

FRANCES WRIGHT: A CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION OF A LEADER
IN EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICA

by

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ABSTRACT

Frances Wright: A Contextual Interpretation of a Leader
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In this paper a case study of two years in the work of Frances Wright is offered as a context for examining an alternative view of leadership. The thesis of this paper is to claim that when historians use a pre-established screen for selecting that and those who are worthy of historical study, e. g., out-front leaders of opinion, that the richness of context is not appropriately explored and thus historical studies tend to distort rather than inform one's understandings of social movements and social events.

By examining Frances Wright through the context of such social conditions as women without suffrage, women as privatized and women as pioneering when they moved into public sector activity, one gains a contextual understanding of the significance of her work. To study how she participated in, how she responded to and interacted with, how she developed her responses to that which contributed to popular opinion helps one to further appreciate her influence in

altering popular opinion. This nineteenth century woman, in addition to pushing the barriers to women, challenged the economic establishment and the moral base of a slavery system which had been protected by the out-front male opinion. Third and of tremendous importance to one's understanding of this nineteenth century leader's context was the role and dominance of organized religion in all of its display of power through out-front opinion.

To look at the dynamics of these conditions is to add a dimension beyond the interest of earlier historians who would have one look to the personalized heroics which flatten and isolate Frances Wright as having had a meteoric and personal achievement in her efforts on behalf of women, blacks, and workers, and those who had not yet achieved a right to free public education. In that this is intended only to raise the issue of historical method through a case study example it has not been a project which would yet do a nineteenth century history or a richly deserved contextually sensitive biography of one of its most visionary leaders.

I remain indebted to the mentors and friends who generously commented on my thesis and helped me to improve my work; especially Dr. William D. Jenkins, Dr. Frederick J. Elson, and Dr. Gloriana M. Leck. I thank Drs. Jenkins and Elson for their guidance and encouragement while I was writing my thesis. I extend special appreciation to Dr. Jenkins for his constant support and friendship during the past two years.

To my co-researcher, and co-author, Dr. Frederick J. Elson, I extend a

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To my co-researcher, and partner, Glorianne Leck, I extend a

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of political values, beliefs, and actions. More importantly, a reexamination of leadership to include not only concepts of power and dominance but also of cooperation and mutual achievement of goals would prevent contemporary researchers in leadership as well as historians who use that research from viewing a leader simply as a male in an out-front politically sanctioned position.¹

In place of defining "effective" leadership by using stereotypic definitions of public and private behavior, Heller calls for a reexamination based on the notion that leaders are visionary men and

¹ This paper is based upon recent research in the field of leadership, which is summarized in Hugh Miller, *Men and Women in Leadership* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1977), p. 21. For additional information concerning leadership, see the volume *Leadership and the Public Sphere*, edited by the American Political Science Association (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), pp. 1-2.

INTRODUCTION

Especially problematic to nineteenth century American historical studies of social change has been the assumption that the most appropriate place to look for "effective leadership" was among those who held an out-front political position. As an obvious consequence this traditional notion of leader has excluded the disenfranchised, especially women, from historical explanation.

In the nineteenth century women were legally, sociologically, and psychologically excluded from the public, political arena and relegated to the private sphere. Trudy Heller takes the position that we need to dismantle this arbitrary bifurcation of public and private. Such a change would allow us to construct a view of women as capable of political values, beliefs, and actions. More importantly, a reexamination of leadership to include not only concepts of power and dominance but also of cooperation and mutual achievement of goals would prevent contemporary researchers in leadership as well as historians who use that research from viewing a leader simply as a male in an out-front politically sanctioned position.¹

In place of defining "effective" leadership by using stereotypic definitions of public and private behavior, Heller calls for a reexamination based on the notion that leaders are visionary men and

¹This paragraph draws upon recent research in the study of leadership, much of which is summarized in Trudy Heller, *Women and Men as Leaders* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982), ix-21. For additional information regarding leadership studies, see Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985, 1-18.

women who in fact sought to avoid the trap of rigid stereotypes developed in the past and instead created new images and possibilities for themselves as well as for situations in society. Do not the following words convey the sense that their writer struggled to avoid the trap of existing stereotypes, created new images and possibilities, and became what Heller calls a visionary leader:

I dare say you marvel sometimes at my independent way of working through the world just as if nature had made me much more of your sex instead of Eve's. Trust me, my beloved friend, the mind has no sex but what habit and education give it, and I, who was thrown in infancy upon the world like a wreck upon waters, have learned as well to struggle with elements as any male child of Adam's.²

Yet, as Jean Engle and Glorianne Leck note, Frances Wright will not be found with any regularity in general histories of the nineteenth century, "... except in specific histories of feminism.... [Wright's leadership] has been neglected by most histories.... Few people know anything about her."³

Just as Heller reminds us that leadership studies were grounded only in the "great man" theory, historian Joan Kelly reminds us that most histories were grounded as well in the "famous man" approach

²Frances Wright to Lafayette, February 4, 11, 1822, Theresa Wolfson Papers, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

³Jean Engle and Glorianne M. Leck, "Frances Wright and Margaret Fuller: Sanctions and Oversights in the Histories of Early Feminist Philosophy," *Women in History, Literature and the Arts : A Festschrift for Hildegard Schnuttgen in Honor of Her Thirty Years of Outstanding Service at Youngstown State University* (Youngstown: Youngstown State University, 1989), 122-23.

and that they "[were] construed from a male position."⁴ Consequently, as Engle and Leck note, Wright was generally "... ignored by most historians" and excluded from their list of nineteenth century leaders.

