
RECOUNTING THE PAST

A Student Journal of Historical Studies at Illinois State University

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Number 5 (Spring 1999)

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**ALL ABOARD LITTLE CHILDREN?
WESTWARD HO! THE EXPERIENCES
AND REFLECTIONS OF THOSE WHO
RODE THE ORPHAN TRAINS**

Jennifer Stoller

It was a sunny day in September, 1854. A group of forty-seven boys and girls from New York City rumbled through the New York countryside in a crowded freight car bound for the West. The children were a peculiar lot, and, having never before seen the country, they were nearly wild with excitement. With the sight of an orchard, its green trees loaded with large, red apples, the hat-swinging, mouth-watering youth erupted in the most vigorous screams of delight. "Oh! oh! just look at 'em! Mister, be they any sich in Michigan? Then I'm for that place; three cheers for Michigan!" And it was to Michigan the children headed. Michigan and home, now one and the same.¹

These children were the first participants in a grand experiment, conceived the year before by the Reverend Charles Loring Brace and several other founding partners of the New York Children's Aid Society. Before the last of these cars headed west in 1929, 150,000 children were placed in homes by the Society and similar charities in a historical migration that has come to be known as the orphan train.² These small "street Arabs," taken out of the crime, sickness, and destitution of the inner city, were carried sometimes thousands of miles

from all they had ever known and all whom they had ever loved and set down, alone, in a strange land among strange people. What became of these young individuals? Was the positiveness of their experience affected by their gender, age, or race? And finally, did they come to view their unusual journey as a blessing or a curse? Thanks to the written memories and testimony of hundreds of orphan train riders and their descendants, these questions can now be considered and addressed.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, urban America had some glaring faults, and New York City shouldered a large share of the blame. Shiploads of immigrants arrived daily in the already terribly crowded city. Sanitation was non-existent, and disease ran rampant. Jobs were scarce and there was little protection for the foreign-speaking masses from the corruption of the local swindlers. As society branded it intolerable for a single woman to bear an illegitimate child, babies were found daily in the vestibules of churches, on the doorsteps of private homes, and in the dark and dampness of the alley.³ New York City's population had reached 500,000, and by the lowest estimate, 10,000 children were orphaned by the cruel harshness of the city and abandoned to the streets by single parents with no one to turn to for help.⁴ In 1852, New York's police chief posted statistics showing four-fifths of the year's felony accusations were against minors.⁵ Running loose in the city of vice, these waifs had little chance but to grow up to become pickpockets, petty thieves, and worse accomplices in crime.

Under these circumstances, Charles Loring Brace, a young Connecticut minister,

¹ Mary Ellen Johnson, *Orphan Train Riders: Their Own Stories*, Vol. 3. (Baltimore: Gateway Press, Inc., 1995), pp. 5-9.

² Verlene McCollough, "The Orphan Train Comes to Clarion," *The Palimpsest*, 69 (Fall, 1988), pp. 145-150.

³ Johnson, *Orphan Train Riders*, Vol. 3, p. 113.

⁴ A.P. Fry, "The Children's Migration," *American Heritage*, 26 (December, 1974), p. 6.

⁵ Leslie Wheeler, "The Orphan Trains," *America History Illustrated*, 18 (December, 1983), p. 14.

and several partners sought to alleviate this pattern of hopelessness by setting up “a mission to the children” called the Children’s Aid Society. The Society began by holding “boys’ meetings,” opening boys’ and girls’ homes, and setting up trade schools, but its leaders soon came to the conclusion that the greatest advantage to the children would come with removal from the city.⁶ Brace wrote that “the family is God’s Reformatory: and every child of bad habits who can secure a place in a Christian home is in the best possible place for improvement.” He also firmly believed that the West had “many spare places at the table of life,” rural folk were the “most solid and intelligent class,” and all western people were made with a sense of equality and a “peculiar warm-heartedness.”⁷ Thus, in 1854, the trains began rolling toward the setting sun.

This new idea of indenturing children was met with no small amount of criticism. Among the accusations of encouraging slave labor and populating the West with the East’s thieves and felons was the Catholic complaint that all children were placed in Protestant homes, regardless of their religious upbringing. In an effort to address this problem and to rescue the countless number of New York’s abandoned babies, Sisters Mary Irene and Teresa Vincent set up in 1869 what came to be called the New York Foundling Hospital. Cradles were placed in the building’s vestibule, into which anonymous mothers surrendered their illegitimate children. Within a year, the hospital was overflowing its capacity, and the sisters began the “Boarding-Out Department.” At first, married women were hired to care for the babies, but the institution soon began securing homes for

⁶ Johnson, *Orphan Train Riders*, Vol. 3, pp. 3-4.

⁷ Donald Dale Jackson, “It Took Trains to Put Street Kids on the Right Track Out of the Slums,” *Smithsonian* 17 (August, 1986), p. 96.

the children through adoption. Before long, the little ones were placed on trains, and these ‘Baby Specials’ rolled into western depots.⁸

In 1854, the practice of indenturing children was unprecedented, and the Children’s Aid Society took steps to minimize the problems that would arise. First, permission needed to be obtained from the child’s guardian in order to remove a child from the city. Only around half of the children “placed-out” were actually orphans in the sense that both parents were no longer living. For example, in 1879, of the 3,447 children sent west, 1,890 were orphans, 162 had a living father, 405 had a living mother, 782 had two living parents, and the status of 208 was unknown.⁹ Those youngsters who were not incorrigible, sickly, or handicapped were selected and put in groups to be “placed-out.” Several of the Society’s agents accompanied the group of usually ten to fifty children, ranging in age from one to the late teens. Some of them, like Kansas’s Reverend J. W. Swan, dedicated many years of their lives to accompanying these young bands. Many riders kindly remembered the individuals who brought them west, and Reverend Swan was always remembered as a kind-hearted grandfather.¹⁰

The arrival of this peculiar cargo caused no small stir in the small, rural communities. Notices were published in the papers and read in the churches, and a crowd almost always gathered to witness the proceedings. Many who arrived out of sheer curiosity went home with a child in their arms. Committees of respected local citizens were

⁸ Johnson, *Orphan Train Riders*, Vol. 3, pp. 111-18.

⁹ Miriam Z. Langsam, *Children West: A History of the Placing-Out System of the New York Children’s Aid Society 1853-1890* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), p. 26.

¹⁰ Michael Patrick, Evelyn Sheets, and Evelyn Trickel, *We Are a Part of History: The Story of the Orphan Trains* (Sante Fe: The Lightning Tree, 1990), pp. 39-40.

set up by the Children's Aid Society to take and review applications for the children. The little New Yorkers, dressed in new clothing and meticulously groomed, were lined up usually in front of the opera house, town hall, or church. Prospective "parents" were then allowed to speak with the children, and many farmers used the opportunity to feel the young boys' muscles. Those children not chosen were sent on to the next town, and those unable to be placed were returned to New York. The rejection these latter children must have felt cannot be imagined. The New York Foundling Home differed in that children were assigned to prospective "parents" before being placed on the train. The charity's agents stayed in the communities for several days, visiting the new homes of each child and making removals and adjustments where necessary.¹¹

Once the children were placed, the Society's responsibilities did not end. It retained the right to remove a child from any home whenever it had reason to believe there was just cause. For this reason, the agents were to visit the children at least once a year until they were "of age," eighteen years for girls, and twenty-one for boys. Many riders remembered these check-ups, and Esther Holman Bowdish of Iowa recalled her agent coming twice a year.¹² Several riders, however, believe their agents never came. William Brown, a young boy who was mistreated by his adoptive parents, said the Society's agent would call in advance, giving his parents time and opportunity to have both him and their home ready. The agent would then take notes while asking him a list of questions in the presence of his mother and father. William states, "I remember thinking, my parents are sitting right here, I'm a little kid, how can I

¹¹ Johnson, *Orphan Train Riders*, Vol. 3, pp. 111-18.

¹² Patrick, Sheets and Trickel, *We Are a Part of History*, p. 91.

say I don't want to stay here, my mother beats me every day and they work me too hard and they don't like me, they will hear it all and my mother will beat me bad when the man leaves so, I said nothing."¹³ But despite individual circumstances, removals did occur, and more than once for a number of children.

Many agents also corresponded regularly with the young riders. The *Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society* always published a number of these letters. In a typical note, twelve-year-old Willie J— wrote, "Dear Mr. Brace: I hope you are well because I am well. We are having a nice time out here slideing down hill. Mamma and Papa went to Rochester to see what the matter was with mamma. I am doing the work while they are gone. I am lots of help to them and they say they are glad they took me...."¹⁴ Many of the published letters were written by the Society's now grown-up beneficiaries. They tell of their success, express their gratitude, and even request that a child be sent to them.

What became of the boys and girls who rode the orphan train? In an effort to form conclusions and draw inferences, research was conducted on over 150 individuals' stories, at least one-third of which are written in first person. Although it is conceivable that many orphan train riders with painful pasts may never have spoken of their experience and thus slipped through the cracks, this sample is as nearly representative as possible. In addition to notes, information on each individual was recorded in a table containing columns for gender, age, date of placing-out, and whether the child reported a positive or

¹³ Frances E. Marks and Patricia J. Young, *Tears on Paper: Orphan Train History* (Springdale, Ark., 1990), pp. 189-90.

¹⁴ New York Children's Aid Society, *Fifty-first Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society* (New York: Wynkoop and Halleneck Printer, 1903), p. 89.

negative experience. Based on this data, several inferences can be drawn. The first and foremost is that around four-fifths of the children had good experiences. Of course, these individuals report positive experiences in varying degrees. Many young people were removed from several homes before finding a real “mom” and “dad.” Nevertheless, there are similarities which exist in the stories of individuals who remember a happy childhood. Most importantly, they were chosen by a family who loved and wanted them. Couples unable to have children or who had lost a child were almost always loving parents. Those families whose children were nearly grown would also often open up their homes to a little “brother” or “sister.” On occasion, an elderly couple would take home a little boy or girl to love and spoil. Last, but not least, there were always those parents with big families and big hearts who could somehow find room for one more.

One particularly touching story involves Robert Petersen who was among five boys not chosen the day his train arrived in Omaha in 1923. The accompanying agent, Mrs. Bogardus, took the boys to the farm of a childless couple past child-bearing age and asked if they wouldn't let a boy see the farm for a day. They agreed, and Robert was chosen. He helped Mrs. Petersen shell peas, and then spent the afternoon exploring and following her husband around. His day was too wonderful to end, and he asked Mrs. Petersen if he couldn't stay with them forever. She replied that they had agreed to take him back in the evening, and in the evening, back they went. Mrs. Bogardus talked to the Petersens in another room for awhile, and when they returned, Mrs. Peterson asked, “How would you like to come live with us?” Robert writes, “How can a person really describe joy? All that I know is that at that moment, I felt that I had to be the luckiest kid in the world and as a

matter of fact, I was. From the time we left the hotel that night, there was never any doubt in my mind or the mind of my folks, that I was their boy. We never even talked about trying it out; it was assumed that I was going to be with them from then on and that I would be treated as any other natural child. They were Mother and Dad and I was their son, and nobody could tell us otherwise.” Such are the grateful thoughts and expressions of many orphan train riders. Robert adds, “We often think of adversity as being a terrible thing to have happen to a person, but sometimes it turns out just the other way. The day I was abandoned on the streets of New York City probably turned out to be one of the luckiest days of my life.”¹⁵

Those individuals who professed positive experiences are not necessarily those who lived a comfortable, easy life. Times were tough on the farm, especially during the Great Depression, and everyone had to work hard. However, happy childhoods had play and later on school and community involvement interspersed with work. Claretta Miller was raised by the Carmans in the 1910's, and she fell in love with the many animals on their Nebraska farm. When she was old enough, they let her join a calf club and gave her a calf to show at the county fair.¹⁶ Art Smith, a 1922 Ohio rider, reminisced, “I was a sophomore in high school and it was about time for the football season to get underway. Since I was over six-foot tall and weighed 187 pounds, Coach Barrows wanted me to play. He proceeded wisely by coming directly to the farm to get parental permission. Dad's answer was yes, and I was introduced to a new activity.... We played in a six-team conference and managed to win three years in a row to become the best football team

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 321-28.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 240.

Clarinda High ever had.”¹⁷ Many riders were involved in music, school plays, church, and numerous clubs at the same time. Several even managed to graduate at the head of the class as valedictorians. More impressive for the time is the large number of rural parents who supported and/or consented to their adopted child’s decision to pursue further education.

But if four-fifths of the children had a good experience, one-fifth did not. The majority of these children were taken solely for the purpose of acquiring free labor. They were not treated as members of the family, only as hired hands. In an extreme case, an indentured boy was not even allowed to eat his meals with the family. He took his meals in the kitchen before dawn and after dusk when his day’s work was done.¹⁸ Most often in such cases, farming was the priority. Although the terms under which children were placed in homes stated that all children should be sent to school, a number of boys became students for only one to three months a year. Whipping was an accepted punishment in those days, for natural sons as well as adopted, but some orphan children were beaten almost daily and at times carried the marks of a whip for many months.

Even in homes where physical violence was unthinkable and adoptive parents were well-respected members of the community, children were not always happy. Toni Wieler, who was adopted as a baby by a couple in their forties, lamented that her family never had any communication. They never talked to each other. She and her mother were opposites. Toni was open and frank and her mother was secretive. Her parents may have provided for her, but Toni had an unhappy childhood.¹⁹

¹⁷ Johnson, *Orphan Train Riders*, Vol. 2, p. 316.

¹⁸ Marks and Young, *Tears on Paper*, pp. 207-10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 283-94.

Some children went without warm clothing in the winter, others went without shoes, and many wore clothing far inferior to that of their classmates, lowering them even further into the pit of shame. Orphan train rider Robert Crook’s daughter wrote that his mother’s substitute for shoes involved wrapping his feet in newspaper and then tying a gunny-sack over the bundle. These “shoes” were none too warm in winter. He was also quite embarrassed about his jeans. “She [mom] cut the front like the back and you couldn’t tell if I was coming or going.” Some neighbor ladies had compassion on him and made him several pairs of jeans when they sewed for their sons.²⁰

Many young boys ran away. Most often they hired themselves out as farm hands in exchange for room and board. For girls, this was not always possible, but several married very early and others became nannies and housekeepers near their adopted homes. Childhood didn’t last forever, and soon they were old enough to take advantage of the freedom of opportunity in America.

When examining the experiences of orphan train riders, the question whether boys or girls had the most positive experiences easily comes to mind. Although there are exceptions to every rule, it appears that about one of every four or five boys reported negative experiences, compared to only about one in six girls. Perhaps this is because boys were taken more often for the physical labor which they performed, outdoors and away from the family, whereas most girls found their sphere to be in the home, working closely with family members. It is doubtful that there was a significant gender gap in the ease with which girls and boys adapted to new homes, although girls may have been more accepting than boys of new family members.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Another significant gender-related statistic involves the number of girls versus boys placed on the trains. Males composed nearly three-fifths of the indentured population. It also appears that the Society operated more homes and trade schools for boys than girls. Very likely boys were quicker to leave home and attempt to make out on their own, thus comprising a larger number of street youth. Most probably, male help on the farm was in greater demand than was female help around the home. This hypothesis is supported by the off-balanced numbers of the first orphan trains, taken west when the Society's motto was "indenture" and not yet "adoption." Although the first orphan train carried both boys and girls, Brace's account of the trip in his book, *Dangerous Classes*, most often refers to the group as a "company of boys."²¹

Putting the gender issue aside, there is a much more noticeable relationship between age and childhood experience. It appears that about one in nine of the children adopted between the ages of one and five had negative experiences, whereas about two in five children ages six and older considered themselves unlucky. For example, Peg Kildare, who entered the Nebraskan Mecke family in 1923 at the age of two, writes, "Personally, I think the placing-out of children the way I was was a great idea. I had a wonderful home, and was treated 'special.' Not only my parents and brother, but all the relatives treated me wonderful."²² Willie Dunnaway who came to Arkansas at around age four had nothing but praise to sing of his parents, "I became the luckiest boy on earth. I was adopted by Charles W. Dunnaway and his wife Maggie Dunnaway. They had been married several years and had no children, so thanks to the Children's Aid Society I was chosen to

become their son. God in all of his greatness never made any better people than they."²³ These examples stand to reason, however, because those couples choosing small children over older children must have had a desire to raise them. If they were only looking for help on the farm, they would have chosen an older child, stronger, and ready to work. Further, children who rode the train before they were five seldom remembered anything about the past. They remembered very few bad experiences and their real mother and father were not a reality to them.

The older children, however, had a much more difficult time forgetting. Not only did many grow up with the hurt and shame of not being wanted, but they very likely also experienced the separation of siblings. An older child often felt responsible for the welfare of a younger sibling. If that little brother or sister was separated, it was difficult for the older child to be content not knowing and sometimes never knowing what became of the little one. Lena Weast experienced this distress when she was separated in central Illinois from her younger brother and sister between 1860 and 1880. She was able to find them years later, but not until they had all been through several painful experiences. Lena herself was badly beaten at the hands of a cruel widow and her stepdaughter. She was only fourteen years old when she ran away and married a railroad worker who had befriended her.²⁴

It is nearly impossible to compare the experiences of children of different races. The rural Midwest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was almost entirely white. Children of color were rarely ever selected to ride the orphan trains. However, in a few of the photographs taken of the

²¹ Johnson, *Orphan Train Riders*, Vol. 3, pp. 5-12.

²² Marks and Young, *Tears on Paper*, pp. 177-81.

²³ Patrick, Sheets, and Trickel, *We Are a Part of History*, p. 105.

²⁴ Johnson, *Orphan Train Riders*, Vol. 2, pp. 17-38.

children upon arrival, there does appear to be one or two black children. If and by whom they were chosen remains a mystery. Unfortunately, none of their experiences seem to have been recorded. There is evidence, however, that German families took Irish children, French families took German children; the list continues, even to the extent that several young charges had to learn a new language. One family reported having taken in a Jewish boy. But the most publicized instance of racial tension is found not in objection to the children, but in objection to the prospective parents. In 1904, a group of forty babies and toddlers were taken to a mining community in Arizona by the New York Foundling Hospital. A Catholic priest in the area had previously taken applications from his parishioners and the children already had the names of their new parents pinned to the inside of their collars when they arrived. However, a large group of white women got wind of the arrival and met the train. They were horrified to see the pretty white babies being given to lower-class Mexican mining families, whom they claimed were not even able to care for themselves. Within a day, an irate mob of white citizens stormed the Mexicans' homes, removing the children and placing them in their own homes. A lawsuit soon followed, and with the exception of a few children allowed to remain in their white homes, the babies headed back to New York.²⁵ This incident appears to be one of a kind. For most children, race did not determine the happiness of an orphan train experience; it determined the possibility of such an experience.

While some riders could not express enough gratitude for their experience, male or female, young or older, black or white, they all shared common heartaches. The

²⁵ A. B. Brophy, *Foundlings of the Frontier* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1972).

most painful was separation. Many siblings had clung to each other through abusive home life, abandonment, crowded orphanages, and the long journey west. Having only each other, the devastation siblings felt watching each other led in opposite directions by unfamiliar hands is difficult to imagine. The Society tried its hardest to keep families together, but adoptive parents were already giving of themselves to take in one orphan child. They could not be expected to take two, three, and four. The Society settled for keeping children in the same community where they would be allowed to keep in touch, but often not even this was possible. George Meason, who took the train to Texas in 1920, described his experience: "Separating me and my brother was a rending experience and I didn't see him again for years. Then, we had a neighbor who kept staring at me every time I went outside to play. Finally, she asked my mother if I had a brother and did he live in Sulphur Springs. My mother said yes, then she asked if she could take me to visit him as he lived near her family. It was a hard decision, but my parents gave consent, and Julius and I were re-united. After that, we visited infrequently."²⁶ George was one of the lucky ones.

Equally traumatic for many riders were the voluminous and haunting questions, "Who am I? What is my name? Who were my parents? Are they still living? Why did they give me up? Do I have any brothers or sisters?" The list is endless. Taken from her birth parents when a baby, Toni Weiler, now a grandmother, admitted being unable to shake this feeling: "I can be surrounded with my family—and my family are wonderful, they love me dearly. But in that instant there will come this loneliness. A feeling of really not knowing who you are, what you are, where you came from or anything. It is the

²⁶ Johnson, *Orphan Train Riders*, Vol. 2, p. 301.

most lonesome feeling that there is in the world.”²⁷

Adoptive parents rarely told orphan children anything about their past, and sometimes the children were not even allowed to ask. One desperate father gave his young son his address, instructing him to write when he reached his new home. That slip of paper was the child’s prized possession. But in the morning when he awoke, the address was no longer in his pocket. After a frantic search throughout the train car, one of the Society’s agents told him, “Don’t worry, where you’re going, you won’t need it now.” It had been taken. The last tie he had to the father who still loved him had been broken.²⁸

The importance of the orphans’ search for their identity and living relations can be perceived in part by the space given such subjects in the orphans’ short memoirs. Often filling half the pages, sometimes more, these searches were more often successful than not in turning up some glimmer of information. Many children were able to reunite with birth parents and relatives, but most report findings similar to that of Irma Schnieders, who was placed with the Boehm family when three years old. She reports: “I was born in New York according to my birth records from St. Vincent’s Foundling Hospital, on the 5th day of July, 1898. My father’s name was Walter Craig and my mother’s name was Lida Steinberg Craig. My father was a draftsman and was 43 years old at the time of my birth. I was brought to the Foundling Home when I was 58 days old by my mother, and I was baptized on Sept. 6, 1889. I haven’t been able to get any records of my parents whereabouts after that.”²⁹

²⁷ Marks and Young, *Tears on Paper*, p. 292.

²⁸ Edward Gray, director, *The Orphan Trains* (Alexandria: PBS video recording, 1995, 75 min.).

²⁹ Patrick, Sheets and Trickel, *We Are a Part of History*, p. 133.

On rare occasions, individuals chose not to learn about the past. They felt completely “at home” with their adopted family and felt no need to discover a second family. Others felt deserted by their birth family and were extremely loyal to their adopted parents. When given notice of the whereabouts of his birth family, Lester Studer, a 1915 Nebraska rider, stated, “Pop Studer offered to pay my expenses to go back to New York to see my mother and sister. I had no desire to go. I felt that it would be disloyal to the Studers. I also felt that I would have nothing to say to my mother. It would be just like a woman walking down the street that I didn’t know telling me that she was my mother when Mom Studer had been my real mother all these years.”³⁰

The Society’s attitudes toward orphaned and abandoned children were stereotyped and hurtful. Some country folk believed the little city urchins had “bad blood.” The placing-out system came under attack frequently for infiltrating the West with the East’s criminals. Toni Weiler’s memoir demonstrates this prejudice when she wrote: “Parents would come to the door and say, come on, I told you not to play with her. I told you not to walk with her.”³¹ Even when an adopted child was dearly loved by his/her parents, the extended family might refuse to accept his/her existence. Children who reported being “just another kid” were fortunate.

Nonetheless, it can be argued that almost all the children were fortunate. Just as the train riders shared common heartaches, they shared common blessings. First, they were taken off crowded city streets and from orphanages where they were rarely more than additional mouths to feed and placed in homes where they were recognized and given attention as individuals. Second, the children were taken out of the clutches of an

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³¹ Marks and Young, *Tears on Paper*, p. 288.

industrial city where labor was cheap, unemployment was high, and poverty was paralyzing, and placed in a rural community where hands were short and food was easier to come by. The never-ending duties of the farm taught children the importance of hard work, a lesson invaluable later in life.

