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Dr. Gamaliel Bradford, Early Abolitionist

James W. Mathews

During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, New England experienced what Vernon L. Parrington called the "second American revolution." An outgrowth of Unitarianism, this second revolution was "respectable and bloodless," an "intellectual renaissance, with its transcendental philosophies and social reforms, its enlarged conception of democracy and its Utopian dreams"¹ Numerous and distinguished were the New Englanders who, early or late, passionately or with moderation, came to espouse the myriad reforms which had their apogee in the crusade to abolish slavery.

One of the earliest of the Massachusetts reformers of this period was Dr. Gamaliel Bradford. Although generally ignored by historians, Bradford was well known in the Boston of the 1820s and 1830s. He was a relative and associate of leading Transcendentalists, a physician and a lecturer on science, a leading temperance advocate, a pacifist, a strict Sabbatarian, an implacable foe of phrenology, and an anti-slavery spokesman at a time when the movement had few adherents.² Emerson, who quoted Dr. Bradford's anecdotes in two essays

1. The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800-1860 vol. II of Main Currents in American Thought (New York, 1927), p. 322.

2. Bradford's eldest sister, Sarah, who married Waltham minister Samuel Riley, was reputed to be one of the most learned women of the nineteenth century; see Frances W. Knickerbocker, "New England Seeker: Sarah Bradford Ripley," New England Quarterly, XXX (1957): 3-22. His youngest brother was George Partridge Bradford, a confidant of Ralph Waldo Emerson and a teacher at the Brook Farm Transcendental community; see James W. Mathews, "George Partridge Bradford: Friend of Transcendentalists," Studies in the American Renaissance (1981): 133-156.

("Experience" and "Historical Notes of Life and Letters in New England"), also listed him among his seven lifetime "benefactors."³

The major sources of information about Bradford's thoughts are a diary which he kept during the last six years of his life, and his occasional writings and lectures.⁴ Taken together, these reveal a complex, paradoxical personality, with a schism between heart and head. Bradford's reason argued for fixed order and tradition, yet his affections inclined toward a broader democracy. Compelled by a strong neopuritan conscience to embrace righteous causes, he was often checked midway by his mistrust of extremists, as well as by his scientific detachment.

Bradford was born in 1795, graduated from Harvard College in 1814, and studied medicine there and at the University of Edinburgh.⁵ After his marriage in 1821 to Sophia Rice, daughter of Boston merchant Nathan Rice, he practiced medicine in Boston and Cambridge until 1827, when he turned to business. He became manager of a large brewery in South Boston, an enterprise not incompatible with his temperance views, since most temperance advocates of the day did not prohibit beer or wine. By early 1833, with his brewery near bankruptcy, Bradford cast around for other employment.⁶ With strong support from Ellis Gray Loring, a prominent lawyer and humanitarian, in whose home he resided temporarily, Bradford was appointed as superintendent of the Massachusetts General Hospital.⁷

3. See Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. by William H. Gilman et al, 16 vols. to date (Cambridge, 1960), V: 385. Bradford's diary is filled with accounts of his dining and/or conversing with such luminaries as John Quincy Adams, William Ellery Channing, Edward Everett, John Gorham Palfrey, the Reverend Samuel Frothingham, the Reverend Charles Lowell, and Judge Lemuel Shaw.

4. The unpublished diary is in four octavo volumes and covers the period from August 27, 1833 through October 18, 1839. It is quoted by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

5. A summation of Bradford's life and character can be found in Convers Francis, "Memoir of Gamaliel Bradford, M.D.," in Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 3rd Series, IX (1846): 75-81.

6. Bradford, Diary, January 2, 1834.

7. Ibid., October 11 and 26, 1833; the best contemporary sketch of Loring is in Harriet Martineau, The Martyr Age of the United States (Boston, 1839), and (New York, reprint 1969), p. 50.

Although a number of Bradford's acquaintances were Whigs and he himself deprecated novelty and social upheaval, Bradford sided with the Jacksonians on most issues. After having dinner with Ezra Stiles Gannett, William Ellery Channing's colleague at Federal Street Church, Bradford reported that "Mr. G [was] quite shocked at my democratic notions, which, to say the truth, are as they always have been, for the last half century of slow progress in Massachusetts."⁸ Earlier that month, he was disturbed by the "tory-ish" reasoning of Convers Francis, the highly regarded minister at Watertown, who declared "that it is idle to attempt to force nature into democracy, when God & nature have clearly designed us for aristocracy . . ."⁹

