



Being Good: An Abolitionist Family Attempts to Live Up to Its Own Standards

Rachel Robinson's boycott of slave-made goods was entirely consistent with her character, with attitudes that she shared with her husband, Rowland T. Robinson, and with the values and ideals that they tried to pass on to their children.

By RONALD SALOMON

On November 30, 1835, William Lloyd Garrison, a leader of the wing of the abolitionist movement that called for immediate emancipation, wrote to George W. Benson, a fellow abolitionist. In the middle of this informal and chatty letter Garrison mentioned

an excellently written epistle, both as to its composition and its penmanship, from Rachel Robinson,¹ wife of Rowland T. Robinson of Ferrisburgh, Vt. . . . It is written in a delicate, tender, yet decisive spirit, and evinces a high degree of consciousness. Not a particle of the productions of slave labor, whether it be rice, sugar, coffee, cotton, molasses, tobacco or flour, is used in her family, and thus her practice corresponds admirably with her doctrine. But I cannot say that I have as yet arrived at clear satisfaction upon this point, so as to be able to meet the difficulties that cluster in our path.²

Who were these people, whose principled lifestyle impressed even William Lloyd Garrison?

Rachel Robinson's (1799–1862) boycott of slave-made goods was entirely consistent with her character, with attitudes that she shared with her husband, Rowland T. Robinson (1796–1879), and with the values and ideals they tried to pass onto their children. The boycott was only one part of the way that the Robinsons conducted their lives, consistently choosing actions they saw as morally right over those that were merely expedient. This attitude often set them apart from the

mainstream of the larger community and it had a profound and unexpected impact on the family.

The meaning of Rachel and Rowland's actions can best be understood in the context of Hicksite Quakerism and the abolition movement. Ultimately, it is necessary to look at the next generation to see the effects of "being good," because the Robinsons' choice to strive for perfection in their own lives was problematic for their children.

THE ROBINSON FAMILY

The Robinson family came to Newport, Rhode Island from the northwest of England near the village of Burgh-Over-Sands in Cumberland, in the mid-seventeenth century. They were devout Quakers, successful merchants, and some were known to be slave-owners. Whether they were involved in the slave trade, like some of their Quaker associates in Newport, is not definitely known.

In 1791 Thomas (1761–1851) and Jemima (1761–1846) Robinson, Rowland's parents, moved to Vergennes, Vermont. Thomas's brother, William, bought six hundred acres of farmland in Ferrisburgh, including land to be used for the establishment of sawmills and gristmills. In 1793 Thomas and Jemima moved to a house on the property, and in 1808 William deeded the property to Thomas.³

Thomas and Jemima were abolitionists and were active in the Ferrisburgh Quaker Meeting. This meeting was established prior to 1793 and was visited in that year by the controversial Quaker minister from Long Island, Elias Hicks.⁴ A glimpse of their character can be seen in a letter to Thomas from James Temple, who had lived with the Robinsons and may have been a fugitive slave. He eventually moved to Montreal. Writing in 1851, Temple's expression of gratitude and praise was effusive. He mentioned that he was using Jemima's eyeglasses that the widowed Thomas had given to him, and expressed his conviction that when Thomas's time comes he will surely join Jemima in Heaven.⁵

Thomas and Jemima had one son, Rowland Thomas, named for the ancestor who had emigrated from England. It was the custom of many Quakers to have their children educated away from worldly influences, and by the late eighteenth century they had established coeducational day and boarding schools. The boarding schools were particularly important to rural Quakers whose children might otherwise be isolated from other Quaker children. The Robinsons sent young Rowland to the Nine Partners School, founded in 1796 with the encouragement of Elias Hicks and associated with the Quaker Meeting at Nine Partners in Dutchess County, New York.⁶ There he met Ann King (1786–1867), a teacher, and Rachel Gilpin, a fellow student from New York. Rowland

and Rachel were both very close to Ann King and shortly after their marriage in 1820 were joined by her on the Robinson farm. She lived there off and on until her death in 1867.

In 1810 Thomas Robinson bought his first Merino sheep. These, together with his apple and pear orchards and mills, made him relatively wealthy and he built a large addition to his house in 1814 or 1815. By 1822, when Rowland and Rachel's first child was born, this rather grand house was home to three generations of a devout Quaker family, as well as a beloved and respected friend and teacher.