Historian Edward Pessen takes the position in his book, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (1967), that "when I conceived the idea of this study, I proceeded to draw up a list of labor figures who seemed to be ubiquitous, influential ... [and] Frances Wright was considered and rejected."⁵ Pessen, in recent correspondence, explained that his thinking "in passing over Frances Wright for Robert Dale Owen as a 'representation' of the N. Y. Working Man's Party ... was that he [Owen] held a position of leadership in the organization." But as Pessen indicates, "Were I to do it now [a study of the Working Man's party], my mind would be open. (I probably would include her.)"⁶

It appears that Heller's call "toward a richer understanding of leadership" is complicated by the fact that history, "construed from a male position," is grounded as well in existing, male-established norms of leadership. As Pessen implied in his 1967 work, "a held position" was synonymous with leadership. If historians, such as Pessen, assumed a leader is a person who was out front, in public

⁴Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 66.

⁵Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1967), 7.

⁶Edward Pessen to Joan E. Organ, January 31, 1989, Youngstown, Ohio. The author of this paper wrote to Dr. Pessen in early January, 1989 asking his thinking in not including Frances Wright as a leader in the New York Workingmen's Movement. Dr. Pessen responded by letter.

control and in power, they certainly passed over those women, like Frances Wright, who in 1829 were without suffrage, who were generally considered an inferior group, and who were just beginning to have access to public forums.

This male bias, according to political scientist James MacGregor Burns, reflects "the false conception of leadership as mere command or control." According to Burns, "as leadership comes ... to be seen as a process of leaders engaging and mobilizing the human needs of followers, women will be more readily recognized as leaders...."⁷

As a feminist historian, I seek to explore the contexts of history, the activities of the everyday, and the interconnections among the many actors who have made history. In so doing, I share with Burns the notion that "our main hope for disenthraling ourselves from our overemphasis on dominance lies ... in seeing that the most powerful influences consist of deeply human relationships in which two or more persons *engage* with one another." "It lies," continues Burns, "in a more realistic, a more sophisticated understanding of power, and of the often far more consequential exercise of mutual persuasion, exchange, elevation, and transformation--in short of leadership."⁸

Unlike previous historical methodology that seeks to pick the leaders, to ask what were their causes, and based on their effect, how successful were they, I seek to examine movements in context, to ask who were the agents of change, what was their manner of acting, and

⁷James MacGregor Burns, found in Heller, *Women and Men as Leaders*, 1. Source for Burns' quote was not given in Heller's bibliography.

⁸*Ibid.*, 45.

what if these agents of change chose to instigate, to nurture, to call for action and then to blend again. Success and failure as connected to the pre-existent notions of leadership no longer become issues in my examination. Someone such as Pessen who attributed success and leadership characteristics to Robert Dale Owen simply because he had held a position not accessible to women necessarily restricts one's understanding of important aspects of a political movement that included men and women and their varying actions for change.

My methodology, therefore, is to reconsider the previous notion of leader as a chosen male who advocated a cause and then produced an effect, and to replace it with the notion of leader as an agent of change who works through a social context. My purpose is to describe Frances Wright's ways of introducing change--her "leadership style"--a style that can not and must not be defined within the limits of the polarized styles of masculine and feminine, of public and private. It is to discover the intricacies of the ways Wright, as a nineteenth century woman, worked through her social context as an advocate for change, as a "leader" in the New York Workingman's Movement of 1829. Her goals, her objectives, her notion of human possibilities occurred within the interactions she had with people, with her social environment, and with her time. Wright's "leadership style" seen from a contextual vantage point not only gives information about contextual differences, but it also legitimizes Wright's differences as important to her ways of calling for change.

In the early nineteenth century, Frances Wright, a woman, who was six feet tall, dared to sound in her paper, *The Free Enquirer*, and on the platform the themes of equality, rationality, tolerance, and

peace. Her purpose, she said, was to outline "the field of truth" and "to expose such existing errors as must tend to blind the intellectual sight to its perception," "to be an agent of the popular mind." She claimed, "I have wedded the cause of human improvement; staked [on it] my reputation, my fortune, and my life...."⁹

Wright, by her very act of speaking, challenged nineteenth century America's assumptions that women, in Frances Trollope's words, "should be guarded by a sevenfold shield of habitual insignificance." The literature of the day glorified what historians Barbara Welter and Nancy Cott have called "True Womanhood," a complex of virtues of which the four most important were piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. As "the lady unattended by a male-protector," who was in her paper and on the stage calling on the nation to educate "the sex which in all ages has ruled the destinies of the world," Frances Wright threatened every one of those virtues.¹⁰

I wish to chart new directions, to show how historians may benefit in their interpretation of what and who produces social change by looking at what is possible and effective given the social, economic and political situation. I wish to use Wright as an example of a person who was an agent for and of change, who was a leader who transformed and was transformed by everyone and everything around

⁹Frances Wright D'Arusmont, *Life, Letters and Lectures, 1834-1844* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), ix, 44.

