



“A Convention of ‘Moral Lunatics’”: The Rutland, Vermont, Free Convention of 1858

*Representatives of nearly every
American Antebellum reform movement
known to humankind crowded into
Rutland in late June 1858 to thump the
drums for their particular causes,
creating a cacophony of assertions and
cross-purposes.*

By THOMAS L. ALTHERR

As Randy Roth has shown in *The Democratic Dilemma*, antebellum Vermont was awash in a tide of religious revivals and sectarian surges. Even though that level of enthusiasm waned by the 1850s, Vermont was still susceptible to short sporadic upheavals.¹ In the summer of 1858, Rutland played host to one of the most unusual gatherings of moral reformers ever to assemble on the American continent. Perhaps New Hampshire abolitionist Parker Pillsbury described it best. Writing to William Lloyd Garrison on June 30, 1858, he remarked, “I am just returned from attending one of the largest and most important Reformatory Conventions ever held in this or any other country. . . . The most prominent topics considered were Spiritualism, the Cause of Woman, including Marriage and Maternity, Scripture and Church Authority, and Slavery. Then the subjects of Free Trade, of Education, Labor and Land Reform, Temperance, Physiology and Phrenology were introduced, and more or less considered.” Pillsbury praised New Lebanon Shaker Frederick Evans for “a calm and clear exposition of the doctrines held by his denomination”; Albany minister Amory Dwight Mayo for “a most eloquent and able address on the Bible”; a variety of feminists for speeches on behalf of Woman; and New York radical Ernestine Rose for “all her strength and noble earnestness.”

“How could we fail, then,” he posed rhetorically, “of an occasion to be felt and remembered forever.” One speaker, Henry Clarke Wright, seemed to embody the eclectic quality of the mix by himself: “H. C. Wright, of no State or country in particular; was also there, endeavoring to weave his broad robes of Righteousness out of Anti-Slavery, Non-Resistance, Temperance, the true laws of Marriage, Maternity, Education and the construction of the family.” “Permit me to say, in a word,” Pillsbury concluded, “that no Convention ever held in America could have had more Millennial hope and promise in it than this.” Repeat it in each state and even the slave states would come shouting for reform, he conjectured.²

In the quest for moral perfection that drew the energies of many reformers in the decades before the Civil War, those Americans sought the proper strategy and cause to bring on the projected millennium. Few single-issue radicals emerged, but many stressed one social evil or economic malady as the major obstacle to paradise regained. For many that was chattel slavery, for others excessive alcoholism or marital domination or male oppression of females or sexual expenditure, and yet for others dietary and nervous system problems seemed the root causes of national debility. To erase these severe smudges on the American moral self-image, reformers championed a flood of movements: abolition, anti-slavery, women’s rights, the Cult of Domesticity, temperance, religious revivalism Second Great Awakening-style, Free Love, passionlessness, spermatic economy, pacifism, celibacy, pantagamy, polygyny, transcendentalism and pantheism, associationism and Fourierist socialism, homeopathic, Thomsonian, and eclectic medicine, hydrophathy, vegetarianism, phrenology, mesmerism and galvanism, law reform, public education, conversion of indigenous people, and spiritualism. Some reformers sampled widely from this menu; others followed one or two through to the bitter end.³

Movement tactics to win followers varied from personal conversion to moral suasion to outright propaganda. Acutely aware of the power of the mass-distributed printed word, radicals distributed tons of pamphlets, newspapers, and broadsides to the public, occasionally flooding the mails with petitions. In an age when lectures were a chief form of entertainment, the reformers hustled out on the lyceum circuit town to town. At times masters of the clandestine maneuver, at others, the purveyors of ultimate candidness, these enthusiasts kept their eyes on their main goals. Although most of them advocated and practiced Christian nonviolence, many up until the Civil War, some leaders thought that violence had value in convincing formerly marginal converts. Confrontational politics was a style few of them avoided. A few knocks from a mob served to strengthen a speaker’s resolve. Paradoxically enthralling

to the individual and predicating collective effort alike, reform movements both succeeded and foundered on these emotional drives.

The convention was an arrangement common to the age. Formalized gatherings of delegates and speakers in large, predetermined locales and arenas, often with thoroughly mapped-out agendas, conventions were ubiquitous by the 1840s. Whether a convention was the best mode of communication and persuasion drew some debate, but increasingly this organizational principle won the day. Reform-minded radicals had no monopoly on the convention process. Businessmen, politicians, ministers, military men, and promoters of conservative socioeconomic institutions such as slavery all convened regularly. Reformers, then, when setting up their own conventions were breaking no new territory, but perhaps were adapting the tactics of the mainstream for their own ends.

