefly to local schools (Goodwin *Lydia*, Britannica *Lydia*). Lydia attended a schoolhouse behind the Congregation Church in which boys and girls were taught in separate rooms. This public acknowledgement that her education was to be so inferior to her brother's was very painful for her. According to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who included a short biography of Child in his *Contemporaries* after her death, Lydia "had, undoubtedly, the superior mind of the two" (Higginson *Contemporaries* 111). Despite Lydia's greater natural aptitude, by virtue only of being born male, Convers was allowed to attend a preparatory academy because of his "remarkable powers of the mind," while his sister was given "a very subordinate share of educational opportunities, attending only the public schools, with one year at the private seminary of Miss Swan in Medford" (Higginson *Contemporaries* 113).

Lydia never forgot how unhappy she was the day Convers left home to take his place at Harvard, nor forgave her father for curtailing her formal education, but her sense of her brother's abandonment was soon heightened by more permanent losses (Clifford *Crusader* 12, 13). In 1814, her mother died and Lydia was immediately withdrawn from Miss Swan's Academy. She could make no sense out of her father's adamant opposition to slavery while he was content in being blind to equal education for females, even for his own daughter. From this injustice, however, Lydia gained a self-reliance that served her well. Although Francis actively discouraged his daughter from reading, Lydia turned to her brother as a mentor and, from that time on, her education was largely self-acquired (Mercer *Lydia*). Her early letters show an acute awareness that Convers was then her strongest link to the life of the mind.

In 1815, Lydia was sent to Norridgewock, Maine, to live with her married sister, Mary Francis Preston. Her father felt domestic skills were necessary to every good wife and Mary would train her well in this area, but all did not go as he planned. The sisters grew close, and Mary encouraged Lydia's new-found freedom by urging her to visit their

neighbors, including members of the local Indian tribes. These new friendships eventually provided material for her first fiction, and the ongoing debate of the times about Native American rights introduced her to the political arena (Mercer *Lydia*). When Maine voted for statehood, but the Missouri Compromise made it contingent upon Missouri's joining as a slave state to maintain balance, Lydia was introduced to a new political awareness.

Her intellectual sphere also widened during these years. Supported by Mary's friendship and encouragement, Convers' tutoring, and a growing awareness of the socio-political world around her, Lydia began to find herself. She expanded her readings to include *Paradise Lost* (to Convers: "Don't you think that Milton asserts the superiority of his own sex in rather too lordly a manner?"), Scott's *Ivanhoe*, the works of Gibbon, Addison, Shakespeare, and Samuel Johnson, Byron's *Don Juan*, Thomas More's *Lalla Rookh*, and many and varied other literary works (Osborne *Lydia* 17, Mercer *Lydia*). Years later, in *The Mother's Book*, she would write, "[W]hile I condemn the excessive love of books, I must insist that the power of finding enjoyment in reading is above all price, particularly to a woman" (Child *Mother's* 20).

The decade of the 1820s was pivotal for Lydia. She moved from Norridgewock to Gardiner to teach school, where she was introduced to the thinking of Emanuel Swedenborg. Much of his philosophy took root in her inquiring mind; however, in a letter to Convers during this time, she wrote, "You need not fear my becoming a Swedenborgian. I am more in danger of wrecking on the rocks of skepticism than of standing on the shoals of fanaticism. I am apt to regard a system of religion as I do any other beautiful theory; it plays round the imagination, but fails to reach the heart. I wish I could find some religion in which my heart and understanding could unite, that amidst the darkest clouds of this life I might ever be cheered with the mild halo of religious consolation" (Goodwin *Lydia*). Lydia and her brother often disagreed on intellectual and theological matters, and although she remained respectful of Convers' education and study, her letters to him show that if he held an opposing opinion to hers, she could and did defend her own. In a letter she sent to him in 1817, she wrote, "Whether the ideas I have formed of that author [Milton] be erroneous or not, they are entirely my own" (Meltzer *Lydia* 2). Despite his formal education, Convers was always easily swayed by

the opinions of others; from the beginning, Lydia was the self-assured sibling (Clifford *Crusader* 35).

In 1821, Lydia moved back to Massachusetts to live with Convers, by then a Unitarian minister in Watertown, and attended his church. Having rebelled early on against her parents' Calvinistic "fierce theology ...with its ever present threat of damnation," she chose to be re-baptized and to change her name to Maria as a declaration of independence (Meltzer *Lydia* 3, Karcher *Lydia* 415). She also joined the Boston Society of the New Jerusalem (Mercer *Lydia*). This was an exciting, experimental time, during which she met some of the most illustrious thinkers and literary figures of her day. Many of them were Convers' friends, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker<sup>1</sup> (Koppelman *Women's* 4).

From this time on, Maria searched for a religion that could satisfy her heart and inquiring mind. She found Unitarianism "a mere half-way house, where spiritual travelers find themselves well accommodated for the night, but where they grow weary of spending the day." She remained connected to the Boston Society into the 1830s, until a pro-slavery pastor made her doubt "whether such a church could have come down from heaven." She was interested in the ideas of William Ellery Channing until he refused to embrace abolitionism wholeheartedly (Goodwin *Lydia*). Although she never found a totally satisfying spiritual home, the quest enriched her life's work immeasurably.

Very soon, however, it was not enough to read others' works. In 1824, Maria wrote her first novel, *Hobomok: A Tale of Early Times. By an American* (Duyckinck *Lydia*). She completed the first chapter within hours of reading John Gorham Palfrey's review of the narrative poem, *Yamoyden*, in the April 1821 issue of the *North American Review* (Higginson *Contemporaries* 116). It was his appeal to writers to use American material in their fictional works that prompted her to write *Hobomok* (Mills *Cultural* 15). At 22, and in just six weeks, Maria simultaneously penned her own first work and the first historical novel ever published in the U.S. (Karcher, *Lydia* 9)<sup>2</sup>. With little worldly

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<sup>1</sup> Maria was often out of sorts with the Transcendentalists, particularly Emerson, because she thought them too intellectual. Her works never appeared in the *Dial* (Meltzer *Lydia* 134, 166).

<sup>2</sup> Goodwin reports that *Hobomok* was written and published when Child was 19, but all other sources, including Child's primary biographer, Carolyn L. Karcher, set the publication date at 1824. *Hobomok* was

experience and all of her literary expertise yet to come, she wrote without precedent and published anonymously. *Hobomok*'s authorship was soon discovered, however, and Maria became an instant celebrity. Even her most ardent critics, who considered the plot of interracial marriage "unnatural" and "revolting," acknowledged her literary promise and began inviting her to their salons (Karcher, *Lydia* 9).

Her writing career launched, Maria never looked back. For the next six decades, she honed her talent to forward a deep belief in equal human rights. Throughout the 1820s, she wrote prolifically. In 1824, she published *Evenings in New England*, and *The Rebels, or Boston before the Revolution* soon followed (Duyckinck *Lydia*). As urban populations grew and husbands found outside employment, it was crucial that wives take on greater responsibilities within the home and run them successfully. Child saw a new market for works that would help women run their households and raise their children successfully. In 1826-27, she inaugurated American children's literature by establishing *Juvenile Miscellany*, a periodical for children, and the next year published *Emily Parker, or Impulse, Not Principle. Intended for Young Persons* (Britannica *Lydia*, Mercer *Lydia*).

Then, in 1828, Maria made a decision that changed her course forever. Ignoring her own prudent and practical advice to young women about choosing their partners wisely, she married David L. Child, writer, editor, and idealist, who "had fallen in love with her daring novel of interracial marriage, *Hobomok*, even before meeting her" (Koppelman *Women's* 3). Unfortunately, he was also an improvident lawyer and journalist whose lack of business acumen led the Childs through many years of indebtedness, litigation, and even imprisonment for him. It was a "loving marriage of like minds," but David's penchant for good causes continually ensnared him in impractical schemes and drained his wife's earnings. Believing in self-reliance, Maria wrote constantly to ward off debtors. One of her most popular early works, *The Frugal Housewife*, was a direct result of sharing with her reading public her own ingenious methods of making do with little. Published in 1830 in a desperate attempt to reduce

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reviewed in the *North American Review* in both July 1824 and July 1825, the latter in an article entitled "Recent American Novels." Karcher relates that Child "seized a pen" after "leafing through an old volume of the *North American Review* in her brother's study" and reading Palfrey's 1821 article asking American writers to help create a national literature (Karcher *Lydia* 9). Since Child was 19 in 1821, but she was reading an *old* (italics mine) article, this accounts for the confusion.

their deep indebtedness, it turned her into an overnight success and was reprinted for decades (Mercer *Lydia*). Sadly, her exhaustive writing efforts were not enough. In 1843, out of desperation, Maria was forced to legally separate her finances from her husband's, an unprecedented action (Goodwin *Lydia*, Mercer *Lydia*). Despite their serious fiscal problems and character differences, however, the couple remained married until David died in 1874.