¹⁰Frances Wright, *Life, Letters and Lectures*, 23. See Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, ed. Donald Smalley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949); Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-174; Barbara Berg, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 75-94. Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977).

her. I wish to describe the connection of the ways Wright advocated for change through her life, her work, her speeches, her writings, her dreams. From the vantage point of contextual interpretation, I hope to legitimize Wright as an example of a woman who lived in the nineteenth century and who was, among other things, a visionary leader, thereby freeing her from the constraints of standard male-biased interpretations of leadership in a political movement.

This thesis is organized into three chapters, beginning with an introductory chapter to explain the justification and purpose of the study, and to outline the organization of the entire work. In the first chapter consideration is given to previous research with particular emphasis on the three twentieth century biographical interpretations of Wright's life: William Randall Waterman's, *Frances Wright*, A. J. G. Perkins' and Theresa Wolfson's, *Frances Wright: Free Enquirer* and Celia Morris Eckhardt's, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*. An attempt is made to determine how each of these biographers viewed Frances Wright, how each assessed Wright's "leadership style," and how each author regarded Wright's contributions to the New York Workingman's Movement of 1829.

The second chapter contains an overview of Frances Wright's life, not a biography as such, but rather a selection of materials necessary to provide points of reference, helpful to understand better the subsequent discussion related to Wright's own ways of agitating for change. In chapter three I present an intense examination of Wright's activities between 1828-1829. Particular emphasis is given to Wright as an interactive and dynamic agent of change for the New York Workingman's Movement.

Frances Wright in retrospect is the topic of the conclusion. The concluding chapter summarizes Wright's ways of changing, her manner of acting, with Frances Wright as an example of a visionary leader in early nineteenth century America.

W. A. A. [?], [?], "Granted," portrayed Frances Wright as "the champion of the [?], workers in 1828." She noted, however, that though "Frances Wright was a vital personality who rose like a meteor and shot across the American horizon leaving many vital reforms behind her," few in the audience remembered her name from their history.¹

Wolfson, co-biographer with Alice Jane Gray Perkins of Wright's life, *Frances Wright: Free Enquirer*, wrote that she first became interested in Frances Wright while doing research on the "early efforts at trade union organization" and on the women's political movement. "The name of Frances Wright," Wolfson noted, "appeared over and over again as that of a woman lecturer who was interested in workers' efforts to improve their own condition." She wrote that in 1959 she was able to find out more about this intriguing character "... this follower of Robert Owen, protege of Lafayette ... of Jeremy Bentham." Writing in later years about her experience as a co-author with Perkins, Wolfson noted that "our collaboration started as a sort of division of labor based on common interest in a personality who was provocative and rich in her own experiences, and whose contributions to American culture we both felt had never been fully recognized."

¹Thomas Walker Paines, *Frances Wright: A Biography*, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

²Research material [?]

CHAPTER ONE

Theresa Wolfson in 1936 wrote that the W. P. A. play, "Injunction Granted," portrayed Frances Wright as "the champion of the American workers in 1828." She noted, however, that though "Frances Wright was a vital personality who rose like a meteor and shot across the American horizon leaving many vital reforms behind her," few in the audience remembered her name from their history.¹

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¹Theresa Wolfson Papers, Box 34, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

²Research material collected by Dr. Theresa Wolfson while co-authoring book

William Randall Waterman noted in the preface to his 1924 work *Frances Wright*, that "at a moment when the women of the United States are ... bringing to a successful conclusion their long struggle for equal rights a study ... of ... Frances Wright seems most fitting, for ... [she] was one of the foremost pioneers...." Waterman continued, "of the life story of this interesting reformer surprisingly little has been known, although writers upon the history of the women's rights movement have almost invariably made her work their point of departure." He concluded his preface "with the hope of making Frances Wright something more than tradition, and of securing for her a definite niche in the social history of the people of the United States...."³

