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# John Rankin, Antislavery Prophet, and the Free Presbyterian Church

by Larry G. Willey

THE OHIO RIVER WAS ICE-COVERED when John Rankin crossed it with his family on January 1, 1822, and made his way to the home of Colonel James Pogue in Ripley, Ohio. Within a week he accepted a call to serve the little Presbyterian congregation in Ripley and the one at Straight Creek, eight miles to the north, fulfilling a goal he had set for himself early in 1817—to settle his family in a free state.

Ohio was just emerging from its frontier status. Two more years would pass before it seated its first native-born legislator. Native Americans, reduced to fewer than 3,000 after the War of 1812, were isolated in the northwest section of the state. A mass migration of people from the east and south pushed its population to nearly 600,000, double the number recorded in 1810. All but 35,000 of its people lived on farms or in villages of fewer than 100 people. Only Cincinnati, still under 10,000, could be dignified with the title “city.”

Still suffering from the effects of the Panic of 1819, Ohio was economically isolated and would continue so until a series of canals began to take shape in 1825. Public school education was nonexistent and higher education was just beginning to make an impact. Politi-

cally, Ohio was not yet strongly partisan. State election contests were decided primarily on the basis of personalities. Issues and parties would not be sharply drawn until the 1824 national elections.

John Rankin and his wife and four children found Ripley still very much a frontier river town. Slightly over four hundred in population, its reputation for immorality and vice was well established in the area. Located on the Ohio River, fifty miles southeast of Cincinnati, the town was laid out in 1812 by Colonel Pogue and named Staunton, after Staunton, Virginia. It was later changed to Ripley, in honor of an officer in the War of 1812. Most of the families who settled in Ripley and the surrounding area came from Virginia and Kentucky.

In early April 1822, Rankin presented his letter of dismissal from the Presbytery of Ebenezer in Kentucky and was received into the Presbytery of Chillicothe, which had been newly erected in October 1821 by the Synod of Ohio to include the counties of Ross, Fayette, Highland, Pike, Adams, Brown, and the eastern parts of Clermont and Clinton. At this first meeting of the presbytery, Rankin joined twelve other ministers, at least seven of whom, like Rankin, were

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southern by birth and antislavery by choice.

### I

Opposition to slavery had been the controlling dynamic of John Rankin's life from the time he was licensed by the Presbytery of Abingdon (Virginia and Tennessee) in the spring of 1817. Born in 1793 near Dandridge in Tennessee, a slave state, John was taught to hate slavery by his mother, Jane Steele Rankin, and those lessons were probably reinforced by Samuel Doak during his tenure at Washington College in Jonesboro. Rankin continued to study theology and prepare for ministry under Doak. When he was licensed in 1817, his willingness to express antislavery opinions made some members of the presbytery nervous. He preached a sermon against "forms of oppression" and roused the ire of local slaveholders, who warned him not to repeat it. When he did, they informed him that he would not be permitted to preach against slavery and invited him to leave the state.<sup>1</sup>

Rankin refused to compromise his antislavery convictions or moral principles. He began to plan a move north to a free state, setting out in the fall of 1817 with his wife, Jean, and infant son, Adam Lowry. A jaded horse and the prospect of winter caused the family to pause in Paris, Kentucky, where they lodged with Dr. James Blythe, pastor of the Presbyterian church. Blythe and another Presbyterian pastor, John Lyle, persuaded Rankin to accept a call to the Concord Church, sixteen miles to the north, near Carlisle.<sup>2</sup>

One of the reasons Rankin was willing to remain in a slave state was Samuel Donnell, an elder of the Concord Church. Donnell had worked hard in 1792 to adopt a state constitution that banned slavery. Though the attempt failed, Donnell and others maintained an active antislavery presence over the years

in the Presbyterian Church and through the Kentucky Abolition Society (KAS). Indeed, Donnell led the local branch of the KAS which included many members of the Concord congregation.<sup>3</sup>

Joining the Presbytery of Ebenezer, Rankin began a four-year pastorate which allowed him to pursue antislavery work in three areas: his own personal work with slaves in the Carlisle area, antislavery preaching and witness in his congregation and in the presbytery, and activity on behalf of the KAS through its Concord branch. Here his antislavery knowledge was increased and his experience broadened. He experienced first hand the impact of the slave system on all parts of society. He learned how difficult it was to assist the slave in a racist society. He discovered who were his enemies and who were his allies.

The Kentucky years were productive primarily inwardly, maturing Rankin as an antislavery advocate, rather than outwardly, altering the Presbyterian Church and society on behalf of the slave. Still they were important and exciting years and in spite of lack of outward progress in most arenas, he would willingly have stayed and maintained the fight because he had strong congregational support and the presence of the KAS.

In the end it was the economy, not opposition, that terminated his stay in a slave state. The Panic of 1819 hit Kentucky hard. Rankin was chronically in debt because the payment of his salary was erratic. He had to mortgage his lot and house. This situation described most of his parishioners. In addition, the debates surrounding the passage of the Missouri Compromise in 1820 crystallized attitudes toward slavery and resistance to antislavery efforts greatly increased. Family after family in Rankin's congregation packed up and migrated to free states. He watched his financial support continue to deteriorate and his antislavery base evaporate. Finally, he



*Yours Truly  
John Rankin*

sold his property, settled his debts, and followed his parishioners to a free state.<sup>4</sup>

## II

When Rankin joined the new Presbytery of Chillicothe in the spring of 1822, he found himself again surrounded by colleagues with strong antislavery sentiments. Several of the ministers had already served in southwest Ohio for many years and worked actively against slavery within the Presbyterian Church. William Williamson (from South Carolina) had served churches in the region since 1805. At the first meeting of the Synod of Ohio in 1814, he was part of a committee which presented a resolution condemning the slave trade and petitioning the General Assembly to purge the church of the sin of slavery. James Gilliland (North Carolina) began serving in southwest Ohio in 1805, along with Robert G. Wilson (North Carolina). Both worked with Williamson on anti-

slavery resolutions at the presbytery and synod levels from 1814 on. James H. Dickey (Virginia and Kentucky) and Dyer Burgess (Vermont) represented their presbyteries as commissioners to the General Assembly of 1818 and brought an antislavery overture which resulted in the Resolution of 1818, the strongest antislavery witness of the Presbyterian Church to date. Samuel Crothers (Pennsylvania and Kentucky) began serving in Ohio and Kentucky in 1810. William Dickey (South Carolina and Kentucky—a half brother of James H. Dickey) began service in 1817. And Samuel D. Hoge (Virginia) moved to Ohio in 1821. All had antislavery backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>

Rankin willingly joined these kindred spirits. He had moved his family from Kentucky in order to escape the oppression of a slave state, but he had no intentions of abandoning the cause of the slave. His opportunity to serve that cause was not long arriving. In December 1823, he received a letter from his brother Thomas, a merchant in Middlebrook, Virginia, who informed him that he had just purchased some slaves. The defection from the solid antislavery ranks of the Rankin family caused John, and undoubtedly the rest of the family, much anguish.