Despite its problems, the marriage was advantageous to Maria in other ways. David traveled in social, literary, and publishing circles that introduced her to some of the most influential writers, editors, activists, and abolitionists of the day. As early as 1829, William Lloyd Garrison, who became one of her most avid supporters, was referring to her as “the first woman in the republic” because of her activism and contributions to society (Mercer *Lydia*). She later admitted that Garrison “got hold of the strings of my conscience, and pulled me into reforms.... Old dreams vanished, old associates departed, and all things became new” (Goodwin *Lydia*). Child met Garrison at a public meeting in 1831, the year he began publishing his abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator* (National *Lydia*). The introduction changed her life. Her first piece for that publication was entitled “Stand from Under,” an horrific tale “actually related by a sailor...on board a slave ship bound to the coast of Africa” (Child, *Stand*). No reader could ever forget this depiction of the slave trade and its conditions of transport as Child told it.

From then on, Child was irrevocably devoted to abolitionism, although she continued to write about the domestic arts because it was lucrative. In 1831, she wrote *The Mother's Book*, another first work of its kind by an American author, which targeted child-rearing from infancy through adolescence. Some of the advice it contained was timeless (“In infancy, the principal object is to find such toys as are at once attractive and safe.”), some was of the period (“I believe a real love of reading is not common among women.”), and some advanced her own philosophies (“[Children] should be taught to love knowledge for the sake of the good it will enable them to do others, not because they will gain praise by it”) (Child, *Mother's* 52, 86, 17). Within another year, she had also published *The Little Girl's Own Book*, as well as the popular *Biographies of Madame de Stael, and Madame Roland, and The Biographies of Lady Russell, and Madame Guyon*

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for the Ladies Family Library. Soon, she had also completed *Good Wives* as Volume 3 of that series (Mercer *Lydia*). Her literary output during this period was astounding.

Then, in 1833, at the peak of her domestic popularity, Child took a great professional risk by publishing *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, relating the history of slavery and denouncing the inequality of education and employment for blacks (Britannica *Lydia*). Once more a ground-breaking work published in book form, *Appeal* signaled a turning point in her career. Child paid a great price for publishing it; she lost much of her hard-won professional popularity and was heavily ostracized for years to come. In *Appeal*, she condemned slavery by highlighting its contradiction with Christian teachings and pointing out that it brought moral and physical degradation upon *slaves and owners alike*. She did not exempt the North from its share of responsibility. Fully aware of the price she might pay when she released the work to her publisher, she wrote: “I expect ridicule and censure, [but] it is not in my nature to fear them” (Goodwin *Lydia*).

The Childs shared this sensibility. After publishing *The Despotism of Freedom*, David defended, *pro bono*, the crew of the *Panda*, a group of twelve black sailors charged with piracy that he felt would not otherwise receive fair trials. During this time, Maria joined the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, actively associated with the most ardent abolitionists of the day, and threw herself into writing for the cause, publishing *The Oasis* and several anti-slavery tracts. David also co-founded an interracial college in New Hampshire (although it closed within six months). Maria helped organize the first anti-slavery fair (Goodwin *Lydia*, Mercer *Lydia*). Yet, even the Childs were not prepared for what was to come.

First, the Boston Athenaeum cancelled Maria’s library privileges, which seriously curtailing her research capabilities (Mercer *Lydia*). Then, her magazine failed when subscriptions were canceled, and the Childs were forced to auction off their personal possessions. David was arrested for debt and his partner on the *Massachusetts Journal and Tribune* filed suit against him (Goodwin *Lydia*, Mercer *Lydia*). Maria’s response - and salvation - was to write *The History of the Condition of Women, in Various Ages and Nations*, Volumes 4 and 5 of the Ladies’ Family Library (Mercer *Lydia*). Her research skills and literary output were becoming the stuff of legends. Anticipating late twentieth-

century trends, the *History* covered every then known race and ethnic group and focused a great deal of attention on Africans (Karcher, *Lydia* 3). This began a lifelong pattern for Child; during her long writing career, she would continually turn to her pen to ease domestic troubles and frustrations with social issues.

The Childs stood firm in their convictions when most would have wavered or simply given up. In 1836, the year Emerson produced *Nature*, Maria published not only the second edition of *An Appeal* but also *Philothea*, a classical romance set in the days of Pericles and Aspasia (Duyckinck *Lydia*). The next year, she returned to *The Frugal Housewife* format with the publication of *The Family Nurse*. During these years, Child wrote to survive (Mercer *Lydia*).

Then, slowly, the political winds began to shift. In 1839, Child, Lucretia Mott, and Maria Weston Chapman were elected to the Executive Committee of the Anti-Slavery Society. Some members objected strongly to women taking these posts; even Lewis Tappan, brother of the organization's president, argued, "To put a woman on the committee with men is contrary to the usages of civilized society" (National *Lydia*). His words are a stark reminder of the conditions under which Child was fighting for civil rights. Undaunted, from 1841 to 1843 she served as editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, the Society's weekly New York newspaper. At her suggestion, David served as assistant editor. Although his appointment was seen by most as an attempt to reduce marital conflict, Maria actually initiated a separation during this time that was to last for eight years (Karcher, *Lydia* 15). She wrote to Ellis Loring, her friend and adviser, that she would move to New York and if David, whom she referred to as her "incurable flaw," wanted to make a home there, she would "find a warm corner... always...ready for him," but she could no longer "float about [and] lose her capacity for business." She had to have a sense of security: "to pump water into a sieve for fourteen years is enough to break the most energetic spirit. I must put a stop to it, or die" (Osborne *Lydia* 31).

The years the Childs lived apart were among her most productive as an author and abolitionist. In her first editorial for the *Standard*, she wrote, "Such as I am, I am here, ready to work according to my conscience and my ability; providing nothing but diligence and fidelity, refusing the shadow of a fetter on my free expression of opinion, from any man, or body of men, and equally careful to respect the freedom of others,

whether as individuals or societies” (Goodwin *Lydia*). Child’s own trials strengthened her resolve to help others and increased her compassion for their trials. In 1841, she met and developed an enduring relationship with John Hopper, the 26-year-old son of Isaac T. Hopper, a friend and prominent member of the Society of Friends. She was a searcher by nature and, in John, she found a soul mate. Their friendship remained platonic, but it was life-altering for her: “The strong necessity of loving has been the great temptation and conflict of my life; yet I sincerely believe that few women are more pure-minded than myself” (Karcher *First* 320).

True to her nature, Child used this experience and those of her marriage, along with her struggle to be accepted as a female writer, to relate directly with the public. *Letters from New York* began as a column of newspaper stories (another genre ‘first’ for her) that were published in book form in 1843 and 1845. The content of these articles is surprisingly apropos to life today, possibly because, while her early books had told her readers what she thought *should* be, her *Letters* gave them glimpses of what she felt life actually *was* (Child, *Letters* 29). They depicted New York life, its neighborhoods, institutions, social reforms, and arts. Extremely popular works, the collections of these journalistic vignettes went through seven editions. In 1899, Higginson referred to them as “the precursors of that modern school of newspaper correspondence in which women have so large a share, and which has something of the charm of women’s private letters, a style of writing where description preponderates over argument and statistics make way for fancy and enthusiasm.... She gave us a new sensation, and that epoch was perhaps the climax of her purely literary career“ (Higginson *Contemporaries* 127-28).

The broad social criticism contained in the *Letters* was not what made them so instantly and enduringly popular with Child’s reading public. Her column, and later the books, owed their popularity to her way of “speaking” directly to her readers, as if she were sitting in a room holding a conversation with each of them<sup>3</sup>. As she guided them

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<sup>3</sup> Child considered herself one of the common people and throughout her life was adamantly anti-aristocratic. In 1857, she wrote to her brother, “As for the rank which the world assigns to one avocation over another, I can hardly find words significant enough to express the low estimate I put upon it. The lawyer who feels above the bookseller seems to me just as ridiculous as the orange-woman who objected to selling Hannah More’s tracts. “I sell *ballads!*” she exclaimed. “Why, I don’t even sell apples!” How absurdly we poor blundering mortals lose sight of the reality of things, under the veil of appearances! In choosing an employment, it seems to me the only question to be asked is, What are we best fitted for and

through their world, or through experiences they might not otherwise have, she related in easily understood language what it meant to live in an ever-changing world. Many were stunned by the seemingly overnight metamorphosis of towns into great cities, the influx of immigrants from countries they would never see, the unprecedented increase in crime, and the ramifications of skyrocketing industrial expansion. As Child explained these processes, she taught her readers about an increasingly demanding and multicultural America, and about themselves. The conversational style of her *Letters* soothed an anxious public.