THE INFLUENCE OF ELIAS HICKS

The Robinsons and Ann King were followers of Elias Hicks, which may explain some of their attitudes towards slavery as well as their general way of living. Hicks, a Quaker farmer from Jericho, Long Island, was associated with the Quaker tradition that emphasized the influence of an "inner light" or "light within" over that of scripture.⁷ By the late eighteenth century there was an informal division in the Society of Friends. One faction eschewed hired clergy and generally held meetings in silence, punctuated by inspired and impromptu testimony. They claimed to be following the original practice of George Fox, the founder of Quakerism. They believed that truth was more likely to be revealed through the "inner light" than through the Bible. The other, evangelical, faction modeled their practice on the more mainstream puritan Congregationalist churches, and placed biblical authority above the "inner light."⁸

Hicks held a particularly intense opposition to slavery. In his 1810 pamphlet *Observations on the Slavery of Africans and their Descendants*, he argued that slavery was "man-stealing" and therefore a sin, that profit from slavery was equal to theft, and that to own a slave was to possess "prize goods." He derived his opposition to profit from slavery and the use of slave-produced products from the earlier eighteenth-century ideas of the Quaker ministers, John Woolman and Benjamin Lay.⁹ In 1793 the Jericho Preparative Meeting entered into its minutes,

Tender scruples hath arisen in the minds of friends with respect to Trafficing [sic] in or making use of the Labour of persons held in Slavery from a feeling of commiseration of their afflicted state.

This minute was endorsed by the monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings. Ferrisburgh Meeting was part of the same New York Yearly Meeting as Jericho.¹⁰

The religious practices of the Robinsons and Ann King grew out of the tradition of according primacy to the "inner light" that, after a formal split in the late 1820s, came to be called "Hicksite" as opposed to the more structured "Orthodox" meetings. Discord in many Quaker

meetings became more rancorous by the 1840s, when the Hicksite New York Yearly Meeting disowned some of Rowland and Rachel's abolitionist associates. At that time the Robinsons left the Society of Friends.

ABOLITIONISM AND THE BOYCOTT OF SLAVE-MADE GOODS

The history of the abolitionist movement in New England and New York reveals a similar, although slightly later, evolution of the tactical orientation to eliminating the evil of slavery. Vermont's entry into the United States as a free state in 1791 presumably reflected popular sentiment. With the exception of its cotton mills, Vermont's commercial ties to the slave economy were not extensive and the state had much less to lose by the abolition of slavery than would Rhode Island or New York. From the early nineteenth century, it was perfectly acceptable to speak out on the evils of slavery. For example, Professor George Benedict of the University of Vermont, in an oration delivered on July 4, 1826, called slavery "an evil of . . . terrific magnitude." But, reflecting a common sentiment among Vermonters, Benedict also said the emancipation must be embraced by all and not imposed from the outside.¹¹

William Lloyd Garrison began his career with these gradualist sentiments but soon converted to "immediatism," the idea that slavery should be abolished at once with no compensation to the slaveholder. Slavery, he argued, was not merely wrong, bad economic policy, or political error; it was a sin. This position was debated in the churches. The Quakers said that slavery was a sin,¹² as did many New England Baptist congregations, some of whom went so far as to "disfellowship," i.e., excommunicate, all who disagreed.¹³ The Congregationalists, on the other hand, said that slavery was "an enormous evil."¹⁴ The implications of the difference between "evil" and "sin" are great. If slavery is a sin, it becomes the duty of all who consider themselves to be good Christians to eradicate it. Furthermore, the toleration of slavery itself is a sin. This attitude fundamentally shaped the Robinsons' ideas about slavery and influenced their behavior, providing the rationale that compelled them to sever all connections with slaveholding.

The idea of a boycott of slave-made goods, or "prize goods," carried abolitionist arguments one step further. In his *Extemporaneous Discourses* Hicks wrote, "What is the difference whether I hold a slave or purchase the produce of his labour from those who do." In his *Observations* he wrote

Is it possible that there should be . . . a man with heart so hard as to assent to purchase, and to make use of the fruit of the labour of his fellow citizens . . . Would not every sympathetic heart, at the sight of a piece of sugar, or other produce . . . be filled with anguish. . . . Would

he not consider the individual who would dare to be so hardy as to traffic in and use the produce of such labour . . . the open and avowed enemy of both God and man.¹⁵

Rachel, Rowland and Ann, having been associated with the school supported by Hicks, were exposed continually to his ideas and influence. Although all Christian religions focus on adherence to God's law, Quakerism, with its continual emphasis on free will and individual enlightenment, required constant vigilance to avoid anything corrupting. Thus, Quakers lived with constant behavioral reminders of their aspirations toward perfection, such as dress, speech, and resistance to oath-taking. Hicks emphasized individual responsibility in his teachings.