In response, John Rankin began to compose a series of letters, designed to reveal the sin and horror of slavery and persuade Thomas to emancipate his new slaves. He had purchased a lot in town and constructed a large building, dividing it into three tenements, to house his growing family. He rented one tenement to David Ammen in the fall of 1823. Ammen moved his family and some printing equipment in and began making plans to publish a newspaper called the *Castigator*. The first edition appeared in June 1824. Ammen agreed to publish the letters to Thomas. John chose to send his letters via a newspaper because it could be mailed at a much cheaper rate than a letter and the paper offered

an opportunity to give antislavery literature a broader audience.<sup>6</sup> So, on August 17, 1824, the first of a series of twenty-one letters, titled simply *Letters on Slavery*, appeared in the paper. The last was published on February 22, 1825.

His purpose was not to marshal a series of arguments against the system of slavery but rather to bring home to Thomas (and others) the enormity of the evils involved in subjecting another human being to the consequences of total bondage. Drawing primarily on personal experience and scripture, Rankin continually steered his discussion out of the realm of abstract arguments to the personal level. He exhorted Thomas to imagine himself a slave, subjected to the unrelenting lash and authority of a cruel master:

And unless you do this I am afraid you will be often offended with my warmth and severity. We are naturally too callous to the sufferings of others, and consequently prone to look upon them with cold indifference, until, in imagination we identify ourselves with the sufferers, and make their sufferings our own. . . . When I look upon slavery as a distant thing, and inflicted upon an indifferent race of beings, it seems to wear a tolerable aspect, but when I bring it near, inspect it closely, and find that it is inflicted upon men and women, who possess the same nature and feelings with myself, my sensibility is immediately aroused—but when I, who sustain the relations of husband and father, see a husband and father whipped severely in the presence of his wife and children, and that perhaps merely to gratify the caprice of an ill-natured master, my feelings become indignant—and when I see the mother most cruelly scourged in the presence of her husband and children, my feelings grow intolerable—my soul sickens at the sight and my indignation almost prompts me to unlawful deeds of vengeance. . . . Had you, my brother, to endure all these cruelties, would you not abhor the law that permitted them to be inflicted upon you? And would you not detest all the people, who, either in theory or practice, gave it their sanction?<sup>7</sup>

When Rankin decided to publish the letters in book form in 1826, he revised and enlarged the text, reducing the let-

ters from twenty-one to thirteen, thereby sharpening and clarifying the contents. The letters were divided into six parts. The first letter discussed the reasons for prejudice against the Africans. The second rejected arguments that Africans were created for slavery. Letters three through nine detailed the evil effects of slavery upon victim and master alike. The tenth letter denied any nonscriptural basis for slavery. Letters eleven, twelve, and the opening part of thirteen illustrated how the Bible opposed slavery. In the closing letter, Rankin demolished six common excuses given for maintaining the system of slavery, and concluded with a warning and a plea for justice:

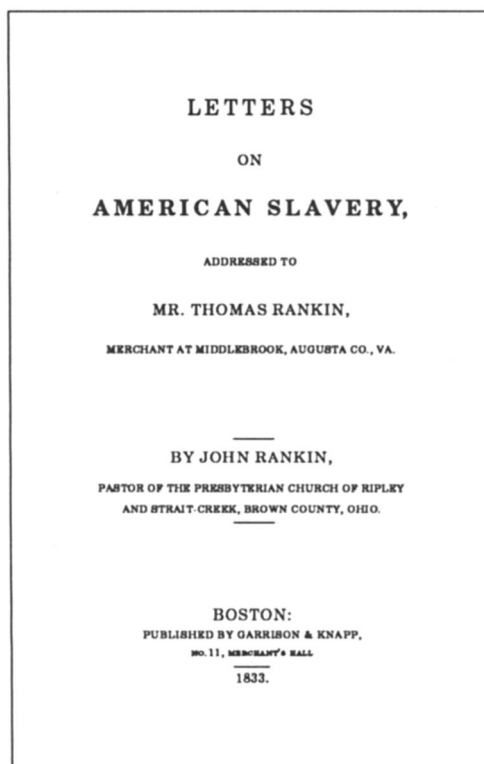
We are commanded to “do justly and love mercy,” and this we ought to do without delay, and leave the consequences attending it to the control of Him who gave the command. We ought also to remember that no excuse for disobedience will avail us anything when he shall call us to judgment. If we refuse to do the Africans justice, we may expect the supreme Governor of the world to avenge their wrongs, and cause their own arm to make them free! Hence our own safety demands their liberation. Hold them in bondage, and you will inure them to hardship, and prepare them for the day of battle. You will also keep them together, increase their numbers, and enable them to overpower the nation. Their enormous increase, beyond that of the white population, is truly alarming. But liberate them, and their increase will become proportionate to the rest of the nation. They will scatter over this Union—many of them will emigrate to Hayti and Africa. Prepare them for citizenship, and give them the privileges of free men, and they will have no inducements to do us harm; but persist in oppressing them, and ruin will eventually burst upon our nation. The storm is gathering fast—dismal clouds already begin to darken our horizon! A few more years, and the work of death will commence!<sup>8</sup>

The circulation of the *Castigator* was not large and there is no evidence that there was much response to the series. Early in 1826, Rankin arranged reduced rent for Ammen in return for the printing of one thousand copies in book form. It

was tiny in size (3" x 4"). Lacking money, he hired a Maysville, Kentucky bookseller named Cox to bind them a few at a time. Five hundred were completed in this manner and furnished to various outlets, including Cox's bookstore, for distribution. The book created more of a stir than the newspaper series, in spite of small numbers and a circulation limited to southern Ohio and northern Kentucky. It created discussion, raised consciences, and in the opinion of some, motivated many people to become part of the underground railroad that shepherded fugitive slaves to freedom. Rankin quickly became the target of personal abuse. Then, early one summer morning, the warehouse in Maysville, which contained the remaining five hundred unbound copies of the first edition, was set afire and burned to the ground.