Third, the children were taken off the streets of crime and vice where many of them would have found their vocation and placed in a community most often built on mutual trust and neighborly interdependence. Noah Lawyer arrived in Missouri on an orphan train in 1907. He was not loved and was treated like a hired hand by the family that took him. He ran away repeatedly. But despite the hardships of his past, Noah believed the orphan train saved his life. ‘If I’d stayed East I’m sure I wouldn’t have made it. I would have starved or wound up killed or in jail. I learned right and wrong on the farm. I’d been a humdinger otherwise.’³²

Last, and most important, many of these unwanted children grew up to live enjoyable and contented lives. Some became quite successful. From their ranks came the governor of a state, the governor of a territory, two members of Congress, two district attorneys, two sheriffs, two mayors, a justice of the Supreme Court, four judges, and the list continues.³³ They became respected citizens, serving their country from the Spanish-American War to World War II. Almost every child who grew to adulthood married, and divorce is almost unheard of among them.³⁴ Building on the lessons learned early in life, they put family first and became dedicated parents and grandparents. The orphan train riders believed in making the best of what God had given them. When Alexander Douthit was taken on the orphan train to Clarinda, Iowa,

in 1924, he called it “the most wonderful thing that ever happened.”³⁵ But actions speak even louder than words. Robert Petersen later had three children—two girls born to him, and a boy whom he adopted around the age of eleven or twelve. He explained: “I adopted him for two reasons. I didn’t have a boy. I had two girls and I wanted a boy. And again, my adoption had been such a lucky event for me, I wanted to do the same for someone else.”³⁶

³⁵ Patrick, Sheets, and Trickel, *We Are a Part of History*, pp. 99-100.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-29.

³² Jackson, “It Took Trains,” p. 96.

³³ Wheeler, “The Orphan Trains,” p. 21.

³⁴ Jackson, “It Took Trains,” p. 102

**FREE BLACKS IN THE PRE-CIVIL
WAR SOUTH: LIVING FREE IN A
LAND OF SLAVERY**

Brian Boyer

It might come as a surprise to some Americans today that a sizable free black population existed in the South even before emancipation and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. In fact, according to figures from the 1860 U.S. Census, the number of free blacks living in the South exceeded those living in the North before the Civil War. Even though many southern whites of the time believed that the proper place for all people of African descent was slavery, quite a few blacks in the antebellum South did not answer to any master. Although life was not very easy for most blacks even outside of slavery, and though whites put numerous legal restrictions on them, free blacks were generally able to make a place for themselves in the antebellum South.

Although the number of blacks living in the free states of the North steadily increased in the decades leading to the Civil War, there were still more free blacks living in the South than in the North. According to the 1860 U. S. Census, approximately four and a half million individuals of African ancestry lived in the United States. Four million of these people, representing the bulk of the black population, were slaves owned by southern masters. Roughly 225,000 blacks lived in the northern states, where slavery had been outlawed decades earlier. The remaining 260,000 free blacks lived in the South, where they comprised six percent of the total black population in the

region and three percent of all free people there.¹

From these figures, we can see that not all freed slaves decided to move to the free states of the North. For many of them, the idea of moving away from the slave states did not have any advantage over staying in a familiar place. Rather than leaving for the North (or later Liberia as well), many slaves freed by their masters preferred to stay in the area where they had grown up. It was often hard to break connections to the place their relatives and friends lived. Also, many skilled workers had established ties with a local clientele.²

According to southern laws, any child born of a free woman was also free. There were many cases in the South where only one of the two parents of a child was a slave. If the mother could prove her own freedom, the child would also be legally free. This did not always involve a child of a free black woman. Occasionally a white woman would have a child by a slave, or more often by a free black man. The latter case was common in certain areas where poorer white women had trouble finding mates. According to one slave's testimony, the child of a slave man and a white woman would be treated as a slave until freed at age twenty-one. In one case, the allegedly abused wife of a slave-owner had an illicit affair with her slave coachman. The resulting child was freed when he reached the age of twenty-one.³

Although southern states passed laws restricting the manumission, or freeing, of slaves, it was possible for masters to free slaves at their own discretion. Quite often

¹ Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), pp. 135-36.

² *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³ Interview with Sam T. Stewart, in George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (19 vols.; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 15.2, pp. 319-20; interview with Adora Rienshaw, in *ibid.*, 15.2, pp. 213-14.

these freed slaves were mulattoes, or mixed-race people. It was likely that these people were illegitimate children of their master, who would have a personal interest in seeing them freed. Some of the favored mulatto children would receive some property on the death of their white parent. In what was certainly a rare case, one master who freed his slaves split up 800 acres among them, and on top of that arranged for their taxes to be paid for a hundred years!⁴

A slave could also attempt to earn and save enough money to buy freedom. This option was quite difficult because it was very hard for a slave to get enough money, especially when that slave was a woman. It was also possible that the master might refuse to let the slave go; any slave who was so industrious was probably too valuable to be freed. Even if the slave was not considered a vital part of the estate, a master might still be reluctant to free him or her. One free black man encountered some resistance from a slave owner when he attempted to buy the freedom of a slave woman whom the black man wished to marry. After the couple managed to scrape together the purchase price, the owner reluctantly let her go.⁵

Aside from the accepted forms of gaining freedom, there were other ways that blacks in the South could enjoy life outside the restrictions of the slave system. Many masters had long allowed their slaves to raise food on a small plot of land on the estate. Through this practice, the slaves were able to supplement the limited diet provided by the master. As well as taking care of the physical well-being of the slaves by this method, a master might hope that land would also provide an incentive for them to

work harder. In such cases where the master gave his slaves unusually preferential treatment (such as educating them), the recipients were often called derisive names by local whites, who would not have anything to do with them if the slaves ever came on the auction block. Other slaves in the neighboring area, who might well be jealous of the better treatment they witnessed, were often warned to stay away from the “tainted” slaves. Even so, by giving slaves a chance to provide for their own living, this limited form of autonomy laid the foundation for other forms of freedoms a few slaves later enjoyed.⁶

The hiring system in the South gave slaves an even greater chance to live outside their masters’ control. During the off-season, many masters would hire out some of their slaves as laborers or craftsmen in order to supplement the income of the estate. Some masters would even allow these slaves to make their own work arrangements and keep part of the earnings. This system of self-hire provided many slaves with a large degree of autonomy. For example, one ex-slave recalled that his grandmother, a slave, had been allowed to go out on her own and work for herself as long as she brought half of earnings back to her master. Self-hire often developed into a form of quasi-freedom, with slaves acting like free blacks, blending in with the free communities. Many of these men and women were skilled slaves who worked in the cities. Some slaves even prospered and gained wealth under this arrangement. There were, however, probably only a few

⁴ Interview with William Scott, in *ibid.*, 15.2, pp. 260-61; interview with Peter Corn, in *ibid.*, 11.8, p. 90.

⁵ Interview with James Martin, in *ibid.*, 5.3, pp. 62-63.

⁶ Interview with Joe Higginson, in *ibid.*, 11.8, pp. 174-75; interview with Jerry Moore, in *ibid.*, 5.3, pp. 121-22; Loren Schweninger, “Slave Independence and Enterprise in South Carolina, 1780-1865,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 93 (1992), pp. 101, 103, 122.

thousand of these quasi-free slaves in the South at any time.⁷

Regardless of their degree of freedom, blacks living outside of the slave system lived under much the same basic conditions as all people in the South of the time. A large number of free blacks living in the South were urban dwellers. Approximately 35% of free blacks lived in cities and towns, compared to 15% for whites and 5% for slaves. Even so, the majority lived in rural areas, much like their white counterparts. In South Carolina, for instance, the free blacks not living in Charleston were scattered all over the countryside. They were largely excluded from the small, white-dominated towns of the upcountry and typically lived by themselves out in the country. White slave owners also attempted to limit the contact free blacks could have with slaves for fear of them acting as a bad influence on the slaves. As one man put it, “the free Negroes were not allowed on the plantations much.” The majority of free blacks in the rural areas of the South earned a living as farmers (landowners with property or tenants without) or worked as farm laborers, often for local whites.⁸

Most skilled black laborers in the South (such as carpenters, bricklayers, smiths, etc.) were slaves, but there were a number of free blacks doing the same work. About 10-16% of the free black population in rural areas was employed in skilled positions. Some specialized jobs in the South—such as

barbers—were largely considered free black occupations. These occupations required specialized skills that more or less prevented competition from less-skilled white laborers. In some cases, the skilled workers had originally been taught as apprentices prior to their release from slavery. Masters often had to consider the ability of a freed slave to support himself, and the prospects for a skilled worker were much better than those for a simple laborer competing with both white and slave labor. Even with a marketable skill, it was very difficult for a free black to get ahead in the South without good connections in the community.⁹

One problem which all free blacks in the South had to deal with were the laws enacted by Southern state legislatures to control their free black populations. In South Carolina, for example, manumissions had to be approved by a group of local whites after 1800. The freed blacks were required to keep papers proving their free status. Any white person could challenge a black person to see his papers, and any problem with the documents could lead to the enslavement of the black and a reward for the white man. One way of avoiding people seeking to trap free blacks and to stay out of other legal difficulties was to cultivate good relations with prominent whites in the community, who would in turn be able to testify to the good character and status of the black involved.¹⁰

The legal restrictions became even tighter after a planned slave rebellion in South Carolina was uncovered in 1822. The most significant detail of this failed plot was

⁷ Schwening, “Slave Independence and Enterprise in South Carolina,” pp. 111-12, 116; interview with A. C. Pruitt, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, 5.3, p. 219; *Dictionary of American Slavery*, s. v. “Free Blacks.”

⁸ *Dictionary of American Slavery*, s. v. “Free Blacks”; Orville Vernon Burton, “Anatomy of an Antebellum Rural Free Black Community: Social Structure and Social Interaction in Edgefield District, South Carolina, 1850-1860,” *Southern Studies*, 21 (1982), pp. 298, 309; interview with William Scott, in Rawick, *The American Slave*, 15.2, pp. 260-61.

⁹ Allison Carll-White, “South Carolina’s Forgotten Craftsmen,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 86 (1985), pp. 32, 38; Burton, “Anatomy of an Antebellum Rural Free Black Community,” p. 309; *A Historical Guide to World Slavery*, s. v. “Freed Persons.”

¹⁰ Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: Norton, 1984), pp. 35-36.

that a free black named Denmark Vesey led it. Since Vesey had close relations with slaves, whites began to fear that other free blacks would instigate similar disturbances. The South Carolina legislature responded by passing a series of laws that effectively limited the actions and movements of free blacks. If a free black left the state, he or she would not be allowed to re-enter. More importantly, all free blacks over the age of fifteen were required to register a white guardian who would be responsible for their behavior. Although this provision was not universally enforced, it essentially meant that free blacks would have to be very careful to maintain good relations with the important whites of their community. If they did not, they could risk enslavement.¹¹

Despite these restrictions, free blacks did have some important protections under the law. As free people, they were entitled to the protection of their lives, liberty and property. Murder or theft committed against a black man was theoretically treated equally as that against a white man. Most significantly, free blacks were able to make binding contracts with any other free person. One result was that, unlike slave marriages, a marriage between two free blacks was entirely legal and recognized by society. There were certain limits to the right to take part in the legal system. If a free black pressed the terms of a contract too hard, or used the courts against whites, he or she could lose favor among whites in the community and risk serious trouble.¹²

Regardless of all the problems free blacks faced in southern society, they were able to make places for themselves. Free blacks had several options in dealing with other people in the community. They might associate only among themselves, forming their own churches and other organizations. Some elite groups, such as the rich

mulattoes in certain areas, isolated themselves from the lower classes much as many white planters did. But in general, free blacks associated with everyone in the South whom they came in contact with, including their white neighbors and slaves as well.¹³

The free black population in the South closely mirrored that of the whites. It was mostly rural with a small proportion of urban dwellers, and a large number of the people were small-scale farmers or laborers, generally making only a modest living. This similarity between free blacks and whites extended to the very system that provided the basis for the southern planter economy. Whites did not hold a monopoly on owning slaves; there was also a very small minority of free blacks who held in bondage people whose skin color was not so different from their own.

How could some free blacks reconcile their ownership of slaves? A few of the free mulatto elite in South Carolina and Louisiana owned large numbers of slaves purely for profit, much as their richer white neighbors did. In doing so, they proved to whites that they also supported the institutions of the South and represented no threat to the system. Other free blacks, however, owned slaves for what could be loosely termed “humanitarian” reasons. Some bought slaves in order to let them buy their freedom cheaply, while others bought slaves with the intention of letting them live freely.¹⁴

The most common reason that some free blacks owned slaves was that they purchased their own family members. A free black man who married a slave might buy his wife and children to make sure that they stayed together. It was also common for free women to buy their slave husbands.

¹³ *Dictionary of American Slavery*, s. v. “Free Blacks.”

¹⁴ Philip Burnham, “Selling Poor Steven,” *American Heritage*, 44 (1993), pp. 92-93.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-43.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 56.

Sometimes this was done with the intention of freeing family members from slavery. However, due to restrictions on free blacks (such as laws requiring manumitted slaves to leave the state), sometimes the family members technically remained slaves to give them a limited amount of protection from the hostility of whites toward free blacks.¹⁵

Although the details provided in this paper come from historical sources, we must consider the validity of those sources. It is possible for a person writing about certain events to give a biased view or to select the facts in such a way as to present a less than accurate account. This is an especially difficult problem when the writer comes from a society that holds a particular view about a given topic. For instance, until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s affected the opinions of white Americans toward African-Americans, slavery was seen by some as having certain definite benefits for the slaves. With a shift in attitudes, it is now possible to take a more critical look at slavery. One way of dealing with the possible bias in writings about slavery is to find first-person accounts of life under the slave system. A number of primary sources dealing with the topic of slavery do exist. The most important of these is a series of narratives collected in the South earlier in the twentieth century.

Even when dealing with first-person accounts of an event or a given topic, there are several difficulties involved. Under the Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s, an effort was made to record the experiences of former slaves in the form of narratives. An interviewer would ask a series of questions and would record the answers. In effect, the Project was preserving oral history in written form. Although these slave narratives were undoubtedly intended to be an accurate reflection of life under slavery, in sorting through the resulting material it

can be seen that the nature of the interviews themselves probably affected the end product.

Among the difficulties in recording the memories of the ex-slaves, one of the more important ones was that it had been almost seventy years since the end of the Civil War at the time the interviews were conducted. This meant that the people being interviewed were very old in the 1930s, and for the most part would have been relatively young when they were freed. Also, they would represent only a small portion of the people who had been slaves, since many would have died between emancipation and the time the interviews took place. It could be argued that if they were children at the time of slavery, their perspectives would be different from those of adults, since they were unlikely to have experienced hard work. Their recollections would also be limited to a very short period in the history of slavery, although they would have some knowledge handed down by older slaves.

A more serious concern is that of the interview process itself. The underlying relations between whites and blacks in the South would have an effect on any discussions between the two groups. This was an atmosphere in which blacks were forced to be very careful in dealing with their still dominant white neighbors. Thus, it could be expected that they would be overly willing to tell the interviewers more of what they wanted to hear rather than what might be more relevant and important. This is most strikingly displayed in the case of the double interview of Susan Hamlin/Hamilton. We can surmise that this woman presented a rosier view of life under slavery when the interviewer was white, while she discussed some of the brutality she had seen when she talked to someone who was apparently black.

In relation to this problem of dialogue between two socially unequal groups of

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

people, the nature of the questions being asked can be very important. Although we are not given the original questions with the narratives themselves, we might wonder whether some of them might have been in the form of leading questions. If they were, then the interviewer might end up getting only what he or she originally expected, thereby reflecting a certain bias. For example, the question “did you see anyone beaten” would elicit a different response from, say, “there weren’t too many beatings, were there?” It could be expected that the person being interviewed would perceive what the expected answer would be and then give that answer, even if it did not represent his or her actual experience.

The problems that exist with the slave narratives are a result of the deceptions inherent in the society of the South at the time. It was often necessary for blacks to deceive whites about their true feelings and intentions, and it was almost as important for the whites to deceive themselves about the real nature of their relation with blacks. In this atmosphere, dating back to its origins in slavery and continuing even after slavery ended, we can hardly expect that ex-slaves could be completely honest about their feelings and experiences when talking to people who they have no obvious reason to trust.

Considering these potential pitfalls in dealing with first-person sources, the narratives related to the topic of free blacks did corroborate much of the information provided by secondary sources. Mostly, the narratives dealt with simple issues such as how the slaves gained their freedom, or the general attitudes toward free blacks in the South. One of the more serious problems I encountered was that there was a lack of connection between the narratives and the secondary sources in terms of geography. While several of my secondary sources were about the conditions of free blacks in the

state of South Carolina, there was a definite shortage of accounts from that state in the slave narratives.

Another key problem is that a large part of the research on this topic by historians to date has centered on free blacks living in Charleston, South Carolina and New Orleans, Louisiana. In 1860, Charleston had only one-third of the entire free black population in South Carolina, while the rest lived out in the countryside. The main reason for this concentration on urban areas is that free blacks in large cities left written records in free black-owned newspapers and in their diaries. In contrast, rural free blacks generally left no writings, and few other records of them remain in South Carolina. Thus, the emphasis is skewed toward where there are more existing records.¹⁶

Regardless of these problems, we can see that it was possible for a slave to gain and then maintain his or her freedom in the South. In a sense, the experience of free blacks before the war helped to influence the nature of southern race relations after emancipation. While the white leaders adapted the old free black codes to maintain control of the local African-American population, the free blacks were also able to change with the new conditions in the South. Since they had already experienced freedom, this previously-separate group of free blacks could help the newly-freed slaves adapt to life outside slavery. Whatever the limitations placed on southern free blacks before the Civil War, they managed to enjoy at least one benefit: the experience of liberty in the midst of a system that considered them only one step beyond slavery.

¹⁶ Burton, “Anatomy of an Antebellum Rural Free Black Community,” pp. 294, 296.

**AMELIORATION RATHER THAN
EMANCIPATION: THE
COMPROMISE OF CHRISTIANITY IN
THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH**

Douglas Kotlarczyk

African-American slave culture in the American South prior to the Civil War was one of the most thoroughly religious cultures to ever exist. Nearly all slaves shared deep religious sentiments which affected most aspects of slave life. Slave religion stressed the exodus of the Hebrews out of Egypt as a parallel for their own bondage, and even more emphasis was placed upon the eventual salvation of the slaves after their deaths. Slave religion had an otherworldliness to make up for the poor condition of slaves in this world. The religion of the slaves, however, was very different from the religion that was taught to them by white ministers. White ministers preached a control-oriented, this-worldly religion, emphasizing the subservience of slaves to their masters. Easter Jones, who had been a slave in Georgia, said that when she went to “de white folks chu’ch... all dey talk ‘bout was obeying Massah and obeying Missus.”¹ This white-taught religion would clearly have been unsatisfying to the slaves. Anderson Jackson, a South Carolina slave, said that when it came to religion, “I stays independent of what white folks tells me.”²

Some ministers enjoyed teaching this version of Christianity as little as slaves enjoyed learning about it. John Dixon Long,

a Maryland Methodist minister who worked among slaves from 1839 to 1856, complained about the “adulterated Gospel” he had to teach.³ If neither the students nor some of the ministers approved of the religion that was being taught, then why was this approach taken? The answer lies neither with the slaves nor the ministers, but rather with the slave owners. The planters in the Old South had very different goals from those of the ministers and the slaves. The planter class often cared little for the spiritual advancement or well being of the slaves, desiring only their unquestioning obedience. Ministers, on the other hand, were typically interested in the conversion and salvation of the slaves. The conflicting goals of planters and ministers, interacting in the cultural pattern of the antebellum South in which planters held nearly all power, forced ministers to compromise the message of Christianity to provide what religious instruction to the slaves that the planters would permit.

Early in the history of the settlement and colonization of North America, masters were nearly unanimously opposed to the religious instruction of their slaves. Many planters were opposed to religious conversion because they operated under an assumption that the baptism of slaves would lead to their emancipation. Another significant reason was a general disinterest and apathy regarding the religious status of their slaves. As early as 1682, English visitor John Barbot disapprovingly commented that “Christians in America... take very little care to have their slaves instructed” in Christianity.⁴ Planters’ interest in their slaves generally extended only to

¹ George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (19 vols.; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 4.2, p. 350.

² Eugene V. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 214.

³ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 46.

⁴ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 98.

their economic output and productivity. English divine Morgan Godwin condemned this worldliness in a 1685 sermon he delivered to Virginians entitled “Trade prefer’d before Religion.”⁵ Beyond apathy, however, the planter class disliked the values that they thought Christianization would impart to slaves. South Carolina minister Francis LeJau, who worked extensively among slaves in the mid-eighteenth century, expressed the views of the planters, saying that they believed that “Christianizing the Negro makes them proud and saucy, and tempts them to imagine themselves upon an equality with white people.”⁶

Slave owners feared that Christianizing slaves would incite slave rebellions. Religion gave slaves a reason to gather—for weddings, funerals, or revival meetings—and planters believed that these gatherings provided opportunities for slaves to conspire. This was particularly true with regard to funerals, at which powerful emotions would already be running deep among the gathered slaves. Thus, as early as 1687, several colonies had banned public slave funerals. In 1772, the corporation of New York mandated that slave funerals could only be held during the day; attendance at slave funerals was limited to twelve mourners or less.⁷

These planter fears of Christianization and slave rebellion were reinforced and given a somewhat different twist with the 1739 Stono Rebellion. This incident involved a mass exodus of slaves from South Carolina plantations, all of whom had

received religious instruction from their former Spanish and Portuguese masters. Pursuit by the South Carolina militia resulted in several pitched battles at Stono, which was only fifty miles from the Florida border. Although most rebels were killed or recaptured, a few escaped to Florida, where Spanish authorities protected the fugitives because they were Christians and knew their catechism.⁸

Strongly interested in the conversion of slaves, ministers both in England and in America were disappointed by the lack of effort on the part of the planters to provide for the religious instruction of slaves. The South Carolina clergy told Minister Gideon Johnston in March of 1712 that “The ignorance... of these poor slaves in the principles of Christianity is not so much their fault as their unhappiness in falling into the hands of such ill masters who not only neglect to instruct them but scoff at those who attempt it.”⁹ To compensate for this lack of effort on the part of slaveholders, English Anglicans founded the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts in 1701.¹⁰ The SPG sent missionaries out among the slaves, particularly in the Chesapeake colonies, attempting to educate them about Christianity and convert them, often over the objections and sometimes vehement opposition of the planters. The SPG, with this sort of guerilla religious education, was not a mainstream movement, however.

Mainstream religion, both in England and in the colonies, attempted to begin the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lester B. Scherer, *Slavery and the Church in Early America, 1619-1819* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 95.

⁷ Banning nighttime slave funerals effectively banned slave funerals altogether since practically no planters would allow slaves to take time off from work during the day for a funeral. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 194.

⁸ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 73.

⁹ Margaret Washington Creel, “A Peculiar People”: *Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), p. 67.

¹⁰ Known as the SPG. Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, p. 60.

conversion of slaves by convincing slave owners that religious instruction would in fact make the slaves better workers. Cotton Mather, an eminent New England preacher claimed as much in the preface to his 1705 text, *The Negro Christianized*, a slave catechism. Mather stated that “the pious Masters, that have instituted their servants in Christian Piety, will even in this Life have a sensible Recompense” in the sense of more diligent workers.¹¹ As eminent a personage as the Bishop of London lent himself to the task of convincing colonial planters, claiming in 1727 that “So far is Christianity from discharging Men from the Duties of the Station and Condition in which it found them that it lays them under stronger Obligations to perform those Duties with the greatest Diligence and Fidelity, not only from the Fear of Men, but from a Sense of Duty to God, and the Belief and Expectation of a future Account.”¹² Despite the efforts of these and many other ministers to convince planters to allow religion among their slaves, most planters remained strongly opposed to the religious instruction of slaves throughout the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth centuries.

The first significant strides in the religious education of the slaves in the North American colonies came during the Great Awakening of the late 1730s and 1740s. George Whitefield may well have been the single driving force in this religious movement. Whitefield arrived at Lewes, Delaware, on October 30, 1739, and over the next several years preached throughout the colonies. Whitefield was able to build on the advances made by such ministers as Theodorus Frelinghuysen, Jonathan Edwards, and John Wesley to reawaken religious interest in many colonists and

¹¹ Scherer, *Slavery and the Church in Early America*, p. 95.

¹² Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 103.

instill in them an evangelical zeal.¹³ This religious movement among whites would clearly have affected their slaves in many ways. As a general rule, the Great Awakening improved the conditions of slaves. It first aroused feelings of Christian charity among slaveholders, tending to make them less severe with their slaves.