Before 1858, American reformers assembled in numerous conventions to promote their specific causes. For example, for most of the years of the 1840s and 1850s women's rights workers held national conventions, as did the abolition, temperance, and other reform movements. Advocates at these conventions might have argued about appropriate strategies and at times some urged shifts to other causes, but mostly these gatherings focused on a single purpose. Thus, when the melange of movers and shakers descended upon Rutland in June, 1858, their arrival marked a break in tradition. Such a mixed assemblage held out the possibility of either extraordinary communication and cooperation or a dispiriting Babel.

Why Vermont? Why Rutland? Vermonters had claimed an independent streak all the way back to Ethan and Ira Allen and the Green Mountain Boys and had had plenty of what historian David Ludlum termed "social ferment" in the first half of the century. Abolitionism had attracted quite a few sympathizers in the 1830s. Future Mormon leaders Joseph Smith and Brigham Young had been born in the state, and Millerite founder William Miller and Oneida Community mastermind John Humphrey Noyes got their start in Vermont as well. Rutland itself had hosted a temperance convention in 1844, and for over thirty years a black minister, Lemuel Haynes, had presided over a congregation there. Vermont boasted some resort spas, and Thomsonian botanist doctors ranged the region.⁴ On the other hand, residents had attacked radicals, mobbing abolitionist Samuel May in Rutland in 1835. Due to business and agricultural shifts, many Vermonters had moved west. By the late 1850s, most Vermonters possessed a more conservative frame of mind. Farmers and businessmen emphasized boosterism and economic prosperity which they hoped the recent railway lines would bring. Reversing the trend of rural abandonment, Rutland's population had jumped from

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3,000 to 7,633 inhabitants by September, 1857.⁵ Even if the state was relatively hospitable for radical gatherings, the choice of Rutland still seemed curious, in that New York, Boston, or some other metropolitan area would have promised the reformers bigger crowds and more immediate media exposure. If they were looking to escape the hot cities, a common summertime practice before the arrival of air conditioning, they found no relief in Rutland; all contemporary reports suggest it was blazing those three days.

The origin of the idea for the convention is somewhat fuzzy, but apparently Spiritualist groups in the Boston area or in Vermont, or both, envisioned a wide-ranging gathering. In late May a call went out for “Friends of Human Progress” to assemble in late June in Rutland. Over 150 Vermonters, most from the western stretch of the state, signed the petition. Rutland businessman John Landon and merchant Newman Weeks appear to have been the chief contacts in the town, but others such as Burlington educator John R. Forrest and Glens Falls, New York, minister Jason F. Walker also took an active role. It is apparent, however, that the Spiritualist contingent engineered the effort. Many newspaper accounts after the event remarked about the predominance of that religious movement at the convention. The Rutland organizers secured much local cooperation in staging the event. *The Spiritual Age* for June 12th gave the details:

Ample accommodations will be made to feed and lodge all who may be desirous of attending the Convention. Arrangements have been made with the different railroads to carry for half fare. Special trains will be run on the Rutland and Burlington, Rutland and Washington, and Western Vermont roads. Our friends from Boston and vicinity who wish to be at the Convention on the morning of the first day, will buy their tickets through Rutland, and take the P.M. train Thursday, June 24th. On the Cheshire Railroad they will be furnished with return checks from Rutland to Fitchburg. Those who leave Boston on the first train Friday morning, will arrive in Rutland at 2:30 P.M. Rooms and board have been secured at hotels, boarding houses, and in private families, from 50 cents to \$1.25 per day. Those wishing to engage rooms beforehand will please make application by letter to John Landon and Newman Weeks, General Committee.⁶

The committee erected a large tent, “one hundred feet in diameter,” “on the vacant lot [on the] east side of Grove street.” The group expected five thousand in attendance.⁷

Although organizers were disappointed that Garrison and Wendell Phillips bowed out of the event, even though they had signed the call, the convention attracted an array of well-known speakers, veterans of reform sorties as far away as Missouri. William Goodell, a moderate

abolitionist who had worked with the Liberty Party in the 1840s, came representing the American Antislavery Society. Stephen Symonds Foster and Parker Pillsbury came with a more aggressive abolitionist bent. The “Poughkeepsie Seer,” Andrew Jackson Davis, and his equally talented wife, Mary, headed the Spiritualist attractions, but editors Joel Tiffany and Samuel Brittan and famed local Vermont medium Achsah Sprague helped round out the cast. Feminists Frances Dana Gage, Julia Branch, Eliza Farnham, and Ernestine Rose added female moral passion. Frederick Evans of New Lebanon, New York, pitched in for the Shaker perspective, and Elder Miles Grant kept the Millerite hopes alive. And the ubiquitous Henry Clarke Wright knitted all the causes together.