From 1844 to 1847, Child turned to another genre to write three volumes of *Flowers for Children* (*Britannica Lydia*). She also renewed a friendship with Margaret Fuller, and the two began to champion the cause of women at home and abroad, including an increasing number of prostitutes in New York, many of whom were young girls attracted by financial independence (Clifford *Crusader* 192). In 1846, she published *Fact and Fiction*, a collection of stories that reflected her frustration with a disappointing marriage and unfulfilled sexuality (*Goodwin Lydia*).

The New York years, however, were coming to a close. In 1852, the Childs reconciled and moved to Wayland, Massachusetts, into a home Maria inherited from her father. There, she wrote *Isaac T. Hopper: A True Life* and, with its publication in 1853, closed a chapter of her life. Isaac had been a true friend and mentor who had not judged her relationship with his son John. A staunch abolitionist, he had “lived almost entirely for others,” and, in this way, he and Maria were kindred spirits. When he died, she wrote, “In this world of shadows, few things strengthen the soul like seeing the calm and cheerful exit of a truly good man” (Child, *Isaac* 492). His death seemed to force her to look at the direction and goals of her own life, and she settled down to complete a three-volume work, *The Progress of Religious Ideas, Through Successive Ages*, as a means of removing “the superstitious rubbish from the sublime morality of Christ.” It was an immense research effort, but when it came out in 1855, it did not sell well. As Thomas Wentworth Higginson commented, it was “too learned for a popular book, and too popular for a learned one” (*Goodwin Lydia*).

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What do we most enjoy doing?”

Nevertheless, Child's life stabilized for a time. She even turned poet with the publication of *Autumnal Leaves: Tales and Sketches in Prose and Rhyme* in 1856. Many believed she was saying goodbye to what would have been an impressive and multi-faceted career, and she seemed to agree. In 1858, she wrote to her brother, "I am not what I aspired to be in my days of young ambition, but I have become humble enough to be satisfied with the conviction that what I have written has always been written conscientiously; that I have always spoken with sincerity if not with power. In every direction I see young giants rushing past me, and I am glad to see such strong laborers to plough the land and sow the seed for coming years" (Meltzer *Lydia* 317).

Suddenly, in 1859, John Brown raided Harper's Ferry and Child was back in the fray. She wrote to him, praising his courage and offering to nurse his wounds. She sent the letter to Virginia Governor Henry Wise, asking that he "transmit it to the prisoner" and professing herself to be "an uncompromising abolitionist" (Child, *Correspondence*). The letters, published in the *New York Tribune*, brought praise from the North and condemnation from the South. Brown's example, she wrote, "stirred me up to consecrate myself with renewed earnestness to the righteous cause for which he died so bravely.... When there is anti-slavery work to be done, I feel as young as twenty." During the Civil War, she offered her home to the Underground Railroad, compiled the *Freedman's Book* (1865), a primer for former slaves, and wrote *The Right Way, the Safe Way* (Goodwin *Lydia*, Mercer *Lydia*).

In *The Right Way*, Child argued for the abolition of slavery on a basis she felt all in both the North and South could understand - its lack of financial viability "as proven in the British West Indies and elsewhere." Attacking the institution from a profit and loss stance, she began her treatise, "It is a common idea that the British West Indies were a mine of wealth before the abolition of slavery, and since that event have been sinking into ruin. To correct those erroneous impressions, I have carefully collected the following facts from authentic sources" (Child, *Right* 3). The content of the work was difficult to refute.

Child also agreed to edit Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1860. Jacobs had asked for her help partly to lend credibility to her own writing. In her introduction to the text, Child wrote, "The author of the following

autobiography is personally known to me.... At her request, I have revised her manuscript ...mainly for purposes of condensation and orderly arrangement. I have not added anything to the incidents, or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks” (Jacobs *Incidents* 7). Still, in a letter to Jacobs written just before the book’s publication, Child wrote, “I think the last Chapter, about John Brown, had better be omitted,” because she did not feel it fit the story (Mills *Cultural* 112). Editing the work was a bold move, considering the social climate of the time, but it greatly enhanced the chances that Jacob’s words would be read.

Expanding on Jacob’s plight and all those she represented, Child turned to the subject of women’s rights. Her works often reflected her own inner struggles and development, as well. In 1867, she wrote, “The fact is all conclusions are fallacious based on the hypothesis that one human soul can be forged in another soul. No human being can possibly think for me, or believe for me, any more that he can eat for me, or drink for me, or breathe for me.... I do not see why difference in voting should necessarily produce dissension between husband and wife, any more than the mere difference of opinion which so frequently exists without such result. Nor do I see why the mere circumstance of depositing a vote needs to make women boisterous, or expose them to rudeness.... Their appearance at the polls would soon cease to be a novelty, and the depositing of a vote might be done as easily and as quietly as leaving a card at a hotel” (Meltzer *Lydia* 472).

After the war, Child founded the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association (although she believed black men should have the right to vote before women did). She also joined a group of Unitarians who established the Free Religious Association and, at last feeling she could agree with their tenets, began attending meetings during visits to Boston. In 1867, she published *A Romance of the Republic*, followed in 1868 by *An Appeal for the Indian* after having actively denounced the genocide of the Plains Tribes throughout the decade. Year after year, Child added to her large body of writing, and even her escape into fiction writing forwarded her causes. *A Romance* is dedicated to “early and everlasting friends of freedom and equal rights” (Child, *Romance* 441).

On June 18, 1874, Child wrote from Wayland to John G. Whittier, “David and I are growing old.... But we keep young in our feelings. We are, in fact, like two old

children...with sympathies as lively as ever in all that concerns the welfare of the world.” Despite all she had seen and experienced throughout her long life, she believed that society, as a whole, was improving with time, and professed to him, “There is more good than evil” (Child, *Letters* 228). After David died in 1874, Maria spent increasing amounts of time in Boston, eventually wintering there, all the while remaining intellectually active. In 1878, she released her “eclectic Bible” of quotations from the world’s religions, *Aspirations of the World*, “to do all I can to enlarge and strengthen the hand of human brotherhood.” It was her last published work (Mercer *Lydia*).

In her final years, Child wrote very little. For the first time, she enjoyed a semblance of financial security and seemed to be content to contribute generously to her many causes. In her last letter, she wrote a friend that it was “a luxury to be able to give without being afraid. I try not to be Quixotic, but I want to rain down blessings on all the world, in token of thankfulness for the blessings that have been rained down upon me” (Child, *Letters* 261). She was content, believing that she had contributed in her own way to her society, and that it was improving. She wrote Francis Shaw later in 1879, “The world *does* slowly become wiser and better as the centuries roll on. You and I have tried to help onward the process; and if we have accomplished ever so little, it is something to be thankful for” (Meltzer *Lydia* 559).

Toward the end, Child was approached by several people who asked for permission to write her biography, including Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who proceeded to do so and sent her a copy. In answer to his request for her comments, she admitted, “I have never read a single word of it.... To read my own biography seems too much like being dissected before I am dead. I have always been talking, more or less, to the public; but I have never talked about *myself*. And I am strangely sensitive about any *personal* introduction to the public” (Meltzer *Lydia* 499).

On the morning of October 20, 1880, Maria woke in good spirits, feeling remarkably well. As she walked from her bedroom, she complained of pains in her chest. Within the hour, her heart had failed. Three days later, on a fittingly blustery Wayland day, Wendell Phillips shared with a small group of friends and family, who had gathered to say goodbye, what they already knew, that she had always been “ready to die for a principle and starve for an idea” (Clifford *Crusader* 297).

## CHAPTER 2

### THE QUINTESSENTIAL ACTIVIST

From the moment Child realized *why* she would never receive the formal education made available to her brother, her soul protested. Whatever else Child was, she was first and foremost an activist. This chapter addresses her lifelong activism and the many remarkable individuals she met along the way who shared her passion for fairness and equality in human rights.

