

Meetings for Learning – Resources – History and Testimonies

Lucretia Mott (1793-1880)



Early Life and Influences

Lucretia Coffin (Mott) was born on 3rd January, 1793 in Nantucket Island, a whaling community. The men were at sea for long periods of time, and the women had to be quite independent. Lucretia attended Nine Partners Boarding School, a Quaker school which Elias Hicks actively supported. When she had completed her education in the school, she was kept on as a teacher. Her pay as a teacher was half the pay of a male teacher. She saw the injustice of it and she decided that in her life she would do everything in her power to have her fair and equal share of everything which she felt sure that God had provided for her in the world. She married another teacher, James Mott on 10th April 1811, and they went to live in Philadelphia with his parents. When her son Thomas died of fever in 1817, it was a major trauma in her life, and she turned much more deeply and seriously to her Religion. She was formally recognized as a Quaker Minister in January 1821, when she was 28 years old. During her life, she was actively involved in a very wide range of reform issues and movements. She

read widely, and wrote letters to her many correspondents. She was influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft (1759- 1797) and her pioneering book, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Dr William Channing, a popular Congregationalist Minister, who preached consistently against war, was another major influence on her.

From the outset Mott was involved in the anti-slavery movement. In the latter part of the 1820's she decided to abstain from using slave produce, and her husband James gave up his profitable cotton business, because of the connection with slave labour.

The Motts mixed with black people and welcomed them to their home. Lucretia took an active interest in the living and working conditions of the poor and the freemen.

When the Quaker separation happened in America in 1828, James and Lucretia Mott made the reluctant decision to join the Hicksite Quakers. The separation amongst Quakers was very difficult. Meanwhile the Grimké sisters stayed with the Orthodox Quakers.

Involvement with the Anti-Slavery Movement

In 1833, three years after the founding of the first anti-slavery society in Boston, William Lloyd Garrison and sixty one other men founded the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. Lucretia Mott and some other women attended, and spoke at the founding meeting, but they weren't formal members. Mott was involved in founding the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. This was followed by the founding of other women's anti-slavery societies. The first National Convention of Anti-Slavery Women met in New York City in 1837. The convention decided that women would collect a million signatures on a petition opposing slavery. This engaged women in a practical way in political

activity. Mott raised money for the building of the Philadelphia Hall which was opened (and burned down by a mob within days) in 1837, and which was intended to provide a place for social reformers to speak.

In 1840 there were two anti-slavery umbrella organizations in America; the American Anti-Slavery Society, led by Garrison, which allowed women into membership; and the National Anti-Slavery Society, led by Stanton, which prohibited women members.

A World Anti-Slavery Convention had been organized for London for the summer of 1840, and delegates were invited to attend from America. The National Anti-Slavery Society sent a delegation of men. The American Anti-Slavery Society sent at least five women among their delegation: Lucretia Mott, Sarah Pugh, Ann Phillips, Abby Kimber and Mary Grew. When they got to London, the Convention spent considerable time discussing 'the woman question,' and whether or not to allow them to participate. Ultimately they were refused, and they had to sit silently in a screened off gallery during the convention, where Garrison joined them in protest.

Henry Stanton was leader of the delegation which opposed women's membership in the movement. Lucretia Mott befriended Henry Stanton's new bride, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in London, and gave her a powerful education on women's rights and equality. Elizabeth's interest in the subject thrived, and she suggested that they hold a Women's Right's Convention when they return to America. Eight years later, they got around to meeting up and organizing that event; the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention of 1848. It covered every main aspect of inequality between women and men, and they gave notice they were going to tackle these issues. They produced a list of women's grievances, along with a comprehensive and important declaration of women's rights, based on the American Declaration of Independence. The event got widespread publicity, and put women's rights, including the right to vote, firmly on the agenda in America.

Mott often spoke against Biblical and clerical authority, which she claimed was mis-used to promote war and slavery, and to oppress women. In a sermon on 'Uses and Abuses of the Bible' at Cherry Street Meeting in 1849, she said that "clerical and ecclesiastical power is gaining ascendancy, so far as it is allowed by public opinion,... and it will make inroads upon us until our liberties are sapped, and we are brought under a yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear." "He that upholdeth Truth designs that there should be no inspiration, no power delegated upon one portion of the people over another."