Although limited space precludes any extended discussion here of the Vermont participants, many were farmers and merchants, and most apparently were Spiritualists. Several, such as Gibson Smith of Shaftsbury, Samuel Davis of Bethel, Dennis Chapin of Huntington, and abolitionist H. P. Cutting of Castleton were Universalist ministers. Joshua Young, a Congregationalist minister from Burlington, became famous the next year for delivering the eulogy at the funeral of John Brown of Harper’s Ferry. A number of alternative medicine practitioners, such as Jacob Holt of Bridgewater, William Hopkins of Vergennes, Ezra Edson of Manchester, and Selah Gridley of Castleton joined up, as did dentist Seth Blake of Bellows Falls. Some participants, such as Augustus and Cyrus Armstrong of Dorset, were probably longtime abolitionists. Rowland T. Robinson of Ferrisburgh had gained notoriety for Underground Railroad activities. Emily Cogswell of Middlebury, just one of many women involved, and Hosea Doton of Pomfret, represented the teaching profession. Large contingents of signers were from the Burlington and Bennington regions. These included several affluent merchants and farmers, according to census records. Far from reflecting a ragtag bunch of radicals, this cross-section of Vermonters consisted of many solid-citizen types, several of whom had held civic offices.

Rutland itself and the surrounding county accounted for a large number of petition signers. In addition to organizers John Landon and Newman Weeks, these included John W. Cramton (misspelled Crampton on the petition), a tinware manufacturer, who went on to hold many high-level positions in business and government and who the *Burlington Free Press* labeled in 1889, the “most ‘official’ person in the state.”⁸ Other signers from the Rutland area included men and women from all walks of life: merchants, laborers, schoolteachers, and small business owners. Many were involved in Spiritualism and some in allopathic medicine.

Newman Weeks, a life and fire insurance and real estate agent, justice of the peace, notary, ticket agent for Grand Trunk Railroad, and mer-

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chant dealing in furniture and upholstery goods, may have been the Rutlander most involved in the Spiritualism movement. In a few letters to Plymouth medium Achsah Sprague, Weeks left record of his enthusiasm. On April 15, 1858, he told her of Burlington bookkeeper William H. Root's recent "waking up" to Spiritualism.⁹ A few weeks after the reform convention, Weeks gushed to Sprague about his Women's Rights politics: "So you see I am practically a 'Woman's Rights Man,' and not only that but a 'Human Rights Man.' I hope the time is not far distant when Women will stand up in their woman hood on a perfect equality with men, & no longer submit to be deemed *inferior*, or the mere *appendages* to the 'Lords of Creation.'" ¹⁰ By the end of October, however, he was lamenting to her about the stagnancy of Spiritualism locally: "There is nothing going on now in Vermont remarkably interesting in the line of spiritual growth."¹¹ And a month later, reflecting on a reform conference in Utica, New York, Weeks declared it "not quite equal to the Rutland Convention."¹² As late as 1867 Weeks was still active in Spiritualism, as he called a national convention to order in Cleveland that September.

Opening the convention on June 25th, Jason Walker exhorted the assembled speakers and crowd to treat the occasion as a "free platform" and to observe toleration toward different viewpoints: "They who would be reformers of their fellows should always be charitable." Albert Landon of Rutland then offered a set of resolutions that the Business Committee had drafted. Sweeping far and wide, the pronouncements declared the individual's authority "absolute and final," condemned slavery, espoused Spiritualism, opposed war and capital punishment, celebrated marriage based on "exclusive conjugal love," defended a woman's right to choose if and when to bear children, praised free trade and land reform, challenged churchly rights to enforce the Sabbath and biblical justification, and finished with six vague statements on the moral improvability of mankind, the last of which wondered whether or not "time and devotion spent on religious service" was of any benefit.¹³ Rather than summaries of the reformers' positions, these tenets served as the starting points for the debates. Over the next three days, despite Walker's hopes for total congeniality, the divergent opinions surged back and forth across the rostrum.

Henry Clarke Wright rose first to take on the very last resolution. An itinerant minister of sorts, Wright agreed that physical structures like churches should not confine worship, but pleaded for Christian sentiments to prevail. This touched off brief remarks by others on the costs of churches and the possibilities of salvation. After repast and refreshment, Wright picked up the mantle again and delivered a long address

on the first resolution, thumping hard for the individual's rights and responsibilities: "*I must be responsible, individually and alone, for my opinions and practices.*"¹⁴ Samuel B. Brittan, the Spiritualist editor, then held forth on the "natural evidences of immortality," triggering responses from Millerite Elder Grant and Spiritualists in the audience. Another well-known Spiritualist editor, Joel Tiffany, followed with a rather abstruse and seemingly pointless disquisition on organization in nature and religion. Such was enough to exhaust the afternoon session. In the evening Amory Dwight Mayo, an Albany minister, attempted to call the radicals more or less back into the conventional Christian fold with an appeal to the sanctity of the Bible. William Goodell and Stephen Symonds Foster rose to rebut Mayo, but the convention president overrode them, and the day closed with presentations by the two Vermont trance mediums, Helen Temple of Bennington and Achsah Sprague of Plymouth.¹⁵