The ideas of slavery as a sin and the use of slave produced products as supportive of sin held currency in the strongly religious, but non-denominational, atmosphere of the various anti-slavery societies in New England. The Vermont Anti-Slavery Society was founded in Middlebury in 1834, with Rowland, who had been a founder of the Ferrisburgh Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, one of its directors. At its second annual meeting it passed a resolution stating that slavery was a sin, and in its third annual report (1836) it stated that "American slavery in principle under all circumstances is a flagrant sin." During that second annual meeting Rowland also proposed a further resolution, which passed, stating

that by consuming the produce of the labour of slaves we are directly sustaining the iniquitous system of slavery; and that therefore as abolitionists, we are called upon to abstain from using such articles as are believed to come to us from a polluted channel.¹⁶

In the previous summer Rowland had written a long letter to *The Liberator* proposing this boycott. Opponents of slavery, he asserted, cannot in good conscience castigate the slaveholder and, at the same time, use the products of slave labor. He acknowledged that there was much disagreement on the subject, including a total lack of interest among some anti-slavery people. Throughout this letter he referred to the duties of Christians, God's laws, and the sinfulness of slavery. He also used phrases from his own Quaker tradition, such as keeping "our eyes open to the light" and the "internal operations of light on our own minds" as a way to bring about agreement on the subject.¹⁷

In the same issue of *The Liberator*, Joseph H. Beale, a Quaker farmer from Westchester County, New York, who also had business interests in lower Manhattan, placed an advertisement for his new store. This was addressed to "his anti-slavery friends" and offered a variety of dry goods, sugar, coffee, and tea, as well as "umbrellas of different sizes covered with free-labor muslin" and paper "made of linen rags."¹⁸

Joseph Beale was a member of the New York Yearly Meeting and a

friend of the Robinsons, of Rachel's family, the Gilpins, and of Ann King. In addition to his farm and store, Beale ran a store for free people of color. He also seems to have served as a private banker for some members of the Quaker community.¹⁹

Beale's store ran into trouble from the start. As early as 1834, before he began advertising in *The Liberator*, he wrote to Rowland.

We have endeavored to do our duty in promoting this good cause of justice and humanity—but we have met with so many difficulties and so little encouragement from our fellow citizens in our own society from whose high profession we expected a little better feeling on this benevolent concern, that we think it most probable that we shall be compelled to relinquish it—as we feel that we cannot give the requisite attention to this business without neglecting more or less the proper education of our dear children.²⁰

Beale remained in business in his shop at 376 Pearl St.²¹ In addition to the lack of support, he was also plagued by lack of supply. He mentioned this in several letters to Rowland. In September 1834 he wrote that his calico was deficient in width and his muslin deficient in quality. In August 1837 he referred to some commodity [not legible] that he would try to get from Belfast or Liverpool or, failing that, Dublin.²² The supply problem was widespread. James Mott, husband of Quaker minister and abolitionist speaker, Lucretia Mott, ran a free-labor store in Philadelphia, but because he was unable to get a supply of cotton, he sold only wool.²³

Despite supply problems some demand for free-labor goods did exist. When people wrote on the subject, both privately and for publication, they expressed sentiments similar to Rowland's. In 1835 Ann King received a letter from her friend Elizabeth, from Scarsdale, New York, saying that she avoided "eatables that come through that channel," but with clothing she found it "impracticable to keep quite clean"; she noted that her sentiments were rooted in "a resolution to take up the cross." However, she referred to herself as "a solitary 'speckled bird' in the family where I board," and implied that even most Quakers did not boycott.²⁴

Attempts to popularize the boycott continued. From the mid-1830s on, women's anti-slavery societies held "Ladies' Anti-Slavery Fairs" in an attempt to promote their cause. These sales of handwork and baked goods were used to raise funds, generate publicity, and provide activities for women, who often were excluded from other anti-slavery activities, particularly public speaking and administration. Baked goods made without slave-produced sugar were often the showpieces. On January 2, 1837, *The Liberator* reported that at the Ladies' Fair of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, "The cake table was loaded with varieties of cake, made with sugar not manufactured by slaves

and near it was placed the motto, FREE LABOR.”²⁵ When Angelina Grimké, a well-known abolitionist speaker, married Theodore Weld, another leading abolitionist, much was made of the wedding cake, which used only free-labor sugar and was baked by a former slave of the Grimké family.²⁶

The desire to avoid the use of slave-produced goods remained ambivalent through the following decades. Many people supported the idea; many more did not. There is little evidence that the practice of the boycott had any broad base. In 1838 a free-labor store opened in Philadelphia at 5th and Arch Streets, but advertisements for it in *The Liberator* appeared for only a few months. This store was across the street from the Free Quaker Meeting House, the gathering place for a breakaway group of Quakers who had fought in the American Revolution, and one block from the Arch Street Friends Meeting, where the more traditional group assembled.²⁷

In 1837 the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women addressed free people of color, suggesting that they “abstain from the use of slave labor products, as far as is practicable.” The convention provided New Testament justification for this position, which echoed the Quaker “prize goods” argument. They went on to say that “our abstinence has strengthened us for the work we are engaged in, and that there is a sweet feeling of conscious integrity that gladdens our heart.” They added, however, that abstinence was not always possible.²⁸