The destruction of the warehouse and its contents ended Rankin's publishing venture. He had no funds to print another edition and assumed that the book would never be reissued. The letters more than accomplished their purpose, however. Thomas Rankin brought his slaves to Ohio and emancipated them. The book was warmly received throughout the Presbytery of Chillicothe, no doubt aiding the forces that were moving this body of Presbyterians toward a more vocal policy against slavery. And John Rankin's reputation as a friend of the slave was firmly established. His home became one of the busiest stations on the underground railroad in the Ohio Valley.<sup>9</sup>

*Letters on Slavery*, however, was destined to play a much more significant role against slavery during the 1830s and 1840s. William Lloyd Garrison began a crusade for immediate emancipation early in 1831 with the founding of the *Liberator* and the New England Anti-Slavery Society. Joshua Coffin, a Quaker and leader in the antislavery society, heard about *Letters on Slavery* from a clergyman who had traveled in the West.



Acquainted with Dyer Burgess, he wrote and enquired about obtaining a copy. Burgess obligingly sent one. Garrison was impressed and immediately serialized the book in the *Liberator*. He published it in book form in 1833. It is probable that at least ten and possibly as many as twenty separate editions of the book, now titled *Letters on American Slavery*, were published by various antislavery groups between 1833 and 1850.<sup>10</sup> It became standard reading for agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society and members of hundreds of local antislavery societies which were formed in the 1830s and 1840s.

### III

Meanwhile, the decade of the 1820s was an important time of transition in antislavery understanding for John Rankin and the ministers of the Presbytery of Chillicothe. In 1818, the General Assembly had passed a resolution de-

claring slavery to be “utterly inconsistent with the law of God” and “totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the Gospel of Christ.” It enjoined all Christians to work “as speedily as possible to abolish slavery throughout Christendom and the world.” This action had satisfied most antislavery advocates for the time being. In Ohio efforts were again focused on the local rather than national scene. In 1820, James Gilliland produced a pamphlet against slavery. In 1824, John Rankin wrote his *Letters on Slavery*. Rankin, Gilliland, the Dickey brothers, and others began to rally to the support of the American Colonization Society, which advocated gradual emancipation by colonizing freed slaves in Liberia. Dyer Burgess, however, repeatedly warned them that colonization was not a realistic long-range solution and would only drain efforts away from the real task—emancipation of all slaves. His protests fell on deaf ears.<sup>11</sup>

As the decade progressed, these men became more and more disturbed by the course of events. The Missouri Compromise debates had revealed a chilling panorama of proslavery attitudes in the nation. The vast majority of people, north and south, remained apathetic to anti-slavery appeals. The slave population was increasing at an alarming rate and the institution of slavery prospered in terms of expansion and apologists. The Resolution of 1818 had no effect in removing it from the Presbyterian Church. Slavery was an ever deepening stain on a nation otherwise moving toward perfection.

The Presbytery of Chillicothe rose to the challenge. In September 1827 it voted to prepare a hundred copies of an anti-slavery pamphlet by Dyer Burgess for distribution among members for resale. In April 1828 the presbytery referred the following question to the General Assembly: “Is the man who buys or sells or holds a slave, for the sake of gain, a

partaker in guilt with the man-stealer? And may such a one be admitted to, or continued in the communion of the Presbyterian Church?” The General Assembly made no reply.<sup>12</sup>

By September 1829 the Presbytery of Chillicothe’s concern with slavery had taken a markedly sharper tone: “Resolved, that the buying, selling or holding of a slave for the sake of gain is a heinous sin and scandal, and requires the cognizance of the judicatories of the church.” Thus, the presbytery answered for itself the question it had referred to the General Assembly in 1828. In addition, it appointed Samuel Crothers and James Gilliland to prepare a pastoral letter to the churches under its care on the subject of slavery. Eventually eighteen thousand copies were produced (probably six to eight times the number of communicants in the presbytery!) and members of the presbytery contributed \$100 out of their own pockets to defray the expenses of printing.<sup>13</sup>

In the fall of 1830, now a part of the newly created Synod of Cincinnati, Rankin and his colleagues in the Presbytery of Chillicothe convinced the synod to affirm that slaveholding was “a heinous sin and scandal” and to set aside a day for fasting, humiliation, and prayer in the churches of the synod because of the deplorable condition of the black population. A committee was appointed (all from the Presbytery of Chillicothe) to correspond with other synods to take action against slavery.<sup>14</sup>

The Nat Turner rebellion (1831) and the resulting debates on slavery in the Virginia General Assembly removed the last shreds of hope that any effective movement toward emancipation would come out of the South. But even as their despair deepened, the antislavery stalwarts in southwestern Ohio began to hear about a movement in the east led by William Lloyd Garrison which was forming antislavery societies in opposition to colonization societies and call-

ing for immediate and unconditional emancipation of all slaves.

#### IV

Early in 1834, Theodore Weld, a disciple of immediatism and a student at newly founded Lane Seminary (Presbyterian) in Cincinnati, organized a series of debates to convince students that colonization was a bankrupt system and that slavery could be eliminated only through immediate emancipation. Rankin heard about it and traveled to Cincinnati with several other clergy from the Presbytery of Chillicothe to attend the nine evenings of debate.<sup>15</sup> Any remaining vestiges of gradualism disappeared from them as a result of this experience. They identified easily with the gospel of immediatism—immediate repentance of the sin of slaveholding, which would result ultimately in the total abolition of slavery. Their views and attitudes did not change much, if at all. They were simply imbued with an evangelical fervor and urgency that now recognized slavery as the greatest national sin that must be dealt with if the young nation was to be redeemed.