On the second day of the conference, matters began rather innocuously with a talk by Dr. H. S. Brown of Clarendon, Vermont on the need for a just government to regulate the affairs of individuals, a refutation of Henry Clarke Wright's position. Then things swung into high gear when New York feminist Julia Branch delivered an impassioned oration on the conditions of married women and offered a resolution that stunned the crowd: "That the slavery and degradation of woman proceed from the institution of marriage; that by the marriage contract, she loses control of her name, her person, her property, her labor, her affections, her children, and her freedom."¹⁶ As Luisa Cetti, one of only a handful of scholars to examine the Free Convention, argued in an unpublished paper, this resolution catapulted the convention in a women's rights direction, perhaps further than most feminists desired at the time, adding in a "Free Love" dimension that many of those assembled detested. Newspapers, particularly *The New York Times*, which devoted the entire front page of its June 29th edition to the convention and Branch's speech, characterized the meeting as a Free Love extravaganza. This was an inaccurate, if not downright unfair assessment, but as other current anti-Free Love stories, such as one about an alleged seduction among the Berlin Heights, Ohio Free Lovers showed, hostility toward that set of ideas was rampant.¹⁷ Stephen Symonds Foster attempted to soften the declaration by advocating marriage "*based upon the perfect principle of perfect and entire equality;*" a notion he probably thought described his own marriage with Abby Kelley Foster. But others such as Joel Tiffany jumped up to attack the Free Love ideas right away. Ernestine Rose set about to smooth things over by asserting that Branch did not mean "to let loose the untamed passions either of men or women," and made her own observations on the deprivations women suffered in

too many marriages. Shaker Frederick Evans leaped forth to encourage the conventioners not just to control but crucify their lusts. This topic of marriage drew responses from the next three speakers. Eliza Farnham, in the midst of a general analysis of women's rights, injected her points that women had endured abuses within marriage too long and that rebellion was in their hearts. Having abandoned a loveless marriage of his own, Henry Clarke Wright echoed the claims about prison-like marriages. And Ohio feminist Frances Dana Gage redirected the discussion to the matter of marital property rights and championed continuing reforms in that area. Thus the morning session drew to a close.¹⁸

That afternoon the abolitionists got their turn. Parker Pillsbury pitched in strongly to embellish his claim that "slavery is the sin and crime of our country." Calling for an interpretation of the Constitution to eradicate slavery, William Goodell joined his fervor to Pillsbury's.¹⁹ Stephen Symonds Foster raised the ante further, charging as a thoroughgoing "Come-Outer" and disunionist that "any law, constitution, court, or government, any church, priesthood, creed, or Bible, any Christ, or any God, that, by silence or otherwise, authorizes man to enslave man, merits the scorn and contempt of mankind."²⁰ By the time Henry Clarke Wright got his turn to speak, he must have been close to frothing in agreement, as he took the podium. "Down, then, with all Constitutions and Unions—" he thundered, "down with all churches, religions, and Bibles—down with all Christs and all Gods, that cannot exist without enslaving or killing men! Let man be sacred! Perish all Bibles, Christs and Gods, that would desecrate him!" Subsequent speakers widened the meaning of the word "slavery" and fulminated on the slavery of mental bigotry or the tyranny of the body over the mind, ending the session with a reaffirmation of the individual's rights.²¹

After the dinner break, the evening session returned to the theme of women's rights. George Sennott of Boston averred that women should take a vital place in reform movements, because, emphasizing the assumed ideal of passionlessness, he reckoned their moral superiority suited them well for the tasks: "For though man's crimes do spring from unprincipled passion, it is a fact as well known as any fact can be, that on the part of woman, there is no *passion* whatsoever. . . . Women are not sensual, they abhor sensuality, and when they become independent, it will be one of the first things swept away, whether in marriage or out." Mary Davis closed out the segment with a speech underscoring Sennott's remarks as well as those by other feminists earlier in the convention.²²

By Sunday, many Spiritualists were expressing dissatisfaction with the twists and turns of the discussions. Apparently, according to Pillsbury, some wished to disband and hold a concurrent Spiritualist-oriented con-

ference. But Andrew Jackson Davis interceded and kept them with the main body, which by that time was approaching about 3,000 spectators.²³ After morning debate on the merits of free trade and a proposition to remove Christian teachings from public schools by Rutlander John Landon, Davis and the Spiritualists took over. Rehearsing his favorite points about harmonial forces in the universe, Davis argued for Spiritualism as a “door to my acceptance of the various reforms for which this Convention has assembled,” as “a broad and glorious triumphal archway leading in all directions into freedom, and a universal enjoyment of a heaven in the world.”²⁴ Frederick Evans then spoke on the Shaker doctrines of physical and spiritual simplicity and celibacy to wrap up the session: “A celibate life, community of goods, separation from earthly governments, abolition of oaths, of war, of slavery, of poverty, and a sinless, innocent life.”²⁵