In 1841 Hannah Green, a young Quaker woman from Cayuga County, near Syracuse, New York, wrote to Rowland, Rachel, and Ann about her attempts to boycott. She felt that boycotting would send a strong message to slave holders and found it puzzling that so many people where she lives were indifferent. Although this indifference would compromise the boycott’s effectiveness, she asserted that it was still important for those who believed to follow through. She added that even though it was difficult to get free-labor goods, like-minded people must “do with less and circumscribe our wants—believing it is better to wash our hands in [insufficiency?] that we may be favored to encompass His alter [sic] with acceptance.”²⁹ As late as 1855, Maria Weston Chapman, in a tract entitled *How Can I Abolish Slavery, or Counsels to the Newly Converted*, advocated the avoidance of sugar.³⁰ Throughout the 1840s and 1850s *The Liberator* continued to report and encourage ladies’ fairs.³¹

Two themes run through these letters, tracts, reports, and pamphlets. The creation of a supply of free-labor goods was not going well, therefore, abstention, when possible, was the best course of action; and second, boycotters believed that attempts to boycott were indicative of a high level of morality and Christian virtue.

MORALITY AND CHRISTIAN VIRTUE
IN THE LIVES OF THE ROBINSONS AND THEIR ASSOCIATES

Morality and Christian virtue are so often emphasized in abolitionist writing that they appear to be the governing principles in the lives of these people. In the Robinson Letters collection, the letters of Rachel Robinson, Ann King, Joseph Beale, and Oliver Johnson, an abolitionist originally from Peacham, Vermont, give the reader the impression of an all-consuming goodness and lovingkindness.³² This is, in part, a Quaker mode of expression, but when one looks at the way these people conducted their lives one can see the style of expression as an outgrowth of their attitudes and practices.

Rachel Robinson was very active in the Ferrisburgh Women's Monthly Meeting. Several times during the late 1820s and early 1830s she held the very powerful position of clerk of the meeting. She was often assigned to be a visitor to meeting members whose conduct raised questions or who were seeking clearance to marry. The frequency of these appointments indicates both her willingness to work for the welfare of the meeting and the trust placed in her by members of the meeting. Her reports in the meeting's minutes frequently emphasized attitude as well as behavior.³³

Rachel was also very well regarded beyond her community. For example, Henry C. Wright, a deeply pacifistic Quaker from Boston, who was also an anti-slavery speaker and writer, wrote to Ann King in 1842 regarding a book he was preparing. It was to be called *A Kiss for a Blow, or a New Way to Prevent All Fighting Among Children*. He planned to send a copy to Rachel because "There are but 4 or 5 persons in all the circle of my acquaintance whose criticism on such a book I would value much & Rachel Robinson is one."³⁴

Rowland was similarly active and held in high esteem. In 1833 he founded the Ferrisburgh Anti-Slavery Society and devoted a large proportion of his time to the abolitionist cause. Being relatively wealthy he was able to hire farm managers and many workers, so he did not have to devote a large amount of personal time to his farm, although he maintained an active interest in the latest developments in scientific farming. He also carried his moral principles into his farming operations. In 1831 he was sued for refusing to grind grain for a local farmer who, he suspected, was going to sell it to a distiller. In 1838 he placed an advertisement in *The Vergennes Vermonter*, a paper with strong anti-slavery sentiments, for the shop of John Roberts in Vergennes, who had a stock of anti-slavery books for sale.³⁵ Rowland was willing to invest his own money to further the cause.

Rowland and Rachel would be considered "left wing" by today's

standards, but the term is somewhat misleading. Their beliefs and practices were motivated, not only by a sense of justice, but also by a need to do God's will. Their ideas about God's will required a high degree of activism. Rowland's principal associates in Vermont were Orson S. Murray and Oliver Johnson. Since little of Rowland's correspondence is available we must rely on Murray's and Johnson's to reveal Rowland's character.

Orson S. Murray was a Calvinistic Baptist minister from Orwell, and later, Brandon, Vermont. He was a paid agent of the New England Anti-Slavery Society and Publisher of the *Vermont Telegraph*, a Baptist newspaper published in Brandon. During his proprietorship he changed the *Telegraph* from a religious paper to one emphasizing anti-slavery, temperance, and pacifism. Murray was apparently a fiery speaker whose intemperate language offended nearly everybody, with the exception of his fellow radicals. He was often physically attacked, or "mobbed," after his lectures.³⁶

Oliver Johnson, a printer from Peacham, and later Middlebury, Vermont, was also an anti-slavery agent. His views were much the same as Murray's, but his style was more diplomatic and restrained. He was able to discuss issues with people who had tolerated the "mobbings" of Murray. In 1840, when the Robinson's second son, George (1825–1894), decided to become a printer, Rowland wrote to Johnson for help in finding an apprenticeship. Only the letters from Johnson survive but it appears that Rowland's main concern was to get George a place that would satisfy his parents' moral standards. Affairs at *The Liberator*, which Johnson was temporarily running, were chaotic, but eventually Johnson found a possibly suitable place in New York with a printer whom he described as "a Presbyterian, but not a bigot."³⁷ Eventually George apprenticed with Orson Murray in Brandon, though he never became a printer.

