

## Radical Friend: Amy Kirby Post and her Activist Worlds

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For generations, American historians fought bitterly over the meaning and legacy of abolitionism. Some have derided the abolitionists as nefarious ‘ultraists’ radicalising the country and bringing about the Civil War, the bloodiest war in American history. Others, the ‘revisionists’ have criticized the abolitionists for being bourgeois colonizers who held dearer the imposition of a capitalist economy on the South than the freedom of the enslaved. In the past two decades, however, a number of works have poured forth arguing that we must look beyond the sweeping claims of the ‘revisionist’ scholarship, and focus on what individual abolitionists actually did and believed. Looking at both canonical and largely forgotten figures, they have found that not only was the women’s rights movement inextricably intertwined with abolitionism, but so were antebellum socialist, labour-rights and anti-imperialist movements. In fact, this generation of scholars has found in the abolitionists not just subjects worthy of empirical or critical study, but ‘heroes’ and ‘role models’ for contemporary social justice movements - far from perfection, and yet just as far from villainy.

An excellent example of this trend is Nancy Hewitt’s *Radical Friend: Amy Kirby Post and her Activist Worlds*. Hewitt discovered the writings of the largely forgotten Amy Kirby Post during graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania over forty years ago. She then spent her career exploring the history of women’s radicalism in the United States while collecting Post’s writings. Post, she discovered, was one of the many figures once central to the story of American social reform, but who now stands unjustly forgotten.

Hewitt's argument, like that of many of the recent works on abolitionism, is two-fold: she seeks both to reconstruct a historical figure and a tradition of American social reform, and also to offer that figure and tradition as an inspiration to contemporary 'radical' activists. In the work, Hewitt recovers Post as a central figure in the abolitionist, women's rights, and spiritualist movements of the antebellum North. Hewitt challenges historians to treat antebellum social reform as a series of overlapping movements rather than isolated causes. Hewitt contends that Post 'epitomizes radical activism in the nineteenth century... her activist worlds demonstrate the significance of egalitarian, interracial and mixed-sex movements for social change across the nineteenth century' (p. 1). Moreover, she argues that we must understand Amy Kirby Post as a 'role model for social justice' movements in our times, who held a 'radical vision of social change' (1, 9).

Hewitt's work succeeds best in recasting abolitionism and, indeed, antebellum social reform itself, as part of a series of interlocking communities, and reconstructing Amy Post's role within these communities. She does this by focusing on Post's role as what Hewitt terms a 'conductor,' working behind the scenes to connect and organise people across the various movements she took part in (5). Post was an organiser, a friend and a supporter, working behind the scenes to organise events and facilitating the work of many of the most important abolitionists and women's rights reformers of her era. Indeed, she spent a lifetime piling 'cause on cause, orchestrating bonds between activists and organizations as well as among local allies and national leaders spread across the Northeast and Midwest' (p. 293). Throughout the work, Hewitt highlights the interracial and mixed-gender nature of the antebellum abolitionist and women's rights movements, and how intertwined were the social and political worlds of these two movements. Appropriately, then, Hewitt's monograph is as much a biography of Post as of her community.

Most of Hewitt's biography takes place in and around Post's house at 36 Sophia Street in Rochester, New York. Post lived in the house for most of her life, moving in with her husband, Isaac, at the age of 34, in 1836. Post made the house 'a center for progressive activism, interracial gatherings, and spiritualist seances' (292). There, she and her husband, Isaac, took in boarders – both black and white, pushed to desegregate their children's schools, and refused to eat or wear anything produced by enslaved people. Together, they hid numerous self-emancipated people, on their way to Canada, and hosted dozens of major social reformers, with backgrounds in spiritualism, abolitionism and women's rights, who sojourned there – some for weeks, others for months and others for years.

The boarders at the Posts' home spanned the various social reform movements that the couple devoted their lives to. They often hosted the abolitionists Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, William Nell and Sojourner Truth. It was Amy Post who convinced Jacobs to publish her now-famous slave narrative, and, though they had a tumultuous relationship, the Posts were some of the first people Douglass turned to after his daughter Annie died in 1855. Post also hosted a number of other reformers who were engaged in the abolitionist movement, but whose names would also become associated with women's rights, like Abby Kelly Foster and Lucy Stone. These radical reformers mixed seamlessly with adherents of the Posts' other major reform commitment: spiritualism. Thus, perhaps unexpectedly to those foreign to antebellum radical social reform, the Posts just as often hosted Kate and Margaret Fox, the founders of spiritualism, and Andrew Jackson Davis, its most influential theologian. The Posts were some of the first and most important popularisers of spiritualism in the United States. They remained staunch defenders of the religion throughout their lives: they hosted Andrew Jackson Davis after his scandalous divorce and remarriage upon discovering his 'true love' in another woman, and often defending the Fox sisters against skepticism, slander and vitriol.

Both in and outside of 36 Sophia Street, Post weaved a wide array of antebellum reform movements into a tightly knit community stretching from Rochester across the northeastern United States and into Canada. From here, she also stood at the center of a vast epistolary network of activists sharing everyday joys and sorrows across long distances. In this network, Post often held people's mail for them, and distributed information to friends far and wide. Hewitt admirably reconstructs this interracial, mixed-sex community. Throughout the region, moreover, she organised countless antislavery fairs, and convened scores of

women's rights meetings.

