

WE SHOULD BE MOBBED

Harriet Martineau's travel through America to find a way to heal the rift between the theory of the American "experiment" in equality and participatory democracy and the practice of inequality and exclusion culminated in her visit to Boston in late 1835. Her main focus was slavery and its abolition. In the South as in the North she had befriended both slaveholders and abolitionists who were Unitarian as herself. The year 1835 was early in the anti-slavery movement, when the majority of the citizens of Boston blamed the rising vocal calls for abolition as a dire threat to the beloved American Union. Mass meetings "to soothe the South by directing public indignation upon the Abolitionists" had led to mob action and direct threats to anyone suspected of Abolitionism. A few had been mobbed and killed. Yet the women who led the Anti-Slavery Society of Boston, most of whom were Unitarian, would not be deterred. All possible locations for an anti-slavery meeting were denied these women until a merchant of Boston, who would not accept that a legal meeting would be prevented by the fearful conspiracy of the town, lent his house for the meeting. The organizers scheduled the meeting for Wednesday, November 18, 1835.

"I was at this time," Harriet Martineau writes, "slightly acquainted with three or four abolitionists, and I was distrusted by most or all of the body who took any interest in me at all. My feelings were very different from theirs about the slaveholders of the South; naturally enough, as these Southern slaveholders were nothing else in the eyes of abolitionists, while to me they were, in some cases, personal friends, and, in more, hospitable entertainers. It was known, however, that I had declared my intention of attending an abolitionist meeting." An invitation came for Harriet and her traveling companion, Louisa Jeffries, to attend the Wednesday meeting and say a few words.

Their hosts, a Unitarian family, "had been reviled in the newspapers already for having read a notice (among several others) of an anti-slavery meeting from Dr. [William Ellery] Channing's pulpit." Harriet and Louisa "separately made up our minds to go, and announced our determination to our host and hostess. Between joke and earnest, they told us we should be mobbed; and the same thing was repeated by many who were not in joke at all."

"At two o'clock on the Wednesday we arrive at the house of a gentleman where we were to meet a few of the leading abolitionists, and dine, previous to the meeting. During dinner, the conversation was all about the Southern gentry, in whose favour I said all I could, and much more that the party could readily receive; which was natural enough, considering that they and I looked at the people of the South from different points of view. Before we issued forth on our expedition I was warned once more that exertions had been made to get up a mob, and that it was possible we might be dispersed by violence. When we turned into the street where the house of meeting stood, there were about a dozen boys hooting before the door, as they saw ladies of colour entering. We were admitted without having to wait an instant on the steps, and the door was secured behind us." To be continued.

Ref: Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, 2 vols. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838), vol. 2, pp. 160-162.