During this period a rift was growing in the anti-slavery movement that showed some similarity to the Hicksite-Orthodox separation in the Society of Friends. In 1838 part of the movement entertained the idea of an anti-slavery political party which, if successful at the polls, would enact anti-slavery legislation and thus achieve their ends. This group was frequently allied with the faction that did not feel that women should have leadership roles in anti-slavery societies. The Garrisonians, on the other hand, supported women's rights and the election of a woman, Abby Kelley, to the executive committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society.³⁸ The 1840 meeting of the society was crucial. Oliver Johnson wrote to Rowland on April 20, discussing the impending split and his personal distress over it and asked him to attend the meeting.³⁹

The Robinsons, Ann King, and their circle, including Murray, Beale, Charles Marriott, and Wright, remained loyal to Garrisonian principles. Among these was the acceptance of people of color as equals. Most White abolitionists would be described today as racist; the Garrisonians believed that there was not only no biblical justification for slavery, but that the Bible was quite clear that all people were equal as created by God.⁴⁰ Rufus Griswold, editor of *The Vergennes Vermonter*, expressed very precisely the principles upon which the Robinsons ran their household.

Teach your children by example and precept never to wound a person's feelings because he holds a humble station in life—or because he is poorly clad—or because the God of nature has bestowed on him a darker skin than theirs.⁴¹

This principle was applied in the Robinson home, although it did not always sit well with the younger generation. From the mid-1830s through at least the 1840s and perhaps later the Robinson farm was a stop on the Underground Railroad.⁴² Fugitive slaves were sheltered and employed for wages on the farm for periods ranging from a few weeks to several months. It is presumed that some of them occasionally lived in the house. One man of color, Mingo Niles, who had been a servant or slave of the Robinson family in Newport, seems to have been on very good terms with the younger generation. Anne Robinson (1827–1917) wrote to George, who was working near Saratoga, that Mingo told him “to be a good boy,” and in a letter from Rowland, Rachel and cousin Huldah there is a reference to “thy friend Mingo.”⁴³

PASSING ON VALUES TO THE NEXT GENERATION

Rachel and Rowland present a puzzling picture of themselves as parents. They combined very high principles and behavioral standards with great leniency. Despite their own dedication to progressive social ideas, they were only partly successful in passing these ideas on to their own children. In their attitudes toward people of color the Robinson children appear to have been more influenced by contemporary racial attitudes than by their parents. Although Rachel and Ann King, through their positions in the women's meeting, strongly encouraged Quaker traditions of plain speech and dress in the community,⁴⁴ and these traditions were followed faithfully in their home, the younger generation never fully accepted them. By the time they reached their teens, the sons were not using Quaker Plain speech, characterized by the avoidance of the second person plural “you” when addressing one person, when writing to each other or to their friends.

Rachel practiced frugality and avoided anything that could be interpreted as wastefulness. For example, in an 1831 letter, written when she

was quite ill, she referred to the remaking of worn out clothing.⁴⁵ In addition to piety, plainness, and frugality, education was of primary importance to the Robinsons. Since the Nine Partners school had become Orthodox after the Hicksite-Orthodox separation, the Robinsons used a combination of local schools, private tutors, including Ann King, and a school that Rowland ran on their property from 1839 to 1845. Several letters refer to attempts to recruit teachers for both this school and private tutoring.⁴⁶

Despite all the attention, examination of the lives of the Robinson children makes one wonder whether the efforts of their parents and of Ann King, whose letters to them are filled with advice and admonition,⁴⁷ had the desired effect. While the correspondence of the Robinson children, including Thomas, who died at age 32 and left only one letter, reveals, through the filter of the typical prejudices of the period, attitudes of compassion and kindness, it also suggests that the major separation between the two generations was often on racial issues.⁴⁸ In his single surviving letter Tom, writing to George, referred to a dance of the “colored friends” and described, in Black dialect, one man’s regret about not being able to attend.⁴⁹ Over many years the correspondence between George, the second child, and Rowland Evans, the youngest, frequently referred to interracial tensions in the Robinson home. During their adolescence and young adulthood one or the other was often living away from the farm. Eventually they ran the farm together although Rowland Evans spent much of his time in New York City and Brooklyn.