The evangelical fervor produced by the Great Awakening also tended to make planters more amenable to the idea of Christianity among their slaves, and slave membership of most established churches grew by leaps and bounds during this period.¹⁴ Growth of church membership was substantial among free whites as well as slaves during this period. The two denominations that experienced the most noticeable growth were the Baptists and the Methodists, both of which were strongly opposed to the institution of slavery. The Baptist church began its growth as a result of the Great Awakening around 1740 in New England. This growth not only increased the size of the church in that region; it also inspired evangelical missions to the middle and southern colonies in the 1740s and 1750s.¹⁵ These missions became somewhat less prevalent in the following two decades as colonial attention became focused on English policies toward the colonies, particularly in New England.

The original anti-slavery feelings of the Baptists and Methodists boiled to a fever pitch with the American Revolution. Following the Revolution, sentiments of liberty and equality swept through the country and slavery became an increasingly unpopular institution. The Baptists and Methodists became extremely outspoken

¹³ Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1930), pp. 4-8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 249-50.

¹⁵ Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1950).

against it. Francis Asbury, bishop of the entire Methodist church in America, drafted a resolution passed at the 1780 Methodist conference in Baltimore, stating that the conference “acknowledges that slavery is contrary to the law of God, man, and nature, and hurtful to society; [and] contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion.”¹⁶

The Baptists were equally vehement in their condemnations. The Baptist General Committee of Virginia passed a strong antislavery resolution in 1789, stating:

Resolved that slavery is a violent deprivation of the rights of nature and inconsistent with a republican government; and we, therefore, recommend it to our brethren, to make use of every legal measure to extirpate this horrid evil from the land and pray Almighty God that our honorable legislature may have it in their power to proclaim the great Jubilee consistent with the principles of good policy.¹⁷

These antislavery stances provoked the animosity of southern slaveholders, who flatly refused to allow Methodists and Baptists to preach to their slaves.¹⁸

The Methodists and the Baptists became mainstream in the South and more acceptable to southern planters during the Great Revival¹⁹ of the early nineteenth century. The Great Revival developed out of the egalitarianism of the post-Revolutionary era; it was an evangelical tide that swept the

southern frontier of Kentucky and Tennessee. The first camp meeting that could be said to have begun the Great Revival was held at Red River, Kentucky, in June of 1800. On August 3, 1801, the Revival swung into full force with a massive revival meeting in Cane Ridge, Kentucky.²⁰ In the great flood of preaching that followed, denominational variations tended to be forgotten, with ministers of different sects working together to convert the masses. In spite of this multi-denominationalism, different religious groups experienced markedly different growth patterns. Baptists and Methodists, as during the Great Awakening of sixty years earlier, enjoyed the most remarkable growth. In fact, Baptist historians refer to the year 1801 as “The Great Year” because of the massive number of converts, over 10,000 in Kentucky alone.²¹ Ironically, it was the resurgence in the Christian feeling of the Great Revival that led to the compromise of Christianity with regard to slaves.

With the massive numbers of white converts secured during the Great Revival, Baptism and Methodism became part of mainstream southern culture. Although all ministers brought something different to the Revival culture, the great majority of them were leery of the excesses of the revivals and camp meetings. Nevertheless, they were thrilled with the number of converts.²² To these ministers, conversion was the great goal of the Revival, and taking a strong antislavery stance would have jeopardized this goal by alienating the powerful planter class. Furthermore, as the Revival progressed, revivalist ministers began to

¹⁶ Herbert Asbury, *A Methodist Saint: The Life of Bishop Asbury* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), p. 148.

¹⁷ Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 86.

¹⁸ Charles Baumer Swaney, *Episcopal Methodism and Slavery, with Sidelights on Ecclesiastical Politics* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1926), p. 15.

¹⁹ Also known as the Second Great Awakening. Robert A. Divine et al., *America Past and Present* (New York: Longman, 1999), p. 323.

²⁰ Daniel T. Bailey, *Shadow on the Church: Southwestern Evangelical Religion and the Issue of Slavery, 1783-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 65-69.

²¹ Walter Brownlow Posey, *The Baptist Church in the Lower Mississippi Valley, 1776-1845* (N.p.: University of Kentucky Press, 1957), p. 56.

²² Bailey, *Shadow on the Church*, pp. 82-83.

gain social status throughout the South. Some ministers, particularly those in the cities, became slaveowners themselves; of course, they became less inclined to condemn a system from which they benefited directly. The rural revivalist ministers, who constituted the vast majority of ministers and were typically poorer than their urban brethren, were loathe to condemn an institution in which others of their sect participated.²³

The Great Revival thus ironically reversed the position of ministers: they became less interested in the condition of slaves, but became more capable of speaking to them about it. This reversal is evident among both the Methodists and Baptists. The Methodists began by ignoring slaves, refusing to issue them the sacraments as early as 1800.²⁴ In 1804, this pro-establishment sentiment became codified in church law with the command to Methodist preachers to “from time to time, as occasion serves, admonish and exhort all slaves to render due respect to the commands and interests of their respective masters.”²⁵ The reversal is perhaps more dramatic with regard to individuals. Francis Asbury, who drafted the 1780 condemnation of slavery, in 1807 began to insist in his public sermons that slaves should obey their masters “as unto Christ,” “with fear and trembling.”²⁶ In 1810, he explained this reversal:

Would not *amelioration* in the condition and treatment of slaves have produced more practical good to the poor Africans than an attempt at their *emancipation*?...What is the personal liberty of the African, which he may abuse, to the salvation

of his soul—how may it be compared?²⁷

The change of Baptist attitudes toward slavery was equally radical.

As Baptists became more mainstream and common in Southern culture, which truly began to occur in the years immediately following the Revolution, they began to drop their condemnations of slavery. John Leland, a prestigious Virginia Baptist who had drafted the 1789 antislavery resolutions, again condemned slavery in 1791, saying that it was a “violent deprivation of the rights of nature.” He urged public prayer against slavery, but began to show signs of compromising with the status quo by stating that if public antislavery prayer “would raise the anger of tyrants, or embolden the slaves to insolence,” then private prayer would be preferable.²⁸ In 1793, the Baptist General Committee of Virginia reversed its 1789 antislavery declaration, deciding instead to allow all white Baptists to decide for themselves on the moral acceptability of slavery.²⁹ This reversal in Baptist attitudes is easily understandable given the history of the faith in America. In colonial and revolutionary times, Baptists were often very poor and seldom, if ever, held slaves. At this time, they preached against slavery. But by the Civil War, the Baptists owned more slaves than any other denomination in the South, except for Methodists, a transition that began in the period immediately following the Revolution. This explanation is further supported by the fact that Baptist antislavery preaching continued longer in Kentucky and Tennessee than it did in the seaboard states of the South

²³ Ibid., pp. 95-96.

²⁴ Creel, “*A Peculiar People*,” p. 147.

²⁵ Swaney, *Episcopal Methodism and Slavery*, p. 30.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 20. Swaney himself is less generous in his appraisal of this change, saying that “for good or for ill, Methodist leaders made the momentous decision to compromise with a known evil.” (p. 15).

²⁸ Scherer, *Slavery and the Church in Early America*, p. 155.

²⁹ Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, p. 89.

because Kentucky and Tennessee continued in a subsistence farming economy (i.e., non-slave economy) longer than the coastal states.³⁰

The Great Revival and subsequent changes in the attitudes of ministers changed many planters' attitudes regarding the religious instruction of slaves. By the early nineteenth century, planters had become more accepting of Christianity among their slaves. Many reasons contributed to this change in attitude, not the least of which was the fact that after the Great Revival, Baptists and Methodists were seen as less of a threat to the status quo. It is also true that some masters were genuinely concerned about the spiritual well being of their slaves. But more likely to have been a significant factor in this reversal of the attitudes of masters is the fact that planters at this time began to recognize that religion could help slaves become more productive and less likely to rebel. The ability of Christianity to act as a social control, as had been preached a century earlier by Cotton Mather and so many others, finally began to be acknowledged by slaveholders. Further, planters had come to believe that Christianity could have positive effects on slaves. One planter noted that his slaves were "attentive to religious instruction, and greatly improved in intelligence and morals, in domestic relations."³¹ Christianization of slaves had positive effects upon the South's external as well as internal relations.

The increased allowance for the religious instruction of slaves coincided with the development of abolitionist movements in the North in the 1820s and 30s. William Lloyd Garrison began publishing his antislavery journal *The Liberator* in 1831. It had been preceded by several other antislavery newspapers, although none of

them ever achieved the fame of Garrison's.³² The refusal of planters to provide religious instruction to slaves was a powerful antislavery weapon for abolitionists to use in interacting with Christians in the northern United States and Europe. By providing that instruction, slaveholders were able to fully rebut that argument. In 1829, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, a wealthy South Carolinian planter and congressman, urged his fellow planters that religious instruction of slaves was necessary to gain "the advantage in argument over... our northern brethren."³³ Religion was indeed used for this purpose: a British visitor to the First Presbyterian Church of Charleston had the full gallery of slaves pointed out to him by a layman who observed, "Here is proof that our domestic institution recognizes and provides for the religious wants of the slaves."³⁴ To some slaveholders, however, none of these arguments provided adequate reason to risk the religious education of slaves.

There were those planters who remained opposed to the thought of religion among their slaves right up until emancipation. Pro-religion and anti-religion planters were often neighbors, and there was little clear reason what would make a particular planter either for or against religion. Ex-slave John Brown recalled that

Sunday was a great day around the plantation.... Everybody got ready for the church meeting.... Mister John's wife would start the meeting with a prayer and then would come

³² Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1961).

³³ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 159.

³⁴ William Ferguson, *America by River and Rail; or Notes by the Way on the New World and Its People* (London: J. Nisbet and Co., 1856), cited in David Gerald Hewett, *Slavery in the Old South: The British Travelers' Image* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1972), p. 191.

³⁰ Posey, *The Baptist Church in the Lower Mississippi Valley*, p. 89.

³¹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 189.

the singing.... But the white folks on the next plantation would lick their slaves for trying to do what we did.³⁵

It is clear that many masters remained opposed to the thought of Christianity among slaves well into the nineteenth century. By some estimates, as of 1831, there were only five known slave churches in the entire South and less than five percent of slaves attended a weekly Sabbath service.³⁶ Planters remained actively opposed to religion because of the deleterious effects they believed that it had on their slaves. One Virginia planter who refused to allow his slaves to go to revivals explained his opposition by saying that “it is the greatest misfortune that can happen” when a slave became a Christian.³⁷ Planters also still feared what they thought to be dangerous and incendiary ideas in Christianity.

This fear of slaves fully understanding Christianity manifests itself in the opposition of the planter class to slave literacy. Henry Bibb, an escaped slave, recalled that in the 1830s a poor white girl had attempted to open a Sabbath school for slaves.

Books were furnished and she commenced the school; but the news soon got to our owners that she was teaching us to read.... Patrols were appointed to go and break it up the next Sabbath. They were determined that we should not have a Sabbath

school in operation. For slaves this is called an incendiary movement.³⁸

The thought of slaves reading the Bible became especially frightening to slave owners following the Denmark Vesey affair in 1822 and the 1831 Nat Turner revolt. Both Vesey and Turner were literate blacks who had read the Bible and claimed scriptural justification for their actions.³⁹ Events such as these caused southern states to adopt laws that made it illegal for slaves to read. A law to that end was adopted in South Carolina in 1834, and during the debate prior to its passage, Representative Whitmarsh B. Seabrook exclaimed that any southerner who wanted slaves to read the entire Bible belonged in a “room in the lunatic asylum.”⁴⁰ Planters distrusted ministers and missionaries among the slaves almost as much as they distrusted the slaves’ own interpretations of the Bible. One planter noted to visiting Briton John Godly, “These ministers are all abolitionists in disguise.... I would not let one of them come among my slaves.”⁴¹ The abolitionist movement thus hindered the cause of slave religious instruction as much as it helped.

Also coinciding with the beginnings of the abolitionist movement was the migration of southern planters, their families, and their slaves from the established seaboard states to the Old Southwest in the 1820s and 30s.⁴² The profile of those planters who established themselves in the Old Southwest is useful in understanding the social and

³⁵ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, pp. 219-20.

³⁶ R. Q. Mallard, *Plantation Life Before Emancipation* (Richmond, VA: Whitten & Shepperson, 1892), p. 144.

³⁷ Alexander Mackay, *The Western World; or Travels in the United States in 1846-47: Exhibiting Them in Their Latest Social, Political, and Industrial; Including a Chapter on California* (3 vols.; London: R. Bentley, 1849), 2, in Hewett, *Slavery in the Old South*, p. 185.

³⁸ Gilbert Osofsky, ed., *Puttin' on Ole Massa* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 68.

³⁹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, pp. 163-64.

⁴⁰ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, pp. 46-47.

⁴¹ John P. Godley, *Letters from America* (2 vols.; London: J. Murray, 1844), 1, in: Hewett, *Slavery in the Old South*, p. 184.

⁴² Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama. Florida is occasionally included as part of the Old Southwest in spite of its geographic location because it was settled at the same time.

economic developments that later took place there. Southerners who moved west were generally younger sons of planters who desired to rebel against the status quo that had been firmly established in the seaboard South by the second decade of the nineteenth century. Economic troubles began along the seaboard around this period, and there was a desire among the younger sons of planters to escape the stifling eastern society for the freedom of the frontier. The memoirs of planters who moved west are full of references to an idea of “manly independence”⁴³ and the rejection of the traditional family and social relationships of the seaboard. This ideal of manly independence translated into a lifestyle of hard drinking, gambling, violence, and abuse of traditional relationships with dependents, the common boast among the men of the Old Southwest being that they lived “like... fighting cocks.”⁴⁴ This radical change in lifestyle from the seaboard South to the Southwest had a dire impact on slaves.

During the settlement of the Old Southwest, more than a million slaves were moved from the old seaboard states to the new states of the “Black Belt.” Living conditions in the Old Southwest were typically far worse than they had been on the seaboard. The Black Belt was settled by planters who moved west seeking wealth and independence, which resulted in a mentality dominated by economic concerns, chief among which was the perpetuation of slavery.⁴⁵ This problem was exacerbated by the development of short-staple cotton as a cash crop. The cultivation of cotton not only began to occur at this time, but the lands of the Old Southwest were also more

conducive to its cultivation than the lands of the seaboard. Short-staple cotton was a far more labor-intensive crop than the rice, tobacco, or indigo that had been grown in the seaboard states, which gave Black Belt planters an excuse to, in the words of one scholar, “ratchet up the level of exploitation” of their slaves.⁴⁶ The model used by planters of the Old Southwest in their treatment of slaves was created and vociferously advanced by Josiah Nott, an Alabama planter of the 1830s, 40s, and 50s. Prior to Nott, seaboard planters had advocated a paternalist view of slavery, in which slaves were viewed as children in the planter’s large family.⁴⁷ Nott, however, rejected paternalism in all its forms and developed a pseudoscience of race, which he used to prove that blacks were a different—and needless to say, inferior—species than whites.⁴⁸ This Second Great Migration had a crushing effect on the slaves.

The terrible results of the migration were in some degree mitigated, however, by the moral reform movements that swept the nation in the 1830s and 40s. The reform movements had actually begun in New England a decade earlier, but they did not reach the Old Southwest until the late 1830s. Movements for temperance, missions, and ministerial education were popular, and reform movements in the Black Belt were based out of New England. The seaboard South had never had a strong reforming tendency, most likely because of the controlling influence that the paternalism paradigm had in the society. The wildness of life in the Old Southwest, however, demanded reform to keep order.⁴⁹ Although these reforms had a mitigating effect on the

⁴³ Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 29-35.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.

⁴⁵ Bailey, *Shadow on the Church*, pp. 56-57.

⁴⁶ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, pp. 359-60.

⁴⁷ This is, of course, an incredible oversimplification of paternalist theories. Paternalism in the South is examined in great detail in Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.

⁴⁸ Cashin, *Family Venture*, pp. 112-13.

⁴⁹ Bailey, *Shadow on the Church*, pp. 203-5.

condition of slaves in the Old Southwest, abolitionism was a reforming tendency that was notably absent. One Presbyterian minister explained this apparent contradiction by explaining that after emancipation, slaves would be open “to the villainy of every white man.” Furthermore, the very societal ills that the reform movements were trying to combat—”blasphemy, profaneness, drunkenness, Sabbath breaking, dishonesty, lying, and defamation”—were claimed to be very prevalent among the free blacks of the North.⁵⁰ By the time of the settlement of the Old Southwest and the moral reform of the 1830s, slavery had been firmly established and tacitly approved by every major church in the South, and slaves could only at best receive a compromised version of Christianity.

Of course, many ministers did not even bother teaching a compromised version of Christianity to slaves. Corruption ran rampant in the system, and many persons and institutions manipulated the low social standing of slaves for private gain. British visitor Joseph Sturge heard tales of a Catholic church in Maryland that “sold some of their own church members in order to apply the proceeds to the building of a new place of public worship.”⁵¹ A prime example of individual corruption is that of Matthew Tate, the Episcopalian rector of St. Helena Church in Beaufort, South Carolina, in the 1830s. In his personal documents, Tate makes very little mention of saving souls or administering sacraments. He instead brags about the money he made from conducting weddings and funerals as the only Episcopalian minister within forty miles of Beaufort. Tate also spent a great deal of his correspondence discussing the

many single and wealthy widows he knew in his congregation.⁵² In addition to the corrupt ministers in the South, there were many who were simply cruel and insensitive to the condition of the slaves.

Slaves often found that ministers either did not understand or did not care about their situation. One of these ministers was certainly the Baptist preacher James L. Gotney. Gotney, like all ministers among the slaves, focused upon Biblical texts stressing obedience. The text of choice was Ephesians 6:5: “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” Randolph Peter, a slave who heard Gotney’s sermons often, remembers a sermon of Gotney in which he said, “It is the devil... who tells you to try and be free.... If you run away, you will be turned out of God’s church, until you repent, return, and ask God and your master’s pardon.”⁵³ Reverend John B. Pinney perhaps managed to be even less sympathetic than Gotney when he gave a sermon in which he discussed the savagery of Africa and attempted to tell the slaves how lucky they were to be enslaved.⁵⁴ This form of religion had a very discouraging effect on the slaves. An ex-slave from Mississippi expressed typical disgust at this sort of preaching when he recalled, “They had a white man that would come over every fourth Sunday and preach to us. He would say, ‘Be honest, don’t steal, and obey your marster and mistress.’ That was all the preaching we had down in Mississippi.”⁵⁵

⁵² Creel, “*A Peculiar People*,” p. 136.

⁵³ Peter Randolph, “Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible,” in Milton C. Sernett, ed., *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), p. 67.

⁵⁴ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 206-7.

⁵⁵ Rawick, ed., *The American Slave*, 19, p. 198.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 219-20.

⁵¹ Joseph Sturge, *A Visit to the United States in 1841* (Boston: Dexter S. King, 1892), in Hewett, *Slavery in the Old South*, pp. 189-90.

Even those ministers who were genuinely concerned for the spiritual welfare of slaves were forced to preach subservience due to the social conditions of the times. Slaves were indoctrinated with this controlling message of the planters from the time of their induction into the church. Catechists were to tell slave pupils “That by their sin against God, they are fallen into a dreadful condition,” but by serving God “patiently and cheerfully in the condition which he orders for them their condition will very quickly be infinitely mended in Eternal Happiness.” Slave catechisms also took many liberties with the Ten Commandments, interpreting the Fifth Commandment to mean that slaves should honor all whites as fathers and mothers, and interpreting the Tenth Commandment to mean that they “must be patient and Content with such a Condition as God has ordered for [them].”⁵⁶ White ministers also took care to instill the doctrines of obedience and passivity.

Even ministers who were widely regarded as sympathetic toward slaves backed these doctrines. C.C. Jones, a South Carolinian Methodist who was generally regarded as a figure very sympathetic toward slaves, still relied upon “Servants, obey your masters,” and also on 1 Peter 2:18, “Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward.”⁵⁷ Jones also developed a list of ten “Rules of Action” to guide the conduct of white ministers and missionaries among the slaves. These rules were widely followed and are extremely telling of the blind eye that ministers turned to the condition of slaves on the plantations. These rules of action include:

1. To visit no plantation without permission, and, when permitted, never without prior notice.
2. To have nothing to do with the civil conditions of the negroes, or with their plantation affairs.
8. To make no attempt to create temporary excitements to introduce any new plans or measures, but make diligent and prayerful use of the ordinary and established means of God’s appointment.
9. To support, in the fullest manner, the peace and order of society, and to hold up to their respect and obedience all those whom God, in his providence, has placed in authority over them.⁵⁸

Perhaps most disturbing was a sermon given by Right Reverend William Meade, Episcopal Bishop of Virginia. Meade, like Jones, was reputed to be very kind to slaves as a general rule. Nevertheless, Meade instructed slaves as follows:

Now, when *correction* [whipping] is given you, you either deserve it, or you do not deserve it. But, whether you deserve it or not, it is your duty, and Almighty God requires, that you bear it patiently. You may perhaps, think that this is a hard doctrine; but if you consider it rightly you must needs think otherwise.... [S]uppose you are quite innocent of what is laid to your charge, and suffer wrongly in that particular thing; is it not possible that you may have done some other bad which was never discovered, and that Almighty God, who saw you doing it, would not let you escape without punishment?⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Scherer, *Slavery and Church in Early America*, p. 97.

⁵⁷ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 208.

⁵⁸ Mallard, *Plantation Life Before Emancipation*, pp. 105-7.

⁵⁹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 208.

This compromise of the Christian message on the part of the white ministers to accommodate the desires of the slave owners does not represent quite as severe a betrayal of the Christian message as it might at first appear.

A Christian ideal of slavery that was conducive to the religious traditions in the American antebellum South developed in the early nineteenth century. The goal of southern missions among the slaves was to create a biracial religious community that functioned harmoniously. Christian humility would make the slaves diligent workers, and Christian charity would inspire slave owners to provide for their safety and well being.⁶⁰ Of course, part of this protection for the slave owners involved securing the religious well-being of the slaves. This would please the slaves, according to the Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the State of Mississippi, because of “that feeling of childlike dependence and leaning on their master, which is well known as one of the elements in their nature.”⁶¹ Furthermore, southern religion placed only a secondary emphasis upon social conditions, stressing instead personal confrontation with God. Personal conversion and salvation, rather than the conditions in this world, were emphasized.⁶² Thus, ministers could ignore the social condition of their slave congregations and instead focus on their spiritual condition, not betraying their religion in doing so.

Indeed, few ministers believed that they were betraying their religion. Missionaries among the slaves were certainly aware that

they had to obey strict legal and social codes in regard to the religious instruction of slaves, but this was only seldom mentioned in their writings of the period. The social control aspect of their instruction was all but ignored by them, and it would appear that many missionaries truly seemed to feel that they were doing God’s work on earth by bringing the Gospel to the slaves.⁶³ The Missionary Society of the Methodist Conference of South Carolina expressed this sentiment at the end of an 1841 report which read: “...to preach this Gospel... is the great object, and, we repeat, the *sole* object of our ministrations among the blacks.”⁶⁴ This statement was clearly made in part to assuage the fears of Southern planters, but it also reflects the otherworldly orientation of missionaries among the slaves. This concept was perhaps better expressed by a Baptist pastor in New Orleans, who observed:

Slavery is a political institution. As a Christian minister, I have nothing to do with politics. My business is to preach the Gospel... in this course I am sanctioned by the Apostle Paul. Slavery existed in his day; but he turned not aside from the great object to attempt its overthrow.⁶⁵

Pursuing the “great object” alluded to here—the conversion and salvation of slaves—was the focus of southern religion, not turning aside to deal with a political, this-worldly institution such as slavery.

Of course, many people would disagree with the statement that slavery was an institution that was not the concern of the churches, including many ministers who preached in the South in the antebellum years. But if slavery was in fact a religious

⁶⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, pp. 165-67.

⁶¹ Bailey, *Shadow on the Church*, p. 251.