Child produced more than thirty books and pamphlets on a wide range of topics, through all of which runs a common thread of activism. The many American literary “firsts” she is credited with were rooted in her deep and burning need to right social wrongs. From her early work on “the Indian question,” Child’s ever-widening social awareness led to her activism on behalf of the lower and middle classes, women of all ages and in all walks of life (including and particularly prostitutes), children, slaves, freedmen, immigrants, and people of various faiths, among others. Indeed, she was so advanced in her thinking in these areas that, in her later years, she was not so far from the indignant child whose education had been curtailed because of her sex, or the young girl who had intuitively understood the injustices suffered by neighboring Abenaki and Penobscot Indians. To be sure, she broadened the scope of her concerns, but her impatience with, and disgust for, prejudice in any form held steady.

As Carolyn Karcher writes in “The Indian Question,” the first chapter of *A Lydia Maria Child Reader*, “the plight of the Indians inspired [Child’s] first ventures into both literature and social reform. So powerful an impression did her youthful introduction to a wronged people make on Child that she continued to wrestle with the Indian question for the rest of her life” (Karcher *Lydia* 25). This sense of injustice about what had been done to Native Americans gripped her as a child and was the subject of one of her last major works. It also, perhaps unconsciously, led her to associate Native Americans with women as entities consigned to the outskirts of society.

Child’s experiences with the Abenaki and Penobscots introduced her to true poverty and deprivation. Driven off their land, a few still lived in the hemlock forests

near her sister's house and she visited them often. This interaction resulted in *Hobomok: A Tale of Early Times. By an American* (1824), an alternative version of the Puritan experiment and the first novel in the U.S. to portray a Native American hero, a mixed marriage, or a Puritan setting. Its plot centers on a colonial New England girl who, when her mother dies and her fiancé is thought lost at sea, leaves her repressive Puritan father to live with an Indian and bear his son. Hobomok's "conduct is all of a piece, noble throughout" (Duyckinck *Lydia*). Mary, however, repents, but never quite reaches nobility ("I cannot go to England, my boy would disgrace me") (Child *Hobomok* 146). Hobomok, the "noble savage," steps aside when Mary's former fiancé returns (Goodwin *Lydia*). In the end, the absent Hobomok is "seldom spoken of," a casualty of the white man's fantasy that the red man would just fade away (Child *Hobomok* xxxii, 150).

Despite its shortcomings, *Hobomok* created a sensation for its early and sympathetic picture of Native Americans. Child had gone much further in her daring suggestions for coexistence than either James Fenimore Cooper in *Last of the Mohicans* (1826) or Catherine Maria Sedgwick in *Hope Leslie* (1827). Some critics have charged, however, that *Hobomok* fell short of a plea for true equality. One feels "The book dramatizes the theory of the inevitable, benevolent displacement of the Indian.... [The author] prefers to have her Indians survive in memory, rather than physical reality" (Black *Lydia*). Another calls Mary's decision to wed cross-racially "the act of a mind temporarily unbalanced" (Najmi *White* 98). Nevertheless, Child deserves full credit for pioneering this concept in the genre. At least one critic feels *Hobomok* "can safely be compared favorably with any work of fiction which had been produced in America, no mean accomplishment for a novice" (Osborne *Lydia* 54).

Abenaki and Penobscot influence on Child can also be found in her second work, *Evenings in New England* (1824) and in the *Juvenile Miscellany*, which included a story in its inaugural issue, "Adventure in the Woods," based on peaceful interdependency between white settlers and Indians (Karcher *Lydia* 27). Fictional works provided Child with a method of formulating and postulating solutions to seemingly insolvable problems, as well as sharing factual history with her readers, long before she was addressing presidents and statesmen on the Indian situation as she did during Ulysses Grant's administration.

In 1828, in response to the state of Georgia's attempts to relocate all Cherokee outside of its borders (despite their social and economic advances, such as a written constitution, alphabet, and bilingual newspaper) and President Jackson's pledge to transport them to Mississippi, Child wrote *The First Settlers of New-England: or, Conquest of the Pequods, Narragansets and Pokanokets: As Related by a Mother to Her Children*. In this work, she argues for the Cherokee to be allowed to "retain what is left of their native inheritance. It is, in my opinion, decidedly wrong, to speak of the removal or extinction of the Indians as inevitable." She suggests that by "intermixing" racially and culturally with Indians, white Americans could not only eliminate perpetual warfare but regenerate their society, and she cites evidence that Europeans owe their arts and sciences to dark-complexioned peoples of Asia and Africa (Karcher *Lydia* 28). Child's prophetic voice went unheeded; by 1838, the situation had degenerated into the mass Indian transport known as the Trail of Tears.

Most scholars agree that *The First Settlers* ushered in Child's career as a true reformer. She had come a long way from *Hobomok*, but it must be said that reviewers, politicians, and even the Cherokee ignored it. The book, in which a mother instructs her daughters about the mistreatment of Indian tribes by seventeenth-century Puritans, was addressed to women and children because Child believed they would be the true reformers (Osborne 24). She did not understand until after the book was published that the generational approach to social change was too slow. From this point on, she began to write articles for newspapers. Over the next two decades, Child composed many articles and short stories on the Indian situation, many of which suggested alternative models of Indian-white coexistence, including intermarriage, mutual trade, cultural fusion, and gradual acculturation.

Because of the removal of tribes from their lands to make way for railroads and westward expansion, in addition to the upheavals of the Civil War, major Indian uprisings occurred during the 1860s. By 1868, when Child wrote "An Appeal for the Indians," incorporating these themes, she had learned to first publish her articles in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and other periodicals, then reissue them in pamphlet form, for the greatest coverage and most immediate effect. Republican women were taught to see themselves as harbingers of civilization and the Indians as potential subjects

for their reform efforts; Child would have argued that she was not a reformer, but in “An Appeal,” she viewed Native Americans “as younger members of the same great human family” at a time when few agreed with her (Schmidt *Early* 415-16).

An Indian Peace Commission was appointed and charged with investigating and ending the unrest. Atrocities soon followed its recommendations to confine Indians to reservations, wean them from hunting to agriculture and manufacturing, and from collective to individual modes of life. The goal was to “blot out” the differences of language and custom to “fuse them into one homogeneous mass.” Child focused her “Appeal” on a more humane program of educational incentives rather than force, fostering pride in tribal history and identity, a model for change that might have saved untold misery. It certainly was a plan far advanced from that of “the vast majority of Americans, who viewed Indians as irredeemable savages, either doomed to extinction or deserving of extermination” (Karcher *Lydia* 30).

The plight of the Indians always deeply concerned Child. In 1873, in a letter to her friend Sarah Shaw, she wrote, “As for the poor Indians, would to Heaven they had education and newspapers to tell *their* story.... General Grant has disappointed me. His Indian policy looked candid and just on paper; but he does not seem to have taken adequate care that it should be carried out.... White men have so perpetually lied to them that they don’t know whom, or what, to believe. And after all, we, who are so much more enlightened, and who profess to be so much more human, have again and again killed Indians who were decoyed into our power by a flag of truce. No mortal will ever know the accumulated wrongs of that poor people. No wonder they turn at bay, in their desperation and despair” (Meltzer *Lydia* 515-16).

As involved as she was in their plight, Child’s activism encompassed far more than the suffering of the Indian nation; very early on, she had applied her hatred of injustice in any form to advancing equal rights for women. For her, the causes were closely linked. It was a Penobscot woman who drew Child’s attention to the inherent strengths of women, in general, as opposed to the “decorum and delicacy” mentality then prevalent in American society. She was staying with friends, in Winslow, Maine, when the woman came to the door, having walked four miles through a deep new snow, to ask for salt-fish. The next day, she returned with a newborn on her back; she had given birth

the night before, chopped through the river ice to bathe her babe, and hiked the four miles again to ask for potatoes, which she slung over her back (with her child) before returning to camp. This feat made an indelible impression on Child, who began to question “the claim that physical frailty was an innate feminine trait” (Karcher *Lydia* 26). In 1835, her *History of the Condition of Women, in Various Ages and Nations* would reflect the cross-cultural perspective on gender roles and child-rearing practices that began to develop with this experience.