In the latter part of the 1850s, when George was running the farm and Rowland Evans was in Brooklyn trying to establish himself as an illustrator and cartoonist, a series of letters expressed the brothers’ dislike of people of color, particularly those living in the house and especially one woman named Mary Ann. She seems to have been a favorite of Rachel and had a lot of influence over her, which led to the only recorded confrontation between Rachel and one of her children. George complained to his brother about Mary Ann and Rowland Evans replied

It is very unpleasant to have the house overrun with “coloured” but no doubt mother thinks she is doing the best she can . . . We young ones have never been thoughtful enough of Father’s and Mother’s feelings in our comments on their various plans . . . not many poor devils have such good old folks as we have.⁵⁰

George replied that it was easy to express such sentiments from Brooklyn but home was becoming quite unpleasant, and he displayed some defiance and defensiveness.

The most, I think all, I ever said to mother was once when she was talking to me about drinking “arduous” spirits, when I told her we all

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had our tastes,—some a strong appetite for coloreds, & others a slight taste for rum, & we must bear with each other, and leave each one to his own judgment and conscience.⁵¹

Much of the tone of the letters between George and Rowland Evans is lighter and they reveal the ways in which the young men deviated from their parents' path. There is a great deal of talk about the Ferrisburgh Town Band and the Vergennes City Band; George played fiddle and flute and Rowland Evans played brass. There is mention of going fishing together and getting drunk, several additional references to George's drinking (more as a problem of supply than behavior), and a great deal of gossip.⁵²

Anne Robinson, the third child and only daughter of Rowland and Rachel was more like her parents. She wrote in Quaker Plain, even to her brothers, and was far less critical of her parents, although her pen could be sharp. Writing to George in 1843 she reported an incident illustrating the split in the anti-slavery movement.

Father went to Williston last third day to an anti-slavery meeting . . . They had terrible doings at their meeting—They nominated father for president, the priest-ridden part objected because he is a no-government man, a no-sabbath man, an anti-minister man &c. &c.⁵³

Rowland was elected over the objections of the evangelical faction. Anne's tone in this letter was of great admiration, even to the point of bragging.

Perhaps the children's ambivalent attitudes had to do with upheavals in the lives of their parents that were caused primarily by the tenacity of their principles. When the Hicksite-Orthodox separation occurred, Rowland and Rachel continued what they considered to be the practice of their Quaker ancestors. At the time of the separation many Quakers, although not all, were fairly tolerant of each other's ways of worship. When the more conservative abolitionists, who were often of the evangelical persuasion, broke with William Lloyd Garrison, forming what was often called the New Organization, the Robinsons remained with the Garrisonian Old Organization. They did not, however, express their differences with other factions in the same vituperative tone often used by Garrison and Orson Murray.

By the 1840s the controlling faction of the Hicksite New York Yearly meeting was becoming less sympathetic to the abolitionist cause, particularly to the radical wing to which the Robinsons and their New York friends were allied. Several of these friends were disowned because of their public anti-slavery activity and the meeting sent a delegation to visit the Robinsons to see if they were deviating from the meeting's precepts. Anne Robinson described this visit, almost satirically, in a letter

to Ann King. The visit ended satisfactorily in that there was no action taken against the Robinsons.⁵⁴

However, shortly thereafter, Rowland and Rachel left the Society of Friends. This was a blow to Quakers in New England, as the Robinsons were well known and respected. D. I. Orvis wrote to Ann King that people were astonished that they had actually left. He stated that people knew that the Robinsons were dissatisfied but assumed that they were “coming back to the good old path again.” Margaret Thyall, a fellow teacher of Ann King, wrote saying, “If such friends leave us, what is to become of the society.”⁵⁵

FAILURE AND SUCCESS

Rowland T. Robinson and Rachel G. Robinson spent their entire lives trying to be as good as possible according to their understanding of human perfection. They were fortunate to have a network of friends—the Beales, Oliver Johnson, Orson Murray, Charles Marriott, Henry C. Wright, and especially Ann King—who loved, supported, and helped them. They were deeply committed to the cause of anti-slavery. The abolition movement had begun with a burst of enthusiasm in the 1830s, but by the 1840s disagreement about methods and goals splintered and enervated the movement. It was not until the Compromise of 1850 with its revived Fugitive Slave Act, that the movement became refocused.⁵⁶ During this period the Society of Friends, which at an earlier time had seemed so committed to the abolition of slavery, began to appear to the Robinsons and their friends to be as timid as the more traditional churches.

Rowland had many outlets for his fervor. Except during periods of ill health, he was active in several anti-slavery societies; he traveled frequently; he used his own money to disseminate anti-slavery information; and he sheltered fugitive slaves. The fugitive slave burden fell on the whole household, but Rowland was the one who made the arrangements for their reception and emancipation.⁵⁷ In addition he ran his farm, orchard, and mills, if not always on a day-to-day basis, nevertheless taking the responsibility for planning and overall management.