⁶² John B. Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1976), pp. 142-43. Some theorists believe that this tradition was incorporated into southern religious culture via the Baptists and their foundations in the English Free Church tradition. Torbert, *A History of the Baptists*, p. 17.

⁶³ Bailey, *Shadow on the Church*, p. 224.

⁶⁴ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 159.

⁶⁵ Ebenezer Davies, *American Scenes and Christian Slavery: A Recent Tour of Four Thousand Miles in the United States* (London: J. Snow, 1849), in Hewett, *Slavery in the Old South*, p. 189.

institution as much as a social institution, religion was still powerless to stop it. Had Methodists and Baptists retained their antislavery stance, then Methodism and Baptism would not have grown as dramatically in the South as they did.⁶⁶ Instead, by compromising the message of their religion and teaching what the planters wanted their slaves to be told as much as what the slaves wanted to hear, Methodists and Baptists became the two largest denominations in the South, accounting for forty-five and thirty-seven percent, respectively, of the populace of the Confederacy at the outbreak of the Civil War.⁶⁷

Ironically, the decision to go along with slavery to prevent the churches from becoming sectional in the end resulted in sectional churches anyway. On May 1, 1844, southern Methodists seceded from the General Methodist Conference to form the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; and on May 8 of the next year, southern Baptists seceded from the National Baptist Convention to establish the Southern Baptist Convention.⁶⁸ This religious secession over the issue of slavery became a grim precursor of the southern state secession that was to come less than two decades later, a connection noted by many contemporaries. The South Carolina Baptist Convention asked, in words that echo with ominous prescience, “If we, who profess to have but one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father, cannot remain united in the cause of benevolent effort, how can they expect to perpetuate their union on mere political principles?”⁶⁹ The institution of

slavery perpetuated such divisions—secular and religious—compromising moral virtue for economic expediency. This was clearly the case with regard to the religion white ministers taught to slaves in the antebellum South, a religion which was compromised by the demands of the economic interests of the wealthy southern planter class.

⁶⁶ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 186-87.

⁶⁷ David B. Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South, 1830-1865* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), p. 2.

⁶⁸ Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky*, pp. 139-41.

⁶⁹ Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South*, p. 5.

**THE MEAT INSPECTION AND PURE
FOOD AND DRUG ACTS OF 1906: A
RESPONSE TO UPTON SINCLAIR'S
THE JUNGLE?**

Brandon L. Caffey

Theodore Roosevelt, 26th president of the United States (1901-1909), is regarded as one of the “strongest and most vigorous presidents” in American history.¹ In battles between business and labor, Roosevelt extended the power of the presidency as well as the federal government to protect what he saw as the public interest. His domestic social and economic reforms were the first federal attempts to deal with problems created by a modern industrial society. By the time Roosevelt was elected to his second term, he had the reputation of a person who “spoke softly and carried a big stick.”² The big stick to which Roosevelt referred was to symbolize the threat of war against nations as well as his intent to act boldly in situations in which he thought firmness was required by his administration.

One of those situations occurred in 1906, the year Upton Sinclair, a reformer and a socialist, published a book entitled, *The Jungle*. The book focused on the Chicago meatpacking industry and its unsanitary conditions. Sinclair describes how dead rats as well as other offensive ingredients had been incorporated into processed goods. *The Jungle* effectively heightened fears about the contamination and adulteration of

¹ John A. Gable, “Theodore Roosevelt,” *World Book Encyclopedia* (1997), 16, p.327.

² Zachary Kent, “Theodore Roosevelt: Twenty-Sixth President of the United States,” *Encyclopedia of Presidents* (Chicago: Children’s Press, 1988), p. 10.

packinghouse products.³ However, the book failed to heighten the public’s awareness of the conditions of the packinghouse workers. In the novel, men and women labor in “dark holes, by electric light.”⁴ As a reformer and a socialist, Sinclair intended to “write the Uncle Tom’s Cabin of the Labor Movement.”⁵

Although the labor issue was ignored by the American public, many citizens became enraged and demanded reform regarding packinghouse products. Recognizing that a large portion of the public expected some sort of government intervention, Roosevelt summoned Sinclair to the White House in an effort to gain a more informed perspective on the situation. After the meeting, the president told William Allen White that although Sinclair was of “service to us,” he was “untruthful” and “three-fourths of the things he said were absolute falsehoods.”⁶ Despite the fact that Roosevelt emerged from the meeting a skeptic, he promised the American public that he would clean up the industry if Sinclair’s accusations were proven.

Concerned about the accusations against federal inspectors and the implications for public health, Roosevelt asked the Department of Agriculture (D.O.A.) to investigate. Visiting eighteen Chicago plants that used federal inspection and three that did not, the investigators reported that they found “good, fair, and bad conditions, often within the same plant.”⁷ Dissatisfied with

³ William Parmenter, “*The Jungle* and Its Effects,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 10 (1983), pp. 14-17.

⁴ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York, 1960), p. 150.

⁵ Louise Carroll Wade, “The Problem with Classroom Use of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*,” *American Studies*, 32 (1991), pp. 79-101.

⁶ Elting E. Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, (8 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951-54), 5, p. 321.

⁷ Oscar E. Anderson, “The Pure Food Issue: A Republican Dilemma,” *American Historical Review*, 61 (1956), p. 560.

the report, Roosevelt asked the committee to perform another investigation. This time, he asked the D.O.A. to address specific criticisms in order to get a clear and definite answer. Once again, however, the investigators reported that sanitary conditions were uneven. Since the two investigations did not produce definitive answers, many believed that Sinclair selected the worst possible conditions which could be found in any establishment and ignored those plants where excellent ones prevailed.⁸

Once Sinclair was informed that his accusations had not been proven by the investigations, he feared that the public would toss his depiction and efforts for reform to the wind and forget about them. Thus, during the last week of May, Sinclair challenged the investigation. In an article in the *New York Times*, Sinclair described packinghouses as “overrun with rats” and food prepared by foreigners and blacks who had no knowledge of sanitation.⁹ Sinclair managed to publish the piece before the government could release the findings of the Department of Agriculture’s investigation. This maneuvering by Sinclair forced the D.O.A. to release the report with an emphasis on the claims that could be supported. As a result, the public’s fears were reignited about the contamination and adulteration of packinghouse products. The public’s reaction led Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana to call for more extensive federal regulation of meat packing and forced Congress to pay attention to pending legislation that would set government standards for food and beverages.¹⁰ Eventually, “Congress bowed

⁸ Alison Wright, “Gut Reaction: Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and Progressive-Era America,” *Melbourne Historical Journal*, 22 (1992-93), p. 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁰ Richard H. Collin, *Theodore Roosevelt and Reform Politics* (N.p.: GCL Company, 1972), p. 128.

to public opinion and the President’s wishes” and passed the Meat Inspection Act of 1906. On the same day, Congress also passed the Pure Food and Drug act of 1906. The two acts were passed four months after Sinclair published *The Jungle*.

The speedy enactment of these bills has long been cited as evidence that the popular furor aroused by Sinclair’s novel lay behind their passage.¹¹ This conclusion, stated generally, implies that Congress typically passes legislation only when forced to do so by the weight of public opinion. While it cannot be denied that acts passed in 1906 followed closely upon public disclosures of wrongdoing, it is wrong to conclude that such legislation served the primary interest of protecting consumers. Consumer concern about the products was clearly at stake, but a large number of business interests and political interests were also involved.¹² Thus, the following question can be raised: Were the Meat Inspection and the Pure Food and Drug Acts of 1906 passed in response to public reaction created by *The Jungle*?

In an attempt to answer this question, this paper therefore examines the history of the controversy over the regulation of food and drugs in the years preceding the passage of the legislation. The two areas of focus will include the role of business and the political ramifications for passing such legislation. In addition, this paper will examine the credibility of Upton Sinclair and other key individuals who played a role in the passage of the respective acts. Based on primary and secondary sources, it reaches the conclusion that the respective acts (Meat Inspection/Pure Food and Drug) of 1906 were not in response to public opinion nor

¹¹ Lawrence W. Reed, “Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906,” *Consumer’s Research Magazine*, 78 (February, 1995), p. 23.

¹² Donna J. Wood, “Business Support for the 1906 Food and Drug Act,” *Business History Review*, 59 (1985), p. 405.

the government's wish to protect the public interest.

First of all, when examining the history of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, it is important to understand that the push for such legislation did not begin with the publication of *The Jungle*. As early as 1870, American citizens had been aware of the contamination of goods and the unhealthy adulterants used to process them.¹³ In fact, packinghouses themselves persuaded Congress to pass a federal meat inspection act in order to regain the customers of those countries which had banned the importation of American products. Public outcry at that time was high enough for Dr. Harvey W. Wiley, chief of the Bureau of Chemistry of the Department of Agriculture, to initiate an investigation of food adulteration. Between 1887 and 1893, his bureau published an eight-part study which demonstrated that citizens were consuming unhealthy foods.¹⁴

Although the study was highly technical and received little press attention, many educated citizens supported Wiley in his attempt to lobby for federal legislation. However, the government paid little attention to Wiley and his push for federal reform. Part of the reason the bills had little support in these years was their flavor of partisan legislation.¹⁵ Wiley himself added to the impression of special-interest legislation. He repeatedly made statements favoring some companies' products over others. Such sentiments naturally placed Wiley in conflict with the makers of the products he condemned and also led state and national lawmakers to question his impartiality and wisdom. Wiley was creating opposition to the pure food

legislation, but he attributed all of it to powerful special interests.¹⁶

Unsuccessful in his attempts, Wiley would gain the support of more citizens following the Spanish-American War of 1898. The press reported that "tons of rotten canned meat had been shipped to American troops."¹⁷ After several states promptly enacted pure food laws, the Senate established a "fact-finding committee" to examine the problem of adulterated foods.¹⁸ The Pure-Food Investigation Committee held a series of hearings during 1899-1900 in Chicago, Washington, and New York, producing a wealth of evidence and testimony on food adulteration. The federal and state hearings "produced a mass of evidence and prompted journalists to report that as much as 15 to 20 percent of America's food supply was adulterated."¹⁹ The public was outraged by the findings in the report known as Bulletin 13.²⁰ With the public in such an uproar, why didn't Congress pass some sort of legislation in response to the findings? After all, "more American soldiers fell before their deadly beef than were hit by all the Spanish guns."²¹

Moreover, large producers hoped that small businessmen would have difficulty coping with federal regulations and thus be forced out of business. In addition, more reputable members of the business community, especially in the food processing industries, wished to set their houses in order regarding adulterated substances manufactured or processed in

¹³ Walter I. Trattner, "The Federal Food and Drug Act: A Complete But Familiar Story," *Reviews in American History*, 18 (1990), p. 395.

¹⁴ Clayton A. Coppin, "Wiley and the Whiskey Industry," *Business History Review*, 62 (1988), p. 286.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹⁷ Reed, "Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906," p. 23.

¹⁸ Wood, "Business Support for the 1906 Food and Drug Act," p. 410.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Bernard A. Weisberger, "Harvey Wiley," *American Heritage*, 47 (February-March, 1996), p. 14.

²¹ Wade, "The Problem with Classroom Use of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*," p. 84.

America.²² Enraged by a new invention imported from France, oleomargarine, which posed a grave threat to butter sales and hence to their economic well-being, dairy farmers also played a major roll in these efforts. Another advocate of some form of legislation was the whiskey industry. Distillers of “straight” whiskey, whose profits were threatened by “blended” whiskey producers, wanted federal intervention to force “rectifiers to differentiate their products from the more expensive but purer ones.”²³

In addition to the pure food investigation he initiated in 1887, Wiley, beginning in 1902, conducted a series of experiments with his infamous “Poison Squad.”²⁴ Healthy young men volunteered for a year to obey strict dietary prescriptions and to have their excreta collected and analyzed.²⁵ The results were published beginning in the year 1904 in a seven-part series called Bulletin 84. The Poison Squad experiments were such a media sensation they inspired poems, songs, and colorful stories, as well as expressions of moral outrage. Wiley, who was the major figure in the pure food crusade, believed that when people were properly educated they would press the government to do what was right in the public interest. Although there was a great public outcry, neither President Roosevelt nor his administration responded to public sentiments. While the government chose not to address the issue of poisonous adulterants, it also chose to ignore a much more widespread problem that perhaps deserved greater attention.

Commercial fraud was seen as a problem in business ethics. Fraudulent

substitution affected the consumers’ ability to know exactly what they were purchasing and to get the full value they expected from dollars spent on food. In other words, “commercial fraud represented an economic loss to consumers.”²⁶ The D.O.A. suggested that 15 percent of American manufactured food products were adulterated.²⁷ This resulted in an annual cost of one billion dollars lost in value to consumers when they paid premium prices for inferior foods. With the American public taking such an economic hit from fraudulent foods, Roosevelt was now under attack by muckraking journalists in search of reform. For them, it was surprising Roosevelt had not swung his big stick in the direction of the beef industry. The fact that the muckrakers had begun to question Roosevelt is a key issue. Muckrakers played an important role in educating the public about issues the government would rather downplay.²⁸ For them, it was surprising that Roosevelt had not swung his big stick in the direction of the beef industry. Roosevelt’s reluctance to act boldly against the beef industry may have been a result of his strong ties to cattle ranchers. Roosevelt ranched for several years on the Little Missouri River in Dakota Territory. There is a wealth of evidence pointing to the impact of Roosevelt’s western experience on his subsequent political career and the development of his attitudes and beliefs.²⁹ The muckrakers, who were usually advocates of change, began to pressure Roosevelt harder than he ever expected.

In this particular instance, the

²² Wood, “Business Support for the 1906 Food and Drug Act,” p. 405.

²³ Coppin, “Wiley and the Whiskey Industry,” p. 291.

²⁴ Harvey W. Wiley, *Autobiography* (Indianapolis, IN: Anderson Publishing Company, 1942), p. 80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁶ Reed, “Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906,” p. 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Wallace G. Chessman, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Power* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1969).

²⁹ William W. Savage, Jr., “Wyoming and the Shaping of a Presidential Advisor: A Comment on Horace Plunkett’s Friendship with Theodore Roosevelt,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 45 (1973), p. 241.

muckrakers challenged Roosevelt on the issues promised in the “Square Deal.” With his Square Deal, Roosevelt sought to create a nation where Americans would not be given special privileges because they were rich or because they were poor.³⁰ In addition, with the Square Deal, Roosevelt distinguished between what he considered good and bad trusts. Did the Chicago packers constitute a bad trust? Roosevelt concluded that they did and took action. Although he was worried about the repercussions, he stated that any man “worth his salt would do his duty, and give the people the benefit of the doubt, and act in any way which their interests demanded....”³¹ Although Roosevelt made such a statement concerning character, he did not act upon the statement until the following year (1905). Fearing that several companies might merge, Roosevelt and the Justice Department secured an injunction prohibiting collusion, and the Supreme Court upheld it.³² Roosevelt now turned his attention to prosecuting packing company officials for violating the injunction. Despite the best efforts of government lawyers, the judge decided in favor of the packers in March of 1906, one month after *The Jungle* was published. The fact that Roosevelt failed to discipline the Chicago packers under the existing law was a negative blow to his administration.

In the midst of an election year, special interest groups were forming all over the country. It was Roosevelt’s intention to prosecute the bad trusts early, in order to avoid the labor issues addressed by Sinclair in *The Jungle*. Provided with advanced copies of *The Jungle* by Sinclair, Roosevelt

noted the socialist message the book intended to convey.³³ In his autobiography, Roosevelt expressed the following sentiments regarding the socialist movement, “I do disagree most emphatically with...the Marxian Socialist. These socialists are opposed to our industrial system.”³⁴ More so, Roosevelt was opposed to the socialist belief that national, state, and local governments are on the side of the employers. Although he was optimistic he and the Republican Party would prevail during the election year, the significance of the labor issue could not be minimized. During the period when *The Jungle* was published, two-thirds of the work force came from the ranks of common labor recruited from the forty nationalities that worked in the Chicago packinghouses.³⁵ With such a large number of minorities and foreigners employed by the packinghouses, Roosevelt feared that attacking the issue head on might result in an economic crisis.

Modern labor’s initial entry on the political scene was closely bound to the participation of Theodore Roosevelt in the election campaigns of 1906. The entry of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) forced the Republican Party to adopt a new strategy.³⁶ James S. Clarkson, a Roosevelt political advisor, urged the president to intervene actively on the labor front. Clarkson knew that the AFL made an important difference in Packingtown. The AFL was not only willing to organize unskilled labor, but female and black

³⁰ David H. Burton, *Theodore Roosevelt, American Politician*, (N.p.: Associated University Press, Inc., 1997), p. 189.

³¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), p. 365.

³² Leroy G. Dorsey, “Roosevelt,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 25 (Fall, 1995), p. 725.

³³ Wade, “The Problem with Classroom Use of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*,” p. 85.

³⁴ Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, p. 367.

³⁵ Gregory R. Zieren, “A Century of Meatpacking and Packinghouse Labor in Chicago,” *Annals of Iowa*, 57 (1963), p. 693.

³⁶ Stephen J. Scheinberg, “Theodore Roosevelt and the A. F. of L.’s Entry into Politics, 1906-1908,” *Labor History*, 3 (1963), p. 135.

workers as well.³⁷ However, the government proved to be unresponsive to the demands of the AFL and other labor organizations. Samuel Gompers, founder of the AFL, was not willing to be brushed aside by the federal government. Gompers consulted on the political situation with Andrew Furuseth, the Washington representative of the AFL, and the two of them drafted what has become known as “Labor’s Bill of Grievances.”³⁸ This document embodied the major political demands of the AFL and was intended to show Congress and the president that labor expected action in its interest. Although Roosevelt showed concern when informed of the government’s negligence in enforcing labor laws, Speaker of the House Joseph Cannon forcefully replied, “Sam Gompers, you are not the whole works in this country!”³⁹ Faced with a negative reaction from the leader of Congress, Gompers decided to center his campaign against his foe.

Roosevelt now had limited alternatives to deal with this situation. He could have supported the AFL in its attempt to cleanse Republican ranks of those unfriendly to labor, or he could shy away from the campaign. The first alternative would have meant a clear split in the Republican Party. The second ran the risk of allowing labor to gain a strong political position. Forced to do something, he chose to intervene actively on behalf of the Republican congressional candidates. Roosevelt knew that some party members wanted a stronger stand against Gompers; however, Roosevelt told his Secretary of Agriculture, James Wilson, “It is a bad business to solidify labor against us.”⁴⁰ However, much to his surprise, after

Roosevelt suggested to Charles Hughes, a candidate for the New York governorship, to accept the assistance of labor leaders, Roosevelt could find no labor leader of any stature who would venture to support Hughes. Although Hughes managed to win the election, Roosevelt knew that his party had to make a stronger appeal to labor. Thus, from a political standpoint, the speedy enactment of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 was not necessarily a response to public outcry, but rather the Republican Party’s attempt to minimize a controversial labor issue in order to secure Congressional seats.

Thus, it is misguided for historians to continue to interpret the passage of the Meat Inspection and the Pure Food and Drug Acts of 1906 as a result of one causal factor. The public reaction to *The Jungle* certainly heightened the public’s awareness to the issue of pure food; however, Sinclair’s contemporaries failed to give him the credit that present day historians have. In fact, Roosevelt, who emerged as a hero from the passage of the acts, “graciously acknowledged Senator Beveridge’s help but said nothing about Sinclair or his novel.”⁴¹ Contemporaries of Sinclair attribute this phenomenon to his lack of credibility. A leading journalist of that time, Jack Sullivan, warned readers to “avoid the error of classifying Sinclair and his *Jungle* with muckrakers.”⁴² They were utterly different in their approach. According to Sullivan, the best muckrakers confirmed everything, while Sinclair was a “propagandist whose account of the conditions in the stockyards did not purport to have any more than the loose standard of accuracy that fiction

³⁷ Anderson, “The Pure Food Issue: A Republican Dilemma,” p. 569.

³⁸ Schienberg, “Theodore Roosevelt and the A. F. of L.’s Entry into Politics, 1906-1908,” p. 140.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴⁰ Chessman, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Power*, p. 269.

⁴¹ George L. Becker, “Upton Sinclair,” *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 15th edition (1980), p. 133.

⁴² Wade, “The Problem with Classroom Use of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*,” p. 91.

demands for local color and background.”⁴³

As evidence for Sullivan’s accusation, many contemporaries and modern day historians point out that Sinclair misinformed readers about life in what he called “Packingtown,” but which residents and reporters knew as “Back of the Yards.”⁴⁴ Such a simple and basic mistake caused many readers to reevaluate the honesty of the book. As the honesty of the book was questioned, the motives of the book then became an issue. Many readers were not surprised when Sinclair admitted that his indictment of the packinghouses of the Chicago stockyards was exaggerated. During an interview, he told a reporter that he made only three visits to the plants. One was an “ordinary” guided tour, the second was with a correspondent for the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, and on the “third and last trip, I was in the wake of a lawyer who had been brought up in the Packingtown district.”⁴⁵

In addition, Sinclair told the interviewer that his knowledge of some plants came from a “story teller” he met at a bar.⁴⁶ Therefore, it is not surprising that Sinclair’s accusations could not be proven by the Department of Agriculture’s investigations. The result of Sinclair’s lack of credibility undeniably led to the public’s lack of attention to his socialist message. If *The Jungle* misrepresented the packinghouses and the products, it is even more misleading about the workers and their community. Sinclair himself concluded in his autobiography that “*The Jungle* concerned packinghouse workers, but internally it was

the story of my own family.”⁴⁷ Sinclair’s admissions of misleading the public were published during the months preceding the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act. Thus, the conclusion can be made that the government was no longer pressured by public demand to pass such legislation. With this in mind, one cannot understand why Sinclair would write such a lurid tale and continue to contradict himself without understanding the complexities of his childhood.

Upton Sinclair was an only child, born in Baltimore in 1878 to an alcoholic father and a religious mother.⁴⁸ In an attempt to better his life, he moved back and forth between the bug-infested boardinghouses his father could afford and the glamorous houses of relatives. While attending college, he began to support his family’s income by selling jokes and short stories. His dream, however, was to write the “great American novel” and achieve wealth and social status.⁴⁹ Considered at the time to be a fair writer, his early efforts were often overlooked by critics and readers. After college, Sinclair would marry his college girlfriend but was unable to support her. He was forced to send his wife back home to live with her parents. Enraged at the social conditions of his family, Sinclair was seeking some type of outlet. It was at this critical juncture that Leonard D. Abbott of the *Literary Digest* gave him some socialist pamphlets.⁵⁰ Many other socialists of the time began to befriend him and introduce him to the socialist movement. Within six months of that initial meeting with Abbott in 1902, Sinclair began to write that the “deepest fact of my nature is a fiery, savage hatred of wealth, and all

⁴³ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴⁴ Wright, “Gut Reaction: Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and Progressive-Era America,” p. 55.

⁴⁵ Zieren, “A Century of Meatpacking and Packinghouse Labor in Chicago,” p. 699.

⁴⁶ Jon A. Yoder, *Upton Sinclair* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1975), p. 74.

⁴⁷ Wade, “The Problem with Classroom Use of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*,” p. 90.

⁴⁸ Yoder, *Upton Sinclair*, p. 75.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 82.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

that it stands for.”⁵¹

Many socialist journalists began to cultivate Sinclair and pay him an income high enough so that he could reunite his family. Sinclair increasingly focused his attention on the great American novel. Initially concerned with the topic of “nineteenth-century chattel slavery, he was persuaded by a five hundred dollar advance to focus on contemporary wage slavery.”⁵² Fred D. Warren, editor of *Appeal to Reason* and author of several articles about “Packingtown” and the Chicago meatpacking strike, offered the advance. Sinclair, who had followed the articles published in *Appeal to Reason*, chose the Packingtown setting since he was somewhat familiar with the situation. Although Sinclair had some knowledge of the labor movement, he was not prepared for what he would encounter in Packingtown. More so, this would be the first time that he had ever written about industrial workers or, apparently, been inside a large factory. Unable to logically understand the complexities of the stockyards, he turned to three particular people who would help him shape *The Jungle*.