The immediate impact of the Lane debates and conversion to immediatism was to cause John Rankin and the men of the Presbytery of Chillicothe to shift the focus of their antislavery efforts from the local scene (presbyteries and synod) to the national scene (General Assembly and other synods) and to extend those efforts beyond Presbyterianism by joining the growing northern movement led by the American Anti-Slavery Society. They invited Weld to lecture in their towns and churches. They helped him form local antislavery societies. Their hopes rose as they watched these societies grow and multiply across sectarian lines. They became “abolitionists” in a new and restricted sense. An abolitionist was now someone who belonged to an antislavery society, who believed that

slavery was a sin, that slaves should be freed immediately, unconditionally, without expatriation or compensation to owners, and who subscribed (at least theoretically) to the doctrine of racial equality.

During the next five years (1834–39), John Rankin’s antislavery hopes surged to the heights and plunged to the depths. He watched approvingly as many Presbyterian churches, presbyteries, and synods adopted more stringent attitudes against slavery and began to press the General Assembly to bar slaveholders from the church. But he observed anxiously the long-dormant Old School–New School theological controversy come alive and heresy trials appear across the church, signaling an internal power struggle that would bring schism in 1837. On the national scene he aided a powerful northern antislavery crusade which produced new abolitionists and antislavery societies with much the same methods and efficiency that the Great Revival of the 1820s had produced new converts and churches. But he watched nervously as a power struggle began to develop within the American Anti-Slavery Society between conservatives who wanted to make the cause political and a single issue and liberals who viewed the political process as corrupt, evil, and proslavery and who wished to champion other controversial issues, such as participation of women in all aspects of society. Schism would shatter this young movement in 1840.

Rankin was in his prime during these turbulent years. The little Ripley church doubled in size. The Presbytery of Chillicothe, led by Rankin, Gilliland, Crothers, Burgess, and others, had a powerful antislavery impact on the Synod of Cincinnati and made its presence felt at the General Assemblies of 1835 and 1836 with antislavery resolutions and arguments, only to see it all turn to ashes with the Schism of 1837. At the height of his optimism, he accepted a commis-



sion from the American Anti-Slavery Society to serve as an agent. He began his agency promptly on August 1, 1836 when he received word from Cincinnati that a mob had ransacked the office of the *Philanthropist*, an antislavery newspaper, and thrown the press into the Ohio River. Rankin's good friend James G. Birney, a Presbyterian layman, was editor of the *Philanthropist*. The two now joined others as the band of "the Seventy," commissioned by the American Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>16</sup> Rankin stumped southwestern Ohio until mid-January 1837, lecturing with evangelical fervor, adding members to existing antislavery societies and helping to organize new ones. In January, however, winter combined with physical and emotional stress to break his health and force him home to Ripley. Recovery was long and not always certain. From his sick bed he watched schism become a reality within his beloved Presbyterian Church.

He had spoken against schism vigorously with pen and voice. In the fall of 1836, he had published a letter to fellow Presbyterians in the *Cincinnati Journal*, expressing his "painful emotions" over the fact that some were contemplating secession from the Presbyterian Church. He outlined five arguments against it: (1) Secession is sinful—opposed to the example and doctrines of Christ and the apostles. (2) The apostles spoke unanimously against it. (3) The constitution of the Presbyterian Church was against it. To secede was to violate the most fundamental vows of ordination and membership. (4) "Nothing can be gained by secession as it respects the purity of the great body of the church. It will lessen rather than extend the influence of the seceders." (5) Great evil will result from secession. The entire strength of the Presbyterian Church will be turned upon itself in self-destruction. Infidelity will triumph and the nation will become a sink of immorality.<sup>17</sup>

Now, however, schism had come and

he was faced with making a choice between the Old School and the New School that was exceedingly painful. John Rankin had always been an Old School conservative. So too, the other ministers in the Presbytery of Chillicothe. As he considered his options, however, his hatred of slavery began to dominate his thinking. He noticed that most southerners were Old School adherents. Indeed, their price for the alliance with northern conservatives that resulted in the excision of whole synods of New School "heretics" in 1837 had been continued silence on the slavery issue. Rankin reasoned that it would be possible to persuade the New School General Assembly to expel slaveholders because there were comparatively fewer of them than in the Old School.

Now with voice and pen he began to call his colleagues to join the New School and make it an antislavery utopia—a model for the rest of society. He turned all the arguments he used in 1836 against schism around and issued a call to come out of a corrupt, unconstitutional Old School into the moral purity of an antislavery New School. He admitted that New School adherents were theologically suspect, but if they were antislavery, they were at least redeemable and their company was far more preferable than that of the proslavery orthodox.<sup>18</sup>

Samuel Crothers, Samuel Steele, and several others, including his brother, A. T. Rankin, tried to convince John that such views were illusory. Many of them were just as unhappy as Rankin with the Old School machinations that had produced the schism, but they believed (correctly) that the New School would be just as equivocal about slavery as the Old School and choices should be made for other reasons. Indeed four members of the Presbytery of Chillicothe eventually joined several from other presbyteries in refusing to adhere to either General Assembly.

Rankin continued stubbornly on his course, however, and in November 1838, he hosted the meeting in Ripley which resulted in the organization of the Presbytery of Ripley, a part of the New School Synod of Cincinnati. He was joined by James Gilliland, Dyer Burgess, Jesse Lockhart, James Gass, and William Rogers—about one-third of the old Presbytery of Chillicothe. Like Rankin, these men were all Old School in doctrine and abolitionists. They immediately set about their task of eradicating slavery in the New School by electing Rankin as their commissioner to the New School General Assembly of 1839 and sending him off armed with several sharp antislavery resolutions.