It should be stated here that Child was not, in the strictest sense, a feminist, to the chagrin of many of her more militant peers. In fact, she had a traditional streak that was not then, and is not now, easily explained. Her eighteenth-century values lent a strange, intermittent ambivalence about her roles as woman and activist, but for all that, she was very effective in the struggle to gain equal rights for her sex<sup>4</sup>. Early in her career, she wrote for women and children (particularly daughters). In 1827, she established “Juvenile Miscellany,” the first children’s magazine in the U.S. It seemed to be a harmless publication for children, full of stories and puzzles and interesting facts, and America’s children “sat on the stone steps of their house doors all the way up and down Chestnut Street in Boston, waiting for the carrier“ (Taketani *U.S. Women* 19). In fact, Child included tales of social significance, such as “Mary French and Susan Easton,” a story of two kidnapped girls, one black and one (black-faced) white, that as much depicts them as objects of exchange in a patriarchal economy as it indicts the domestic slave trade (Taketani *U.S. Women* 31).

From 1829 to 1836, Child wrote prolifically for her female audience, including “Reasons for Hard Times” and the much reprinted *Frugal Housewife, The Mother’s Book, The Girl’s Own Book, The Biographies of Lady Russell, and Madame Guyon, Good Wives*, and the comprehensive *History of the Condition of Women*. She also produced a novel that she had long wanted to write, *Philothea*, which offered a woman’s

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<sup>4</sup> Some of this ambivalence may have been rooted in self-assessment. Albeit her claim of being a commoner, in 1858 she wrote to friends Lucy and Mary Osgood, “It is curious how you have found me out. I have always known that George Sand was my twin sister ... with allowance for the difference occasioned by one of us being born in France, and the other in New England ... . But the grain of the wood is certainly the same ... . [H]er works ... provoke me; sometimes shock me; but I am constrained to acknowledge, “Thus in all probability, should *I* have written, had I been brought up in France” (Meltzer *Lydia* 316).

viewpoint of spiritual love in a setting of ancient Greece. Yet, as deeply as her feelings ran on the subject of women's rights, she was never truly comfortable with the lengths to which her contemporaries took measures to secure them.

Some of her hesitation to fully engage in women's suffrage may be traced to the criticism Child received when she, a young female, dared to write *Hobomok*, or the harshness of the reviews of her earliest abolitionist works. Her reactions, supported by the need to, first, earn her own living and, then, underwrite her husband's financial debacles, had been to publish what turned out to be highly successful domestic works for women. She went as far as she could to advise females of all ages to read and obtain as much education as possible; as innovative and advanced as her ideas were for the times, her works continued to be popular. But Child came from solid New England roots and held to many of those traditions. She always felt that women could and should be allowed to attempt and accomplish as much as men, but that they could do that through inner strength as well as outward acts, and without the militancy that others espoused, particularly toward the end of the century. She was an intellectual with an artistic soul, and she preferred to attack problems from that stance. Hence, she wrote while others marched, quietly separated her finances and herself from her husband while others divorced, took prostitutes into her own house to give them a second chance while others castigated and shunned them, and generally lived her own life quietly and without explanation or apology.

Though she was never a feminist in the strictest sense of the term, Child was an extremely effective ally in the fight for women's rights. Feminist consciousness, although she would not have called it that, came to her when her father refused her an education matching that which he provided for her brother. It was strengthened through her association with Abenaki and Penobscot women during her adolescent years in Maine. Mary Conant, the heroine of *Hobomok*, is not a shy and retiring type; she knows her own mind and follows it, against all that her family and community stand for. During a time when it is almost blasphemous to do so, Child liberates her from the misogyny of Puritan New England by marrying her to an Indian with whom she lives for three years and parents a child. A second female character in *Hobomok*, Sally Oldham, is also

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independent, as are the female characters of Child's second novel, *The Rebels, or Boston before the Revolution* (1825) (Karcher *Lydia* 335).

In her own life, Child acted as an early feminist in many ways. Against the wishes and advice of those around her, she married a man who admired her for her mind and her political writing. She was aware of his professional record and may have been too optimistic about her potential influence on him, but she also knew, and took pride in the knowledge, that the income from her writing would be needed to help support them. Ironically, however, her marriage put a temporary hold on her earliest and most ardent feminist ideas. She was soon writing articles for his newspaper, the *Massachusetts Journal*, including "Comparative Strength of Male and Female Intellect," which disavowed the radical feminist Frances Wright's doctrines of sexual equality.

In addition to helping David edit his newspaper, Child began using her literary talents to write domestic advice books so she could help pay his debts. Under nineteenth-century marriage law, all proceeds and copyrights to her books were his property. In another twist of irony, the heavy weight of this realization and the depth of her new husband's lack of business expertise led her, as she wrote in an editorial for the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, "to take my freedom without disputing about my claim to it" (Karcher *Lydia* 336).

As she did with her abolitionist activities, Child came to simply ignore typical restrictions on women when she chose to work toward equal rights; if, in theory, she repudiated feminism, in practice, she was a participant. In doing so, she set precedents for others to follow. Yet, she also bowed to reality, when necessary, such as writing for "male mouthpieces to transmit her views" because she preferred "male-dominated forums to separate female organizations," which seemed to her "like half a pair of scissors" (Karcher *Lydia* 336). In other words, unlike some feminists who wanted to take to the podium or the streets to present their own messages, Child began her crusade for women's rights with a very pragmatic eye toward getting the message. That she believed this often meant working within the current system did not set well with some of her contemporaries.

Child's two-volume *History of the Condition of Women, in Various Ages and Nations*, published in 1835, satisfied many of these contemporaries that her heart was

with their cause and gained her the respect of all but the most diehard feminists. In this work, she expressed her conflicted views toward the “woman question,” but also gave her Indian and African and white sisters, including those walking the streets, the ammunition they needed to challenge existing social mores. The *History* anticipated current multicultural Women’s Studies by exploring similarities and differences of women worldwide at a time when society was telling them that they were in every way, shape, and form subservient to their husbands. Her material covered women from ancient to contemporary times, from remote tribes in Africa, Siberia, and the Pacific Islands. A comprehensive chapter was devoted to African women, highlighting their crafts, songs, dances, hunts, and battles, despite the fact that the majority of the book’s American audience either upheld or ignored the atrocities of slavery being committed *in their own country* (Karcher *Lydia* 334-35).

This was no work of opinion; Child used a set of indicators to compare each society, including marriage customs; laws relating to virginity, adultery, concubinage, polygamy, prostitution, and divorce; patrilineal and matrilineal descent and custody of children; women’s occupations; their access to education, employment, political power, and priesthood, and the degree of personal freedom or confinement that was available to them (Karcher *Lydia* 337). Although her research pointed to the obvious, she refrained from conclusions, which strengthened her case that no one concept of womanhood can possibly encompass the tremendous diversity of gender, and that nurture determines women’s roles, not nature. Within the next decade, her friends had used her research to further the feminist cause, stating clearly what she had inferred: Sarah Grimke produced *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Woman* (1838) and Margaret Fuller had published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845).

In 1836, Child published *Philothea, A Romance*, a work of literature she had allowed herself the luxury of composing while she was researching and compiling her *History*. Set in ancient Greece, it was an escape into intellectualism and, possibly, a way to explore her requirements from, and dynamics of, her own passionless marriage. It was also a surprisingly successful romance of classical proportions, depicting a heroine sharing a spiritual love with her husband. Reviewers praised it and readers, both male and female, loved it. The *North American* reviewer predicted, “It will take a permanent

place in our elegant literature.” Edgar Alan Poe praised it lavishly, declaring that the reader was “overwhelmed” with the author’s “acquaintance with ... the times, places, and people depicted” and “turn[ed] ... these pure and quiet pages with ... gasping satisfaction.” He was certain it would become “an effectual aid in the study of Greek antiquity.” The book was nearly universally praised, and Helene G. Baer, one of Child’s biographers, felt “her inmost self called out from every page” (Osborne *Lydia* 69-70).

*Philothea* was published the same year as Emerson’s *Nature*, and transcendental ideas can be traced throughout the novel, particularly as they relate to a reliance on intuition. Child had reached a point in her life and writings at which she needed to rise about the flaws of contemporary humanity to bask in the glory of ancient times, what one critic called “an antidote to the sensualist’s philosophy of life.” Her female readers could also escape into the exploits, rescue, and happy salvation of *Philothea* with total abandon. But there were deeper messages, of power and its abuse, of demagoguery (“every man boasts of his own freedom, and no man respects the freedom of his neighbor”), of political gambles (with Pericles “purchasing the favour” of the rabble), and of conscience compromised for ambition as men in high office ignore their priorities. *Philothea* “holds symposiums where evenings are spent in conversation and in feasting and drinking, marked on occasion by decadent revelries.” *Philothea* warns to “be aware of the presence of evil, if they sought to put away the love of it in their own hearts.” She is the ideal, who sends messages from across the centuries, a tribute to her creator (Osborne *Lydia* 71-81).