Evidence shows that interest in the intriguing character of Frances Wright continued and extended beyond the Waterman and Perkins/Wolfson studies. Letter after letter can be found amidst the Theresa Wolfson papers in the Martin B. Catherwood Library at Cornell University which detail correspondence between Wolfson and persons

with Perkins is located in Wolfson Papers, Boxes 34-43. Material includes notes, correspondence, copies of Wright documents and drafts of various chapters. Wolfson first became interested "in the name of Frances Wright" while a graduate student at the Brookings Institute of Economics in the 1920s. Particularly interesting is the correspondence between William R. Waterman, first twentieth century biographer, *Frances Wright, 1924*, to Wolfson, which delineates the difficulties he encountered in his research. Apparently Waterman found Wright's grandson, Dr. William Guthrie "most trying." After Guthrie moved to New York City from Sewanee, Tennessee "the box of Frances Wright papers could never be located." Guthrie then referred Waterman to Alice Jane Gray Perkins who had visited Sewanee in 1909 and had made extensive transcripts of the Frances Wright papers. Waterman noted that "a good deal" of his own material came from Perkins' material, which "is fundamental" to any study of Wright's life. The process that surrounded the Wolfson/Perkins collaborative work, the interest that each author had in writing a biography on Frances Wright is revealed in the typed and handwritten correspondence between and among Waterman, Wolfson and Perkins.

³William Randall Waterman, *Frances Wright* (1924; reprint New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1967), 9.

interested in researching various aspects of Wright's life.

For example, Virginia Rutherford, a Ph.D. candidate at Northwestern University, wrote in 1954 of her interest in writing a dissertation on the speeches and speechmaking of Frances Wright in America. W. S. Tyron, professor of history, wrote in 1955 of his research on a book about Wright's Nashoba colony, and of his interest in the "some forty or fifty letters not seen before that have come to light between Fanny and Camilla Wright, Lafayette, Sismondi, and the Garnett sisters."⁴

Within the past twenty-five years, several doctoral dissertations and one other significant biography have been written on Frances Wright. Marie Patricia Parnell in her 1964 dissertation, "The Educational Theory of Frances Wright D'Arusmont," noted that "no memorable events occurred to mark the date September 6, 1795, as an especially significant one; just as ... nothing historically important is connected with the date December 13, 1852." "These two dates were noteworthy, however," suggests Parnell, "for they marked the birth and death of a woman [Frances Wright] whose startling, unfeminine activities were to shock her generation...."⁵

"Despite her meteoric career, Wright's name is not well-known today, ... save for an occasional reference in an obscure footnote or as illustrative material when a lecturer wishes to document the

⁴Virginia Rutherford to Theresa Wolfson, April 21, 1954; W. S. Tyron to Theresa Wolfson, June 7, 1955, June 14, 1955, Wolfson Papers, Box 34, Files 15-16.

⁵Marie P. Parnell, "The Educational Theory of Frances Wright D'Arusmont (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, April, 1964), 1.

extremists of American reform," wrote Mabry Miller O'Donnell in her 1977 dissertation, "Reflections on a Free Enquirer: An Analysis of the Ideas of Frances Wright."⁶ Like Wolfson, who forty years earlier compared Wright to a meteor, O'Donnell as well as Celia Morris Eckhardt in her 1984 biography, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, referred to Wright's career as meteoric.

Curiously, Eckhardt first heard of Wright in 1974, the year after Wolfson died, when a friend from Tennessee called to tell her that he had "just run across the most dazzling woman: her name is Frances Wright." What Waterman, Perkins/Wolfson, Parnell, O'Donnell, and Eckhardt, strangers to Wright and to each other, seemed to have in common was the desire "to pay the honor properly due Frances Wright...."⁷

It seems ironic that with each generation trying to show "the long-dead friendship of some forward-looking woman ... Frances Wright" that Wright's name, as O'Donnell observed in 1977, "is not well-known today, nor does she capture much of a place in historical accounts....." Why haven't Frances Wright's contributions been more clearly articulated and celebrated by nineteenth century American historians? O'Donnell suggested that "unfortunately" one reason for Wright's exclusion from history may simply be that she was a woman. O'Donnell also observed that "her relatively short time on the scene

⁶Mabry Miller O'Donnell, "Reflections on a Free Enquirer: An Analysis of the Ideas of Frances Wright" (Ph.D. diss., Bowling Green State University, August 1977), 2.

⁷Celia Morris Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), vii.

and what may be termed her relative lack of success" may have contributed to her seeming anonymity.⁸

O'Donnell's interpretation seems to be accurate especially since evidence has shown that males who held out-front, politically sanctioned positions have captured the leadership roles in historical accounts and that their success has been evaluated based on their immediate and demonstrable effect. Wright, though certainly out-front, was first and foremost a woman, and because of her gender was therefore necessarily excluded from consideration both by her contemporaries and by historians as a leader in the way leadership has been traditionally defined and characterized. Success, a characteristic that has been traditionally defined, takes on a new look, however, when viewed not from the perspective of length of time but from the vantage point of what happened in response to Wright's presence.