His trip east was a bitter disappointment. Setting out in late April, he went first to New York City to attend the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society. He was honored with an invitation to deliver the opening address. The situation deteriorated rapidly, however. Rankin had hoped to find unity at a meeting made up entirely of abolitionists. Instead, he observed a battle between radicals and conservatives over the rights of women to vote in antislavery societies and the role of political action in abolitionist strategy. The struggle would culminate a year later in schism.<sup>19</sup>

With a heavy heart, he traveled to Philadelphia for the New School General Assembly, only to learn that his brother, Samuel Crothers, and Samuel Steel were right—the New School was not ripe for abolitionism. Rankin and his antislavery allies lost every attempt to commit the New School to immediate emancipation. They were unable to sustain even a resolution to affirm the General Assembly resolution of 1818 on slavery being inconsistent with the laws of God. Instead, the matter was referred to the lower judicatories for individual action. Rankin returned to Ripley filled with bitterness.

The next two New School General Assemblies (1840 and 1843) refused to budge on the issue of slavery, confirming what the abolitionists of the New School Synod of Cincinnati had begun to suspect in 1839. In June 1843, they met with some Old School abolitionists, commissioning an address, written by John Rankin, to antislavery members of both schools on the duty to withdraw from their present bodies to form a Presbyterian Church that would exclude slaveholders.<sup>20</sup> There was little positive response to the overture and the matter dropped from public attention.

Rankin's naivety about the New School becoming abolitionist dissipated completely after the 1840 New School General Assembly. The Presbytery of Ripley was so pessimistic about the 1843 New School General Assembly (the first in a series of triennial meetings) that it did not even send a commissioner. The presbytery would have formed an antislavery church in 1843 if the response to Rankin's call had been the least bit encouraging. Instead, they commiserated with their Old School abolitionist colleagues who were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with what they perceived to be proslavery actions on the part of the Old School General Assembly. And in 1846 they led a successful effort in the New School Synod of Cincinnati to suspend William Graham, a member of the New School Presbytery of Cincinnati, after he protested Rankin's call for an antislavery church within a speech condemning abolitionism and defending slavery on the basis of scripture. Graham appealed to the New School General Assembly of 1846, which ordered the suspension reversed. This was the final straw for the Presbytery of Ripley. Rankin chaired a correspondence committee which produced a second call to antislavery presbyteries in the Old and New Schools. They were requested to send delegates to Cincinnati on May 27, 1847, to aid in organizing an

antislavery church. The New School Synod of Cincinnati, meeting in October, censured the Presbytery of Ripley for issuing the call. All the members of the presbytery thereupon requested that their names be stricken from the rolls of the synod.<sup>21</sup>

At that point, the Presbytery of Ripley was, *de facto*, the antislavery church that John Rankin had sought for so many years. Indeed, during the next few months the Presbytery marked time, defending its actions, cultivating other abolitionist presbyteries, and giving the New School General Assembly one last chance to act against slavery. It did not, so the convention met in Cincinnati, as planned, but only members of the Presbytery of Ripley were present. Under Rankin's leadership the presbytery proceeded to organize the Presbyterian Church of America, commonly called the Free Presbyterian Church, adopting the confession of faith and form of government practiced by the New School Presbyterians. To these they appended a Declaration of Human Rights which declared the abolitionist position of the new denomination:

I. God has made of one blood all nations of men; consequently all human beings endowed with rationality have an equal right to freedom.

II. The holding of human beings as property is destructive to all the ends for which man was created and endowed with rational powers, and consequently, one of the greatest evils that can be inflicted upon human nature, highly immoral, entirely inconsistent with Christian character and profession.

III. No person holding slaves, or advocating the rightfulness of slaveholding, can be a member of this body.

IV. That no Church, Presbytery, or Synod, tolerating slaveholders or the advocates of slaveholding in its communion, can be a constituent part of this body.<sup>22</sup>

John Rankin's great desire had become a reality. A "pure" Presbyterian Church was ready to give a united witness against slavery, the greatest evil ever to blight the nation.

Ironically, when he completed the organization of an antislavery church in 1847, Rankin did precisely what he had pleaded with others not to do in 1836—engage in schism. The consequences, unfortunately, were also precisely what he had predicted they would be in 1836: a scattered remnant with hopelessly inadequate resources and little power or influence. But the overriding moral concerns had at last been satisfied—the sinners could not be brought to repentance, so the only alternative was withdrawal from their fellowship in order to avoid participation in their sin.

## V

When the Free Presbyterian Church was formed in May 1847, the war with Mexico was one year old, the national antislavery movement was fragmented and impotent, the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society had ceased to function, and the Liberty Party was being drawn into a coalition of political antislavery forces which resulted in the forming of the Free Soil Party, and which later became the nucleus for the Republican Party. Within evangelical Protestantism, the issue of slavery had brought schism along sectional lines to the Methodists and Baptists. And within these denominations and both branches of Presbyterianism as well, disgruntled abolitionists had fled to form antislavery churches.

Rankin faced three immediate tasks as leader of the Free Presbyterians: justification of the schism, encouragement of the remnant that formed the new organization, and enlistment of more ministers and congregations. The first two were easier than the last. In the fall, four dissident ministers from eastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania led their congregations out of the Old School and with Rankin's help formed the Free Presbytery of Mahoning. The Free Presbytery of Ripley divided; a portion formed the Free Presbytery of Hillsbor-

ough. In November the three presbyteries joined together in the Free Synod of Cincinnati.<sup>23</sup>

The years of growth for the Free Church were 1847 through 1854. During this time, the nation experienced increasing social unrest and growing sectionalism. The Wilmot Proviso, born out of the struggle over the spoils of the Mexican War, placed the issue of slavery irrevocably in the center of national politics. In the ensuing conflict, the North and the South hammered out the Compromise of 1850 with its infamous Fugitive Slave Law. In 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, sending waves of shock through the North and resentment through the South. The Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed in 1854, repealing the Missouri Compromise and providing a setting where the proponents and opponents of the extension of slavery could and did clash violently.

At first glance this atmosphere of national unrest and growing northern antislavery sentiment appeared to be very favorable for the rapid growth of the Free Church. It was not, however. Most of the growing antislavery sentiment was channeled into the Free Soil movement opposing the extension of slavery in the territories, rather than into the more thoroughgoing abolitionist position. During this time, Old and New School Presbyterianism said as little as possible about slavery. Those abolitionists who remained in these denominations were not willing, by and large, to exercise the ultimate act of separation. Thus the Free Church grew slowly and erratically. The hoped-for influx of churches and pastors which the leaders of the Free Synod of Cincinnati had predicted in 1848 never happened.