Rachel was active in the local Quaker meeting. This gave her a local influence but she was unable to affect the national debate in the issue of slavery. Women had an established place in Quaker meetings but in the anti-slavery movement they were usually auxiliaries; the crux of women’s civic abolitionist activities were ladies’ fairs and ladies’ anti-slavery societies. Abby Kelley’s attempt to speak in public was cause for dispute and her election to office in the American Anti-Slavery Society was fundamentally divisive. Ladies’ fairs took place in heavily populated areas where a sufficient number of customers could arrive on

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foot.⁵⁸ However, this was not an option in a sparsely populated western Vermont county, no matter how great the local anti-slavery sentiment.

Boycotting slave-labor goods was a way that a woman could take a positive step for the cause. By refusing to have these goods in her house and by communicating this to William Lloyd Garrison, Rachel made a public commitment to destroying the slave system by hurting its trade, and a private commitment to live according to the principles she believed in, whatever the sacrifice. Rachel and other women who boycotted knew that they were doing the right thing. None of the letters of these women admits to any doubt in their own minds, although they admit that others doubted.

The boycott was consistent with the pattern of Rachel's life. She visited other Quakers to help them to stay on the right path. She and Rowland took great pains with their children's education. They sheltered fugitive slaves. She treated all people, no matter how repulsive they were to her sons, as equals. Indeed, she showed great tolerance for her sons' rebellions. When she corrected them, at least in writing, she did it with no display of anger.

The boycott was not extensive and it did not end slavery. It did ensure that its participants remained totally apart from the slave system. Similarly, treating people of color as equals did not end racism, even in her own family, but it gave Rachel the knowledge that she was following the injunctions of her faith. Rachel can be said to have been empowered by her behavior. Through her devotion to behaving with goodness she came to be very much in control of her own life.

Did the Robinsons fail or did they succeed? They did not end slavery. Although notable regionally, they were marginal figures on the national scene and had little influence over the larger course of events. Helping fugitives, boycotting "prize goods," and educating children had little significant effect on contemporary issues. In this sense they failed to achieve their most cherished goals. But they had strong ideals and principles, which they made concrete through the conduct of their lives. They rarely compromised. From this point of view they would have to be judged successful, as people who lived up to their own high standards for "being good."

NOTES

¹ Rachel Robinson's letters, in contrast to those of many of her relatives, are extremely easy to read. The penmanship is the first thing one notices.

² Walter M. Merrill, ed., *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Volume 1* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 566.

³ Much of the information presented here on the history of Rokeby and the Robinson Family has been gathered in conversation, over several years, with Rokeby Museum's past director, Karen

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Peterson, present director, Jane Williamson, and trustee, Dean Leary. As research on the farm and family is ongoing, some information is both speculative and changeable, but most is verifiable.

⁴ Bliss Forbush, *Elias Hicks: Quaker Liberal*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 92.

⁵ James Temple to Thomas Robinson, 11 May 1851, Robinson Letters, Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, Vermont. (The Robinson Letters are currently housed in the Sheldon Museum although they are the property of Rokeby Museum, Ferrisburgh, Vermont, and are used by permission.)

⁶ Forbush, 93.

⁷ Many sites associated with Hicks and his ministry are preserved in the Jericho-Westbury area of Long Island.

⁸ Margaret Hope Bacon, *The Quiet Rebels* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1985), 83–87.

⁹ Forbush, *Elias Hicks*, 145, 89. In the Quaker religion “minister” does not refer to hired clergy, but rather to people recognized by the elders of the meeting as being worthy to preach.

¹⁰ 17 October 1793, quoted in *ibid.*, 89–90.

¹¹ George M. Benedict, *An Oration Delivered at Burlington, Vt. On the Fourth of July, 1826* (Burlington: E. & T. Mills, 1826), 17, 24.

¹² *The Liberator*, 3 December 1836, 4:3.

¹³ Erwin S. Clark, *History of the Town of Addison, Vt., 1609–1976* (Middlebury: The Addison Press, 1976), 40–41.

¹⁴ Rev. John E. Nutting, *Becoming The United Church of Christ, 1795–1995* (Burlington: Vermont Conference for the United Church of Christ, 1995), 17.

¹⁵ Elias Hicks, *Extemporaneous Discourses* (1825) and *Observations on the Slavery of Africans and their Descendants* (1810), quoted in Forbush, 148.

¹⁶ *The Liberator*, 5 March 1836, 1:1–3; 4 March 1837, 3:3; 5 March 1836, 1:3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18 July 1835, 2:4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:5.

¹⁹ See Joseph Beale (JB) to Rowland T. Robinson (RTR), 10 February 1837, 24 August 1837, 17 June 1840, and 14 November 1840 in Robinson Letters.

²⁰ JB to RTR, 11 September 1834, Robinson Letters.

²¹ Today the site of 376 Pearl St. is occupied by the Gov. Alfred E. Smith Houses, one of New York’s earliest large-scale housing projects. So the site is still functioning as an attempt at social betterment.