Parnell offered another suggestion to account for Wright's seeming anonymity. Parnell suggested that "Wright never aligned herself with one particular cause or with one particular task." She was interested in the slavery question, the recognition of the common man, the denunciation of clerical control, the triumph of rationality, the rights of woman, the politics of her day." According to Parnell, Wright also remained "unswervingly dedicated" to the role of education in the re-shaping of free and independent men and women." Parnell advanced that Wright was merely one person who lent support, and consequently, in the study of any particular issue during the period in which Wright did her work, "she would emerge as only a

⁸O'Donnell, 2-3.

shadowy figure who lent . . . support to the cause of reform." "The very breadth of her abilities and interests," wrote Parnell, "have served to limit her fame rather than to create it."⁹

Parnell's analysis suggests more than a concern about "leadership" style. Do not most historians generally cite as leaders those persons, especially those "famous men," who worked out-front for a given special interest, as opposed to those who advocated for multiple causes from a deeply rooted ideology? Does it make sense that Frances Wright's name is not as well known as that of Thomas Paine? or Paul Revere? Does it make sense that Wright's is not as well-known as Lucretia Mott's or Margaret Fuller's?

Each of Wright's twentieth century biographers--Waterman, Perkins/Wolfson, Eckhardt--each in varying degrees, tried to give Frances Wright a "definite niche" in the social history of the United States, in recognizing Wright's "tigerish energy," her ability to "find diamonds in a dustbin." Waterman describes Wright as a leader "whose personality and eloquence" appealed to the "popular imagination"; Perkins/Wolfson describe Wright as "an effective leader of the popular mind," and Eckhardt describes Wright as "a self-styled leader of the popular mind."

Though the niche that Eckhardt created for Wright is larger than that created by Perkins/Wolfson, and the niche that Perkins/Wolfson created is certainly larger than that created by Waterman, all three biographical interpretations seem to be inadequate to the task of examining the breadth of Wright's career.

⁹Parnell, 166-67.

Her "leadership style"--her ways of producing change--is either missed completely or is ill-defined in all three works. Whatever the case may be, because of the limitations of these interpretations, the best that each work can attempt is to offer Wright a niche in social history, and not a position as a visionary leader.

Though Waterman claimed that Wright "showed what the feminine mind was capable of," he actually delineated in his biography what he termed Wright's "masculine independence of character."¹⁰ He advanced the notion of independence as masculine when he introduced Wright's letter to Lafayette in which she described her "independent way of walking through the world." Waterman interpreted her description as a comment "upon her masculine independence of character." Early in his work, when describing the Mylne family members' response to Camilla Wright, Waterman stated that they "were more fond of Camilla, whom they believed to be somewhat coerced by the more independent and masculine character of Frances."¹¹ Instead of a description of one of the most interesting and courageous of nineteenth-century women, Waterman defined Wright's "maleness." He attempted to legitimize her as "a famous honorary man" who championed the cause of the have-nots.

When describing her oratorical style, Waterman consistently used the words of Frances Trollope and her son, T. Adolphus Trollope. The Trollopes suggested that Wright was "a woman of a handsome masculine type ... [whose] almost unequalled command of words, ... had

¹⁰Waterman, 1-55.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 29.

the power of commanding the attention, ... of any audience...."¹² Waterman accepted the notion that what was seen as powerful must also be seen as masculine.

Continual reference can be found in Waterman's work to the many newspaper citations that described Wright as having leaped over the boundary of feminine modesty and "laid hold upon the avocations of man." Though Waterman stated that many of Wright's detractors continually described her as a "lady-man," it appears that Waterman himself used those passages that described Wright as "having ceased to be a woman" in order to legitimize her activities in the public sphere.¹³

Occasionally Waterman attributed Wright's "feminine mind" to her womanhood. Though Wright's taking the public lecture platform was felt to be an outrage upon the 1820s American sense that the woman's place was in the home, her action, suggested Waterman, lacked neither courage nor coolness in the face of hostile audiences. Yet again what Waterman connected was Wright's courage and coolness to her "masculine character."

Waterman referred to the courage that Wright needed to take the public lecture platform, to speak out against the union of Church and State, Bank and State, to speak for the perfectability of mankind and womankind. He described Wright as "that leader whose personality and eloquence" made "organized skepticism" more

¹²See Thomas Adolphus Trollope, *What I Remember* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1888), 106-108; Frances Trollope, *The Domestic Manners of the Americans*, Donald Smalley, ed. (1832, reprint; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 70-73. Hereinafter Frances Trollope will be abbreviated FT.

¹³*New Harmony and Nashoba Gazette*, December 10, 1828. Quotation taken from the *Louisville Focus*.

generally felt, who appealed to the "popular imagination." Yet throughout all these descriptions, Waterman clearly gave the impression of Wright "as an antipodean ... in a cabin crowded with ladies who feel. . .as [if they are] in the presence of a new importation from the south seas...."¹⁴ By his attention to those references that described Wright's "masculine eloquence"--her "doing what only a man should attempt," he grounded Wright in the "famous man" approach to history and construed his story from a male position.