Where Hewitt's work does not succeed as clearly is in making clear what Posts' 'universalistic' vision actually was and what kind of a world she sought to bring about. The closest thing that she offers in this direction is an interesting exploration of the Posts' Quakerism. Across the work, Hewitt introduces various figures as both co-members of the Religious Society of Friends, and close friends of the Posts themselves. Both Amy and Isaac had been raised as Quakers, and regularly attended Quaker meetings across her region. In fact, Many of the Posts' longest and most meaningful friendships were with Quakers. As Hewitt argues, by the 1830s, a web of Hicksite Quakers connected radical activists across the northeast and into Canada, and it was into this network that Amy Post stepped in adopting her 'radical' reform positions.

Hewitt follows a number of recent historians in explaining the association between Quakers and social reform in terms of their adherence to an 'inner light' theology. Quakers believed that each person had an inalienable 'inner light,' a force which connected them directly to divinity and made them partially divine, and gave them a duty to aspire to a personal connection with the divine. As such, the argument goes, Quakers were much more likely to support any social reforms that allowed all people to attain to such a connection, and aspire to virtue. Elias Hicks, the minister whom the Posts followed, taught that the sole duty of Quakers was to follow their inner lights. Hewitt argues that it was his radical theology that led the Posts to their political positions.

Yet, it is unclear how inner-light theology, and Hicksite affiliations, on their own, could have led the Posts' to their political views and the particularly 'radical' nature of their social reform work. Indeed, inner-light theology led some people to holding slaves, just as it led others to opposing slavery. Even though Elias Hicks wrote a treatise against slave-holding, many Hicksite Quakers strongly opposed this-worldly activism. As Hewitt recounts, the Posts were in a vocal minority who participated in the nascent abolitionist movement. In fact, they had to fight both their local and regional congregations to be able to take part in social reform work, to begin with. So, while Hewitt's work fails to convincingly offer Quaker theology as the sole explanation of the Posts' vision of social reform, it does open a number of fascinating new avenues for research. In particular, Hewitt makes clear, the Posts owed much of their radical political visions to their religious seeking.

In addition to being lifelong Quakers, the Posts were also deeply interested in questioning their own tradition, and exploring others. At 36 Sophia Street, the Posts held weekly interreligious 'free meetings,' seeking to create a 'church of humanity,' combining 'faith and activism and admit[ing] people regardless of religious affiliation, race, or sex' (p. 211, 175, 211). In these spaces, the Posts explored the other theology that would guide their lives: spiritualism. Indeed, Amy and Isaac Post were at the heart of 19th century spiritualist circles. In 1852, Isaac Post published an important work written while he was in a trance-state, channeling spirits: *Voices from the Spirit World, Being Communications from Many Spirits, by the Hand of Isaac Post, Medium*, with an introduction by Benjamin Franklin. The Posts regularly conducted séances in their home and often called on the spirits of the dead to aid and guide them in the rest of their reform work. These seances were often attended by their abolitionist and women's rights colleagues, and even occasionally attracted the likes of Frederick Douglass (who did not much care for the practice) and William Lloyd Garrison (who was much more sympathetic).

In fact, Amy Post devoted herself to spiritualism to such an extent that in 1886, a spiritualist magazine honored her as 'the Mother of Modern Spiritualism' (p. 285). Throughout the work, Hewitt discusses how taken the Posts were by the idea that people never died but merely passed on to another state of life. In describing Isaac's death, Hewitt speculates on whether Amy Post may have found solace in his letters denying the existence of death. Later on, Hewitt makes reference to Amy Post's notion that people lived forever in the spirit world, and that death was just the death of the body, and she adopts the Posts' metaphors in appealing to the 'spirit' of Amy Kirby Post in the conclusion.

Though Hewitt's arguments and evidence suggest that Post saw spiritualism as just as important as

Quakerism, Hewitt does not explore how Post's spiritualism underlay her social reform. Hewitt, for example, mentions, though does not explore the fact that in 1888, Post founded a 'joint stock company' to advance 'spiritualistic philosophy ... and measures of reform' (p. 287). This is an especially odd omission given her citing the pioneering work linking radical social reform and spiritualism in the antebellum era multiple times and thanking its author, Ann Braude, in her acknowledgements.

Overall, Hewitt's work expertly recovers Amy Kirby Post, revealing both how connected she was with the radical social movements of her day, and how interconnected those movements were with each other. Her story adds to the growing consensus that, central to the inextricably intertwined movements of abolitionism and women's rights, were a community of radically egalitarian friends. Yet, her work does not quite answer the question of how we could seek to build these radically egalitarian friendships ourselves, what visions they held for a perfected world, and what about these visions was admirably 'radical.' Though Hewitt does not provide the details one would wish for if Post's life is to be a blueprint for modern reformers, her work, is an excellent addition to the recent surge of scholarship on abolitionists and antebellum reformers, and a brilliant recovery of a largely forgotten figure.

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