Child carried this work into abolition, which presented unique challenges for both black and white women. Because rioters held to the code of not attacking white ladies, they began acting as bodyguards for male abolitionists. Their heady success led them to demand more important roles in the abolitionist movement. Child’s *History* fueled that fire even more by providing identifiable and quotable reasons for why this should happen, particularly since she was so visible in the abolitionist movement herself. As meetings cross-gendered, the “sisters” gave a new voice to the cause, adding the powerful testimony of the promiscuous and savage behavior they had witnessed in slaveholding households. By 1838, the “woman question” had divided the antislavery movement, with Garrisonian radicals allowing women full participation in meetings and

religious conservatives organizing rival societies barred to women. Yet, in a letter to the *Liberator* in September 1839, Child wrote, “Oh, if I was a man, how I *would* lecture! But I am a woman, and so I sit in the corner and knit socks” (Karcher *Lydia* 338).

Child had long been urged by her friends to “come out” for feminism, but only in the 1840s did she give it her own brand of political expression. The long incubation period strengthened her resolve and sharpened her arguments. In February 1843, in two of her last *Letters from New York*, she finally and fully endorsed the women’s rights cause, not coincidentally at the time of the formal separation from her husband. Her inner struggles over those years must have been tremendous, but once she made her decision, she forged ahead. In these *Letters*, Child explodes with anger, accusing men of having kept women in subjection throughout history by physical force, verbal ridicule, gallantry, and intellectual condescension, all of which rings true today. This had been her own experience for decades, and the fury with which she wrote testified to the depth of her frustrations. For years to come, she remained adamantly against the double standard of sexual mores of men and women, and she came to sympathize strongly with so-called “fallen women” she met on New York’s streets and in its prisons. Her writings from the mid-1840s focus on the repressive moral code that denied women the right to their own sexuality and victimized them into prostitution, imprisonment, or death if they lapsed, when their male counterparts were free to indulge themselves in any type, or lack, of morality.

By advocating that sexual desire was natural for women as well as men, Child aligned herself with Margaret Fuller and feminists attempted to welcome her into their ranks. During the next few years, she wrote many articles, *Letters*, and short stories that championed women’s rights from her unique and humanitarian perspective. In 1845, for “Hilda Silfverling,” Child used the science fiction genre to allow her to freeze the ‘fallen’ Hilda’s body in a laboratory for a century to give her time to live down her disgrace and begin life anew. A bawdy tale, the story celebrates sexuality and emancipates its heroine. In her 1846 story “Rosenglory,” in which the magistrate who condemns the “fallen” heroine to prison later propositions her, Child wrote, “She had never read or heard anything about ‘Woman’s Rights;’ otherwise it might have occurred to her that it was because men made all the laws, and elected all the magistrates” (Karcher *Lydia* 340-41).

In 1848, Child's friends, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, organized the first Women's Rights Convention. The idea had been brewing since women had been given access as delegates to the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840, and one agenda item was a demand that women be allowed the right to vote. It wasn't until 1856, however, that Child felt she could openly embrace women's bid for the vote. In that year, she wrote "The Kansas Immigrants," finally depicting females as active political agents and publishing it in the *New York Tribune* just before the 1856 election.

Caught up in the abolitionist cause prior to, and during, the Civil War, she found her feminist voice again in 1867 with the publication of "Woman and Suffrage" in the *Independent*, which called for voting rights for women and African American men. The article argued that enfranchising women would not unsex them or endanger the family structure, but it garnered a surprising criticism from Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who disagreed with Child that black suffrage was on a par with woman suffrage. Her answer was "Women and Freedman," printed in the *Standard* in 1869, in which she reminded white women of the debt they owed to ex-slaves for having so often saved the lives of Union soldiers during the war. She also intimated that to deny freedpeople the right to vote was to deliver them into the hands of the Ku Klux Klan (Kacher *Lydia* 342).

Although Child was never a "typical" feminist, her published works did much to advance the cause. It must be remembered that she was fighting for human rights on several fronts at the same time; in her mind, those rights were important to Native and African Americans and women of all races. In fact, she was frustrated not only by the bitter split in feminist ranks but also by the very fact that such distinctions were being made. Her article "Concerning Women," published in the *Independent* in July 1869, took the historical perspective of the debate of whether or how political enfranchisement would affect women, giving the feminist analysis she had long avoided. In *Letters from New York, Number 34*, of February 1843, Child wrote, "You ask what are my opinions about 'Women's Rights.' I confess strong distaste to the subject, as it has been generally treated. On no other theme probably has there been uttered so much of false, mawkish sentiment, shallow philosophy, and sputtering, farthing-candle wit."

In January 1867, she wrote to a contemporary, "It is the theory of our government

that the people govern. Women constitute half of the people. It has been legally decided that they are citizens; and, as citizens, constituting so large a portion of the people, I think they plainly have a right to vote” (Meltzer *Lydia* 470). That same month, she ended “Woman and Suffrage” with the words, “With increasing knowledge the work goes on with accelerated speed; but the world is far enough yet from the great festival of ALL SOULS” (Karcher *Lydia* 358, 401). Her analysis of how women had advanced since ancient times was also an admission of the evolution of her own thinking.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE ARDENT ABOLITIONIST

Expanding on Child's general activism, this chapter will explore her role as an abolitionist. She was fully committed to ending slavery when most of society accepted the tenets and actualities of colonialism. Why did her convictions run so deeply? What led her to turn her back on a promising literary career to risk reputation, livelihood, and even personal safety on the abolitionist cause? Many family members, friends, and acquaintances supported her convictions, but some she lost along the path of conscience. Her abolitionist works helped to shape her society, to be sure, but such professional choices affected her personal life and she sacrificed a great deal for her involvement. After years of working long and diligently to abolish slavery, she resigned from all such societies, even as reconstruction was failing.

Child entered the fight against slavery in the very earliest years of the struggle and remained an avid abolitionist until after the Civil War. Early in the century, the domestic slave trade had increased dramatically; when she entered the antislavery movement, more than two million slaves lived in the U.S. (Meltzer *Lydia* 26). Tireless in her efforts to free them, she wrote abolitionist works that became legendary, including *Appeal for that Class of Americans called Africans* (America's first anti-slavery work in book form), *Anti-Slavery Catechism*, *Authentic Anecdotes of American Slavery*, *The Evils of Slavery and the Cure of Slavery*, and *The Freedman's Book*. She also wrote an introduction for Harriet Jacob's *Life of a Slave Girl* and a definitive biography of abolitionist Isaac T. Hopper, and worked on the *Liberator*, contributed to the *North American Review*, and edited the *Anti-Slavery Standard*. A simple listing of her accomplishments, however, does not explain her passion for the cause, or her motives.

Child came of age just as the conflict over slavery erupted on the national scene. It had been a political issue lying dormant since the ratification of the Constitution. After the Revolution, slavery seemed to be dying out; the northern states passed emancipation laws and most of those opposed to slavery expected the southern states to follow suit,

particularly after the passing of a law banning the African slave trade in 1808 (Karcher *Lydia* 135). Most white reformers spent this time fostering colonization, a term for the repatriation of free blacks, in other words, sending them all back to Africa. But the Industrial Revolution, along with the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, had created new markets for products that many thought would best and most cost-effectively be harvested by slaves. The profits, for Southern plantation owners but also for northern and British textile factories, were huge, and resistance to the abolishment of slavery and the slave trade grew as the years passed.

As the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 opened new territories to the cultivation of cotton and sugar, slavery began to expand into the Northwest Territories, despite a prohibitive law passed in 1787. Seeing this, African Americans actively rejected colonization and began agitating for equal rights in the nation their labors had helped to build. Child watched in Norridgewock as Maine's statehood was tied to Missouri's admission as a slave state. In her children's book, *Evenings in New England* (1824), she featured "The Little Master and His Little Slave," seeming to endorse gradual voluntary emancipation and relocation, but barely reining in her strong feelings against slavery. Even then, she went far beyond most abolitionists in calling for colonization in Haiti, a republic established by slave revolutionaries, rather than Liberia, "a puppet state for emancipated slaves established by the slaveholder-dominated American Colonization Society" (Karcher *Lydia* 135-36).