The first person Sinclair relied upon was Algie M. Simons, a socialist organizer and editor of the *International Socialist Review*. A former charity worker in the stockyards, Simons had become a socialist journalist in the late 1800’s.⁵³ Simons would introduce Sinclair to Adolphe Smith, an English socialist who wrote favorable articles about the European slaughterhouses. The last of the influential three was Ernest Poole, who had come to Packingtown to cover the 1904 labor strike. Educated at Princeton, Poole was credited with having a great wealth of knowledge about the strikers and the

⁵¹ Becker, “Upton Sinclair,” p. 137.

⁵² Yoder, *Upton Sinclair*, p. 45.

⁵³ Wade, “The Problem with Classroom Use of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*,” p. 93.

conditions of the neighborhood people.⁵⁴ Many of Poole’s works had already gained the attention of President Roosevelt. Although Sinclair had reputable sources, time and money pressed him. The lack of financial resources caused Sinclair to return home to New Jersey. Unable to finance a second trip to Chicago, he finished the novel with “everything I knew and thought my readers ought to know” about socialism.⁵⁵

The novel seemed so outlandish that five separate publishers refused to take the book without substantial revisions. Sinclair recognized that in order to produce any major reaction from the public, the manner in which he wrote the novel must remain intact. In fact, contemporaries that praised the book alluded more to the style of writing than its factual truth. Winston Churchill, who did an early review of *The Jungle*, stated, “*The Jungle* pays tribute to the author’s powers of description and recognizes the breadth of human appeal that would make it one of great bestsellers of all time.”⁵⁶ Determined that the book would become a best-seller, Sinclair began to sell copies through different publications as well as establish a publicity office in order to promote the novel. The “purpose of Sinclair’s activities was to convince critics that the novel was an exact and faithful picture of conditions as they existed in Packingtown.”⁵⁷ Sinclair although often proved to be his worst enemy. He told readers of the *Appeal to Reason* that the novel was designed to “drive home to the dullest reader” the point that the destruction of families was the result of economic systems.⁵⁸ This, however, contradicts Sinclair’s financial motives for writing the

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 97.

⁵⁷ Becker, “Upton Sinclair,” p. 140.

⁵⁸ Wade, “The Problem with Classroom Use of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*,” p. 95.

novel. Although he believed in the socialist movement, Sinclair stated, “I really paid little attention to the meat question while I was in Chicago.... I did not see half as much as I might have seen had I tried harder.”⁵⁹

This admission of misrepresenting the Chicago packinghouses only confirmed the sentiments of those who believed the tales Sinclair described were a result of the socialist movement. The majority of the public believed that socialists held extreme views that were supported by little, if any, truth. If this is so, the actions taken by Roosevelt and his administration were not a result of public demand for reform. On the contrary, these actions can be seen as Roosevelt’s attempt to challenge the beef industry, as a battle between big business and government regulation. The notion that he acted on behalf of public interest is vaguely supported. It is much more plausible to accept the theory of Robyn Muncy, who believes that the intervention of Roosevelt was due to the fact that the battle between big business and government was the crux of Progressivism. Muncy concludes that the Square Deal offered by Roosevelt rested on the assumption that the independence people sought came in the form of ownership of their own farms or businesses.⁶⁰ If this is the case, leaders of organized labor tried to undermine that independence.

Historians have failed also to examine the motives of Dr. Harvey Wiley. While history has credited everyone from Sinclair to Beveridge and Roosevelt, it was the works of Wiley that were reflected in the passage of the bill. Over time, Wiley has also emerged as a peoples’ champion. Historians have described Wiley as the only

man who had the public interest at heart. Wiley has been portrayed as “morally upright, solicitous of the health and welfare of the consumer, and opposed on principle to inferior products and fraudulent labeling.”⁶¹ However, if closer examinations had been conducted, historians would have discovered that Wiley himself, after his resignation, argued that the public interest had been “captured and subverted by the fake whiskey industry.”⁶²

It is now clear that Wiley’s interest in the pure food legislation “stemmed from his desire to enhance the importance of his own bureau.”⁶³ After fighting so hard for the passage of pure food legislation, Wiley was determined to have the act placed under the enforcement of his own department, the Department of Agriculture’s Chemistry Division. However, during the early years of his campaigning, a “number of amendments were introduced that would have placed enforcement in another department.”⁶⁴ In 1903, another threat to Wiley’s bureau surfaced when the National Association of State Dairy and Food Departments proposed the creation of a separate bureau within the federal government to administer the pure food law if it were passed. In an effort to gain support, Wiley directed his efforts to the debate over “blended” or “straight” whiskey.⁶⁵ The whiskey debate was a long-standing battle over exactly what constituted a blended or straight whiskey. Distillers of straight whiskey wanted provisions that forced blended whiskey to be labeled as an “imitation.” Although blended whiskey was cheaper and contained fewer poisonous ingredients, Wiley campaigned in favor of straight whiskey. If Wiley were acting in the

⁵⁹ Zieren, “A Century of Meatpacking and Packinghouse Labor in Chicago,” p. 701.

⁶⁰ Robyn Muncy, “Trustbusting and White Manhood,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 25 (Fall, 1995), p. 35.

⁶¹ Weisberger, “Harvey Wiley,” p. 14.

⁶² Coppin, “Wiley and the Whiskey Industry,” p. 288.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

⁶⁵ Wood, “Business Support for the 1906 Food and Drug Act,” p. 430.

best interest of the public, why would he campaign in favor of a more harmful product? The answer to that question appears to be quite simple. In his campaign for straight whisky, Wiley convinced Charles Reed of the American Medical Association to testify that only straight whiskey should be used for medical prescriptions.⁶⁶ As a result, the bill was eventually placed under the supervision of the Chemistry Division, and Wiley was named chairman of the interdepartmental committee charged with administering the Pure Food and Drug Act.

Thus, it is quite clear that the actions of Wiley had little to do with the public's interest. Wiley's efforts were, if anything, harmful to the public because straight whiskey was the more poisonous product in comparison to blended whiskey brands. In addition, Wiley knew that the distillers of straight whiskey were more than "eager to return the favor by supporting him financially to gain control over the act once it passed."⁶⁷ The efforts of Wiley paid off as the Bureau of Chemistry expanded rapidly after the passage of the legislation. The total number of personnel of the bureau increased from 110 in 1906 to 250 in 1907. The financial appropriations of the bureau increased dramatically as well. The whiskey episode is then in part consistent with the theory expressed by Muncy. The regulation efforts of Wiley were a mutually "beneficial exchange between particular business people and government officials."⁶⁸ The idea that Wiley acted solely upon a concern for consumer safety is misleading and inaccurate.

In conclusion, it is important to re-examine the multiple reasons behind the passage of the Meat Inspection and Pure Food and Drug Acts of 1906. If we continue

to believe that the legislation was in response primarily to public demand, we fail to understand the importance of big business and its role in the political arena of that era. The whiskey industry in particular used Wiley to gain an advantage over its competitors by supporting him in his efforts to secure more power for himself and his department. If we begin to understand this strategic behavior practiced by private industry and government, we may begin to recognize that the title of hero that was bestowed upon Roosevelt and others is not warranted. Today, Roosevelt, who had little to do with the passage of the acts, is given the primary credit. In fact, it is quite clear that Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana played a far more important role in the process than President Roosevelt. It was Beveridge who was startled by the investigation performed by Wiley. Although his role has been overlooked by many historians, Beveridge actually drafted and pushed the bill through Congress. Nevertheless, Walter Trattner recently wrote that "Roosevelt turned his attention to measures to protect the public against harmful meat and drugs and almost single-handedly got Congress to pass the Meat Inspection and Pure Food and Drug acts."⁶⁹ Most works, past and present, have arrived at similar conclusions.

If we continue to accept the notion that the government responded to the public reaction of *The Jungle*, we accept to a certain degree the conditions which Sinclair described in his novel. It is now, more than ever, evident that Sinclair purposely misled the readers of *The Jungle* in order to promote his own career. Should educators and historians continue to use a novel that was based on exaggerations and misleading information? To continue to accept his novel as the basis for the legislation passed by

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 432.

⁶⁷ Coppin, "Wiley and the Whiskey Industry," p. 308.

⁶⁸ Muncy, "Trustbusting and White Manhood," p. 36.

⁶⁹ Trattner, "The Federal Food and Drug Acts: A Complete But Familiar Story," p. 393.

Congress is to accept a flawed and exaggerated picture of urban immigrant industrial life in the early twentieth century. Beyond that, historical novelists are perhaps receiving the message that it is all right to use vivid imagination in place of good research. Cushing Stout argues that historical novelists need what he terms a “veracious imagination.”⁷⁰ Sinclair does not meet Stout’s criteria—a respect for both the documentable and the imaginative without sacrificing either to the other. In the end, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* did not cause the passage of the Meat Inspection Act or the Pure Food and Drug Act.

⁷⁰ Wade, “The Problem with Classroom Use of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*,” p. 101.

POLISH NATIONAL IDENTITY IN AMERICA

Carrie Borowski

Polish immigration to the United States from 1870-1917 can be described as one of the “great migrations” in history. Poles came from every region in Poland to settle in a country completely foreign to them. They immigrated to this country for a variety of reasons, but, in general, the majority of Polish immigrants came to the United States in search of a better life for themselves and, more importantly, their children. They knew neither the language, the culture, nor the religion of the United States. These linguistic and cultural differences that the Poles faced in America contributed to the prejudice that they felt in the political and economic sectors. “Making such fine distinctions, employers established the pecking order of their workers on the basis of race, ranking white native-born Americans at the top; Irish, Scots, English, Welsh and Germans below but near them; Poles, Magyars, Italians, Slovaks, and Russians next, in various orders; and Black Americans in the bottom category.”¹

Although the Poles faced rough times upon arrival in the United States, America provided them with something that they had never experienced in partitioned Poland—a sense of identity and pride in their Polish heritage. While some characteristics kept the Poles separate from other immigrant groups and native Americans, they also brought them together with other Poles. Therefore, Poles discovered who they were in the

United States rather than in Poland. They formed a strong Polish community in the United States, Polonia, which still exists today. This Polish community and its social networks—including organizations such as the Polish National Alliance, the Polish Falcons, and the Polish Women’s Alliance—enabled Polish-Americans to forge a link between assimilation into American culture and retention of Polish heritage.

Polish immigration to the United States reached its zenith in the years 1899-1932. According to the table entitled *Permanent Immigration of Ethnic Poles in the United States 1820-1980*, there were 33,489 persons who identified themselves as Polish from 1820 to 1885. During the period 1885-98, persons identifying Poland as their land of birth numbered 131,694. Hitting their peak in the years 1899-1932, Polish immigrants, defined as persons identified as Polish by race or people, reached 1,148,649.² Before one can understand the great influx of Poles into the United States, it is essential to understand the role that historical Poland plays in the equation.

Poland ceased to exist as an independent country during the high immigration years 1870-1917. Not until after World War I did Poland achieve the status of an independent country again. After 1795, Poland had been separated into three spheres, each controlled by Poland’s powerful neighbors: Russia, Prussia and Austria. “In 1795, after the failure of a massive revolt against the partitioning powers led by Tadeusz Kosciuszko, Russia, Prussia and Austria again divided the remnants of Poland and erased the state from the European map.”³ Poland had gone from a Polish independent

¹ John J. Bukowczyk, *And My Children Did Not Know Me: A History of Polish-Americans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 21.

² Donald Pienkos, *PNA: A Centennial History of the Polish National Alliance of the United States of North America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

state rich with culture and scholastic achievements to a people and a culture repressed by their occupiers. During the partitioning of Poland, the Poles faced harsh treatment under each of the three powers. Prussia and Russia even established programs of forced control of the Polish language in schools, churches, and governmental administrative and judicial agencies during the partition.⁴ The history of Poland since 1795 illustrates why Poles were so willing to give up everything familiar and immigrate to a land in which they had only the principles of freedom and economic prosperity in common with the Americans.

Poles have been in United States since the American Revolution. In fact, one of the earliest heroes in this country was Casimir Pulaski, who aided in the fight for independence. However, Polish immigration did not attract large numbers until around the time of the American Civil War. According to Andrzej Brozek, Poles immigrated to America after 1854 due to certain push and pull factors. "Political and cultural oppression, improper land distribution, and overpopulation acted as 'push' factors, while a generous American immigration policy and favorable prospects for employment drew the discontented and ambitious here."⁵ Polish immigration to the United States was by no means homogeneous in nature. Reasons for immigration ranged from unemployment to fear of conscription into the Russian army. The emigration movement from Poland was composed of political exiles, peasants, religious dissidents, and others. However, the Polish peasantry which left Poland after

⁴ Josephine Wtulich, ed., *Writing Home: Immigrants in Brazil and the United States 1890-1891* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 5.

⁵ Andrzej Brozek, "Polish Americans 1854-1939," *Journal of American Ethnic History* (Spring, 1988), p. 105.

the 1850s was far larger in number than any other emigration group due to the worsening of economic conditions as the nineteenth century progressed. As the population grew and industrialization failed to keep up, the Polish peasant was left with little choice but to immigrate to a foreign country.⁶

One example of Polish immigration to the United States is the story of a Polish woman, Marie Zakrzewska (1829-1902), who fled Prussia in 1853. Being a woman of Polish ethnic background, Zakrzewska was denied her medical degree by a hospital in Berlin. She immigrated to the United States, where she earned her medical degree and became a pioneer in medical and nursing education for women. "Little really is known in Berlin about America, and to go there is considered as great an undertaking as to seek the river Styx in order to go to Hades....But this could not prevent me from realizing my plans.... I had idealized the freedom of America and especially the reform of the position of women...."⁷ Although Zakrzewska was rather ignorant of the United States, she, like thousands of other Poles, risked everything to immigrate here. "A stranger in a strange wide land, not knowing its habits and customs, not understanding its people, nor its workings and aims, yet my mind was not clouded with loneliness....I was happy."⁸

Hilda Satt Polacheck's immigration to the United States was very different from Zakrzewska's immigration. For one thing, Polacheck was Jewish. Although Polacheck was only a child when she left Poland in 1892, she had already experienced the discrimination that faced Jews in Poland. As an old woman, Polacheck could recall the

⁶ Pienkos, *PNA: A Centennial History*, pp. 40-41.

⁷ Marie Zakrzewska, "My Education and Aspirations Demanded More," in Maxine Schwartz Seller, ed., *Immigrant Women*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

religious intolerance and national hatred that she experienced while living in the section of Poland partitioned to Russia. "As far back as I can remember, the Poles hated the Russians and the Germans. The Germans looked down on the Poles and the Russians. There was a mutual hatred among the people of the three countries.... But there was always a double dose of this hatred for the Jews."⁹

An important source for understanding Polish immigration to the United States is the book *Writing Home*, which is a compilation of immigrant letters that were sent back to Poland. It illustrates first hand the difficulties and benefits that Poles faced in the United States. It also highlights the Polish social network that was already in place in 1890 in the United States. In letters to their families back home, Poles wrote about Polish friends and family who attempted to make their arrival in the United States easier. "They treat me not as an uncle and aunt would, but as parents. I get my meals in their house, and uncle also pays 3 dollars a month for my lodging. At Uncle Chuna's I am learning how to sew on a machine."¹⁰

On the one hand, immigration to the United States was extremely traumatic for Poles given the extreme differences in language, religion, and culture. But, on the other hand, these differences helped to create a Polish national consciousness. Prior to arriving in America, many Poles did not distinguish themselves as such. Stefan Barszczewski, the author of the first history of the Polish National Alliance, discussed this phenomenon in 1894: "In answer to the question, 'where are you from?' our immigrants reply almost unanimously, 'from under the Prussians, the Austrians, or the

Russians,'...Not surprisingly, American census officials report thousands of immigrants from those countries, but few Poles, when the exact opposite is true."¹¹

The U.S. Census Report of 1900 further illustrates this lack of a Polish identity. After examining the Census population statistics from the Town of Cicero in Cook County, Illinois, Barszczewski's position is strengthened. As to the place of birth, census officials listed Prussia and "Poland Germany" for many Chicago Poles in 1900.¹² Therefore, it was here in America that many immigrants became fully conscious of their Polish identity.

By the time of the Columbian Exposition of 1893, Poles were fully conscious of their Polish identity, especially in Chicago which was already the second largest Polish city in the world. Polish communities, churches, schools, and social organizations had been formed throughout the United States. Each country represented at the Columbian Exposition enjoyed a national day to celebrate its achievements and successes. Although Poland was not yet an independent country, Poles were given October 7, 1893, as their day to celebrate. The October 8th edition of the *Chicago Tribune* recalls the grand parades and ceremonies that dominated Chicago on Polish Day. Over fifty thousand Poles gathered in the streets that day to pay homage to their heritage. Polish bands, military companies, and social groups, including the Polish National Alliance, were present the parade.¹³ Justice M. A. La Buy was one of the speakers at this great event.

The Polish people have been driven from their native soil, not at the point of the bayonet, but by despotism, tyrannical laws and

⁹ Hilda Satt Polacheck, *I Came a Stranger: The Story of a Hull-House Girl* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 9.

¹⁰ Wtulich, *Writing Home*, p. 225.

¹¹ Pienkos, *PNA: A Centennial History*, p. 43.

¹² U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Illinois Census Population: 1900*, Population Schedules.

¹³ *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 1893, p. A4.

oppressive taxation; they have selected their homes under liberal governments such as Switzerland, France, England, and last, but not least, 2,000,000 of Poles have selected their homes under the protection of the proud flag of the United States. We Polish Americans are here to declare our love and reverence for the laws, institutions, and governments of the American people. It is well that our forefathers, Kosciusko, Pulaski, and others, assisted George Washington, the Father of our adopted country, in his great battles of independence; for we are reaping the fruits of that great victory. We are proud that Polish patriots have fought in the battles of Bull Run, Wilderness, Shiloh, Lookout Mountain, and at Richmond in the defense of the Stars and Stripes. We are here assembled to congratulate each other that we are under the flag of the United States.¹⁴

Polish education was also displayed at the Columbian Exposition. In Polacheck's autobiography, she recalls her participation in the exposition. "In the exhibit of the schools, the Jewish Training School was well represented. And I almost swooned with excitement when I saw my name attached to a small canvas bag that I had made. My sister, who was several years older, had embroidered a delicate white silk cover and pillow for a doll's bed."¹⁵

On the most important level, the Columbian Exposition illustrated Polish national consciousness and the ability of the Poles to retain their heritage while adopting American ideals. The sense of Polish identity that was discovered in the United States led to the birth and growth of the Polish-American social and organizational

network. The social organizations and networks that Polish-Americans formed in the United States helped them assimilate into American culture while also maintaining the importance of their Polish heritage. Organizations such as the Polish National Alliance, Polish Falcons, and the Polish Women's Alliance provided the stability and security that was needed by the Polish community. These organizations were able to coalesce both American and Polish principles while forming a unique Polish-American identity that still exists today. Polish-Americans are one of the few ethnic groups in America that retain much of their heritage even into the late twentieth century. The current memberships of the Polish Falcons and the Polish National Alliance highlight the importance that Polish ethnicity still plays in the lives of Polish-Americans. The Polish language is still spoken in many homes, churches, and grade schools, especially in the heavily Polish populated areas of Chicago.¹⁶

Because there are numerous Polish organizations in America—in fact far too many to discuss in this paper—I will focus on three of the most influential Polish-American organizations formed in the late nineteenth century: the Polish Falcons, the Polish National Alliance, and the Polish Women's Alliance. The strength of these Polish organizations highlights the strength of the Polish national identity in America. Each of these organizations has helped to ease the transition for Poles into American society while also continuing to emphasize Polish heritage and pride. These organizations can be further connected on a geographical basis due to their relationship with Chicago.

The Polish National Alliance (PNA) is the oldest Polish fraternal organization in the United States. The PNA was founded on

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Polacheck, *I Came A Stranger*, p. 40.

¹⁶ Polish Falcons of America Website, <http://www.polisfalcons.org/membership.html>, 1.

August 10, 1880, in Philadelphia, in response to the religious nature of an earlier Polish organization, the Polish Roman Catholic Union.¹⁷ The founder, Julius Andrzejkovicz, called for the creation of a strong organization that represented all Poles in America rather than just Catholics. Andrzejkovicz, along with others, argued that immigrants must enter American society rather than to remain apart from the cultural mainstream. “Only through full integration into American life would it be possible for Poles to advance socially and along the way to attain increased influence in promoting the Polish cause to non-Poles.” However, the preservation of Polish culture had to be taken into consideration. Accordingly, the PNA committed itself to form a more perfect union of the Polish people in America with the rest of the citizenry of the United States and to transmit this relationship to future generations; to insure to them a proper moral, intellectual, economic and social development; to foster and cherish the best traditions of the cultures of the United States and of Poland; to preserve the mother tongue, and to promote all legitimate means leading to the restoration and preservation of the independence of the Polish nation in Europe.¹⁸

The PNA also aided the Polish community by becoming an insurance fraternal organization. Poles were able to purchase death insurance through membership in the PNA, which insured each male member at \$500.00 and his wife at \$300.00.¹⁹

¹⁷ Casimir Wronski, “Polish Organizations of Chicago,” in *Poles of Chicago, 1837-1937* (Chicago: Polish Pageant, 1937), p. 150.

¹⁸ Pienkos, *PNA: A Centennial History*, p. 59.

¹⁹ Wronski, “Polish Organizations of Chicago,” p. 150.

By reading the mission statement of the PNA, one is able to deduce the importance of both assimilation and retention of the Polish culture. The PNA was critical to the development of the Polish-American social network because it was the first organization that adopted a secular outlook. This secularism expanded the Polish community to include many non-Catholic Poles who had been denied membership in the Polish Roman Catholic Union. As the years progressed, the PNA executive board seemed to liberalize even more with regard to membership. “At the 1895 [meeting], the PNA voted to drop its opposition to the admission of socialists and adopted a resolution encouraging acceptance of anyone who subscribed to its aims, regardless of his political or religious affiliation.”²⁰ Therefore, the PNA attempted to look beyond religion and political ideology when trying to unite Polish-Americans. By broadening its membership base to include non-Catholics, the PNA has been the dominant secular force in the Polish-American community for over 100 years.

The PNA aided in the fight for Polish independence, offered hope and security to Polish immigrants, and educated many American-born Poles on the importance of the Polish language and culture. The PNA was successful in uniting Poles in terms of Polish national consciousness. As discussed earlier in the paper, the PNA led the participation in the October 7, 1893, “Polish Day” celebration at the Chicago Columbian Exposition. “For this occasion, approximately 25,000 Poles, many attired in martial or folk costumes glorifying Poland an America’s histories, took part in a massive parade culminating at the city’s lake front fair grounds.”²¹

²⁰ Pienkos, *PNA: A Centennial History*, p. 77.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

Although Teofila Samolinkska was one of the spiritual founders of the PNA, the PNA continued to refuse women as voting members until 1900. The fundamental reasoning behind this discrimination was the patriarchal character of Polish immigrant life at the time. According to the sociologist Helena Lopata: "Polish culture contained at the time of migration...many assumptions as to the nature and proper roles of women in each major stage of their life course.... Peasant families expected girls to continue the work of their mothers, learning to keep the home, sew, cook and take care of younger children."²² This description of Polish immigrant women does not do justice to the Polish women who fought for their equal rights in the face of discrimination and sexism. Women activists such as Samolinkska and Stefanie Chmielinska led the battle for equal rights within the PNA until 1899 when they decided to form a separate organization, the Polish Women's Alliance. The motivation behind the new women's alliance was and has remained the winning of universal respect for the principle of the full equality of women with men in both American and Polish-American life.²³

The Polish Women's Alliance (ZPA) holds the same aims, promoting pride in Polish heritage and creating a system of fraternal insurance for its members as does the PNA, but it takes a different approach to them. The ZPA focuses more on social work and education than the PNA. Thaddeus Radzialowski states that "the most important activity that the ZPA devoted itself to was the education of Polish women and children."²⁴ In the early twentieth century,

²² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 243.

²³ Polish Women's Alliance Website, <http://www.pwaa.org/history.html>, 4.