Seventy-two Free Church congregations have been identified. Most of them were clustered in southern Ohio and western Pennsylvania, but they were scattered widely from New York to Iowa.

Ten were located within the boundaries of the Old School Presbytery of Chilli-cothe, testifying to the effectiveness of the abolitionist preaching in that area.<sup>24</sup>

When the Free Presbyterian Church completed its basic organization in 1848, it was pitifully weak in numbers, influence, and resources. Its leaders knew that if their voices were to be heard, they would have to join with other Christian abolitionists in a united movement. The American Anti-Slavery Society had provided the organization and leadership for a national abolitionist movement from 1833 to 1840. It had foundered on the rocks of schism, however. It was now controlled by William Lloyd Garrison and confined mainly to the New England area. Most western abolitionists were suspicious of Garrison's unorthodoxy and his increasingly radical views about the Constitution, which he branded as a proslavery document. The American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, the other offspring of the schism in 1840, was primarily a handmaiden for the Liberty Party, and functioned only sporadically in the 1840s when the Liberty Party began to be absorbed by the Free Soil movement. While most Free Church members were supporters of the Liberty and Free Soil parties, they believed their primary mission was to serve as an antislavery beacon around which the rest of the Christians in the nation could rally. They were convinced that if all Christians could unite as a body against the system of slavery, it would suffer swift and complete destruction. In the west, the Free Church found a sympathetic core of supporters from among Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers, Wesleyan Methodists, Reformed and Associate Presbyterians, and independents.

Accordingly, John Rankin and his Free Church colleagues eagerly supported the call for an ecumenical Christian Anti-Slavery Convention to meet in Cincinnati in April 1850. Although unable to

attend, he sent a letter of encouragement and was delighted with the results of the meeting—a series of eighteen resolutions which placed the convention squarely in the mainstream of abolitionism, outlining the principles and strategy of a united Christian alliance against slavery. The first fruit of this alliance was the formation of the Western Home and Foreign Missionary Association (WHFMA) with Rankin as its president. The society was designed to support missionaries and congregations of various denominations who refused to “support, countenance, or tolerate slavery, polygamy, caste, or other popular immoralities.”<sup>25</sup>

The Free Presbyterian Church continued to call abolitionists to come out of the Old School and New School Presbyterian churches and unite in a “free” Presbyterian Church, but the primary arena of the little denomination’s antislavery efforts became the loose evangelical alliance of denominations which formed the Christian Anti-Slavery Convention. The second convention convened in Chicago in July 1851, drawing 257 delegates from across the Old Northwest. The Congregational Church provided the majority of this number with most of the remaining delegates coming from the Free Presbyterian, Baptist, and Wesleyan Methodist churches. Five were New School Presbyterians. It produced little beyond reports on past activities and a study committee or two.

But Rankin decided it was time to pursue one of the suggestions he had made to the first convention in 1850. Shortly after the 1851 convention, he opened correspondence with various leaders of the alliance concerning the possibility of forming an antislavery tract society. With their support, he issued the call for a convention to meet in Cincinnati, December 17, 1851. The convention proceeded to organize the American Reform Tract and Book Society (ARTBS) and to elect John Rankin as

its president. Convinced that the nation’s religious press was under control of proslavery forces, supporters of the ARTBS designed it “to operate systematically and perpetually against Slavery, until it, with all its attendant vices, will have been abolished.”<sup>26</sup>

Although the Christian Anti-Slavery Conventions convened annually at least through 1855, they accomplished little beyond harsh rhetoric and resolutions. Attendance declined dramatically after 1853 and there is no record of conventions after 1855. But the WHFMA and the ARTBS continued to function and receive good support for many years. Rankin seems to have devoted most of his antislavery energy to the ARTBS, which published over two hundred books and tracts through the early 1860s. Rankin himself wrote many of them. He was elected president annually, at least through 1868, when the society published his biography.

The Free Presbyterians used the WHFMA and ARTBS as their missionary society and publishing house. In addition, they launched a newspaper, the *Free Presbyterian*, in 1850 and a college in 1854. But the founding of Iberia College appears to mark the high point of the Free Church. Its growth, always slow, now all but ceased. In spite of its supporting institutions and a common antislavery goal, the little denomination began to deteriorate due to lack of organizational discipline, many small and weak congregations scattered over an immense territory, absence of strong central leadership, and a stubborn tendency to expend most of its slim financial resources on objects of benevolence other than itself. At its peak, the Free Church probably numbered 1,500 to 2,000 communicants.

Although Rankin had provided the momentum and drive which called the Free Presbyterian Church into being, he failed to sustain it with the leadership and wisdom needed to mold it into a

disciplined organization. None of his colleagues stepped forward to fill such a role. Consequently, by the late 1850s it was little more than a loose collection of scattered congregations who shared a common confession of faith and antislavery focus. John Rankin did not lack the gifts to provide such leadership, but he did lack the will and motivation. He had no desire to fashion and lead his own ecclesiastical empire. To him, the Free Presbyterian Church was a safe haven (hopefully temporary) from the sin of slavery, no more. Indeed, when the New School finally divided along sectional lines in 1857, leaving the northern churches with almost no slaveholders, he championed reunion with it, much to the consternation of Dyer Burgess and several other faithful antislavery allies.

The resulting controversy was prolonged and bitter, producing confusion, bad feelings, and a growing inertia in the little denomination, which limped into the 1860s in a demoralized and undisciplined condition.<sup>27</sup> By the end of 1861, the Old School had also divided and few slaveholders remained in the northern Old School and New School bodies. This increased the quandary of the Free Presbyterians. But no strong leadership appeared to solidify the organization of the denomination. Small, weak congregations without pastors began to drift back into the Old and New School branches one by one. When the latter began to make strong antislavery pronouncements, some Free Church pastors began leading their congregations back to them. The exodus was neither organized nor orderly, yet by the end of the Civil War, the Free Church had literally ceased to exist.