The turning point in Child's activism came in 1830 when she met William Lloyd Garrison, a passionate young abolitionist who admired her writing and recruited her to the cause. At that time co-editor of the abolitionist paper *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, he advocated immediate emancipation and offered space to any African American who wished to protest colonization. In 1831, he established his own paper, *The Liberator*, in which he "repudiate[d] all colonization schemes" in an editorial dated 22 January (Karcher *Lydia* 136). At the same time, Child was including articles against slavery in nearly every issue of her *Juvenile Miscellany*. "Jumbo and Zairee," also published in January 1831, is militantly against colonization, depicting in graphic detail the cruelty of the whites, the evils of slavery and the slave trade, and the immorality of not freeing slaves once injustices are understood.

During this time, Child was also gathering material for what would become her *Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, published in 1833. Significantly, the title defines blacks as Americans and not a separate race. The *Appeal* was the first and most comprehensive book printed in America to call for immediate emancipation of slaves, an end to all forms of racial discrimination, and the integration of African Americans as equal citizens. Her research was exhaustive, but as she stated in the preface, she was “fully aware of the unpopularity of the task I have undertaken... expect[ing] ridicule and censure” (Osborne *Lydia* 25). The work explored the history of slavery and the African slave trade; compared America with other slave societies, and described the American slave law as the harshest in the world; offered a possible explanation for safe emancipation and the potential for increased profitability of free labor; objected to the American Colonization Society; examined how the Constitution allowed slaveholding states to dominate Congress and national policy; refuted charges that Africans were intellectually inferior and morally debased, and condemned prejudice in the North (Karcher *Lydia* 137). The *Appeal* was unique in its dismantling of racist ideology and its positive treatment of African cultures. Its publication gave Child a respected and prominent place in the abolitionist movement and a position of political influence never before realized by a woman. It also recruited many future leaders to the cause, including the Republican Senator Charles Sumner.

There was a negative side to the publication, as well. Child paid a tremendous professional price for having her say, particularly against racism: subscriptions to the *Juvenile Miscellany* plummeted and she was forced to close the magazine; readers boycotted and book sales dropped to nothing; the Boston Athenaeum cancelled her library privileges (which drastically curtailed her research), and a prominent politician publicly threw a copy of the *Appeal* out of his window. Those associated with the South attacked the *Appeal* and its author, including northern merchants, manufacturers, bankers, politicians, newspaper editors, and clergymen.

If Child did not cause it, her *Appeal* certainly contributed to the increase in civil unrest that followed. In the North, riots broke out, led by gentlemen of property, and abolitionist speakers were barred from city halls and churches. Abolitionist meetings were disrupted, printing presses were destroyed, and leaders were threatened with

lynching. Elijah Lovejoy, an abolitionist newspaper editor, was killed and British antislavery lecturer George Thompson barely escaped an anti-abolitionist mob. In the South, abolitionist sympathizers, real or imagined, were run out of town or physically attacked. Child actively participated in a “mailing” of abolitionist literature to white Southerners that sparked mob ransacking of post offices and bonfires of “offensive documents.” Congress passed a “gag rule” that tabled anti-slavery petitions (Karcher *Lydia* 137-38).

It was not America’s finest hour. In September of that year, Nat Turner led a rebellion and southern states began to talk recession. By 1834, forty-seven associations pledged to fight for immediate abolition had organized in ten states (Karcher *Lydia* 138). Throughout the decade, tensions ran high and bitter infighting resulted in factions on all sides of the conflict. African American leaders adopted militant measures to protect against kidnappers and some even began advocating a form of colonization. The Childs were not immune; on August 1, 1838, they found a leaflet tacked to their door that read, “First of August! ON THIS DAY ABOUT 500,000 Persons in the British West Indies, will be emancipated from Slavery.” The words “persons” was scratched out and “Niggers” put in its place” (Meltzer *Lydia* 79).

Because of these splits and factions, Child was asked to lend a reasonable voice to the editorship of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, based in New York. She was the first woman in the U.S. to take charge of a newspaper oriented to an issue of public policy (Meltzer *Lydia* 139). Holding the post from May 1841 to May 1843, she acted as mediator between abolitionist factions and treated African Americans with respect. Instead of trading insults, as previous editors had done, she dialogued with them and asked them to consider alternatives. In her two-year tenure, she changed the face of the paper by gearing its content toward the general public rather than abolitionists already won to the cause. The many articles Child wrote for the paper, “To Abolitionists,” “The Iron Shroud,” and “Annette Gray,” in particular, were written to close the gaps between factions so that the abolition of slavery could again be their common goal. She even took special pains to praise the non-abolitionist John Quincy Adams for his campaign against the gag rule.

Child continued to use fiction to promote empathy for slaves, although most of

her writings during this time took the form of factual tracts and articles. In “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes,” she fictionalized rapes, murders, revenge cases, and stories of heroic self-sacrifice that had been reported in newspapers. In “The Black Saxons,” she reminded readers that their Anglo-Saxon ancestors had once been slaves to conquering Normans. She tried every means known to her to heal the breaches between the factions of her readership, and she nearly ruined her health attempting to bring peace to the movement so that efforts and energies could be pooled to make a positive difference. Finally, exhausted and discouraged, she resigned her position as editor of the *Standard* and her memberships in abolitionist societies to resume her literary career.

During the years that followed, the political climate worsened as the slave empire expanded to the Pacific coast, continued atrocities were reported in the South, slave catchers roamed the streets of northern cities, terrorism increased nationwide, and finally, in December 1855, civil war broke out between pro- and anti-slavery immigrants in Kansas. Child had turned her activist efforts toward other issues where she thought she might make a difference, but in the summer of 1856, she was moved to action. Charles Sumner, the senator from Massachusetts whom she had recruited to abolition through her writings, was brutally caned on the floor of the Senate for delivering a speech denouncing the “rape” of Kansas by proslavery settlers and their congressional allies. In response, she wrote “The Kansas Emigrants” and serialized it in daily and weekly editions of the *New York Tribune* immediately preceding the 1856 presidential election (Karcher *Lydia* 142).

With this story, Child attempted to unify antislavery factions behind the two groups that were most effectively challenging southern dominance - the settlers fighting to make Kansas a free state and the Republican party, which opposed the spread of slavery. She had never before supported armed conflict, nor had she dabbled in party politics, but what she had been advocating for so many years, a peaceful means of abolishing slavery, had been tried and ignored. She abhorred violent methods but agreed to a need for action. She considered it unconscionable that Sumner could not express his views without suffering for it. She was distrustful of politicians (except Sumner), but admitted an ambivalence about violence. In a letter to Sumner, she wrote, “I honor those who conscientiously fight for justice, truth, or freedom; but I revere those who will *die* to

advance great principles, though they will not *kill*” (Karcher *Lydia* 143).

This philosophy helps to explain Child’s involvement with John Brown after his October 16, 1859 raid of Harpers Ferry, Virginia; she rejected his methods but admired his heroism. She and other abolitionists had first become aware of him because of his reprisals against proslavery atrocities in Kansas and when he led a flight across slave territory to take fugitives to Canada. Six men, among them Child’s nephew-in-law, George Luther Stearns, and her friend and biographer Thomas Wentworth Higginson, agreed to finance a plan Brown had developed to strike a blow against slavery. This turned out to be his raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Whether Brown’s plan was designed to be a suicide mission or a hit-and-run on the arsenal no one will ever know, but he became a martyr to the cause, and that deeply affected Child.

Militarily, the plan was a disaster; of the sixteen whites and five blacks Brown led, ten were killed in the raid, including two of Brown’s sons. Of the twelve survivors of the battle, seven were captured, tried, and hanged. Of the five that escaped, Osborne Anderson published the only eyewitness account of the raid by an African American participant, *A Voice from Harpers Ferry*, in 1861. Still, as Brown lay bleeding on a pallet on the floor of the armory, saying “I pity the poor in bondage that have none to help them: that is why I am here,” he was gaining a convert to his cause of mobilizing the North for a war against slavery (Karcher *Lydia* 144-45). Child wrote to him, in care of Governor Henry Wise, offering to travel to the armory to nurse him. When he replied that she could do him a greater service by attending to his family, she did so.

Child was shocked, but not dismayed, when *Correspondence between Lydia Maria Child and Gov. Wise and Mrs. Mason, of Virginia* (wife of Senator James M. Mason) was published. Wise had initiated the publication, and he and Mason had accused Child of fanaticism and hypocrisy. The correspondence was reprinted as a tract that sold 300,000 copies. Child later stated, “[Whether] John Brown did wrong, or not; whether he was sane, or not, all I know, or care to know, is that his example has stirred me up to consecrate myself with renewed earnestness to the righteous cause for which he died so bravely” (Osborne *Lydia* 35).