As a political scientist, Waterman was more interested in showing that Wright's primary interest was in discovering the "successful operation" of American political institutions. He even took the position that the most important cause for the failure of Wright's experimental community, Nashoba, was "the unhappy attempt to combine the original project with a cooperative community scheme, based upon Owenite plans for moral regeneration of mankind." According to Waterman, "not much can be said for community scheme." Waterman advanced that Wright had envisaged a practical experiment [Nashoba] when she "might have been more usefully employed in preparing the popular mind for exercise with knowledge of popular power." Wright spoke on July 4, 1828 for what Waterman believed to be "the crowning glory of American political institutions--their adaptability to change through amendments."¹⁵

As a Progressive, Waterman felt that "the real stir" that occurred

¹⁴Frances Wright to Camilla Wright, December, 1828, quoted in Waterman, 165.

¹⁵Waterman, 132-36.

in the late 1820s was caused by "the outcome of the clash between the expanding social, political, and economic life of the nation and outworn colonial practices and institutions." According to Waterman, where colonial practices and institutions restricted the development of social, political, and economic life, "dissent arose, a dissent which often took the form of infidelity, because the chief conservative influence was religion." He thus suggested that "it was Miss Wright's fortune to appear at the moment when that dissent was ripe for leadership...."¹⁶

Waterman's notion of leadership appears similar to what Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus call an old notion of leadership--"great events made leaders." Waterman suggested that skepticism, or infidelity as the clergy termed it, was already strongly evident in America's mid-1820s. Wright's "public advocacy of her philosophy of rationalism, and the freedom with which she expressed her opinions on existing institutions and conventions" fit with the great events of "the free enquiry movement." Waterman advanced the notion that the already existing "infidels and skeptics of the country rallied almost as a unit" around her.¹⁷

Similarly, Waterman took the position that "the free enquiry movement came in contact with the awakening of American labor" and that the Free Enquirers saw the possibility of securing a hearing for their own educational program through the workers' faith in education "as a panacea for their many ills." According to Waterman, "the

¹⁶ibid., 186-88.

¹⁷ibid., 160.

awakening of American labor ... was not the work of Robert Dale Owen and Frances Wright ..." Waterman suggested that "it was the outcome of hard times and the attempt of the workers to seek redress for ... grievances which appeared ... to widen the gap between the rich and the poor." He further suggested that Wright seized the opportunity to advance her notion that the remedy for inequality of condition lay in the reform of education. Workers rallied around Wright's lecture platform and listened to her words, "What has been partial in its distribution, imperfect, irrational, and unconstitutional in its nature, must be liberalized, equalized, rationalized and nationalized." According to Waterman the great events of the first American labor movement fit with Wright's system of "National, Rational, Republican Education."¹⁸

In a 1930 letter to Wolfson, Waterman stated that Wright's "interest was not in the labor movement per se ... but rather in using that movement as a lever to effect a general reorganization of American society." He wrote that he "is not so sure" that he agreed with Wolfson "as to the value of Wright's contributions to the American labor movement." "It must be kept in mind," Waterman wrote, "that during the greatest activity of the working men, from October, 1929, to the spring of 1830, Wright was not in the country ... [she was] occupied in removing the slaves to Haiti." "The more I have studied the labor movement of the [18]20s and [18]30s, the more I am convinced," Waterman continued, "that ... Wright's interest in the movement, particularly in New York City, gave it tremendous color...."

¹⁸Waterman, 187. *Free Enquirer*, April 22, 1829.

Waterman believed that Wright "was responsible for not a little undesirable publicity," and that "the very generous tinge of exotic radicalism which the presence of Wright, Owen, and Evans gave to the movement proved most disastrous." He stated that Wright's "most important contribution to the cause lay in stimulating the interest of the workingmen in public tax-supported education." Waterman added that "it must be kept in mind that the interest was there before she began her work...." Therefore, he concluded that "Frances Wright's contributions to the American labor movement ought to be handled with some caution."¹⁹

Wolfson's and Perkins' biography certainly indicated that they handled Wright's contributions to the New York Workingman's Movement with caution. It is not certain, however, that their caution resulted from a shared conviction that "the workingmen would have made quite as much progress if Frances Wright ... had not appeared on the scene." Evidence seems to indicate that their caution resulted more from their lack of primary sources.²⁰

It is significant, as Waterman had pointed out to Wolfson in their 1930 correspondence, that Perkins "was interested in a highly personal biography of Fanny" and "did not seem interested" in the political, social, and economic background. He noted that he "found

¹⁹William Randall Waterman to Theresa Wolfson, January 17, 1930, Wolfson Papers, Box 34, File 3. Though it is difficult to prove that Wright was the originator of a public tax supported education, evidence certainly shows that she actively espoused the idea and was in fact a key agent of change "in raising the consciousness of the working classes on behalf of public schooling." See Gerald Gutek, *Education in the United States: An Historical Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1986), 76-79.

