

The Martyrdom of Abolitionist Charles Torrey

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Review

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Torrey, E. Fuller *The Martyrdom of Abolitionist Charles Torrey*. Louisiana State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9780807152317

A Little Known Figure Brought to Light

Until recently Charles Torrey has been a relatively unknown figure to most students of history. Rescued from obscurity by Stanley Harrold in his path-breaking study on abolitionism in the District of Columbia, *Subversives* (2003), Torrey now benefits from a more detailed biography. Not an historian by training (although he has published several works of history), E. Fuller Torrey--a distant relative of his subject--is retired from a distinguished career as a psychiatric researcher in the fields of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. While at times his research lacks the depth one would expect from an expert in the field, he has produced overall a well-documented, engagingly written work that deserves attention from scholars, students, and the general public.

Charles Turner Torrey grew up in coastal Massachusetts in the early nineteenth century. From a prominent New England family, he was orphaned at a young age and raised by his grandparents in a happy and comfortable environment. Most of the book focuses not on its subject's upbringing and personal life, rather on his role in the abolition movement and the circumstances of his untimely death.

The author portrays Torrey as one of the central figures in the schism between the followers of William Lloyd Garrison and the political abolitionists. Garrison favored a completely pacifist approach to ending slavery and a morally pure one that opposed involvement in politics and even considered northern secession if southern whites could not be persuaded to abandon slaveholding. For Torrey and many others, refusing to work within the political system--in a democracy--seemed foolish, potentially leaving millions in bondage. Even violence--particularly when employed in self-defense--had to be considered. To go to war without all possible weapons at one's disposal made no sense.

To this end, Torrey (publically called by Garrison, the leader of the "conspiracy"), along with Amos Phelps, Henry Stanton and several others, brought about the break in the movement that eventually created two rival anti-slavery societies in 1839. Torrey also helped found the Liberty Party, and he worked more directly to assist slaves out of bondage, setting up a well-organized route from the Washington-Baltimore area that continued to function after his death. According to the author, he helped over four hundred slaves escape to freedom.

Although Garrison's approach essentially failed--"moralsuasion" didn't end slavery--he and his supporters lived to write the movement's history, while Torrey and his compatriots, one by one, fell on hard times, Torrey most of all. His life was in many ways a continuous struggle--to maintain family life (he often lived apart from his wife and children and was eventually estranged from them), to stay employed and out of debt (a failure at his first two careers, teaching and the ministry, he eeked out a living as a reporter for abolitionist newspapers), to avoid imprisonment while working on the Underground Railroad, and to stay healthy despite the early appearance of debilitating tuberculosis. Eventually all these problems caught up with him.

While helping a group of slaves escape from Baltimore in 1844, Torrey was captured, jailed, convicted, and after nearly two years in prison, died at age thirty-two.

Speakers at memorials held in Boston's Baptist Tremont Temple and Faneuil Hall included Henry Stanton, John Greenleaf Whittier, and James Russell Lowell who wrote a poem, "On the Death of Charles Turner Torrey." Tributes came from around the northern United States, British Isles, and most especially from free African Americans, many of whom had worked with Torrey. He was especially radical, the author notes, for creating--with his black allies Thomas Smallwood, and James J. G. Bias--an effective interracial Underground Railroad network, and one so far south.

This work falls a little short of being a full-fledged biography. But it is an excellent step in restoring to a place of significance in our memory an important figure in American abolitionism and an exemplar of antebellum interracial activism.

Carol Wilson is the Arthur A. and Elizabeth R. Knapp Professor of History at Washington College, Chestertown, Maryland. She is the author of Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780-1865 (University of Kentucky Press, 1994) and The Two Lives of Sally Miller: A Case of Mistaken Racial Identity in Antebellum New Orleans (Rutgers University Press, 2007).