Within the next 18 months, before war broke out, Child began a whirlwind of tract-writing and activism. Mob violence continued to sweep the North, and the South

threatened to secede if Abraham Lincoln was elected president. He was, and they did, beginning with South Carolina in December 1860. In April 1861, Confederate troops fired on Fort Sumter and the Civil War began. On August 22, 1862, Child wrote to Lincoln, passionately reiterating how she and other abolitionists differed from him in their goals. Lincoln wanted to save the Union; Child, Garrison, and other abolitionists wanted to destroy slavery and reconstruct a nation based on racial equality. She felt it was “absurd policy ... [t]o send back those [fugitive slaves] who want to *serve* us” when they would be “employed by the rebels to help them in *shooting* us” (Karcher *Lydia* 145). All agreed on the need for an emancipation proclamation.

In 1860, Child wrote, “I feel as if every day were lost, in which I do not try to do something to hasten emancipation” (Meltzer *Lydia* 324). She wrote an anti-slavery tract titled *The Duty of Disobedience to the Fugitive Slave Act: An Appeal to the Legislators of Massachusetts*, in which she related a 1,500-year-old story about Gregory, a Christian bishop in Asia Minor, who preached a sermon rebuking the sin of slaveholding: “Show me, then, your titles of possession. Tell me whence you derive this strange claim. Is not your own nature the same with that of those you call your slaves? Have they not the same origin with yourselves? Are they not born to the same immortal destinies?” (Conrad *In* 474-75).

In 1861, Child also edited Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a heart-wrenching but not pitiful account of a life lived in slavery and a glorious struggle for freedom. In her Introduction, Child explained, “I do this for the sake of my sisters in bondage who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them” (Jacobs *Incidents* 4). Because she treated Jacob’s story matter-of-factly, as the author herself did, the words have retained their stark power, albeit “no pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery” (Jacobs *Incidents* 51).

The next year, Child published her tract *The Right Way the Safe Way, Proved by Emancipation in the British West Indies, and Elsewhere*, and at her own expense, mailed them to legislators in an attempt to appeal to the economic interests of southerners. Throughout the war, she wrote a great number of tracts; continued her abolitionist activities; lobbied Congress to protect African Americans, slave and free, from border

patrols; petitioned to allow them the right to fight for their own liberty by joining the Union army, and suggested granting them freedom and land for their military service. Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, was a former Tennessee slaveholder, and after he took office, the gap between abolitionists and President widened. After the war, as he slowly restored the property rights of ex-Confederates, Child proposed that plantations be divided into 40-acre parcels and allocated to freedmen. Instead, Johnson readmitted former Confederate states to the Union with little change to their Constitutions and no provisions for black suffrage. This put the freedmen at the mercy of the states and kept them in a state of quasi-slavery. Almost immediately, Black Codes were passed in several southern states virtually re-instituting slavery. Johnson also demobilized the Union Army.

Ironically, the culmination of these actions increased the ranks of the abolitionists and, in 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified, granting voting rights to all male U.S. citizens regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude" (Karcher *Lydia* 149-50). This was an achievement for the abolitionists, but Child felt it wasn't enough. Throughout the decade of the 1860s, she had contributed works to the cause on subjects she felt would most help, *The Freedmen's Book* in 1865 and, throughout, articles for the *Independent* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. The articles assessed the gains of the war, problems of Reconstruction, and necessary long-range objectives, calling abolitionists to complete their work. *The Freedmen's Book* was Child's way of providing information freedmen needed to make the most of their opportunities. She and her publisher, Ticknor and Fields, paid for the printing and she refused royalties, instead giving them to the Freedmen's Association (Osborne *Lydia* 37). A primer and self-help guide, it began from the premise that freedmen must first learn to read to create a pride in identity, and then benefit from the practical information it offered. It was also a history text, with inspirational stories of successful liberations from oppressive societies, biographical sketches of black role models, and articles by African American authors. Although, in retrospect, it fell short of providing realistic material that could make a difference in everyday lives, it was a worthy effort and served to established cohesiveness and group identity.

Congress never seriously considered Child's land redistribution proposal. The Ku

Klux Klan's reign of terror expanded. The 1873 depression and scandals within the Grant administration, along with Rutherford B. Hayes' removal of the last troops from the South in 1877, were the final blows to the hopes of the abolitionists and freedmen. To escape terror and oppression, thousands of blacks fled the South into the North and West in what was called the Negro Exodus. Most went to Kansas (Meltzer *Lydia* 557). Yet, on December 19 of that year, Child wrote to Sarah Shaw, "I don't feel so sad as you do about the transition-state in which we are living. I admit that it is not so *pleasant* as a quiet adherence to old opinions and traditional forms. But transition is necessary to *growth*; and the same universal laws of Providence take care of the souls of men in states of transition, (as well) as in the places where they have rested for a while. The chrysalis seems a dead thing; but there is a beautiful winged creature within it, and in due time it comes forth" (Meltzer *Lydia* 546).

When William Lloyd Garrison died in 1879, Child was forced to admit that the end of an era had come. To Francis Jackson Garrison, she wrote, "My radicalism grows more pronounced, the older I grow." To Anne Whitney, she confided, "I remember very distinctly the first time I ever saw Garrison. I little thought then that the whole pattern of my life-web would be changed by that introduction. I was then all absorbed in poetry and painting, soaring aloft, on Psyche-wings, into the ethereal regions of mysticism. He got hold of the strings of my conscience, and pulled me into Reforms. It is of no use to imagine what might have been, if I had never met him. Old dreams vanished, old associates departed, and all things became new.... I could not otherwise, so help me God!" (Meltzer *Lydia* 558).

The struggle had lasted forty years, and those with the old fire for the cause were passing away. Yet, in a eulogy for her old friend, Child celebrated Garrison's values, drawing from the experience of his life, for the benefit of future generations, that one person who was fully dedicated to a righteous cause could revolutionize the world. She wrote of hope in a dark time and moral courage in a cowardly age. It was her own last message to the world.

## EPILOGUE

With the advantage of hindsight, who then was Lydia Maria Child? What literary, social, and political contributions did she truly make to nineteenth-century America? Tributes and obituaries, published in the months following her death on October 20, 1880, lamented that the press did not appreciate the significance of her cultural and political contributions. The *Nation* bemoaned the *New York Times* report that American housewives would mourn the author of *The Frugal Housewife*. Only the *Springfield Republican* wrote, “At one time Mrs. Child was almost at the head of journalism in America, as we now understand it” (Karcher *First* 605). There was a sense that Child had been a woman of her time, and that time had passed.

In 1899, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her contemporary, wrote, “She was one of those prominent instances in our literature of persons born for the pursuits of pure intellect, whose intellects were yet balanced by their hearts, both being absorbed in the great moral agitations of the age.... [Because] she was placed where there was as yet no exacting literary standard.... She did not...win that intellectual immortality which only the very best writers command, and which few Americans have attained. But she won a mead which she would value more highly, that warmth of sympathy, that mingled gratitude of intellect and heart which men give to those who have faithfully served their day and generation” (Higginson *Contemporaries* 140-41). After the turn of the century, all evidence of Child’s former influence dropped out of sight.

What can she contribute to our society today? We struggle with many of the same challenges that faced those of her time; her writings can give us insight into our own issues and ease our struggles. She lived through an unsettled and agonizing period of our country’s history. So do we. By studying her works, we can understand how she and her peers approached social challenges, possibly benefiting from what she worked so diligently and wanted so desperately to share.

Through sheer strength of will, the “First Woman of the Republic” triumphed over personal disappointment and public ostracism during one of the most challenging periods of our country’s history. In her time, she was a powerful force for social change.

“To recover Child’s vision in our own era is to experience the same empowerment”  
(Karcher *First* 607). Instead of remembering her for authoring a children’s poem, if we remember her at all, it would be far more fitting and productive to resurrect and act upon her timeless and still sorely needed message of equal and unlimited opportunity for all.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Paula Anderson was born in Michigan, spent her childhood in the North, attended high school and college in central Florida and raised a family in Minnesota and Virginia before relocating with them to Tallahassee. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature, with honors, from the University of Wisconsin in conjunction with the State University of New York. Long a believer in the power of communication, Ms. Anderson has, over the course of a varied professional career, served as teacher, librarian, writer and editor. After being a Director of Publications at Florida State University for several years, she is now a Public Information Officer and Trainer with the Office of Communications of the Florida Department of Health. Ms. Anderson has also operated a freelance writing and editing business for many years and will soon be an instructor for an area community college. Like Lydia Maria Child, she truly believes that equal opportunity, diligence, understanding and humor could cure the majority of society's ills.