Evans may have been a hard act to follow, for the concluding evening session account reads like a denouement. A Mr. Markham held forth briefly on “natural rights,” and then Miles Grant launched into an attack on Spiritualism, declaring that “communications purporting to come from departed human spirits proceed from demons, and lead directly to skepticism, sensualism, and a rejection of the doctrines of the Bible.” Grant promptly found himself locking horns with Joel Tiffany until both exhausted their points of view. Thomas Curtis and Stephen Symonds Foster offered up the obligatory commendations to the organizers, to the Harmonists from Troy, New York, who had provided intermission singings, and to the people of Rutland, most of whom must have been as drained by the conference as were the participants.²⁶

The Rutland convention captured many of the swirling radical religious currents of the day. Although the Second Great Awakening was thirty years in the past, the gathering bore some resemblance to the camp revivals in the frontier groves. Each reformer sought to evangelize for his or her cause. Fervor was the order of the day. Rutland must have felt a little scorched from its three days of being “burnt-over.” Although it’s impossible to know the religious composition of the audience, clearly traditional religions and sects had scant representation on the podium. Liberal Christianity seemed retrograde compared to the challenges of “Come-Outerism,” Millennialism, and Spiritualism. The conference even got one cleric into hot water with his congregation. Reverend Joshua Young of Burlington apparently did not attend the gathering, but his signing of the petition drew little applause from his flock, who later that year removed the pastor from his position.²⁷

Several newspaper accounts declared that the Spiritualists predominated. Probably the stories referred to the number of Spiritualists in attendance, but the growing movement did make its mark on the conference.

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Although historians debate the structure of the Spiritualist movement—Ann Braude emphasizing the role of women in a more loosely-knit coalition of anti-authoritarian reform and Bret Carroll detecting a greater pattern of organization—the movement had definitely gained steam since its spirit-rapping days of the 1840s.²⁸ The Rutland conference gave the Spiritualists a featured role. Mary and Andrew Jackson Davis delivered long disquisitions on the expected celestial harmonium. Spiritualist editors Brittan and Tiffany chimed in with their own advocacies of their perspective. Trance mediums Helen Temple and Achsah Sprague took the stage to display their talents.²⁹

But the Spiritualists did not completely dominate the field. Anti-ecclesiastical speeches and queries permeated the conference. For example, the organizing committee submitted the following resolution concerning the Bible: “*Resolved*, That nothing is true or right, and nothing is false or wrong, because it is sanctioned or condemned by the Bible; therefore, the Bible is powerless to prove any doctrine to be true, or any practice to be right, and it should never be quoted for that purpose.”³⁰ Henry Clarke Wright, erstwhile Presbyterian minister, challenged the audience about religious hypocrisy, in which they attended services and sang hymns, but failed to incorporate genuine Christianity into their lives. Wright railed: “You do not take him home to your houses, your stores, or your shops. You keep your God closed up in your churches through the week, and then open the doors and let him out again. One hundred million dollars are invested in houses for God in the United States, and fifty-two days of each year are set apart for God-worship, and thousands of priests are employed to conduct that worship.”³¹ Ernestine Rose, who was somewhat of an atheist, avowed, “I am opposed to all the creeds, systems, legislations, all the writings, printings, or acts of men with regard to any other being, except men and women here. If there is another life, I say the same. Let us do our duty to humanity here, and when we reach another state of existence, we will attend to the duties of that state.”³²

Occasionally speakers attempted to reconcile the radical and traditional outlooks. Joel Tiffany spoke on behalf of “organization in a religious sense”: “Suppose I find ten, twenty, thirty, or fifty men and women who think and feel as I do, who have the same aspirations, and who feel that they can gather together with me, and thus, by our mutual breathings forth, stimulate each other to higher, holier and purer desires, and for that purpose we come together, and thus unitedly, with all our hearts and aspirations, breathe forth our desires to that great infinite source of all good—have you any objection to it?”³³ Horace Seaver, of Boston, declaimed that although he was a non-believer himself, he did not be-

grudge anyone who found some happiness in religion. "Religion," he said, "has made of this world, almost literally, a hell, and if there be any liberalism that can make a heaven for any portion of humanity, or all of us, I have no objection."³⁴ And Tiffany, apparently frustrated by the diversity of opinions at the convention, tried to salvage some respect for religion, even if not the sectarian brand, as moral suasion: "I mean by 'Religion,' that truth which I believe is necessary to enlighten the world; and I wish not only to know that truth, but to practice it in my life. When I wish to present to the world the idea of purity, I wish to present that idea through my own daily life, by becoming the embodiment of it."³⁵