Rankin laid aside his antislavery effort gladly at the conclusion of the Civil War. He presided with relief over the reunion of the First and Second Presbyterian churches of Ripley. He greeted the healing of the Old School-New School schism with joy. He became pas-

tor of the nearby New Richmond church for two years. He traveled east to spend time with his son Samuel, who was a pastor in Glastonbury, Connecticut. During this time he wrote a tract for the Republican Party and raised funds for the ARTBS, now named the Western Tract and Book Society. He spent several months visiting children who had settled in the western states. He settled for a while in Granville, Illinois, serving a Presbyterian church there. Then he moved to Kansas to live with his son Thomas. While there he organized and supplied a church for nearly two years at a salary of \$150. He spent his remaining years in Ironton, Ohio, dying on March 18, 1886, at the age of ninety-three.

## VI

Historians of the antislavery movement have noticed John Rankin primarily in terms of his work in southwestern Ohio. Consequently, his status has been that of an Ohio folk-hero, based on his exploits with the underground railroad. Ironically, this portion of his antislavery work, as important and heroic as it was, is the most obscure part of his efforts, leaving almost no reliable documentation behind to describe it. His credentials as an antislavery leader can be based on far better and more substantial evidence. It is possible that he was part of the beginning of organized antislavery activity in Tennessee—the Tennessee Manumission Society. He worked with the Kentucky Abolition Society until it entered its death throes in the early 1820s. He was part of the colonization movement when it reached its peak of popularity in Ohio in the late 1820s. He poured his very lifeblood into the abolition movement in Ohio in the 1830s, nearly dying due to the rigors of his agency for the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1836 and 1837. In the 1840s and 1850s he gave his support to the Liberty, Free Soil, and Republican par-

ties as the nation polarized over the issue of slavery. As a Presbyterian minister, he fought to advance his antislavery principles at every level of the denomination, from the session to the General Assembly.

Rankin's contemporaries recognized his contributions to the antislavery cause much more than did later historians. The leaders of the national movement knew him, sought his advice and services, and made his *Letters on American Slavery* one of the most widely read antislavery works of the era. Within Presbyterianism, his efforts were not so well recognized. Although he and his fellow abolitionist ministers enjoyed considerable success in advancing their antislavery views in the Presbytery of Chillicothe and the Synod of Cincinnati, they accomplished little of a permanent nature beyond that level. When Rankin formed the Free Presbyterian Church in 1847, those scattered congregations which joined him from the Old and New Schools were too few to cause the parent bodies much distress. Many Presbyterians were unaware of and unaffected by the brief existence of the Free Church.

John Rankin's life, as a whole, can be described as one dedicated to the goal of destroying slavery. And few indeed were the facets of the antislavery movement in the nineteenth century that were not in some way touched by his pen, his preaching, or his presence.

## NOTES

*Bibliographical Note:* No collection of John Rankin manuscripts exists. The Andrews Library, The College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio, contains the Welsh Manuscripts, the most abundant source of information on the Free Presbyterian Church. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Department of History in Philadelphia, in addition to minutes and records of various General Assemblies, synods, and presbyteries, houses the Collections in Church History, Volume I of which was especially helpful, and the Shane Collection. These collections contain material on the Chillicothe Presbytery and many who served in it.

For a more exhaustive treatment of John Rankin, including his local church experience in Ripley, his

leadership in higher education, and other aspects of his ministry in Kentucky and Ohio, see Larry G. Willey, "The Reverend John Rankin: Early Ohio Antislavery Leader," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1976.

1. Most details about the early life of John Rankin in Tennessee were found in the following sources: "Life of Rev. John Rankin Written by Himself in His Eightieth Year," copy in Union Township Public Library, Ripley, OH; "Autobiography of Adam Lowry Rankin," n.d., transcript in Ohio Historical Society Library, Columbus; Andrew Ritchie, *The Soldier, the Battle, & the Victory: Being a Brief Account of the Work of Rev. John Rankin in the Antislavery Cause* (Cincinnati, 1868).

2. Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 3 vols. (Richmond, 1963-73) 1: 155-65; "Autobiography of Adam Lowry Rankin" 12-13; John Rankin, *A Short Memoir of Samuel Donnell, Esq.* (Cincinnati, 1856) 17-18.

3. Asa Earl Martin, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky Prior to 1850* (Louisville, 1918) 12-36; Ivan E. McDougale, *Slavery in Kentucky, 1792-1865* (Lancaster, PA, 1918), 93-94; Rankin, *Short Memoir of Samuel Donnell* 15-16.

4. Rankin, *Short Memoir of Samuel Donnell* 17-26; *Free Presbyterian* 1 July 1857; "Life of Rev. John Rankin" 20-23; "Autobiography of Adam Lowry Rankin" 19.

5. Records of the Washington Presbytery, 1805, in Collections in Church History, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Department of History, Philadelphia (hereafter DOH) I: 14, 28-29, 46; Transcript of the Records of the Synod of Ohio, DOH, 1 (1814-27): 21-22; R. G. Galbraith, *The History of the Chillicothe Presbytery, from Its Organization in 1799 to 1889* (Chillicothe, 1889) 53-54, 145-47, 210-11, 217; Andrew E. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro—A History* (Philadelphia, 1966) 19; William Birney, *James G. Birney & His Times: The Genesis of the Republican Party with Some Account of the Abolition Movement in the South Before 1828* (New York, 1890) 167-68; Alfred Nevin, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1884) 187, 336-37, 1020; Thompson 1: 336-37.

6. Ritchie 19; *The Castigator* 17 Aug. 1824; John Rankin, *Letters on American Slavery, Addressed to Mr. Thomas Rankin, Merchant at Middlebrook, Augusta County, Virginia* (Newburyport, MA, 1836) iii; "Life of Rev. John Rankin" 44.

