

## INTRODUCTION

### *Acorns into Oaks: Notes on the "Marginal" and "Sub-Marginal" in American History*

It is always amazing how old self-evident realities have to be rediscovered. The reason appears to be that historical materials from which those realities have to be drawn tend to erode. They become blurred or lost. We no longer have them clearly at hand. So we compensate by imagining what they are, or were, and by judging them as though we actually understood their content. Stephen Pearl Andrews has certainly been part of such materials, and has experienced their fate.

Moreover, we have tangibly before us a variety of current hypotheses which interpret reality for us. They tell us that Andrew Jackson was a great reformer; that slaves were like Jews in German concentration camps; that abolitionists like Garrison secretly hated Negroes, but that Radical Republicans like Thaddeus Stevens were sincere and did not threaten the Office of the Presidency with their assault on Andrew Johnson. They tell us that these are all important people, unlike "marginal" ones like Andrews. Such vivid assertions, authoritatively phrased, suffuse our minds and reassure us that all is well with our information and grasp of affairs.

Facts and figures—historical figures, that is—which conflict with the pat generalizations rate as impediments to smooth historical statement. They wander about the era or subject, creating mental conflicts and confusion. But if we are not determined to try to live comfortably with nonsense, it becomes our privilege to welcome them rather than resist their challenge. We must return to the original sources, look into the old debates, and renew knowledge of what were once urgent points and arresting individuals.

For they may well, in new form, become significant once more. The world has turned topsy-turvy before. *Are* we all agreed that Andrew

Jackson was a great emancipator, rather than the slaveholding frontier aristocrat his Tennessee neighbors knew? Is the evidence complete that "Uncle Tom" was contemptible in his human qualities? Or that Wendell Phillips stinted his admiration for freedom? Or that Radical Republicans were not, in fact, endangering our political system of checks and balances? Our à la mode intellectuals cannot answer these questions. They can only feed our vaguer yearnings for a better world which will somehow not demand better and more realistic detail.

Stephen Pearl Andrews has been one of the historical figures whom the pundits have demoted not only as "marginal" but even as "sub-marginal." It has never been established how we can distinguish one from the other. It is like calling somebody a "tenth-rater." There are rarely careful computations made with ninth- and eighth-raters, to go no further.

What must one do to be important? How do we avoid being marginal? Andrews was principal in an effort to keep Texas free of slavery, and, if necessary, to join her to the British Empire in order to do so. He brought shorthand to America, as it happens for idealistic purposes. I grant you that many of his closely held views on human nature and life were conjectural and outlandish. But he did create out of them a utopia in the great tradition of utopias. He merits the attention to this aspect of his personality that all social experimenters do. They are innovators and theorists. A wise society remembers them because they have probed our human capacities and contributed to the resources we require for necessary social change.

I do not think anyone need apologize at length for Andrews' drastic views on marriage and sex. We are said to be living in the midst of a "morals revolution." We have manifest need for formulating a firm ethic based on experience, if we are not to slide down into casual chaos. Andrews was at the center of thought and action in this regard, and, therefore, anything but marginal.

His present biographer has long been a dedicated and competent student of our past. Miss Stern's forte has been an interest in people, particularly reformers, and notably women. Her studies of Margaret Fuller, Louisa May Alcott, and the very remarkable Mrs. Frank Leslie have focussed on persons of character who struggled with their destiny as Americans. Without being an enthusiast herself, Miss Stern has been

sympathetic to their problems and careers, and presented them with a sense of their purpose.

She adds here another panel to her researches. Andrews lacked Margaret Fuller's genius and Alcott's popularity. Much of his life was anticlimactic, following brilliant beginnings. But before this occurred, Andrews had been a pioneer in Southern abolitionism. He had been associated with the great Myra Clark Gaines case, which accreted a literature of its own. He had worked with Lewis Tappan, Josiah Warren, the spectacular Victoria Woodhull, and others who are unlikely to be forgotten in our annals. There is much yet to be done before we are as familiar even with these, as able to employ them in our comparisons and other historical references, as we should be.

One must begin somewhere, and it is not for persons who have done nothing with the field, relegating it to marginality, to instruct others who have done much. It is not for people who have dined on such cardboard nourishment as the "Barnes Thesis" and other glib hypotheses in the reform field to direct further work involving it. So excellent a student of slavery as Kenneth M. Stamp, for instance, is inadequately informed on antislavery: a division of scholarship not calculated to raise sophistication in either area. As a result, Stamp can complain of a "bewildering recital of obscure names"—Andrews' being one of them—"without identification." A healthy history does not ask for simplistic identifications but is itself a strong tissue of interrelated personalities.

The fact is that history is indivisible. The student who is not courteous and receptive to the values in Andrews' life will not be sufficiently receptive to the values in Robert Owen's life, or Edward Bellamy's life, or Henry George's, or many other lives which have patently affected our thought and decisions. We need to relate such figures to each other more than we do. Our society always tends toward atomization. To make sense of its movements takes imagination and intellectual effort. The very idea of "Utopia" has been made a *limiting* concept rather than the creative, emancipating avenue of thought and action its partisans intended it to be.

Ultimately, if one cannot appreciate the vital features of Andrews' life and works, he will learn little enough from more "charismatic" people. We have flattered ourselves that Andrews was part of a "stammering century." If he was, how are we to characterize our own? It be-

comes us better, I suggest, to approach him and his times more modestly and with a will toward appreciation. We will thank Miss Stern for her researches and, not incidentally, for her patient bibliographical achievements. They are bound to serve future students, and serve them well. As Henry James liked to say, there is still something to be added.

LOUIS FILLER

*Antioch College*