Predictably, much of the debate centered on the role of the Bible in religion. Amory Dwight Mayo declared, "The most important question to the religious development of our country is now *The Authority of the Bible*. Every doctrine of theology, every phase of ecclesiastical policy; every problem of private and public morality, is involved in its solution. It is a hopeless endeavor to reconcile the present confusion of religious affairs until we have arrived at some intelligent answer to these queries—*What is the Bible?; what is its Authority in Religion; what is the true method of its use?*"³⁶ Now and then a speaker called for a more fundamentalist reading of the Bible. After a sharp attack on Spiritualism, Miles Grant defended the Bible: "How do you know good from evil? Try it by the Bible. I take the Bible as the *only* rule of faith and practice; there fore I believe these spiritual manifestations are from demons." Grant, however, became embroiled in a dispute with Joel Tiffany over biblical semantics. Pillsbury rushed in to chide them for "discharging small shots of text at each other."³⁷

Far and away the greatest amount of anti-ecclesiastical thunder came from the Come-Outers, a movement that had grown increasingly vociferous. As George Sennott, a Boston lawyer, remarked about the strength of this group, "twenty years ago, a 'come-outer' was a name to hoot at—a singularity; now they hold conventions."³⁸ Pillsbury submitted a resolution that distilled the arguments of Come-Outerism: "*Resolved*, That the two great pillars of the slave system of this country are the State and the Church—the former as represented by the two great political parties, the Republican and Democratic; and the latter by the Congregational, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopal Churches, and the American Bible and Tract Societies—not one of which has ever repudiated the principle that man may breed, buy, sell and hold his fellow man in absolutely brutal slavery."³⁹ After his own similar resolution, Foster went on to upbraid the Spiritualists: "in this nineteenth century, a nation, that every seventh day goes on its knees before God, thanking him that we live in a land of Gospel light and civil and religious liberty,

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denies, on pains of stripes and imprisonment, its own Sacred Scriptures to one-seventh part of its population—and we are to talk about a belief in immortality, are we? We are to discuss the question whether spirits in the other world can communicate with us, are we? . . . You pretend to be Spiritualists, and believe in a future life; and yet, you are so attached to this, that you dare not repudiate this pro-slavery, man-thieving government, because it may cost a drop of blood, a scratch on the face! You believe in Spiritualism? Why, I have more Spiritualism in my little finger than you have in your whole bodies.” He especially singled out the Methodists who he thought carried out the work of slave-hunters north of the Mason-Dixon Line.⁴⁰ S. C. Chandler took the anti-institutionalist line even further. In addition to the four or so million slaves, Chandler asserted there were another sixteen million church members who were chained to “this ecclesiastical God, that tells you what ideas you shall possess of him, what you shall find in the Bible and what you shall not find there, and what you shall think in relation to ourselves and your present and future destiny.” He implored the audience “to set aside that ecclesiastical authority, to break the shackles that bind your minds down, and forbid you to tread in the paths of mental freedom.”⁴¹ For many of the Rutland radicals, religion was the ultimate prison, the Devil’s handmaiden.

For weeks after the Rutland Convention newspapers as far away as Kansas and New Orleans printed reports and editorials about the debates. Only a few treated the event neutrally or with approval. Spiritualist newspapers, such as *Banner of Light* and Brittan’s *The Spiritual Age* printed lengthy transcripts of the debates. Similarly, *The Liberator* and *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* carried reports and letters to the editor, the former into early September.⁴² All the other newspaper accounts savaged the conference. Some took the strategy of disassociating the meeting from its location, wondering how such a thing could have ever befallen Rutland. For example, the Bradford, Vermont, *Aurora of the Valley* opined: “Why these heterodox people should select such a peaceful, retired and virtuous locality as Rutland, as the scene in which to ventilate their horrid doctrines we are at a loss to tell.” “The town of Rutland is now being smitten as with a plague,” pronounced the St. Johnsbury, Vermont, *Caledonian*. Similarly, the *Burlington Free Press* consoled, “We do not wonder that the decent people of Rutland were annoyed at the presence of the Convention, for we do not remember to have read of a greater exhibition of mingled nonsense, indecency, insanity, and blasphemy, than appears to have been made by it.”⁴³ Several other newspapers employed attacks on the speakers’ personal characteristics, real or imagined. The Jackson *Mississippian Daily Gazette* referred to a convention “composed of masculine females and feminine males.”