One of Bradford's strong aversions was pretentiousness. Convers Francis commented that "For all that even wore the semblance of quackery or pretence he had a strong dislike, which expressed itself with severe honesty. A sham, however disguised under solemn forms or veiled with stately words, found little mercy at his hands."¹⁰ A case in point was Bradford's speaking and writing against phrenology at a time when the pseudo-science was being embraced by a number of Boston intellectuals, including many members of the medical establishment.¹¹

William Ellery Channing, the renowned Boston Unitarian leader, did not receive his customary adulation from Bradford. Certain Channing sermons Bradford described as "wearisome," "useless," or "monotonous."¹² Yet when Channing began to take a stand against slavery, Bradford expressed his admiration: "Dr. Channing preached one of the most splendidly eloquent sermons I ever heard. True Christian republicanism. It will probably be printed. In the meantime it may be considered that the cause of Negro emancipation is fairly launched. Many recoil however."¹³

8. Bradford, Diary, October 21, 1833.

9. *Ibid.*, October 2, 1833.

10. Francis, "Memoir of Gamaliel Bradford, M.D.," p. 77.

11. In addition to several unpublished lectures opposing phrenology, Bradford published two articles on the subject: "On Craniology," United States Review and Literary Gazette, II (May, 1827): 124-135, and "Phrenology," North American Review, XXXVII (July, 1833): 59-83.

12. Bradford, Diary, January 27, 1834, March 30, 1834, and February 22, 1835.

13. *Ibid.*, October 12, 1834; this sermon contained sharp criticism of the violence perpetrated against the abolitionists, which "deserves the severest reprobation of the

Because of his dissatisfaction with liberal Unitarianism, in June of 1835 Bradford took refuge in the Bowdoin Street Congregational Church. Almost immediately, however, he found himself at odds with minister Hubbard Winslow on abolition. About one of Winslow's sermons, Bradford commented:

Mr. Winslow preached all day [i.e., at both services]. Mainly against the abolitionists — arousing some most extremely tory sentiments — such seems the result — of the controversy — a man cannot take up abolitionism, according to its opponents, without immediately becoming a tory. Certainly the opposers of the abolitionists as a body are driven into some very tory notions — and as to fanaticism — the abolitionists share that credit with the zealous promoters of every good cause going.¹⁴

A year later, having in the meantime gone public with his support of abolition, Bradford still chafed under Winslow's fulminations:

Winslow in the morning preached against abolitionists — on the ground that they polluted the minds of their hearers by representations of vice — which naturally excited licentious passions — a charge, as it appears to me, so destitute of foundation as to be ludicrous — but it is well for him to give his reasons, as which unknown, they might be that stronger.¹⁵

As concerned as Bradford was over the theological drift of Unitarianism, he was just as strong a supporter of freedom of expression. He believed that reason, not authority, would vindicate the truth in all matters. He was naturally opposed to George Ripley's article in the *Christian Examiner* of November 1836 denigrating miracles, and he was gratified by Andrews Norton's response in the

philanthropist and the Christian," but also took the abolitionists to task for their fanaticism and excesses. Channing did not allow the sermon to be published, since "the strength of the argument against slavery was not given" and the "errors" of the antislavery societies were not fully exposed; see William Henry Channing, Memoir of William Ellery Channing (Boston, 1854), III: 156-158 and 162-165.

14. Bradford, *Diary*, September 20, 1835.

15. *Ibid.*, July 16, 1837.

Boston Daily Advertiser. Yet he was forced to reverse his opinion of Norton's defense when he read Ripley's rebuttal: "G. Ripley out this week with an able article in reply to Norton, I was hasty in my opinion. Think he will get the better of Norton's attempt to put down by authority, what he should have answered by argument."¹⁶ On another explosive issue, Abner Kneeland's conviction on the charge of blasphemy, Bradford seemed to side with the liberals:

At Channing's meeting of Progress Club. Conversation on Kneeland case — who has lately been condemned for denying God. All agreed that Society has no right to punish, as in this case, a mere expression of opinion, having no direct tendency to produce specific actions.¹⁷

Bradford's conservatism on some issues did not hold true when it came to slavery. He was present at the adoption of the constitution of the New England Anti-Slavery Society on January 6, 1832, although he did not join the organization, becoming instead a sympathetic bystander and occasional spokesman. Given Bradford's diverse beliefs, his ambivalence concerning the Anti-Slavery Society cannot be reduced to a single cause. He was evidently skeptical of the Society's aim of immediate emancipation, as were several early sympathizers, including his friend Ellis Gray Loring.¹⁸ He also was repelled by the bellicose language and inflammatory tactics of William Lloyd Garrison, which ran counter to Bradford's strong pacifism and his devotion to reason.¹⁹ Despite his hesitation about the Society, Bradford was a private abolitionist of deep conviction, a fact reiterated in mid-April of 1835: "Read this week [Judge William] Jay's book on Colonization & anti-slavery societies — powerful book. 10 years, I trust I will see slavery on its last legs in every Christian country."²⁰

16. *Ibid.*, November 11, 1836.