²⁴ Thaddeus Radzialowski, "Let Us Join Hands: The Polish Women's Alliance," in Seller, ed., *Immigrant Women*, p. 191.

the ZPA conducted schools in Polish, opened reading rooms to women in Chicago, and conducted summer camps for Polish immigrant children from the cities. These activities aided in retaining a strong Polish identity in the United States.

The symbol of the Polish Women's Alliance illustrates the motivation behind the organization. The emblem shows representatives of the women of Poland and America with their hands touching across the Atlantic Ocean in a sign of solidarity of values and service. In the background of the emblem is a sun which symbolizes the freedom and opportunity women cherish for themselves, their families, and their homelands, in addition to their pride in their heritage.²⁵ The Polish Women's Alliance was able to bring together modern American principles of female suffrage and traditional Polish principles under one motto.

In the beginning, neither the Polish National Alliance nor the Polish Women's Alliance was open to young people. Nevertheless, a great number of PNA members realized the need for a Polish youth organization and fought for its inception. The Falcons movement, unlike the other two, was already popular in Poland. The national order of Polish Falcons (Sokols) was established in Poland over 150 years ago and around 100 years ago in the United States. "The aims of its founders were: the fostering of brotherhood, discipline, subservience of private interests for the good of all, and equality of rights and obligations within the nation; to bring up coming generations, healthy in body, sound in mind, beautiful in character, lofty in ideals and conscious of their duties as citizens of a free commonwealth."²⁶

²⁵ Polish Women's Alliance Website, <http://www.pwaa.org/history.html>, 2.

²⁶ Wronski, "Polish Organizations of Chicago," p. 159.

More than the previous two organizations, the Polish Falcons concentrated on physical fitness among its members and military training for Polish independence. From 1905 to 1912, the Falcons were composed of young men and women in their late teens and twenties who became one of the most assertive voices in all of Polonia for Polish independence.²⁷ Even though the Falcons were the closest of the three organizations to their Polish heritage, they were also able to combine American ideals and Polish traditions. An example of this is the figures that the Falcons selected for its patrons: General Thaddeus Kosciuszko, a national hero of Poland, and Abraham Lincoln.²⁸

Polish immigration dominated American life for more than fifty years. During this time, over two million Poles immigrated to the United States for a wide range of reasons. Once in the United States, Poles established extensive organizations that aided in the assimilation process. American ideals and history were taught through these organizations by direct and indirect means. The indirect means was the fact that Poles were able to organize a group, form a Polish newspaper, and provide support to other members. These things were aided by democratic rule in the United States. Poland was being ruled at this time by authoritative regimes in all areas of the country. The organizations that Poles formed once in the United States also taught Polish-Americans that it is all right to retain your Polish heritage. You can be American and Polish at the same time.

By placing emphasis on both American ideals and Polish tradition, Polish social organizations such as the Polish Falcons, the

Polish National Alliance and the Polish Women's Alliance have acknowledged that there is nothing wrong with being American and retaining one's Polish heritage. In fact, these organizations promoted a Polish national consciousness that is still present among Polish-Americans.

²⁷ Donald Pienkos, *One Hundred Years Young: A History of the Polish Falcons of America 1887-1987* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 3.

²⁸ Wronski, "Polish Organizations of Chicago," p. 160.

THE MANHATTAN PROJECT SCIENTISTS AND THE DROPPING OF THE ATOMIC BOMB

Rod Githens

The end of the Cold War brought with it a renewed interest in what is now history. This interest is seen through popular television shows, such as CNN's *Cold War*. Questions sometimes arise such as, "What if the Cold War had never happened?" or "Could the Cold War have been prevented?" In studying the Cold War, one often overlooks how the scientists felt about it, especially what their feelings were about the dropping of the bomb. Few are aware of the warnings about the use of the bomb that were given by the scientists. Obviously, the Cold War could not have existed for as long as it did without the atomic bomb. The atomic bomb caused an arms race that took nearly forty years to end. Few realize that the designers of the bomb opposed its dropping because of their fear of an arms race, their belief that it was unnecessary to end the war, and their concern about the senseless killing of civilians.

The question of whether the bomb needed to be dropped to end the war should be explored. There are obviously opposing views regarding this question. The orthodox view of the need for the bomb being dropped to end the war and therefore save thousands of American lives has been affirmed by authors such as Herbert Feis,¹ who was the adviser to three World War II-

¹ Herbert Feis, *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966).

era cabinet secretaries.² The traditional view was challenged by Gar Alperovitz's "bombshell,"³ *Atomic Diplomacy*,⁴ which challenged the widely-held assumptions as to the reasoning behind the dropping of the atomic bombs. Published during the Vietnam War era, when many were already questioning American foreign policy, Alperovitz's accusations became popular. Since Alperovitz's book, many other authors and historians have questioned the military and diplomatic rationale behind dropping the bombs.

Alperovitz continues to be one of the leading writers in the ongoing debate about the real reason(s) for dropping the bomb. He alleges that the public does not fully understand the circumstances regarding the wartime situation in Japan and the Pacific. New evidence shows that the bomb was not the only way to end the war. When the Soviets agreed to enter the war in the Pacific, Truman wrote in a letter to his wife that the declaration meant, "we'll end the war a year sooner now, and think of the kids who won't be killed!"⁵ Alperovitz claims that this and a comment in Truman's Potsdam journal indicate that he understood that after the Russian promise to enter the war, the Japanese would be forced to surrender. Therefore, Truman's previous claims of a quarter million to millions of casualties, without the dropping of the bomb, seem to be false.⁶

One possible implication of this knowledge is that if the bombs were not used by the time the Soviets entered the war,

² Gar Alperovitz, "Hiroshima Historians Reassess," *Foreign Policy*, no. 99 (Summer, 1995), *Expanded Academic ASAP*.

³ James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), p. 301.

⁴ Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965).

⁵ Gar Alperovitz, "Hiroshima Historians Reassess."

⁶ *Ibid.*

then there would be no time to use them. Therefore, two proposals emerge explaining the real reason the bomb was used (whether consciously or unconsciously): Congress would demand an explanation for the \$2 billion spent on the Manhattan Project,⁷ and the U.S. position against Russia would be strengthened if the new weapon was used.⁸ According to Alperovitz, there is considerable evidence to suggest that this reasoning heavily influenced the decision made by Truman and his top advisers.

Even orthodox supporters of the bomb, such as Herbert Feis, later acknowledged that if the U.S. had told the Japanese of the plans for Soviet entry and assured the emperor's position, that the war could have been ended without the dropping of the bombs. He states that if "the American and Soviet governments together had let it be known that unless Japan laid down its arms at once, the Soviet Union was going to enter the war. That, along with the promise to spare the Emperor, might well have made an earlier bid for surrender effective."⁹ However, Feis goes on to explain that he believed the prospects of the Soviets announcing their intentions of entry were unlikely because of the likelihood of Japanese preparations for a Soviet assault.¹⁰

Feis, however, was certainly not an opponent of the use of the bomb. He staunchly defended the official view of the dropping because of the American lives reportedly saved by ending the war quickly. He believed that the dropping of the atomic bomb shocked the Japanese into surrendering quickly.¹¹ Feis concluded that the U.S. desired to end the "defiant, crazed, useless" prolongation of the war by Japan.

⁷ Davidson and Lytle, *After the Fact*, p. 287.

⁸ Gar Alperovitz, "Hiroshima Historians Reassess."

⁹ Feis, *The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II*, p. 187-88.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

He also stated that the entry of the Soviet Union into the war needed to be accompanied by the actual dropping of the bomb in order to persuade the Japanese to surrender.¹²

Robert Maddox found that the claim that several of Truman's advisers attempted to persuade him against the use of the bomb because it was "militarily unnecessary or immoral, or both" was false.¹³ He explains that there is no conclusive evidence that any such petitions were made. However, Maddox and others fail to report that many of the top scientists who designed the bomb vehemently opposed the way in which it was used against Japan.

According to Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, the atomic scientists warned the world about the nature of nuclear weapons and the apocalyptic implications that they carried. Although Lifton and Mitchell acknowledge that there were a variety of responses from the scientists, a group of "prophetic survivors" emerged that helped antinuclear activists spread their gospel.¹⁴ They conclude that most of the scientists were "neither able to fully condemn nor accept it, but expressed their special knowledge in fervently testifying to nuclear danger."¹⁵ A smaller group of scientists vocally opposed the decision to drop the bomb, although there were some who forcefully defended its use. Lifton and Mitchell assert that the scientists' guilt was channeled into proclamations of social responsibility in nuclear weapons usage and testing through organizations such as Leo Szilard's Council for a Livable World. This proclamation enabled the scientists to

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹³ Robert James Maddox, "The Biggest Decision: Why We Had to Drop the Atomic Bomb," *American Heritage*, 46 (May-June, 1995), p. 73.

¹⁴ Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1995), p. 245.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

“confront the source of that guilt in a manner that could lead to positive action.”¹⁶ Lifton and Mitchell further conclude that the scientists had the most varied opinions of those involved in Hiroshima and that they were the most successful early challengers of the “official narrative.”¹⁷

This challenging of the “official narrative” is seen in the many documents that the scientists produced. The primary sources examined vary from official correspondence and diary entries to later memoirs of those involved in the Manhattan Project. These materials are published in various forms: some are in documentary compilations, others are primary source quotations in secondary sources, two are published newsletters, and others are autobiographical in nature. The wide variety of source types allows for a more representative and accurate sampling of scientists’ documents.

A book containing Leo Szilard’s thoughts and correspondence provides many insights into his moral views on the dropping of the atomic bomb.¹⁸ His wide-ranging correspondence and other documents allow the researcher to understand his concern for humanity. His correspondence proves to be very valuable because it was written during a time in which Szilard’s views were not popular and caused him to have to participate in an ongoing battle with the military. In one instance, when Szilard pressed to have a non-secretive petition released, the military threatened to have him fired from the University of Chicago and “prosecuted under the Espionage Act.”¹⁹ The book also contains parts of his autobiography recorded

while he was in the hospital. Obviously, an autobiographical account recorded while one is dying could be tainted with personal preferences and hindsight. However, Szilard’s actions and the plethora of correspondence from the time of his active participation in the Manhattan Project seem to verify much of what he states in his autobiographical accounts.

Among other valuable documents are the actual facsimile copies of the poll of the scientists²⁰ regarding the suggested course of action in the dropping the atomic bomb. These documents were classified correspondence and, therefore, their value is very significant. Another important document is The Franck Report.²¹ This report to policymakers was an official statement signed by seven top scientists involved in the Manhattan Project. This document gives us an idea of the consensus of those scientists who were generally opposed to the dropping of the atomic bomb.

Leo Szilard was the most vocal and active scientist in opposing the dropping of the bomb prior to its use. This Hungarian scientist was the initial instigator of the Manhattan Project. He convinced Einstein to write a letter to Roosevelt (which only Einstein signed because of his notoriety) encouraging the president to begin the project by obtaining the necessary quantities of uranium. Roosevelt was warned that the Germans had already taken over Czechoslovakian mines and that there was an urgency to continue to develop this technology because “some of the American work in uranium is now being repeated [in

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 249.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 251.

¹⁸ Spencer R. Weart and Gertrud Weiss Szilard, eds., *Leo Szilard: His Version of the Facts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978).

¹⁹ Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, p. 67.

²⁰ Farrington Daniels to A.H. Compton, July 13, 1945, in Michael B. Stoff, Jonathan F. Fanton, and R. Hal Williams, eds., *The Manhattan Project: A Documentary Introduction to the Atomic Age*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), p. 173.

²¹ J. Franck, chair, *The Franck Report*, June 11, 1945, in *ibid.*, pp. 140-47.

Germany].”²² Because of Szilard’s initial steps, the Manhattan Project quickly came into existence.

Nearly six years later, Einstein wrote another letter to Roosevelt. This time it was a cover letter, introducing a secret memo that Szilard had composed for the president. Szilard was still unknown to Roosevelt, in spite of the fact that his co-discovery of the nuclear chain reaction was what “all present work on uranium is based.”²³ Once again, Einstein’s letter would help insure that the memo reached the President. Einstein’s letter was sent through Eleanor Roosevelt in order that an appointment could be set up with the President and to increase the chances that it was not stopped along official channels.²⁴ In the memo, Szilard warned that the use of the bomb could “precipitate a race in the production of these devices between the United States and Russia and that if we continue to pursue the present course, our initial advantage may be lost very quickly in such a race.”²⁵ Szilard understood the consequences of keeping the bomb a secret from the Soviets and suggested developing a system of controls with Russia and Great Britain rather than keeping Russia from knowing about the weapons. He also suggested that a government department handle the emerging nuclear situation for the post-war United States.²⁶

In addition, Szilard implied that the morality of the United States would be compromised if the bomb was used. He said that “from a purely military point of view

this may be...favorable.”²⁷ However, if the bomb was used, Szilard said many of his fellow scientists believed there would be “destruction of the strong position that the United States hitherto occupied in the world.”²⁸ The implication is that the opposition to the use of nuclear weapons was not strictly in diplomatic and military terms, but also in moral terms.

However, because of Roosevelt’s death, the memo never reached the president. Szilard eventually got an appointment at the White House and was redirected by President Truman to James Byrnes in South Carolina. Byrnes, a former high-ranking government official who had held several White House posts, was now a private citizen and occupied no position in government. However, it was clear that Byrnes would soon occupy a high office in the Truman Administration. Szilard reported in his recollections that when he met with Byrnes he said that the government should decide how the bomb situation would be handled before its existence was disclosed. However, Byrnes initially showed concern over Congress questioning the two billion dollars spent on the bomb if it was not disclosed. Byrnes explained to Szilard “that Russia might be more manageable if impressed by American military might, and that a demonstration of the bomb might impress Russia.”²⁹ Szilard was “flabbergasted” by this assumption. Szilard recalled that he realized he could get nowhere with Byrnes and that he “was rarely as depressed as when we left Byrnes’ house. How much better off the world might be had I been born in America and become influential in American politics, and had Byrnes been born in Hungary and studied physics. In all probability there would have

²² Albert Einstein to Franklin D. Roosevelt, August 2, 1939, in *ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

²³ Albert Einstein to Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 25, 1945, in Weart and Szilard, eds., *Leo Szilard*, p. 205.

²⁴ Weart and Szilard, eds., *Leo Szilard*, p. 182.

²⁵ Leo Szilard to Franklin D. Roosevelt, in *ibid.*, p. 206.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Weart and Szilard, eds., *Leo Szilard*, p. 184.

been no atomic bomb and no danger of an arms race between America and Russia.”³⁰

The visit to Byrnes caused an “uproar” in Chicago. Szilard recalled that “the Army had violently objected to our visit to the White House and to Byrnes.... Groves told him that I had committed a grave breach of security by handing a secret document to Byrnes, who did not know how to handle secret documents.”³¹ In the aftermath of this uproar, Arthur Compton, head of the Chicago project, organized a committee to be led by James Franck to report on whether the bomb should be used against Japan. The report suggested that because of the nature of the atomic bomb, “new and imaginative methods” should be used in demonstrating it. The report suggested that an ultimatum be given to Japan to evacuate certain regions or face total destruction by the bomb.³²

Szilard stated that at this point he realized that the bomb would be used against Japanese cities. He wanted the scientists to go on record against the bombing on moral grounds. Szilard reported that fifty-three people signed the first draft of the petition, including “all the leading physicists...and many of the leading biologists.”³³ A second petition gained a “significantly larger number [of signatures]” because of its milder wording.³⁴ The actual petition went through regular channels because James Franck would not sign it otherwise. However, Szilard worried that it would be sabotaged by being held until after the war. The petition never reached

President Truman, as revealed later by Army Lieutenant R. Gordon Arneson.³⁵

Nonetheless, the petition is certainly significant in understanding the rationale of the scientists. It stated that they had been working on the atomic bomb because of the threat of nuclear attack by Germany. Even though the atomic bomb might be effective in quickly ending the war, the scientists state that its use could not be justified until the post-war terms were made public and “Japan was given an opportunity to surrender.”³⁶ The petition goes on to explain that a nation that uses these “newly liberated forces of nature for purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale.”³⁷ The scientists state that this new power could end in the destruction of many American cities through later nuclear warfare. In addition, they proposed that the moral standing of the United States would be weakened if the bomb was used. It is also significant to note that this petition was sent to Los Alamos but was not circulated, at Oppenheimer’s direction.³⁸ The Chicago group tended to be more active in opposing the use of the bomb than the Los Alamos group, probably because of the remoteness and high security of the Los Alamos area. The persistence of Szilard is significant. Scientists such as Szilard and Eugene Rabinowitch were active in proclaiming nuclear containment before the dropping of the atomic bomb because of the impending arms race. They saw the immorality of using the bomb and worked to keep it from being used, even in a time of anti-Japanese sentiment when most

³⁰ Ibid., p. 184-85.

³¹ Ibid., p. 186.

³² J. Franck, chair, *The Franck Report*, in Stoff, Fanton, and Williams, eds., *The Manhattan Project*, p. 144.

³³ Weart and Szilard, eds., *Leo Szilard*, p. 187.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 187.

³⁵ Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey, “The Fight Over the A-Bomb; Secret Revealed After 18 Years,” *Look*, August 13, 1963, pp. 22-23.

³⁶ *A Petition to the President of the United States*, July 17, 1945, in Weart and Szilard, eds., *Leo Szilard*, p. 211.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Weart and Szilard, eds., *Leo Szilard*, p. 213.

Americans would probably have agreed to use it if they had prior knowledge of it.

After the dropping of the two bombs, Szilard “realized very quickly in Washington that for the time being at least the scientists who were regarded as being responsible for the creation of the bomb had the ear of the statesmen.”³⁹ Szilard felt that some people in Washington were starting to understand that American possession of the bomb did not mean infinite American security. He tried to organize a conference between Russian and American scientists for the purpose of collaborating on safeguards for the world. However, Secretary of State Byrnes vetoed the proposal, in spite of its endorsement by Assistant Secretary of State William Benton (former vice president of the University of Chicago).⁴⁰ After this failure, Szilard continued to be involved in the process of urging nuclear containment and eventually founded the Council for a Livable World.⁴¹

Szilard later condemned himself in a parable called “My Trial As a War Criminal.”⁴² He said that he was guilty because the petition he circulated earlier was sent through proper channels; he should have acted more radically, as had been his impulse.⁴³ He made a comment about the prominence and attention that the scientists received in the years following the bombing, saying that “It is remarkable that all these scientists...should be listened to. But mass murders have always commanded the attention of the public, and atomic scientists are no exception to this rule.”⁴⁴ The atomic scientists received much fame and attention

and frequently spoke on a wide-range of subjects after the bombing.

The scientist who was the primary writer of the *Franck Report*, along with Szilard, was Eugene Rabinowitch. Rabinowitch edited the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, a journal which dealt with many public policy and scientific issues. In an editorial, he criticized the U.S. government for ignoring earlier warnings of the impending nuclear arms race. He also criticized Americans for failing to work closely with the Soviets in reconstruction after the war.⁴⁵ Rabinowitch describes the day when a group of scientists “walked the streets of Chicago” before the bomb was dropped on Japan, imagining the devastation that might be brought upon Chicago if a nuclear attack was to occur.⁴⁶ The idea of “the steel skeletons of skyscrapers bending into grotesque shapes and their masonry raining into the streets below”⁴⁷ disturbed Rabinowitch so much that he seriously considered leaking the news of the planned drop to the media. In a later letter, Rabinowitch said: “Twenty-five years later, I feel I would have been right if I had done so.”⁴⁸ He said that the American people should have been alerted so that they would feel responsibility for the mass murder committed in their name without their prior knowledge.⁴⁹

Only one scientist actually left the project when it was apparent that Germany would surrender. Joseph Rotblat left because of the “disagreeable shock” of hearing first-hand from General Groves that “the real purpose in making the bomb was to subdue the Soviets.”⁵⁰ After leaving the project he began to work in the area of nuclear

³⁹ Ibid., p. 224.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, p. 249.

⁴² Leo Szilard, “My Trial As a War Criminal,”

University of Chicago Law Review, (Autumn, 1949).

⁴³ Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, p. 248.

⁴⁴ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 61.

⁴⁵ Eugene Rabinowitch, “Five Years After,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 7 (January, 1951), p. 4.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Eugene Rabinowitch, Letter to the editor, *New York Times*, June 28, 1971.

⁴⁹ Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, p. 249.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 248.

medicine. He called his involvement with the project a “traumatic experience... Our concepts of morality seem to get thrown overboard once military action starts.”⁵¹ Several of the other scientists were vocal in moral opposition to the bomb after it was dropped. Robert Wilson, another project scientist, became physically sick after hearing that the bomb had been dropped and later said he would never forgive himself for not leaving after the defeat of the Germans. In 1980, he said, “I cannot understand why I did not act.”⁵²

Seth Neddermeyer confessed in a later interview that he was now “overwhelmed” by guilt. He recalled, nearly in tears, “This is what bugs me more than anything else—I don’t remember having any strong feelings about [the bombings] at the time. I guess I just got caught up in the mindless hysteria.”⁵³ However, others never publicly expressed guilt over the bombings. Luis Alvarez said he had little sympathy for his colleagues who had guilt over the bombings. In fact he felt “great pride” over having helped create the bomb. Edward Teller, another staunch advocate of the bomb, claimed that notion of nuclear weapons being lethal in the long term was exaggerated. Pointing to the rapid recovery of Hiroshima, he dismissed such a conclusion as “a dangerous myth.”⁵⁴

The committee that was to oversee the use of the bomb, headed by Secretary of War Henry Stimson, agreed that the bomb should be dropped without warning, as it was. Four scientists were on the Interim Committee, but Szilard said he initially knew that of the two who would be against its use, neither would be persistent. Robert Oppenheimer was also on the committee, but Szilard said there was no question that

he would be for dropping the bomb because of his vested interest in its making.⁵⁵ On the committee, only Secretary of the Navy Ralph A. Bard voted against dropping the bomb, after which he resigned from the committee.⁵⁶ It could be speculated that Bard’s vote dealt with possible loss of Navy prestige if the Air Force (then part of the Army) was seen as winning the war. The placement of four scientists on the Interim Committee shows that scientists did have a voice in the decision to drop the bomb. However, those scientists who were staunchly opposed to its use were not on the influential committee.

Even though some of the scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project did not oppose the use of the atomic bomb on Japan, there were a significant number who were opposed to it being used unannounced. A poll of the atomic scientists found that of 150 scientists, only fifteen percent advocated the bomb being used in whatever manner would bring “prompt Japanese surrender at minimum human cost to our own armed forces.”⁵⁷ Forty-six percent advocated giving “a military demonstration in Japan, to be followed by a renewed opportunity for surrender before full use of the weapons is employed.” Twenty-six percent wanted “an experimental demonstration in this country, with representatives of Japan present; followed by a new opportunity for surrender before full use of the weapons is employed.” Eleven percent advocated “withhold[ing] military use of the weapons, but mak[ing] public experimental demonstration of their effectiveness. Two percent supported “maintain[ing] as secret as possible all

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., p. 247.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 248.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 247.

⁵⁵ Weart and Szilard, eds., *Leo Szilard*, p. 186.

⁵⁶ Stoff, Fanton, and Williams, eds., *The Manhattan Project*, p. 137.

⁵⁷ A.H. Compton to Farrington Daniels, July 13, 1945, in Stoff, Fanton, and Williams, eds., *The Manhattan Project*, p. 173.

developments of our new weapons, and refrain[ing] from using them in this war.”⁵⁸ This poll, from July 13, 1945, shows that only a small percentage of scientists desired the bomb to be used in the prescribed manner.

The evidence shows that the way in which the bomb was used on Japan was not in keeping with most scientists’ desires. Although a few influential scientists wholeheartedly supported its use, the majority were opposed to the manner in which it was used. They knew of the horrendous devastation that would be caused to human life and property when the bomb was dropped, and most did not want their creation to kill innocent civilians. The debate continues as to whether the bomb needed to be dropped to end the war quickly. However, we see from the previously-stated evidence that it is very probable that U.S. officials knew that the war would be won quickly without the bomb. Because of the shortsighted views of some presidential advisers wanting to control Soviet expansion, Soviet cooperation was not sought and the already adversarial relationship continued to get worse between the Soviets and the Americans.