“Female Plug Uglies” was the headline in a Fayetteville, Tennessee, *Observer* piece. A few stories, such as one in the Albany, New York, *Evening Journal*, took pleasure in derogatorily describing the physical characteristics of Eliza Farnham, Frances Dana Gage, and Julia Branch.⁴⁴

Most of the newspaper accounts, however, expressed dismay over the ideas of the conference. “Such miserable stuff as this must create intense disgust in the minds of all reasonable people,” blasted the Portland, Maine, *Advertiser*, “and this will work its own cure. We have no fear of seeing such revolting doctrines made popular so long as they are presented in their hideous deformity.” The Davenport *Daily Iowa State Democrat* chimed in: “What a happy meeting of all that is mean, all that is disgusting, all that is impudent, all that is sacrilegious.” “If the permanent lady residents of Rutland had taken their broomsticks and chased some of these hot-heads out of New England, they would have effected a greater ‘reform’ than all the conventions in the Union could accomplish,” spouted the Youngstown/Canfield, Ohio, *Republican Sentinel*. The prize for cleverness probably goes to the Wheeling, Virginia, *Daily Intelligencer* for its ridicule of the topics: “While their hand is in, why not introduce some resolutions defining the precise position of the Convention on the old hen question, the diagnosis of stump-tail milk, the pathology of pork, and the peregrinatory processes of green cheese.”⁴⁵

What overall impact did the Rutland Free Convention make on the United States of 1858 other than stirring up editors? Few of the participants later referred to their participation. Many nationally known radicals, such as Wendell Phillips, Garrison, Theodore Parker, and Theodore Dwight Weld, the Grimké sisters, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, the Fox sisters, Horace Greeley, and the Tappan brothers had not joined in the conference nor did they leave any reaction to it. Aside from the debate in the abolitionist and Spiritualist newspapers, the convention left little mark. It didn’t sway the major political parties overtly, and it did not accelerate or halt the tide toward civil war. The state of Vermont did enact a staunchly abolitionist measure, “An Act to Secure Freedom to All Persons within this State” in November, 1858, but even that law’s connection to the Rutland Convention is unclear.⁴⁵ Was the convention just some sound and fury in backwater Vermont?

The Rutland gathering may not have generated earthshaking changes in Americans of that day, but it still serves as a barometer of the prejudices and passions that simmered then, as a crazy-quilt paradigm of the reach of reforms afoot, and as an example of the internecine bickering among the reformer wing. Moreover, even though editors lambasted the Rutland conclave, the convention movement hardly died out. For years afterward, reformers continued to assemble in convention as if it were

the most natural of activities. Similarly, although the speakers may not have referred to the Rutland affair afterwards, it still was part of the relentless process of being a radical in those tumultuous decades, yet one more baptism under fire for unpopular causes. It is tempting, but probably overstating the case, to see the meeting, its speakers, and its ideas as prophetic, pointing the way to a future when Americans would normalize several of the reformers' platforms. Or, perhaps historian Louis Filler was closer to the truth with his observation: "It was as though these restless perfectionists were convening for all but the last time—at least as a coherent body—before civil war made largely irrelevant their configuration of causes."⁴⁶ But the scenario arises immediately of Henry Clarke Wright leaping to his feet, along with the other "fanatics in grand conclave," to debate that point yet one more time.⁴⁷

NOTES

¹ Randolph A. Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). A version of this paper appeared in the *Rutland Historical Society Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (1999): 34–48. My thanks to the Rutland Historical Society for permission to use material from that article here.

² Parker Pillsbury to William Lloyd Garrison, reprinted in *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 10 July 1858, 1.

³ Historical summations of the antebellum reform movements are numerous, but two useful, brief monographs are Ronald A. Walters, *American Reformers 1815–1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978) and Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1995).

⁴ David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939). See also Wilbur H. Siebert, *Vermont's Anti-Slavery and Underground Railroad Record* (Columbus, Ohio: Spahr and Glenn, 1937); John L. Myers, "The Major Effect of Antislavery Agencies in Vermont, 1832–1836," *Vermont History* 36 (September 1968): 214–229; Randolph A. Roth, "The First Radical Abolitionists: The Reverend James Milligan and the Reformed Presbyterians of Vermont," *New England Quarterly* 55 (December 1982): 540–563; Louise B. Roomet, "Vermont as a Resort Area in the Nineteenth Century," *Vermont History* 44 (1976): 1–13; and Harold A. Meeks, *Time and Change in Vermont: A Human Geography* (Chester, Conn.: The Globe Pequot Press, 1986).

⁵ Austin J. Coolidge and J.B. Mansfield, *A History and Description of New England, General and Local*, 2 vols. (Boston: Austin J. Coolidge, 1859), *Vol. I: Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont*, 894.

⁶ *The Spiritual Age*, 12 June 1858.

⁷ "The Free Convention," *Rutland Herald*, 25 June 1858, 2.

⁸ *Burlington Free Press*, 21 January 1889, 5.

⁹ Newman Weeks to Achsah Sprague, 15 April 1858, Achsah Sprague Collection, Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, Vermont, Document Box #181, Folder 5.

¹⁰ Weeks to Sprague, 17 August 1858, *ibid.*, Folder 6.