17. *Ibid.*, May 2, 1838.

18. At the organizational meeting of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, David L. Child, Samuel Sewall, and Loring "questioned the expediency of basing the society on the doctrine of immediate emancipation . . ." See Walter M. Merrill, Against Wind and Tide: A Biography of William Lloyd Garrison (Cambridge, 1963), p. 55.

19. See Bradford, *Diary*, December 27 and 28, 1836; September 18, 1837.

20. *Ibid.*, April 18, 1835.

At Loring's home, first on Washington Street and later in Brookline, Bradford sat in on many discussions of the early abolitionists. There he encountered such champions as David Child and his wife, Lydia Maria (Francis) Child, who was much less circumspect than her brother Convers. Also present from time to time were Samuel Joseph May, Mrs. Maria Weston Chapman, Francis Jackson, George Hillard, Dr. Charles Follen, Edmund Quincy, Charles Sumner, Wendell Phillips, the English reformer Harriet Martineau, and the prime mover of the cause, William Lloyd Garrison. After the Anti-Slavery Society's first two stormy years, Bradford rejoiced with Loring over its growth: "At Mr. Loring's in the evening, find him delighted with the improving prospects of the anti-slavery society having this year, a crowded meeting, where last year, they had scarcely any"21

In the early autumn of 1835, Bradford added his voice to the abolitionists' complaint against their oppressors. This unprecedented public statement was in response to the Faneuil Hall meeting of August 21, when Boston's political leaders attempted to mute the increasingly vociferous abolitionists. Having been goaded by Garrison and his disciples since January of 1831, when *The Liberator* was launched, New England's conservatives exploded when Garrison sponsored a speaking tour of the English abolitionist George Thompson during 1834-1835.²² The reactionary Faneuil Hall assembly itself seems to have excited little passion in Bradford, at least initially:

Great meeting at Faneuil Hall to pass resolution against abolitionists — Hall not full — and on the whole little zeal. Fletcher, Sprague, & Otis spoke — the latter now too old to be very interesting. The principal objections were brought up against those things, which the abolitionists themselves disclaim as the excess of intemperate zealots of their party. The meeting apparently got up to satisfy the South, which it is not likely to do.²³

21. *Ibid.*, March 17, 1834.

22. Merrill, *Against Wind and Tide*, p. 101.

23. Bradford, *Diary*, August 21, 1835; the three spokesmen were well-known in the region. Richard Fletcher (1788-1869) was a distinguished Boston lawyer, who later as a member of Congress urged the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. Peleg

Twelve days later, however, Bradford, probably smarting over the affront to his friend Loring and others, became sufficiently piqued to write an open letter to the speakers, which was rejected by the *Daily Advertiser*: "Mr. [Nathan] Hale refuses to admit my letter to the speakers at Faneuil Hall on the ground that it is best to let the question subside. When the other side of the question had been strongly urged in his paper — and when half the papers are full of it."²⁴ He then turned to *The Courier*, whose editor Joseph T. Buckingham consented "to admit the letter, readily."²⁵

Bradford's letter, which was published in *The Courier* on September 15, 16, and 17, and later was issued as a pamphlet, appealed to reason over the authority of the leaders of the Faneuil Hall meeting, whose knowledge was by self-admission deficient. Writing as one who had "never been a member of any anti-slavery society," Bradford nonetheless claimed first-hand knowledge of the rationale and endeavors of the abolitionists, which "appeared to me to be sound, and ... to contain much good morality and sound judgement." Their strident, refractory language, of which he did not approve, he excused as an example of "that universal tendency of zeal in any cause to go beyond the bounds of discretion"²⁶

To the speakers' charge that the abolitionists were merely agitators without a concrete plan, Bradford responded by pointing out that their goal was "to produce a majority of votes in Congress in favor of bills for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia" and other territories, and "for the prohibition of the domestic slave-trade between the States."²⁷ Furthermore, to demonstrate that slavery is "a great moral and political evil," these people, like the supporters of temperance and the National Bank, had a right "to organize societies, publish papers, make speeches, and set in motion all the machinery, by which public opinion is ordinarily attempted to be

 Sprague (1793-1880), another Boston lawyer and once a United States Senator from Maine, became a federal district judge and a mild abolitionist. Harrison Gray Otis (1765-1848) was also a United States Senator, and from 1829 to 1831 he served as mayor of Boston.