Mott's 'Discourse on Women'ⁱ was delivered at the Assembly Hall in Philadelphia on December 17th, 1849. She was invited to make a speech replying to Richard Henry Dana (1787-1879), who was touring America at the time, and had delivered a lecture in Philadelphia ridiculing the idea of women's rights. Mott began her lecture looking at the Biblical arguments for and against women's equality; something she repeated in several of her other lectures. She regularly quoted parts of the bible supporting equality, and disposed of Paul's apostolic prohibition on women speaking in church as being merely relevant to the unruly Church in Corinth at the time, not meant for any other time or place.

Mott spoke out against 'priestcraft' and discriminatory laws which were upheld by the church. She spoke of women's 'exclusion from the pulpit or ministry, her duties marked out for her by her brother man, subject to creeds, rules and discipline made for her by him'... 'In marriage, there is assumed superiority on the part of the husband, and admitted inferiority, with a promise of obedience, on the part of the wife.' In most of her speeches to women, she demanded reform of the law in relation to marriage which at that time made 'the husband and wife one person, and that person is the husband.' Mott called for equal education for girls and boys, and denounced the fact that in classrooms boys often did advanced mathematics on the blackboard, while girls were made to do sewing instead. Mott said women should have the right to vote, whether she exercised that right or not. She quoted Walker, of

Cincinnati, in his *Introduction to American Law*: ‘We require them [women] to contribute their share in the way of taxes, to the support of government, but allow them no voice in its direction. We hold them amenable to the laws when made, but allow them no share in making them. This language, applied to males would be the exact definition of political slavery.’ Mott went on to say that the taxes which women pay sustained colleges, but women had not been permitted to enter them.

Mott spoke of married women’s lack of property rights, and the lack of entitlement to their own wages. ‘There are many instances in our city where the wife suffers much from the power of the husband to claim all that she can earn with her own hands’, and Mott said she had ‘known cases of extreme cruelty’.

Mott complained that some women were ‘satisfied to be the mere plaything or toy of society, content with her outward adorning’. But, if women ‘would bring all their powers into use’, men wouldn’t have to work so hard to provide extra money, ‘in order that woman in fashionable society may be supported in their daily promenades and nightly visits to the theatre’. In other speeches she criticized the unhealthy tight bodices and waistbands in ‘fashionable’ dresses, and the long skirts that sweep the dirt on the streets, worn by women who themselves denounce the comfortable and practical bloomer outfit. Mott, with her very characteristic sharp humour, encouraged women to venture beyond ‘ministering to man’s self-indulgence at the fireside,’ and engage their talents more fully in society beyond the household sphere.

She was courageous and outspoken throughout her life. Lucretia Mott died in 1880.

Questions for small group discussion or journaling:

- Lucretia Mott delivered a speech to the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia in 1863, where she said: “Some of us women can

perhaps more fully sympathise with the slave, because the prejudice against him is somewhat akin to that against our sex”. Do you agree that people who have experienced discrimination or prejudice, can have a greater empathy with others, which may give energy to work for change in society? Have you engaged in any particular social action, for such reasons?

- Why did Mott denounce the fact that in classrooms in 1840, boys were doing advanced mathematics on the blackboard, while girls were sewing? Are there similar problems in education today?
- Around 1820, Lucretia Mott and her husband James decided to abstain from using slave produce, and James gave up his profitable cotton business, because it was connected with slave labour. To what extent should we use ethical and fair trade goods? What sacrifices might you be prepared to make?

Further reading:

Lucretia Mott, *Her Complete Speeches and Sermons*, ed. Dana Greene (London: Edwin Mellon Press, 1980)

Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott, ed. Beverly Wilson Palmer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002)

Margaret Hope Bacon, *Valiant Friend, the Life of Lucretia Mott* (New York: Walker and Company, 1980)

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ⁱLucretia Mott delivered a number of speeches and sermons, the complete texts of which have been edited by Dana Greene, and published in 1980 by the Edwin Mellon Press.