¹¹ Weeks to Sprague, 31 October 1858, *ibid.*, Folder 7.

¹² Weeks to Sprague, 26 November 1858, *ibid.*, Folder 7.

¹³ J. M. Yerrinton, ed., *Proceedings of the Free Convention Held at Rutland, Vermont June 25th, 26th, and 27th* (Boston: J. M. Yerrinton, 1858), 8–10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11–23; quotation is on p. 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24–50, 177–184.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50–55; quotation is on p. 55.

¹⁷ Luisa Cetti, "The Radicals and the Wrongs of Marriage," unpublished paper presented at the Third Biennial Symposium of the Milan Group in Early United States History, "Making, Unmaking and Remaking America: Popular Ideology before the Civil War," Milan, Italy, June 1986.

¹⁸ Yerrinton, ed., *Proceedings*, 56–63, 67–81; quotation is from p. 56.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 82–93; quotation is on p. 82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 95–99; quotation is on p. 95.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 100–109; quotation is on p. 101.

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²² *Ibid.*, 109–124; quotation is on p. 118.

²³ Pillsbury to Garrison, *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 10 July 1858, 1.

²⁴ Yerrinton, ed., *Proceedings*, 143–148; quotations are from pp. 147–148.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 151–159; quotation is on p. 159.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 160–173; quotation is on p. 161.

²⁷ I am indebted to Elizabeth Dow, former curator of the Wilbur Collection at Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont, for calling this development to my attention.

²⁸ Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), especially her recounting of the Rutland Convention Spiritualists, 69–73; and Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

²⁹ Yerrinton, ed., *Proceedings*, 119–124, 143–151, 24–29, 36–42, 177–184.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

³² *Ibid.*, 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 164–169; quotations are from pp. 164 and 169.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 96–99; quotations are from pp. 96 and 99.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 104–105.

⁴² *The Liberator* featured material pertinent to the convention in its June 4th, June 11th, July 2nd, July 9th, July 30th, August 6th, August 13th, August 27th, and September 3rd issues. *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* paid somewhat less attention to it, including pieces in only its July 31st and August 21st numbers.

⁴³ “Free Convention at Rutland,” Bradford *Aurora of the Valley*, 3 July 1858, 2; “A ‘Reform’ Convention,” St. Johnsbury *Caledonian*, 3 July 3 1858, 2; and Burlington *Free Press*, 30 June 1858, 2.

⁴⁴ “Northern Wickedness and Fanaticism,” Jackson *Mississippian Daily Gazette*, 14 July 1858, 3; “Female Plug Uglies,” Fayetteville, Tennessee *Observer*, 8 July 1858, 2; and Albany *Evening Journal*, 2 July 1858, 2.

⁴⁵ “A Convention of ‘Moral Lunatics,’” Portland, Maine, *Advertiser*, 6 July 1858, 1; “‘Isms’ in Convention,” Davenport *Daily Iowa State Democrat*, 29 June 1858, 2; Youngstown/Canfield, Ohio, *Republican Sentinel*, 15 July 1858, 2; and Wheeling, Virginia, *Daily Intelligencer*, 29 June 29 1858, 1. But probably the most vilifying prose appeared in the Nashville, Tennessee, *Union*, whose editorial the Concord, New Hampshire, *Democratic Standard* reprinted in its July 24th issue, page one; the essay warrants some lengthy excerpting here:

All the moral and political diseases which have afflicted society for many years past, recently broke out in a violent eruption at the “Reformers’ Free Convention” at Rutland, Vermont. That unfortunate city seems to have been selected as a moral pest house on this occasion, where all the plagues that infest the world have congregated together, that they may engender some new and more loathsome leprosy. By a sort of affinity which exists in the social as well as the physical world, all forms of error and vice have been attracted to revel and riot in these saturnalia of sin. Licentiousness scarcely concealing its hideous deformities under the robe of a false and disgusting philanthropy; Superstition, appealing to the worst passions and propensities of our nature and linked with the most degrading vices; Infidelity, trampling upon the sacred shrines of religion; Abolitionism, insolently defying the obligations of human and divine law and substituting its own infamous doctrines for those eternal truths which the wisdom of our fathers have left us for our own guidance—these are the elements which mingled in that foul assemblage of pestilence and pollution. . . . These dangerous and destructive heresies have never flourished at the South. They cannot live upon our soil. They wither for want of sustenance in the purer, moral atmosphere that surrounds them here. They vanish, like morning mists, in the clearer light of our social and political philosophy. We have no fens of moral disease and pestilence, to nourish their rank and poisonous growth, no fetid pools of pollution in whose still and stagnant depths the germs of these social evils may be engendered.

⁴⁶ Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery 1830–1860* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 263–264.

⁴⁷ The phrase in quotation marks was the headline of the Springfield, Massachusetts, *Republican* article about the convention, 28 June 1858, 2.