24. Bradford, *Diary*, September 11, 1835.

25. *Ibid.*, September 12, 1835.

26. Bradford, A Letter to the Hon. Harrison Gray Otis, Peleg Sprague, and Richard Fletcher, Esq. (Boston, 1836), p. 5.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

influenced."²⁸ As evidence that present abolitionist activities were not without precedent, Bradford cited several examples of past anti-slavery movements, including the 1790 Philadelphia resolution signed by Benjamin Franklin.

Such appeals to reason did not placate the foes of abolition. One month after the newspaper publication of Bradford's letter, a riot occurred outside the Anti-Slavery Hall, during which William Lloyd Garrison barely escaped lynching. Bradford was obviously an eyewitness to the melee, as his diary entry suggests: "It appears that after I came away yesterday, Mr. Garrison was found by the mob, and slightly ill-treated but rescued by the Mayor and officers."²⁹ The following day he reported that "Mr. Francis Jackson offers his house today for a place of meeting for the Ladies anti-slavery society being determined to settle if possible the question of mob-law and though there is not much danger of a mob returning to attack his house, his spirit and courage are worthy of all honour."³⁰

Early the next year, Bradford had another opportunity to become more than an armor bearer. This was the second meeting that leaders of the society had with a special committee of the Massachusetts legislature, to avert suppression of the organization by political fiat. The first meeting was terminated without satisfaction, as Bradford noted: "At State House in afternoon to hear abolitionists before Committee — Mr. Loring made an excellent speech — being often interrupted by committee who insisted upon their appearance there by a mere matter of favor — at which the speakers annoyed at last break off the discussion and declaring they wanted no favors."³¹

Two evenings later, on Sunday, a group met at Loring's house, and among the topics was their future strategy. According to Bradford, those present were "Misses Martineau & Jeffrey, Mrs. Chapman, Messrs. Hillard & [Robert] Rantoul & Garrison" Bradford became involved in a "debate with Mrs. Chapman & Garrison who support the wildest anarchy of Tom Paine & Godwin — from looking only at one side of the Christian doctrine of love &

28. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

29. Bradford, *Diary*, October 22, 1835.

30. *Ibid.* October 23, 1835; like Ellis Gray Loring, Francis Jackson (1789-1861) was one of the financial supporters of Garrison and the entire anti-slavery movement. The Female Anti-Slavery Society did meet in his home on November 19, 1835.

31. Bradford, *Diary*, March 4, 1836.

liberty — an instance of the evil of want of thorough ethical education — in powerful partizan characters. . . ."³² Bradford was never able to tolerate Garrison's dogmatism. In late 1836, he wrote of spending the "evening . . . at Mr. Loring's with Mr. Garrison & Mrs. Child & Chapman — Abolitionist debate, Garrison very intolerant towards all who do not join him."³³ Later, on a return trip to Boston from the Bradford family home in Duxbury, Bradford "took up Garrison in stage at Scituate & disputed with him all the way to the steamboat on defensive war — government — inward light, etc."³⁴

Having been alerted to the possibility of his speaking at the upcoming legislative hearing, Bradford prepared some remarks. The next day he took a walk around Cambridgeport, and "carried over the leaves of a speech which I propose to make before the anti-slavery committee of the Legislature, if I see a good chance."³⁵ After the session, he seemed pleased with his performance, and with his colleagues' apparent success:

At the representatives room in the afternoon. Hall crowded. May, Sewall, & Follen spoke capitally — the latter frequently interrupted by the Chairman but finding the sympathy of the audience with Follen — was obliged to let him go on — next speaker was [William] Goodell, who was interrupted & at last forced to sit down by the Chairman for going rather strongly against Southern laws — The Anti-slavery party declined going on farther — professing themselves dissatisfied at that moment, when the indignation of the audience was evidently excited, stepped up & shot off my little gun to good effect. The chance was unexpectedly fine — worth a dollar and I think I impressed pretty fairly — was followed by Mr. George Bond, who declared his opinion that the Committee were too fastidious and that the Abolitionists had not had a fair hearing — Amen & ditto resounded from the audience and the assembly separated, satisfied that the