There were a few voices, however, that predicted the ensuing Cold War. Leo Szilard and Eugene Rabinowitch were steady in voicing their unpopular views of the impending arms race. In addition, they viewed the unannounced slaughter of Japanese civilians as being intolerable. The scientists’ fears were ignored by close advisers to the president, who failed to give him their warnings. Had the president been aware of the warnings, the world might be a very different place. Possibly thousands of innocent lives could have been saved. Another possibility is that Russian and American cooperation would have prevented the Cold War, thus saving billions

of dollars in resources that could have been invested elsewhere. These billions of dollars could have been channeled into research that could have resulted in medical advancements that we have yet to see. Perhaps we can learn from our past mistakes and work to prevent similar diplomatic catastrophes in the future.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

**SAINT OF THE WOLF:
FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND CREATION**

William Steinbacher-Kemp

In the landmark essay titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” Lynn White Jr. proposed infusing an environmental conscience into Christianity through the example of St. Francis of Assisi. In that essay, first appearing in the journal *Science* more than thirty years ago, White called the twelfth-century saint the “greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history.”¹ Indeed, Francis, born in 1182 (or 1181) and the founder of the Order of the Friars Minor, was a remarkably original figure on several fronts. Yet for the purposes of this paper, it is Francis’ views on nature that call for further examination. White, in his oft-cited and debated essay, argued that societal ideas about the natural world are conditioned by religion, and that if one traced the lineage of belief systems that contributed to the current environmental crisis, the single greatest culprit would be Christianity. The Judeo-Christian notion of linear time fostered “an implicit faith in perpetual progress which was unknown either to Greco-Roman antiquity or to the Orient,” argued White.² Furthermore, the Bible succinctly outlined humankind’s divinely acquired right of dominion over nature. For example, in Genesis 1:28, God commands of male and female: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and [fill] the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that

moveth upon the earth.”³ “Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen,” declared White.⁴ If the roots of this crisis are religious, he added, then the solution must also be rooted in notions of humankind’s relationship with the creator and creation. White believed that St. Francis represented “an alternative Christian view of nature and man’s relation to it,” for the Little Poor Man of Assisi “tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man’s limitless rule of creation.”⁵

This paper will not address the convoluted and interwoven relationship between Christianity and the use and abuse of the natural world. Instead, employing White’s choice of Francis as a Christian exemplar for a more sustainable, loving relationship between humankind and nature, this paper will examine both the ideas and legacy of his views on creation.

Francis’ father, Pietro di Bernardone, was a well-to-do textile merchant and his mother was from a prominent French family, thus making his renunciation of wealth and property sometime in 1206-1208 all the more remarkable. As a young man, Francis was a leading young noble of Assisi, and he participated in a brief war between

³ Genesis 1:26 states: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” C. I. Scofield, ed., *The New Scofield Study Bible*, authorized King James version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), will be used for chapter and verse citations.

⁴ White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” p. 1205. “To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the scared grove is alien to Christianity and the ethos of the West. For nearly 2 millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature.” See p. 1206.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1207.

¹ Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science*, 155 (March 10, 1967), p. 1207.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1205.

his hometown and nearby Perugia, hostilities that led to his capture and imprisonment in 1202. Francis' "transformation was not one single moment of blinding incandescence, but a gradual movement away from his old way of life to a new understanding of himself and of his mission in the world," according to theologian Jaroslav Pelikan.⁶ Poverty was the defining principle of the Franciscan order, and the vision of Christ as a destitute monk shaped Francis' life and ministry. "Poverty was not merely the absence of property, but was a positive good, 'the queen of virtues,' because of its identification with Christ and with Mary."⁷

Francis also represented a radicalized figure to the church establishment given his remarkable ideas about the natural world. Medieval hagiography offers a wealth of stories detailing Francis' unique relationship with plants, animals, and the elements. To provide but one example, the *Fioretti*, dating to the latter half of the fourteenth century, related the story of Francis and a small village terrorized by a fierce wolf "so rabid with hunger that it devoured not only animals but even human beings."⁸ Francis, despite pleas from the frightened residents of Gubbio, left the safety of the enclosed village and greeted the wolf, chastising it for "committing horrible crimes by destroying God's creatures without any mercy." He then secured a promise from the wolf that it would no longer harm the residents or their

⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, "Christ—and the Second Christ," *The Yale Review*, 74 (April, 1985), p. 333. He quotes Dante, who said of Francis, "a sunrise broke again upon the world."

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

⁸ This story is detailed in *Little Flowers of St. Francis (Fioretti)*, a modern English translation from the Latin, in Marion A. Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), pp. 1348-51. This standard work will be used when citing both Francis' writings and the medieval hagiography on his life.

livestock, and proceeded to lead the animal into the village. Before the amazed villagers, Francis announced: "Listen, dear people, Brother Wolf, who is standing here before you, has promised me and has given me a pledge that he will make peace with you and will never hurt you if you promise also to feed him every day." The wolf lived for two more years, going door to door for its meals. "It hurt no one, and no one hurt it. The people fed it courteously. And it is a striking fact that not a single dog ever barked at it."

In 1209 or 1210, in response to the growing numbers following Francis' lead, Pope Innocent III sanctioned the small monastic order. After a failed attempt to convert Moslems during the Fifth Crusade, Francis returned home and became increasingly removed from the day-to-day governance of the order, choosing instead to devote his remaining years to contemplation. In 1224, while secluded on the mountain of La Verna, he received the stigmata, the first recorded instance of this phenomenon. His last years were marked by blindness and failing health, and he died in Assisi in 1226, only to be canonized two short years later by Pope Gregory IX.

One must approach Francis with caution, for the saint has undergone repeated reinterpretation throughout the centuries. To cite but one remarkable example, in the early 1970s Francis was perceived by some as the hippie saint. The Order of the Friars Minor, according to Joseph Roddy, were anti-establishment mystics representing the "unchurchable young." Francis (whom Roddy described as "the scruffy little Umbrian figure . . . a bearded, barefoot, slightly prankish, and largely unfathomable man") and his followers represented "medieval precedents" for those "hailing from the hippie communes."⁹ It is within

⁹ Joseph Roddy, "The Hippie Saint," *Look*, April 20, 1971, p. 32. "The faith of these new Franciscans—like the first Christians—is in a counter-culture. Their

this tradition of interpretation, reinterpretation, and misinterpretation that one must approach with circumspection pronouncements on Francis as an environmentalist. “Medieval reactions to the natural environment, and, in particular, St. Francis’ reactions to nature, are issues that have been subjected to a very great deal of partisan distortion and mythologizing,” noted scholar Roger D. Sorrell.¹⁰

Nonetheless, Francis is increasingly viewed as the “green” saint capable of mending centuries of Christian-sanctioned indifference, neglect, and abuse of the natural world. In 1979, Pope John Paul II declared Francis the heavenly patron saint of those interested in ecology. “Among the saints and illustrious men who had a special cult for nature, as God’s magnificent gift to mankind, St Francis of Assisi is deservedly included,” stated the papal bull.¹¹ In a 1990 speech on the environment, John Paul II contended that Francis “offers Christians an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation.” The saint invited “animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon” to honor and praise the creator. “It is my hope that the inspiration of Saint Francis will help us to keep ever alive a sense of ‘fraternity’ with

hopes are that the world will turn truly communal fast or the very roof of heaven will fall in.”

¹⁰ Roger D. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes Toward the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 3. “[Francis] has been seen as a pantheist, a Protestant, a devout Catholic, a Catholic liberationist, and a heretic who miraculously escaped the stake,” he noted in a brief overview of the “misinterpretation and distortion” common to studies of the saint. See p. 5. Sorrell’s work will be the most oft-cited secondary source.

¹¹ “S. Franciscus Assisiensis caelestis Patronus oecologiae cultorum eligitur,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis—Commentarium Officiale* (Acts of the Apostolic See) vol. 71, 1979, pp. 1509-10, translated in “Papal Bull of John Paul II: Naming St Francis of Assisi the Patron Saint of Ecology,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition, May 12, 1980, p. 12.

all those good and beautiful things which Almighty God has created,” announced John Paul II.¹² In fact, for a growing number of activists in the Catholic Church, ecological health is increasingly interpreted within the framework of social justice. For instance, Catholic bishops of the American Northwest and British Columbia are heading a three-year study of the ecological health of the Columbia River watershed, with a pastoral letter forthcoming.¹³ And Franciscans remain in the forefront of this emerging environmental movement cast in spiritual terms. The SouthWest Environmental Equity Project (SWEET), to cite one example, was organized in 1992 as the first Franciscan organization dedicated to the environment.¹⁴ The Secular Franciscan Order includes the National Ecology Commission, deriving its charge from article eighteen of the Franciscan *Rule*: “Moreover they should respect all creatures, animate and inanimate, which ‘bear the imprint of the Most High,’ and they should strive to move from exploiting Creation to the Franciscan concept of universal kinship.” Pronouncements from this commission include letters on endangered species and

¹² Pope John Paul II, “The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility,” Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990. “The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples.”

¹³ Trebbe Johnson, “The Second Creation Story: Redefining the Bond between Religion and Ecology,” *Sierra*, November-December, 1998, p. 55.

¹⁴ Keith Warner, O.F.M., “From Parishes to Maquiladoras,” *Sojourners*, 26 (May-June, 1997), p. 39. This organization is active in the low-income Latino communities of the American Southwest. “SWEET embraces Francis of Assisi’s devotion to the poor and his love of creation. The result is a blend of community organizing, Franciscan spirituality, environmental education, and political advocacy.”

California redwoods, and “A Franciscan Vision for American Forests.”¹⁵

One must now pose this question about Francis: “Do his writings and deeds warrant the current interpretation of the saint as proto-environmentalist?” At least on one level, his life does represent a potential opening between the insular Christian tradition and nature. Although not alone in praising the natural world, the degree to which Francis interpreted creation in joyous, rapturous terms was unique for his era.¹⁶ Sorrell noted that “the sheer number of anecdotes relating positive encounters with creatures dwarfs the number recorded in the masterpieces of hagiography from the ages before Francis.”¹⁷ For Francis, wilderness did not represent chaos and temptation. Rather, it was an expression of the fullness and benevolence of God. The *Legend of Perugia* related that Francis asked a friar to reserve a portion of a garden plot for “all kinds of aromatic herbs and flowering plants” in order that such a celebration of scents and colors would “invite all men who looked at them to praise God; for every creature says and proclaims: ‘God has created me for you, O man.’”¹⁸ J. Donald Hughes asserted that the “central characteristic” of Francis’ spirituality was

¹⁵ “National Ecology Commission, Secular Franciscan Order, U.S.A.,” in National Ecology Commission Home Page. On-line. Internet. Available from <http://www.pages.map.com/SecularFranciscanEcology>. Accessed September 9, 1998.

¹⁶ In contrast to the neo-platonic dismissal of any inherent value of nature, Francis’ view is “overwhelmingly positive,” according to Elizabeth Dreyer. “Nature is rarely seen as seriously tainted with evil, as something to be fled, as temptation to sin.” See Elizabeth Dreyer, “Ecology, Theology, and the Medieval Franciscan Tradition,” *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, 12 (February, 1991), p. 41.

¹⁷ Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, p. 46.

¹⁸ *Legend of Perugia*, translated by Paul Oligny from the annotated French version by Damien Vorreux, with an introduction by Theophile Desbonnets, O.F.M., in Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, p. 1029.

“his instance on the goodness of creation,” even so far as deeming “Sister Death” a blessing.¹⁹ As with other issues such as the righteousness of poverty and the evils of property ownership, Francis’ belief in the goodness of creation ran counter to the prevailing attitudes of the papal authorities. “[Francis’] view can be distinguished from the idea of creaturehood as a brutal state, which is evident in Innocent III and the medieval Church generally.”²⁰

A more thorough examination of the writings and life of St. Francis will shed additional light on his attitudes toward what today is called the environment. Much of his writing on the subject remains, including material that addresses, both indirectly and directly, nature, including *The Admonitions*, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, and *The Praises of Virtues*. There also exists a body of biographical work. The most reliable medieval works on St. Francis are the two primary works of Brother Thomas of Celano.²¹ His *First Life of St. Francis (Vita Prima)* was commissioned by Pope Gregory IX around 1228. Sixteen years later, Celano agreed to write a *Second Life (Vita Secunda)*, this time at the behest of the minister general of the Franciscan order. The *First Life* relied on first-hand accounts of those who witnessed and participated in

¹⁹ J. Donald Hughes, “Francis of Assisi and the Diversity of Creation,” *Environmental Ethics*, 18 (Fall, 1996), p. 314. Near the end of *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, Francis declares: “All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Death,/From whose embrace no mortal can escape.” See *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, in Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, p. 131.

²⁰ Hughes, “Francis of Assisi and the Diversity of Creation,” p. 316.

²¹ See Thomas of Celano, *First and Second Life of St. Francis*, translated from the Latin, with introduction and notes by Placid Hermann, O.F.M., in Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, pp. 177-611. These two works of Celano will be referred to herein as *First Life* and *Second Life* respectively.

Francis' wanderings, sermons, and miracles. Celano also made wide use of Francis' writings, including his masterpiece, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*.²² Sorrell maintained that after Celano's two works, the most reliable source for information about the life of Francis is the *Legend of Perugia*, since archival research has demonstrated that its early chapters are based on the since-lost writings of Brother Leo, a confidant of Francis.²³ Leo was a longtime companion of Francis, and during the saint's final years he acted as his personal secretary, nurse, and, in the end, his confessor.²⁴ Additional information and commentary can be found in several other thirteenth-century works, including the *Mirror of Perfection* (*Speculum Perfectionis*), a work based at least in part on the writings of Brother Leo. Last, there are St. Bonaventure's *Major and Minor Lives of St. Francis* (*Legenda Maior* and *Legenda Minor*), the former dating to 1263.

In Celano's *First Life*, Francis is described as "a man of very great fervor and great tenderness toward lower and irrational creatures." Even of greater import is the idea that Francis and the natural world shared a reciprocal bond, for even irrational creatures "recognized his affection for them and felt his tender love for them."²⁵ Bonaventure noted the story of a cicada that would sing to Francis as he prayed. The insect's song

inspired the saint to rejoice in God, for "he could admire the glory of the Creator in the most insignificant creature."²⁶ In the *Second Life*, Celano stated that all creatures "tried to give their love in return to the saint and to reply by their own gratitude according as he deserved; they were glad when he caressed them, they agreed when he requested anything, they obeyed when he commanded anything."²⁷ Stories abound in the writings of Celano and other earlier biographies detailing Francis' deep and expressive relationship with animals. "He had so much love and sympathy for [creatures] that he was disturbed when they were treated without respect," noted the author or authors of the *Legend of Perugia*. "He spoke to them with a great inner and exterior joy, as if they had been endowed by God with feeling, intelligence, and speech. Very often it was for him the occasion to become enraptured in God."²⁸ Francis and several Franciscan brothers once found themselves feeding table crumbs to a pair of birds, male and female. "The holy man rejoiced in creatures like these and he coaxed them, as was his custom, and offered them grain solicitously," recounted Celano.²⁹ Sometime thereafter, the adult birds departed, entrusting to the friars the care of their hatchlings. The Franciscans lovingly watched over the birds, until realizing that

²² Jaroslav Pelikan calls this canticle "the first significant work in the history of Italian literature." See Pelikan, "Christ—and the Second Christ," p. 339.

²³ "The *Legend* thus arguably reflects the views of Francis and his inner circle of followers." See Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, pp. 149-50. Also see Appendix II, titled "Analysis of the Early Franciscan Sources," pp. 149-51.

²⁴ See introduction to *Legend of Perugia*, p. 959. "This portrait has all the qualities of a memoir. Its tone is simple; there is no labored style nor tendency to moralize that betrays the professional writer who is thinking of his public like Celano or St. Bonaventure." See p. 970.

²⁵ Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, pp. 277, 279.

²⁶ St. Bonaventure, *Major Life of St. Francis*, translated from the Latin by Benen Fahy, O.F.M. with introduction by Damien Vorreux, O.F.M., in Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, p. 695. Although Bonaventure's work was a reworking of the preceding hagiographies, he had access to all available sources, including liturgical records, as well as written and oral recollections. Bonaventure's "laborious 'pilgrimage to the sources'" makes him "an irreplaceable and unequalled master in helping us in our search for that element on which the authenticity of our Franciscan life depends." See introduction, pp. 618-19.

²⁷ Thomas of Celano, *Second Life*, p. 496.

²⁸ *Legend of Perugia*, p. 1027.

²⁹ Thomas of Celano, *Second Life*, p. 404.

the largest of the hatchlings was stealing food from his smaller siblings, even though his hunger was satiated. Commenting on this display of avarice, Francis predicted that the bird would “come to a bad end yet.” And sure enough, the greedy bird fell into a vessel of water and drowned. “No cat was found nor any beast that would touch the bird that had been cursed by the saint,” recorded Celano.³⁰ Francis had a special love for birds in general and larks in particular. Noted the *Legend of Perugia*:

We who lived with blessed Francis and who have written these memoirs bear witness that many times we heard him say, “If I could talk to the emperor, I would beg him, for the love of God, to grant my prayer and to publish an edict forbidding anyone from trapping our sisters the larks or from inflicting any harm on them.”³¹

Francis also wished that leaders would entreat their subjects to celebrate Christmas by scattering grain along roadsides, “so that on this great solemnity the birds and especially our sisters the larks would have food.”³²

Francis was said to have communicated not only with animals such as birds, rabbits, and wolves, but inanimate objects as well, such as water, boulders, and even fire. Celano recorded that when Francis encountered a cluster of flowers, “he preached to them and invited them to praise the Lord as though they were endowed with reason.” He further noted: “In the same way he exhorted with the sincerest purity cornfields and vineyards, stones and forests and all the beautiful things of the fields, fountains of water and the green things of

the gardens, earth and fire, air and wind, to love God and serve him willingly.”³³ In his *Second Life*, Celano recounted Francis’ treatment for deteriorating eyesight, a condition that required the use of a red-hot iron for cauterization. For Francis, fire was a brother that could be reasoned with based on a shared love for the Creator. “My brother fire, that surpasses all other things in beauty,” exhorted Francis. “Be kind to me in this hour, be courteous. For I have loved you in the past in the Lord. I beseech the great Lord who made you that he temper your heat now so that I may bear it when you burn me gently.”³⁴ Celano described how the “iron was plunged into the tender flesh with a hiss,” yet Francis revealed no outward signs of pain. “In truth I say to you, I did not feel either the heat of the fire or any pain in my flesh,” he remarked to his Franciscan brothers, who had fled in horror at the sight of the iron.³⁵ According to the *Legend of Perugia*, Francis cautioned the friars against scattering campfire embers or logs. Instead, “he wanted them to be placed gently on the ground out of respect for Him who had created them.” Such careless disregard demonstrated a lack of appreciation for such a strong, beautiful, and useful “brother.” Sister Water was treated with the love and respect accorded fire. “When he washed his hands, he chose a place where rinse water would not be trampled under foot.”³⁶

It must be stressed that Francis’ beliefs, however original they appear to the modern reader, must be grounded in the medieval climate whence they were formed. Sorrell noted that for a saint depicted today as a lover of nature, it is surprising (at least to the

³⁰ Ibid., p. 405. Celano added this moral: “Greed in men is surely a horrible evil if it is punished in such a way in birds. The words of the saints too are to be feared if punishment follows upon them with such ease.”

³¹ *Legend of Perugia*, p. 1086.

³² Ibid.

³³ Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, p. 297.

³⁴ Thomas of Celano, *Second Life*, p. 496.

³⁵ Ibid. The doctor then proclaimed: “I say to you brothers, I *have seen wonderful things today* [Celano’s italics].” See p. 497.

³⁶ *Legend of Perugia*, pp. 1028-29.

twentieth-century observer) to learn that he never used the term *natura*. “Francis instead talks of the ‘heavens,’ ‘earth,’ and ‘the world,’ and ‘all creatures which are under the heavens.’” Francis’ worldview was shaped by the Vulgate Bible and the uncompromising belief in the biblical story of divine creation “organized according to a plan that is hierarchical and unchanging, with all parts having their established positions and dependent on divine will and action.”³⁷ For example, his love of animals was limited, at least in certain instances, to those mentioned in the Bible. Bonaventure stated that Francis “reserved his most tender compassion for those creatures which are a natural reflection of Christ’s gentleness and are used in Sacred Scripture as figures of him.”³⁸ For Christmas, he asked that a statue of the Virgin Mary be placed in the crèche between live animals, and “that everyone be obliged to give our brothers the oxen and the asses a generous amount of feed.”³⁹ The *Mirror of Perfection* stated that Francis’ reverence for water was due to its central role in Christian worship, for during baptism “the soul is cleansed from its stains and receives its first purification.”⁴⁰ Likewise, he walked “reverently and fearfully” over boulders “out of love for Christ Who is called *The Rock*.” He also cautioned against wasting timber, instructing a friar “that he must never cut down the whole tree, but remove branches in such a way that part of

³⁷ Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, pp. 7, 8. Francis’ views of the natural world are firmly rooted in “the terms and conceptions he found in the Vulgate Bible, especially in the Psalms and Canticles of the liturgical offices he recited daily.” See p. 7.

³⁸ St. Bonaventure, *Major Life*, p. 692.

³⁹ *Legend of Perugia*, p. 1086. During Christmas Francis called upon all to “give handsome presents not only to the poor but also to the domestic animals and birds.”

⁴⁰ *Mirror of Perfection*, translated by Leo Shereley-Price, with an introduction by Theophile Desbonnets, O.F.M., in Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, p. 1256.

the tree remained intact, out of love for Christ, Who willed to accomplish our salvation on the wood of the cross.” And Francis’ request that another friar reserve a section of the garden for flowers was based “out of love for Him,” who is referred to in the Bible as “The Rose on the plain and the Lily on the mountain slope.”⁴¹

Perhaps the most celebrated legend in the life of St. Francis is his sermon to the birds. During a journey through the Spoleto valley near Bevagna, he encountered a large number of birds of various species, and “being a man of very great fervor and great tenderness toward lower and irrational creatures,” he left his traveling companions and ran toward them. As he neared the mix of doves, crows, and others, Francis “was filled with great joy and humbly begged them to listen to the word of God.” Celano’s *First Life* includes a fragment of the sermon:

My brothers, birds, you should praise your Creator very much and always love him; he gave you feathers to clothe you, wings so that you can fly, and whatever else was necessary for you. God made you noble among his creatures, and he gave you a home in the purity of air; though you neither sow nor reap, he nevertheless protects and governs you without any solicitude on your part.⁴²

The birds, acknowledging Francis’ admonishments “according to their nature,” stretched their necks and opened their

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1256-57. See Deuteronomy 32:4 for one example of the God-as-rock metaphor. “He is the Rock, his work is perfect; for all his ways are justice; a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he.”

⁴² See Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, pp. 277-78, for a detailed account of the sermon. Celano viewed his role as an historian seriously, at least from a medieval perspective. Many legends in his two works are attributed to either Francis or those that witnessed them. The flock’s reaction, for example, is prefaced with “as Francis himself used to say. . .” See p. 278.

wings. After receiving a blessing and a sign of the cross, they finally departed. Upon witnessing the joyous reaction of the flock, Francis chided himself for failing to preach to creatures in the past. “And so it happened that, from that day on, he solicitously admonished all birds, all animals and all reptiles, and even creatures that have no feeling, to praise and love their Creator,” recounted Celano.