²² JB to RTR, *ibid.*, and 24 August 1837, Robinson Letters.

²³ Bacon, *Quiet Rebels*, 105.

²⁴ Elizabeth [surname unknown] to Ann King [AK], 23 December 1835, Robinson Letters.

²⁵ *The Liberator*, 21 January 1837, 4:3.

²⁶ Janet Stevenson, “A Family Divided,” *American Heritage*, 18 April 1967, 88.

²⁷ *The Liberator*, 1 June 1838, 4:6; “William Penn Tours Guidebook” (Philadelphia, Quaker Information Center, 1996). Pacifism was central to Quaker practice.

²⁸ *An Address to Free Colored Americans Issued by the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, May 9–12, 1837* (New York: William S. Dorr, 1837), 17, 18.

²⁹ Hannah Green to RTR, Rachel G. Robinson (RGR), and AK, 6 March 1841, Robinson Letters.

³⁰ Maria Weston Chapman, *How Can I Abolish Slavery, or Counsels to the Newly Converted—Anti Slavery Tract #14* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1855), unpaginated.

³¹ *The Liberator*, 7 January 1842, 13 January, 20 January, 27 January 1843, for example. *The Liberator* also published a list of Massachusetts railroads and their attitudes toward people of color, with the implied suggestion of which ones to avoid.

³² I do not mention RTR because he was not a good correspondent. Friends and relations continually complained of this. A postscript in his hand attached to someone else’s letter was often the best that could be hoped for. In addition, his penmanship was terrible.

³³ Ferrisburgh Society of Friends, Women’s Monthly Meeting: Minutes, Bailey-Howe Library, Department of Special Collections, Manuscript Collection, University of Vermont.

³⁴ Henry C. Wright to AK, 25 July 1842, Robinson Letters.

³⁵ RGR to RTR, 1 September 1831, Robinson Letters; *The Vergennes Vermonter*, 30 April 1838, 3:5.

³⁶ David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont: 1791–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 131.

³⁷ Oliver Johnson (OJ) to RTR, 27 March 1835, 20 September 1840, and [date obscure] 1840, Robinson Letters.

³⁸ James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 94–95.

³⁹ OJ to RTR, 20 April 1840, Robinson Letters.

⁴⁰ This sentiment can be found in almost any issue of *The Liberator* or *The Vermont Telegraph*.

⁴¹ *The Vergennes Vermonter*, 31 October 1838, 1:6.

⁴² For an unraveling of the mythology of the Underground Railroad see Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1961, 1996); for Vermont see Raymond Zerblis,

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Friends of Freedom: The Vermont Underground Railroad Survey Report (Montpelier: Vermont Department of State Buildings and Vermont Division of Historic Preservation, 1996).

⁴³ Anne King Robinson (AKR) to GR, 22 January 1843; RTR, RGR, Huldah Hoag to GR, 19 February 1843, Robinson Letters.

⁴⁴ Ferrisburgh Women's Monthly Meeting, Minutes, Bailey-Howe Library, Department of Special Collections, Manuscript Collection, University of Vermont.

⁴⁵ RGR to RTR, 16 August 1831, Robinson Letters.

⁴⁶ RGR to RTR, 8 July 1831; J. S. Bingham to RTR, 19 July 1838; RTR to RGR, 2 September 1831; AKR to AK, 6 September 1844, Robinson Letters.

⁴⁷ AK to GR, 3 August 1840, 18 December 1842, April 1843; AK to Rowland Evans Robinson (RER), 20 October 1850, 25 December 1850, 10 February 1851, 20 April 1851, 15 June 1851; all in Robinson Letters.

⁴⁸ For a revealing and sensitive look at Vermonter's racial attitudes in the midcentury see the reactions of Ophelia Sinclair to Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This puts the Robinson boys' language in perspective.

⁴⁹ Thomas Robinson II to GR, 21 March 1847, Robinson Letters.

⁵⁰ GR to RER, 21 February 1859; RER to GR 9 March 1859, Robinson Letters.

⁵¹ GR to RER, 27 March 1859, Robinson Letters.

⁵² I recommend reading boxes three and four of the Robinson Letters together to get the sequence of the correspondence between George and Rowland Evans correct.

⁵³ AKR to GR, 22 January 1843, Robinson Letters.

⁵⁴ AKR to AK, 6 September 1844, Robinson Letters.

⁵⁵ D. I. Orvis to AK, 29 March 1846; Margaret Thyall to AK, 1 January 1846, Robinson Letters.

⁵⁶ Stewart, *Holy Warriors*, 93ff.

⁵⁷ See letters from Joseph Beale, Ephram Elliott, and Oliver Johnson to RTR, Robinson Letters.

⁵⁸ *The Liberator*, 2 January 1837, 7 January 1842, for example.