²⁰William Randall Waterman to Theresa Wolfson, January 17, 1930, Wolfson Papers, Box 34, File 3.

little" in "Perkins' ... selections ... on Fanny's part in the labor movement ... [since] Miss Perkins' selections, of course, reflected her own interests."²¹

Writing in 1959 about hers and Perkins' interest in Wright, Wolfson stated that "Miss Perkins was particularly interested in Miss Wright's relation to General Lafayette and also in her [Wright's] idea of American democracy." "I was particularly interested," stated Wolfson, "in Wright's influence on the American scene, in her influence on the formation of the Workingman's Party ... in specifically why the first Workingman's Party in the United States was called the Fanny Wright Party." When it came to material that would answer Wolfson's questions related to Wright's involvement in the Workingman's Movement, "dependence," as Waterman observed, "still had to be placed upon [Perkins'] transcripts of the originals." Waterman added that "it seems too bad that with a second [work] of ... Wright's life ... [so much depended on] ... Perkins' own selections from the originals."²²

Evidence indicates that the Perkins/Wolfson biographical interpretation suffered from their "collaborative" efforts. After reading two chapters that Wolfson wrote, Perkins commented in a letter to Wolfson that "they [Wolfson's chapters] seem ... a little heavy--not interesting enough to the general public." Perkins further indicated that "fundamental difficulties" existed in Perkins' and Wolfson's "methods of approach...." Obviously, Perkins' interest in writing a "highly personal biography" conflicted at times with Wolfson's interest

²¹ibid., Undated correspondence, Box 34, File 3.

²²ibid., Undated correspondence, Box 34.

in studying, describing, and evaluating Wright's contributions to the politics and activities of the American Labor Movement.²³

What those "fundamental difficulties" were between Perkins and Wolfson and how they eventually resolved these differences can only be surmised. Descriptors found in their book on Wright's activities indicate that most likely compromise existed between Perkins' desire to engender controversy and excitement and Wolfson's desire to investigate.

Such bothersome descriptors introduce, for example, Wright's remarkable attempt at an experimental slave colony as "... Fanny's rose-colored representation of ... a free love colony..."²⁴ "Rose-colored" gives the reader the impression that Wright was unrealistic about her plan for the gradual emancipation of the slaves. Evidence shows, however, that Perkins, in fact, had records that indicated that Wright had done extensive research into the problem of slavery. She possessed written correspondence that indicated that when Wright explained the idea of her experimental colony to Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Andrew Jackson and Lafayette that they in fact supported her project.

Similarly, descriptors imply that Wright's Nashoba was "a brief and tragic experiment" and that her activities in the summer of 1829 "may be counted as one of the most soul-satisfying periods in Fanny Wright's lifelong struggle for noble fame." "It is a pity," suggested the

²³Ibid., Box 34.

²⁴A. J. G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson, *Frances Wright: Free Enquirer* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939), 182.

Perkins/Wolfson work, that "it was so brief."²⁵ Again, the word "pity" emotes an evaluation that the reader should feel sorry for Wright, that the reader should view Wright's "success" only in terms of her 1829 activities, and that Wright was on a search for "noble fame." Perkins/Wolfson seem to have fallen for the "meteoric career" description of Wright's life that existed in many of the theretofore interpretations. For Wright's "vitality" to be connected to only one or two years misses the completeness, the fullness of her life. Wright herself in describing her Nashoba experiment stated that "I have made the hard earth my bed, the saddle of my horse my pillow, and have staked my life and fortune on an experiment having in view moral liberty and humane improvement..." Wright concluded that her preparation for Nashoba had given her "the information and the experience ... to guide the efforts of a really efficient leader of the popular mind." She believed herself now ready to prepare "the popular mind for the exercise with knowledge of popular power."²⁶ Wright's words hardly give the impression of a woman who wanted pity, who saw her political work confined to a year or two, and who sought fame.

Though evidence indicates that Perkins was the author who was primarily interested in Wright's temperament, these editorial-like descriptors certainly color what is suspected to be Wolfson's narration of the activities of Wright's "public life." Perkins/Wolfson at times

²⁵ibid., 244.

²⁶Frances Wright D'Arusmont, *Biography, Notes, and Political Letters* (New York: John Windt, 1844), 22-33. Hereinafter Frances Wright will be abbreviated FW.

presented Wright as the champion of the idea "that man was not a helpless victim who needed only the ... development of the power already in his possession to be happy" and ironically, at other times, presented Wright as the victim of her own power.²⁷

Also frustrating to the Perkins/Wolfson interpretation is that the authors often quoted extensively from letters and other documents without identifying their provenance. Though certainly less than satisfactory as a biographical interpretation of Wright's life, interest in the Perkins/Wolfson "collaborative" work exists, however, in their sense of Wright as a leader. Perkins/Wolfson used Wright's own words in their portrayal of her as an "efficient leader of the popular mind."²⁸

Perkins/Wolfson quoted Wright that in her new role as "efficient leader of the popular mind ... she felt ... better equipped for her next adventure in the field of social service...." These authors advanced the notion that this "social service" had to do with Wright's speaking on the lecture platform and with her writing in the *Free Enquirer*, and that the "the kind of people who made up Fanny's audiences," who benefited from her "social service" were persons of the "popular" mind, of "popular" opinion.²⁹