7. Rankin, *Letters* 56-57.

8. Rankin, *Letters* 112-17.

9. Rankin, *Letters* 111; "Life of Rev. John Rankin" 44-45; Ritchie 29-30; Paul R. Grim, "The Rev. John Rankin, Early Abolitionist," *Ohio State Archaeological & Historical Society Quarterly* 46 (1937): 223-24; "Autobiography of Adam Lowry Rankin" 25-26; A. T. Rankin, *Truth Vindicated & Slander Repelled* (Ironton, OH, 1883) 1; W. B. Siebert, "Beginnings of the Underground Railroad in Ohio," *Ohio Archaeological & Historical Society Publication* 4 (1895): 76-78; J. C. Leggett, *Ceremonies Attendant upon the Unveiling of a Bronze Bust & Granite Monument of Rev. John Rankin* (1892) 10. Copies of the 1826 edition of *Letters on Slavery* are in the Cincinnati Histori-

cal Society Library and the Ohio Historical Society Library (Columbus).

10. Rankin, *Letters on American Slavery* (Boston, 1833) v–vi. Garrison serialized the letters in thirteen issues of *The Liberator*, beginning 25 Aug. 1832 and concluding 17 Nov. 1832. Dwight L. Dumond, *A Bibliography of Antislavery in America* (Ann Arbor, 1961) 97; *Report of the Second Anniversary of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society...1837* (Cincinnati, 1837), 53–56; Dwight L. Dumond, ed., *Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831–1857*, (New York, 1938) 1:351; *Philanthropist* 5 August 1836.

11. Birney, *James G. Birney* 433–34; Rankin, *Letters on Slavery* (Ripley, 1826). For Rankin and colonization, see his article, “A Review of the Statement of the Faculty of Lane Seminary,” which appeared in the *Liberator*, 2 May 1835, and the *Emancipator* (New York), 28 Apr. 1835. See also *Free Presbyterian* 11 Feb. 1857. For James H. Dickey and colonization around Red Oak and Ripley, see Richard F. O’Dell, “The Early Antislavery Movement in Ohio,” Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1948, 308; *African Repository & Colonial Journal* Apr. 1830: 64. For Burgess’s dissent against colonization, see Records of the Synod of Ohio 1: 251–52.

12. Records of the Chillicothe Presbytery, DOH, 1 (1818–31): 241–42, 252.

13. Records of Chillicothe Presbytery 1: 283, 235, 240 (The pagination of this volume is confusing; the pages 235 and 240 cited are after p. 283). The two letters were published as James Gilliland and Samuel Crothers, *Two Letters on the Subject of Slavery from the Presbytery of Chillicothe to the Churches under Their Care* (Hillsborough, OH, 1830).

14. Records of the Synod of Cincinnati, DOH, 1 (1829–1832): 19–20. The committee produced a 24-page pamphlet: *An Address to the Churches on the Subject of Slavery* (Georgetown, OH, 1831).

15. Dwight L. Dumond, *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (Ann Arbor, 1961) 161–62; Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830–1844* (New York, 1933) 66–68; Louis Filler, *The Crusade against Slavery* (New York, 1960) 68–70.

16. For a brief account of events leading up to the destruction of Birney’s press and of the agency system, see Dumond, *Antislavery* 222–23. Later in

1836, Birney moved to New York City to become executive secretary of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

17. *Cincinnati Journal* 27 Oct. 1836.

18. *Cincinnati Journal* 5 July 1838.

19. *Sixth Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society, Held in New York City, May 7, 1839* (New York, 1839) 3–49. See Aileen S. Krador, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834–1850* (New York, 1967) 51–55, for the struggle between radical and conservative abolitionists.

20. *Watchman of the Valley* (Cincinnati) 17 Apr. 1843.

21. *Watchman of the Valley* 16 Jan. 1845, 30 Oct. 1845, 9 July 1846, 22 Oct. 1846, 12 Nov. 1846; *Free Presbyterian* 25 Feb. 1857.

22. *National Era* (Washington, DC) 17 June 1847.

23. *National Era* 8 July 1847; *Free Presbyterian* 11 Mar. 1859; Gaius J. Slosser, ed., *They Seek a Country: The American Presbyterians, Some Aspects* (New York, 1955) 227–28; *Watchman of the Valley*, 25 November 1847, 2 December 1847.

24. Edward B. Welsh, “Chillicothe: A Distinguished Rural Presbytery,” *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 23 (Sept. 1945): 141. Welsh, the Free Church historian, identified sixty-nine congregations. My own research has turned up three more. See Welsh Manuscripts 2, Andrews Library, College of Wooster, Wooster, OH. Galbraith 185.

25. *The Minutes of the Christian Anti-Slavery Convention, Assembled April 17–20, 1850, Cincinnati, Ohio* (Cincinnati, 1850) 18–19, 83–84; *Constitution of the Western Home & Foreign Missionary Association* (n.p., n.d.) 2–9, copy in Welsh Manuscripts.

26. *National Era* 31 July 1851, 7 Aug. 1851, 14 Aug. 1851; *The Free Missionary* (Cincinnati) 1 Jan. 1852, in Welsh Manuscripts 3: 75; *National Era* 20 July 1854; *Statement & Catalogue of the Western Tract & Book Society* (Cincinnati, 1866); Ritchie 75–77; “Life of Rev. John Rankin” 46.

27. *Free Presbyterian* 15 July 1857, 5 Aug. 1857, 12 Aug. 1857, 19 Aug. 1857, 26 Aug. 1857, 2 Sept. 1857, 16 Sept. 1857, 30 Sept. 1857; “Life of Rev. John Rankin” 48.



## INCIDENTAL ADDENDA OCCASIONALLY OFFERED FOR GENERAL INTELLIGENCE

**Item 86th.** It was reported in the press that the “people of color” of Oxford, Ohio, met with “a good deal of spirit,” on May 24, 1847 to take measures to see to the formal education of their children. They resolved to raise \$25.00 per quarter for three quarters each year from August through April and pledged “to provide and furnish a comfortable room...provide necessary fuel, and have our children supplied with necessary school books.” The concerned parents were greatly assisted by a three hundred dollar gift, the bequest of the late William McCaw of Preble County, Ohio, which was presented to them by the Reverend Joseph Claybaugh, minister of the Oxford Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. The African-American community voted their thanks, calling the gift “a token for good to our race.” (*United Presbyterian and Evangelical Guardian* 1(1847–48): 172f.) Robert E. Blade