Francis’ notions of faith and the natural world reached their maturity in *The Canticle of Brother Sun*. “It represents the final expression, the final synthesis, of Francis’ thought in the area of relationships between humanity, creation, and Creator.”⁴³ The *Legend of Perugia* described Francis’ frame of mind at the time of the *Canticle’s* composition. Nearing the end of life (it is believed that the strophes relating to nature were composed in the winter of 1224-25, less than a year before his death), with his deteriorating health leaving him in constant pain, a voice told Francis to “be glad in the midst of your infirmities and tribulations; as of now, live in peace as if you were already sharing my kingdom.” This assurance reinvigorated Francis. According to the *Legend*, Francis composed his “Praises of the Lord” first and foremost as a celebration of the natural world. “These creatures minister to our needs every day: without them we could not live; and through them the human race greatly offends the Creator,” Francis declared. “Every day we fail to appreciate so great a blessing by not praising as we should the Creator and dispenser of all these gifts.”⁴⁴ This work is a testament to Francis’ exuberant joy and love toward creation, even in light of his pain and suffering. It is also interesting to note that Francis composed this work in vernacular Italian instead of Latin in the hope of reaching the widest possible audience.

⁴³ Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, p. 98.

⁴⁴ *Legend of Perugia*, p. 1021.

Sorrell maintained that this work is linked to the vernacular troubadour tradition of poems, stories, and songs, and thus was “clearly not meant to be obscure, esoteric, or literary, but, rather, popular and oral. It is a medieval attempt to propagandize.”⁴⁵ After several introductory lines praising and glorifying God, the *Canticle* invoked the magnanimous strength and vigor of the Sun.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made,

And first my lord Brother Sun,

Who brings the day; and light you give to us through him.

How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendour!

Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

After praising “Sister Moon and Stars,” Francis rejoiced in the beauty, usefulness, and power of the elemental forces.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,

And fair and stormy, all the weather’s moods

By which you cherish all that you have made.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Water,

So useful, lowly, precious and pure.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brother Fire,

Through whom you brighten up the night.

How beautiful is he, how gay! Full of power and strength.

Last, for our purposes, he addressed the earth, its fertile soil and its wild and domestic bounty.

⁴⁵ Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, p. 114.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Earth, our mother,

Who feeds us in her sovereignty and produces

Various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.⁴⁶

One must be careful not to romanticize or simplify the ideas behind this work.⁴⁷ “[The Canticle] expresses an essentially religious attitude to nature and contains the authentic Christian outlook on nature,” maintained Franciscan Eric Doyle.⁴⁸ For Francis, the *Canticle* represented an exhortation to praise and rejoice in God’s magnificent beneficence. Yet the *Canticle*, though composed within the bounds of accepted medieval theology, is remarkable for its excessive praise of nature. The use of the word brother and sister throughout the work is one of its most defining and original characteristics. Sorrell maintained that the lines dedicated to the natural world diverge “from the more traditional expressions in medieval spirituality . . . to his very personal spiritual view of creation: the ‘enfraternization’ of creatures and the honoring them with titles in spiritualized chivalric deference.”⁴⁹ Remarkd Sorrell:

In a simple and childlike way, each creature is praised—its best physical qualities are described with wonder and enthusiasm. It is this unaffected sense of loving personal connection with and approval of individual

creatures which gives the poem its unique spirit and aesthetic and which is one of its greatest original contributions to Christian attitudes toward the environment.⁵⁰

“The realization that everything comes from the same source filled Francis with greater affection than ever,” stated Bonaventure, “and he called even the most insignificant creatures his brothers and sisters, because he knew they had the same origin as himself.”⁵¹ According to Doyle, the word “friar” (or brother) was one of the “most sacred in his vocabulary . . . one might even say that for St Francis this was a primordial word.”⁵² Sorrell viewed Francis’ use of brother and sister as evidence of his elevation of chivalric *noblesse oblige* as a guiding principle in the relations between humankind on one side and plants, animals, and natural forces on the other. Francis’ use of chivalry “creates a mutual regard and honorable deference between brothers serving God together, even though they are on different levels of the divine hierarchy.”⁵³

Although the *Canticle* can be read as a celebration of the natural world, its potential aesthetic and spiritual power is much greater, according to Sorrell. The underlying meaning of the work is still a matter of dispute. The basis of the controversy is the interpretation of the Italian *per* in the central stanzas relating to nature. Seven lines feature the phrase *Laudato si . . . per*. One could read the lines either as “Be praised, my Lord, *for* Sister Moon and the Stars” or “Be praised, my Lord, *by* Sister Moon and the Stars”⁵⁴ Sorrell favored a third interpretation: “Be praised, my Lord, *because of* Sister Moon and the Stars.” This

⁴⁶ For the complete text of *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, see Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, pp. 130-31.

⁴⁷ “[Francis’] profoundly Christian love of creation (*Canticle of the Sun*) has, unfortunately, not always been properly understood and has often encouraged romantic enthusiasts.” See L. Hardick, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), VI, s.v. “Francis of Assisi, St.,” p. 130.

⁴⁸ Eric Doyle, O.F.M., “Ecology and the Canticle of Brother Sun,” *New Blackfriars*, 55 (1977), p. 397.

⁴⁹ Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, p. 129.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ St. Bonaventure, *Major Life*, p. 692.

⁵² Doyle, “Ecology and the Canticle of Brother Sun,” p. 398.

⁵³ Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, p. 74.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

is the more radical, from an environmental perspective, of the competing interpretations. “It depicts the Canticle as the positive, injunctive form of an extremely unusual and forceful accusation by Francis—that medieval society does not appreciate creation and is not grateful for creatures’ benefits to humanity.” Added Sorrell: “Such a direct, outspoken criticism coupled with a positive injunction is, so far as I know, unique for Francis’ time and perhaps unparalleled in medieval history before him.”⁵⁵ Even if one does not agree with this interpretation, the *Canticle* remains a powerful medieval work encouraging humankind to appreciate and celebrate nature.

Again, it must be underscored that Francis can only be seen and understood if one accounts for the medieval climate of opinion. The appearance of miracles, also known as thaumaturgy, is a common event in the legends, and his ability to wield seemingly supernatural influence over animals is one aspect of his life that runs counter to the modern environmental view of a nonhierarchical nature. The wolf of Gubbio is but one of many legends whereby Francis commanded creatures or the elements to abide by his word (and by extrapolation the word of God). Bonaventure’s story of the cicada of Portiuncula is another example of Francis’ reliance on thaumaturgy. “Then one day he called it and when it hopped on to his hand as if it had been taught by God, he told it, ‘Sing, my sister cicada. Sing a song of praise to God your Creator,’” recorded Bonaventure. “Immediately the cicada started to chirp and never stopped until the

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 118-19. “For it is not primarily creation that would be exhorted to praise God, but *people*, because of their offensive ingratitude to God. Thus the *per* would be interpreted as ‘Be praised, my Lord (by humankind) for (because of) Sister Moon and the Stars.’” See p. 121. For a thorough examination of this debate, see pp. 115-24.

saint told it to go back to its usual perch.”⁵⁶ After narrating the story of Francis’ successful effort to rescue the ill-fated town of Greccio from both rapacious packs of wolves and damaging hailstorms, Bonaventure noted that the saint’s “loving compassion” brought forth “savage animals into subjection . . . training those which were tame already and claiming obedience from those which had rebelled against fallen mankind.”⁵⁷ In this excerpt, it is clear that Bonaventure viewed Francis’ mastery over animals as the ability to regain at least a flickering gleam of remembered Eden. After recounting the story of the glowing iron and Francis’ seared and cauterized flesh, Celano surmised: “I believe that he had returned to primitive innocence, for whom, when he wished it, cruel things were made gentle.”⁵⁸ Sorrell argued that Francis’ contemporaries and earlier hagiographers did not interpret Francis’ path as radically divergent from tradition, but rather as an attempt in “restoring and participating in the apostolic age, extending the Christian mission to its logical finality—to ‘preach the gospel to all creatures,’ as the Bible literally commanded.” Mark 16:15 reads: “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” Thus the assertion: “Where moderns would see innovation in Francis’ expressions, the early official sources [Celano and Bonaventure] see Francis as the resurrector of all that was good in ancient Christian tradition.”⁵⁹

There is near universal recognition that Francis’ estimation of the natural world was indeed revolutionary, for his time as well as ours. Yet, as noted earlier, his views did not

⁵⁶ St. Bonaventure, *Major Life*, p. 695.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 697-98. Bonaventure, citing 1 Timothy 4:8, added, “This is that virtue which subjects all creation to itself and ‘is all-availing, since it promises well both for this life and for the next.’”

⁵⁸ Thomas of Celano, *Second Life*, p. 497.

⁵⁹ Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, pp. 62, 50.

arise out of a social and theological vacuum. An early form of Christian monasticism, noted historian Jaroslav Pelikan, predates Christianity, and there existed deeply rooted hermitic and monastic (both Jewish and pagan) traditions in the Egyptian desert wherefrom Christianity arose.⁶⁰ Sorrell also devoted a lengthy chapter to the relationship between the Christian ascetic tradition and Francis. The familiar stories of Francis' intimate relationship with animals have parallels in earlier medieval hagiography, according to Sorrell.⁶¹ This is of little surprise when one considers that those pursuing the eremitic life (a hermetic existence for religious purposes) frequently lived in brute wilderness and made contact with large predators, such as wolves and bears. In all likelihood, many hermits and Christian ascetics, before and after Francis, enjoyed profound relationships and extended dialogues with the wild. "While Francis' vision of interdependence between humankind and animals was uniquely his own," surmised Sorrell, "his basic values of respect and gratitude for creation's aid to humanity were not innovations."⁶²

One must be careful not to mistake Francis' life and writings as expressions of a Buddhist-like contemplation on the oneness of existence. Lynn White labeled Francis' view toward humankind and nature as "a unique sort of pan-psychism of all things animate and inanimate, designed for the glorification of their transcendent Creator."⁶³ Others were not so eager to interpret Francis along these lines. Argued Hughes: "His devotion did not immediately dissolve multiplicity into oneness, but glorified God in each created being and

delighted in their individuality."⁶⁴ He differentiated between what he believed was Francis' *panentheism* and the term *pantheism*. The former can be used to describe Francis' recognition and appreciation of God's goodness in every living and nonliving object. Hughes contended that Francis was not a panpsychist or pantheist, if those words are defined in terms of "all beings share a single soul." From a Christian perspective, such oneness "belittles" individuality, be it "the distinctness of man or black bear or oak tree."⁶⁵ One must also be careful not to misinterpret Francis' love of nature. The infinite revelations of the natural world—the wooded groves, streams, granite cliffs, migrating flocks, and buzzing cicadas—are but an expression of God. For Francis, to praise creation and not the Creator would be wholly inconceivable, an exercise in absurdity at best, blasphemy as worst. The danger of pantheism (or at least its superficiality), according to the Franciscan Eric Doyle, is that it "destroys the diversity of creatures" by removing independence of the many for the sake of the "All." Such reasoning creates an insurmountable teleological problem (at least from a Christian perspective). For if one accepts a fusion of creation into one pulsing unknowable, "it makes change, finitude and even evil, intrinsic to God Himself."⁶⁶ In addition, it must be noted that Francis had no interest in understanding creation from an intellectual or scientific perspective, and he no doubt would have deemed as pointless such fields as biology, chemistry, or ecology.

Though Francis was not a pantheist, as stated earlier, certain elements of his

⁶⁰ Pelikan, "Christ—and the Second Christ," p. 323.
⁶¹ Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, pp. 48-49.
⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 49.
⁶³ White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," p. 1207.

⁶⁴ Hughes, "Francis of Assisi and the Diversity of Creation," p. 311.
⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 317.
⁶⁶ Doyle, "Ecology and the Canticle of Brother Sun," p. 392.

relationship with nature were revolutionary. For example, there is general agreement that he was what we would call today a Christian nature mystic. Whereas Francis' extension of the evangelical mission into the natural world was rooted, at least in part, in Christian tradition, his forays into nature mysticism represented a radical departure.⁶⁷ There are startling intimations in the hagiographies of Francis losing himself in the contemplation of the natural world. For instance, in a previously excerpted account in the *Legend of Perugia*, Francis receives "great inner and exterior joy" in the contemplation of animals. "Very often it was for him the occasion to become enraptured in God."⁶⁸ There is evidence of such rapturous contemplation in the other sources. "We who were with him have seen him take inward and outward delight in almost every creature," surmised the *Mirror of Perfection*, "and when he handled or looked at them his spirit seemed to be in heaven rather than on earth."⁶⁹ In his *Major Life*, Bonaventure stated:

Francis sought occasion to love God in everything. He delighted in all the works of God's hands and from the vision of joy on earth his mind soared aloft to the live-giving source and cause of all. In everything beautiful, he saw him who is beauty itself, and he followed his Beloved everywhere by his likeness imprinted on creation; of all creation he made a ladder by which he might mount up and embrace Him who is all-desirable.⁷⁰

Sorrell maintained that these and other passages embodied the ideal of nature

⁶⁷ "Francis' nature mysticism was his most untraditional positive reaction to creation." See Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, p. 79.

⁶⁸ *Legend of Perugia*, p. 1027.

⁶⁹ *Mirror of Perfection*, p. 1257.

⁷⁰ St. Bonaventure, *Major Life*, p. 698.

mysticism, "a vision of sublime creation catalyzing a mystical experience with the divine."⁷¹ The *Major Life* recounted the story of Francis crossing Lake Piediluco and being offered a bird by a fisherman. He accepted the gift and attempted to set it free, but the bird remained cradled in his arms. "The saint stood there praying with his eyes raised to heaven, and after a long time *he came back to himself* [italics mine] and once more encouraged the bird to fly away and praise God."⁷² In another story, Celano described a scene whereby Francis was given a fish on the Lake of Rieti. He placed it in the water, and during his prayer the fish "played in the water beside the boat and did not go away from the place where it had been put until his prayer was finished and the holy man of God gave it permission to leave."⁷³

If Francis' views on nature are being rediscovered and reinterpreted, this is in itself an indication of the centuries of neglect that predated this renaissance. In 1266, all the *legandae* about St. Francis, including Celano's works, were ordered destroyed in an attempt to introduce a less radicalized saint. Although the dispute between the pope and the order centered upon an extreme interpretation of poverty among friars, the loss of a dynamic and dangerous Francis also represented a loss in the understanding and appreciation of his intimate relationship with creation. Authors Father Peter Hooper and Martin Palmer

⁷¹ Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, p. 93.

⁷² St. Bonaventure, *Major Life*, p. 694.

⁷³ Thomas of Celano, *First Life*, p. 280. Francis and the fish "seem to enter an enchanted world of their own, a world filled with joy, respect, kindness, and unity, where they share a mysterious and sacred sort of communication," stated Sorrell. The scene is one of "an indefinable and elusive feeling of transcendence" between a saint and a fish "who have entered together the realm of the sacred and share there an ineffable rapport for a short time." See Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, p. 96.

argued that the saint's deep love and respect for creation was, upon his death, "almost immediately forgotten, or romanticized into a slightly soppy version of Francis who chatted with birds." In time, "the conventional understanding of nature as being below us returned and swallowed Francis's more challenging and more beautiful vision."⁷⁴ Only a small number of Franciscans, such as Duns Scotus and Roger Bacon, both from the thirteenth century, would address nature on a level comparable to Francis.

The debate over Francis' ideas and legacy, ignited by Lynn White thirty years ago, continues today. At one end of the spectrum stand those who view Francis as a harbinger for the modern environmental movement. This view is represented in modest terms by White's assertion that Francis stands as the patron saint of ecology, and recklessly by others who, instead of finding a humble Franciscan, have inexplicably uncovered an anti-establishment flower child. The other end of the spectrum is represented by those asserting that Francis is first and foremost a medieval figure; to dovetail his beliefs into modern conceptions of both Christianity and the environment is impractical. The truth is perhaps somewhere in between. In his notable study of Francis and nature, Sorrell concluded that several of Francis' essential expressions relating to the natural world were original (at least "original to Western Christianity"). These ideas included Francis' repeated interpretation of nature as benevolent, and, more importantly, a nature capable of worshipping the Creator. In addition, Francis broke new ground with his recorded forays into nature mysticism and his utilization of chivalric *noblesse oblige* to

⁷⁴ Father Peter Hooper with Martin Palmer, "St. Francis and Ecology," in Elizabeth Breuilly and Martin Palmer, eds., *Christianity and Ecology* (New York: Cassell Publishers Limited, 1992), p. 84.

expand notions of humankind's relations with plants, animals, and natural forces. Yet in the end, one must conclude that St. Francis' ideas regarding nature have been somewhat overstated. Although the original elements in Francis' views on nature "may lean toward modern ideas, the motivation behind them stems from a mind that is, even though original, profoundly medieval," stated Sorrell.⁷⁵ Francis was a profoundly devout monk whose attitudes toward nature were shaped by the Vulgate Bible. "He would sew pieces of rope on the inside of his tunic if he found the garments not coarse enough; he mingled ashes with his food, to keep it from being too palatable; he whipped his body when he felt sexually tempted, saying to it, 'There, Brother Jackass, that is how you deserve to be treated,'" Pelikan recounted. "Yet even these extremes of ascetic self-denial were part of the total view of the world and of life."⁷⁶ If one ignores Francis' complete immersion in Christ, one risks losing not only the saint, but of losing the man as well.

Yet if the saint's ideas have been overstated, his legacy, conversely, has been underutilized. The distinction is an important one, and is outlined by scholar J. Donald Hughes: "While Francis's thought *per se* cannot be held to prefigure ecology, his attitude has been widely recognized as a precursor of positive environmentalism. Not least is this true of his appreciation of the diversity of creation and his recognition of

⁷⁵ Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, p. 139.

"Many of Francis' expressions which seem original or to have parallels in modern ideals must be understood within their thirteenth-century context, however, so as not to be misinterpreted." Attempting to understand Francis' *Canticle*, for example, without acknowledging the underlying Christian tradition is akin to understanding and appreciating a child without knowing its mother. See p. 130.

⁷⁶ Pelikan, "Christ—and the Second Christ," p. 339.

the unique value of every creature.”⁷⁷ For example, Francis obviously had no conception of biodiversity, an idea central to modern environmentalism. Yet his love for creation and, more importantly, his unbounded gratitude to the Creator for the seemingly limitless diversity of His creations, both animate and inanimate, has remained a potent symbol for more than 800 years. Francis’ original views do not lead “directly and overtly to present ecological concerns,” concluded Elizabeth Dreyer, but his “example of caring love for all creation” remains vitally important to the twentieth century.⁷⁸

Perhaps it is Francis’ attitudes toward humankind and his conception of a spiritual life that hold the most promise for a Christianity more attuned to the deepening, planet-wide ecological crisis. St. Bonaventure wrote that compassion so penetrated the inner depths of Francis that he was able to share in the sufferings of Christ on the cross:

It is loving compassion which united him to God in prayer and caused his transformation into Christ by sharing his sufferings. It was [compassion], which led him to devote himself, humbly to his neighbor and enabled him to return to the state of primeval innocence by restoring man’s harmony with the whole of creation.⁷⁹

“The key to an understanding of Francis is his belief in the virtue of humility—not merely for the individual but for man as a species,” argued Lynn White.⁸⁰ Perhaps the most profound lesson of Francis’ life is the danger of hubris. Humankind’s overbearing

pride and ignorance in its supposed mastery over the natural world is surely a grand display of hubris. In his *The Praises of the Virtues*, Francis declared:

Pure and holy Simplicity puts
all the learning of this world,
all natural wisdom to shame.
Holy Poverty puts to shame
all greed, avarice,
and all the anxieties of this life.
Holy Humility puts pride to shame,
And all the inhabitants of this world
And all that is in the world.⁸¹

“What have you to be proud of?” he asked in *The Admonitions*, twenty-eight brief exhortations addressed to the friars. “If you were so clever and learned that you knew everything and could speak every language, so that the things of heaven were an open book to you, still you could not boast of that.”⁸²

The image of the Little Poor Man of Assisi, hungry, cold, and alone, handing over his last handful of grain and his threadbare cloak to a foul-smelling leper stands as a grand lesson of Christian giving. Yet it can also stand as a grand lesson for the environmental awakening of mainstream Christianity. Issues of consumption, such as consumerism and advertising, are now viewed as leading causes in the rapacious destruction of the natural world. Earlier this decade a team of scholars representing various religions—including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, and aboriginal belief systems—gathered to examine environmental issues. “[W]e concluded that the global market economy, with its teleology constantly to increase

⁷⁷ Hughes, “Francis of Assisi and the Diversity of Creation,” p. 320.

⁷⁸ Dreyer, “Ecology, Theology, and the Medieval Franciscan Tradition,” pp. 44-45.

⁷⁹ St. Bonaventure, *Major Life*, p. 688.

⁸⁰ White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” p. 1206.

⁸¹ *The Praises of the Virtues*, in Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, p. 133.

⁸² *The Admonitions*, in Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, pp. 80-81.

consumption, was as strong, if not stronger, threat to the earth's ecology than population increase," reported Harold Coward.⁸³ Consumption is an issue the West finds profoundly unsettling. This study noted that a child born in Western Europe or North America will consume roughly thirty times more natural resources (and consequently spew forth, directly and indirectly, thirty times more pollution) than his or her counterpart in the Third World. "It is the babies of the well-off parents of the first-world who pose the largest threat to the ecology—not the babies of the underdeveloped Asians, Africans, or Latin Americans,"⁸⁴ Coward wrote. James Nash, executive director of Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy, noted:

Frugality is an indispensable virtue in our time. It is precondition of distributive justice and sustainability under conditions of relative scarcity, where "enough" can be available to all—human and nonhumankind, present and future—only if essential resources are not "hogged" by economic elites. Frugality was once near the heart of Christian economic ethics It is a severely neglected norm now, but it must be revitalized as a witness to a culture that is literally consuming itself to death.⁸⁵

⁸³ Harold Coward, "New Theology on Population, Consumption, and Ecology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 65 (Summer, 1997), p. 265.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 260, 264. "Therefore, it is the child who has the most, the first-world child, whom the world can least afford." See p. 264.

⁸⁵ James A. Nash, "Toward the Ecological Reformation of Christianity," *Interpretation*, 50 (January, 1996), p. 12. "If God the Creator, Christ, and Spirit is love, then the process of creation itself is an act of love," stated Nash, adding that the "love of nature" is a universalized expression of the "love of neighbor." Thus his assertion: "The Christian faith, when properly interpreted, has the impressive

"Self-denial is an essential part of Christian discipleship, and Christians ought to take the leadership in teaching and practising it in its obvious connections with ecology," stated Doyle. He believed that "someone has to have the courage to tell us and show us as graphically as possible that we must be prepared to make sacrifices, to say 'No' to ourselves, as the only way to combat the greed and selfishness that is at the root of the crisis."⁸⁶ Perhaps that "someone" is St. Francis of Assisi.

In Bonaventure's *Major Life*, the story is told of Francis coming across a beggar on a road from Siena. Francis decides to give the beggar his short cloak. "We'll have to give this cloak back to that poor beggar, because it belongs to him," he says. "We only got it on loan until we found someone in greater need of it." Francis' companion protests, arguing that the ailing saint needs the cloak as much as the destitute panhandler. Francis rebuked his fellow traveler by saying, "God the great Almsgiver will regard it as theft on my part, if I do not give what I have to someone who needs it more."⁸⁷ This is a powerful allegory for the absolute obligation of the haves to comfort and support the have nots. But Francis' insistence that he is "borrowing" the cloak can also serve as a metaphor for the sustainable care of the earth. Each generation is wearing a borrowed "cloak" (a metaphor for the earth and its bounty—soil, fossil fuels, water, etc.) until it comes time to hand it over to their children. "We only got it on loan until we found someone in greater need of it," Francis says. In *The Admonitions*, one can

potential to provide firm foundation for ecological integrity—second to none." See pp. 7, 9.

⁸⁶ Doyle, "Ecology and the Canticle of Brother Sun," p. 401.

⁸⁷ St. Bonaventure, *Major Life*, pp. 691-92. Chastising a friar who refused to aid a beggar, Francis said, "My dear brother, when you see a beggar, you are looking at an image of our Lord and his poor Mother." See p. 691.

glimpse Francis' belief in the potentiality of faith among plants, animals, the elements, and even inanimate objects. In *Admonition V*, a warning against pride, Francis states: "Try to realize the dignity God has conferred on you. He created and formed your body in the image of his beloved Son, and your soul in his own likeness. And yet every creature under heaven serves and acknowledges and obeys its Creator in his own way better than you do."⁸⁸

⁸⁸ See *The Admonitions*, p. 80.