32. Ibid., March 6, 1836.

33. Ibid., December 27 and 28, 1836.

34. Ibid., September 18, 1837.

35. Ibid., March 7, 1836.

Committee had missed fire, and that the Abolitionists were essentially triumphant.³⁶

Garrison's *Liberator*, in an introduction to the text of the speech, reported that Bradford, who was "not a member of the Anti-Slavery Society" and who was "present as a spectator," gave "an eloquent, thrilling, and impassioned, but entirely respectful appeal in favor of free discussion." While Bradford's delivery may have been thrilling and impassioned, the printed text suggests his calm logic. His basic argument stated that the activities of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society were not contrary to international, constitutional, or moral law. To support his third point, he contended that no moral or religious law could forbid a strict interpretation of "love thy neighbor as thyself." Finally, if damage were to be done "to the great principles of the liberty of speech and of the press, and the right to private judgment" by suppressing abolitionists, Bradford hoped "the blow [would] not come from a Massachusetts Legislature — it would be a parricidal blow."³⁷

The persistence of the abolitionists was rewarded, and in less than a year, as Bradford recorded with satisfaction, the "House of Representatives vote the use of their hall to the A. Slavery society to the horror of the Boston Whigs, whose reign seems drawing to a close."³⁸ Two days later, he wrote: "Many converts to abolition at the representatives hall. Opposition pretty angry."³⁹ Of course, the past two years had brought new captains into the anti-slavery army, including Boston's venerable William Ellery Channing.

Channing's *Slavery*, which had been hastened by attempts to silence the abolitionists, appeared in December of 1835 and received Bradford's praise: "Dr. Channing's book on slavery — capital production — aiming at the exact truth and therefore will probably satisfy neither party."⁴⁰ He was right. The work received the scorn of Garrison, Follen, and Loring for its compromising tone, and it alienated many conservative members of the Federal Street Church,

36. *Ibid.*, March 8, 1836.

37. *The Liberator*, March 26, 1836, pp. 49-50.

38. Bradford, *Diary*, January 24, 1837.

39. *Ibid.*, January 27, 1837.

40. *Ibid.*, December 3, 1835.

including state Attorney-General James T. Austin, who published a rather intemperate attack.⁴¹ Also during 1836 and 1837, the District of Columbia question was becoming more divisive, as John Quincy Adams bombarded the House of Representatives with abolitionist petitions from all over the country. In early 1837, Bradford noted the "Prodigious uproar in Congress on account of abolition petitions by Mr. Adams & considerable debate on same subject in Senate. All profitable to abolition cause."⁴² Another victory for the abolitionists had come the preceding summer, when Justice Lemuel Shaw ruled for Loring in the famous case of the slave Med. Bradford was jubilant over the decision: "Case of the slave decided in Mr. Loring's favor, namely that slave bro't to Mass. by owner becomes free, not being a fugitive. Good."⁴³

As 1837 faded into 1838, so did Bradford's overt efforts for abolition — and for that matter the other causes which he had previously supported. According to Convers Francis, Bradford suffered his first epileptic seizure in 1832, and by mid 1838 what few placid days he had left were taken up with hospital duties, an occasional outing with the Progress Club or the Cincinnati Society, and his personal affairs. Bradford wrote in his diary for the last time on October 18, 1839, and on the 22nd he died, following an attack which Francis described as "of unusual severity."⁴⁴ Bradford was forty-four years old at the time of his death.

Dr. Gamaliel Bradford's name appears only in footnotes to histories of the "second American revolution," yet he is worthy of wider recognition as a strong supporting actor in the explosive social drama of the day. If Bradford took a conservative stand on some issues, he marched courageously in the vanguard of abolition, at a time when the crusade had few champions. It should be noted that he spoke out long before many of his liberal friends, including Emerson, had made up their minds. Even though progressive illness exacerbated Bradford's saturnine temperament and limited his opportunities, he was redeemed by his intellect, high principle, and determination. The trustees of the Massachusetts General Hospital recognized these qualities in their posthumous tribute: "During the last

41. Jack Mendelsohn, Channing, the Reluctant Radical (Boston, 1971), pp. 253-256.

42. Bradford, Diary, February 11, 1837.

43. Ibid., August 27, 1836.

44. Francis, "Memoir of Gamaliel Bradford," p. 77.

year, it has been our painful duty to record the death of Dr. Gamaliel Bradford, a man equally remarkable for strict integrity of purpose, and great independence of judgment."⁴⁵

45. Massachusetts General Hospital Report for 1839.