Those persons of the popular mind, according to Wright herself, were "mechanics [from Philadelphia, New York City, and Baltimore] who are in active cooperation and want nothing, ... but some heads to guide them...." Perkins/Wolfson further indicated that these workers

²⁷ *ibid.*, 30.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 33.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 33.

were "fascinated" with Wright's "charm of style, beauty of diction, and boldness of invective." Her *Free Enquirer*, stated Perkins/Wolfson, "made itself useful as a medium of exchange of views, and information concerning the general activities of those groups of young mechanics who had begun to combine for redress of the hard conditions of their daily toil." "No inconsiderable part of her audience," wrote Perkins/Wolfson, "was drawn from exactly this class of society." Perkins/Wolfson also took the position that the "popular mind" came to include not only the mechanics but also those "respectable members of the female sex and those protesting elements in the population which neither church nor political parties had been entirely successful in assimilating."³⁰

What is worth noting about the Perkins/Wolfson work is the distinction that they imply when they stated "that the tolerant, somewhat contemptuous amusement and curiosity displayed by leaders of opinion towards. ... a lecturing woman, ... was gradually replaced by disapproval from both pulpit and press."³¹ Without any analysis, however, Perkins/Wolfson seemingly advanced the notion that differentiation existed between the "leaders of opinion" and their "efficient leader of the popular opinion."

Those "of opinion," implied Perkins/Wolfson, were those who were out-front and in control, those who held property, spoke from church pulpits, and held public positions. The leaders of opinion were those men who were thus legitimized by their propertied and office-

³⁰Perkins and Wolfson, 245-250.

³¹*Ibid.*, 256.

held positions. Their voice, though representative of the few, was the heard voice. Those of popular opinion, on the other hand, were the propertyless mechanics, artisan journeymen and small masters, "the members of the female sex, and the protesting elements in the population which neither church nor political parties had assimilated."³² They were "the other," the not legitimated, unheard voice of the many.

Wright as the leader of the popular mind was a woman, and at that "a new phenomenon among the human species--a lecturing woman"--and as such represented the not legitimized "other." Her voice thus was the voice of "the other" addressing the "other." Reference to Wright as the excluded other is found in the Perkins/Wolfson interpretation of Wright at her Hall of Science. "For now, at least," stated Perkins/Wolfson, "as a leader of the popular mind and director of the Hall of Science,. . . she could feel herself secure in the possession of one place of assembly which the most powerful of her enemies had no power to exclude her."³³ The uniqueness of the Perkins/Wolfson 1939 biographical interpretation lies in its beginning formulations of the existing differences between leaders of opinion and those of popular opinion.

With regard to her actual involvement as "a leader" in the New York Workingmen's Movement, however, Perkins/Wolfson stated that "certainly the barrage of attacks which was hurled upon her gave her a far more prominent place as a leader of the workingmen's movement

³²ibid., 260.

³³ibid., 295.

than she actually deserved." They further indicated that "the workingmen's political and economic movement ... was decidedly an American product" and that "[she] was never sufficiently aware of the American worker to realize that he could not accept the remedies which she proposed."³⁴ In later correspondence Wolfson took the position that with regard to "the Fanny Wright Party in Politics one will never understand how the name of Fanny Wright came to be the sign and symbol of the first labor movement in the United States."³⁵

According to Perkins/Wolfson, "the Hall of Science remained the one tangible sign of her [Wright's] campaign for a juster and more liberal public opinion." "Its forums," wrote Perkins/Wolfson, "furnished a much needed center for free enquiry among the more intelligent young mechanics of the Workingman's Party to whom all other institutions of higher learning were hopelessly closed." With its eventual sale in the early 1830s, Perkins/Wolfson commented that "thus came to an end the only one of Fanny's ventures in the cause of human improvement which had achieved an immediate and tangible success." "She yet remains," stated Perkins/Wolfson, "a person whose permanent achievements in the field of social service far outweigh the many obvious and disastrous failures of some of her most cherished intentions."³⁶

Perkins/Wolfson obviously interpreted success according to the traditional notion of success as something that lasts, can be seen, is

³⁴Ibid., 253.

³⁵Undated correspondence, Wolfson Papers, Box 34.

³⁶Perkins and Wolfson, 310, 383.

tangible. Yet, though "barren of tangible success," Perkins/Wolfson took the position that Wright "had by no means relinquished her old self-appointed task as efficient leader of the popular mind," that her "efforts to stir up and quicken the somewhat stagnant currents of the popular mind in the early nineteenth century have had incalculable results...." Her work, stated Perkins/Wolfson, "still continues to bear good fruit in all sorts of nooks and corners ... where old local tradition of the origin of some work of social service still points back to the long-dead friendship of some forward-looking woman of an older generation with Frances Wright."³⁷

Perkins/Wolfson, women who had lived during the Progressive Era and who wrote their biographical interpretation during the New Deal era, portrayed Wright as the pioneering leader in social service. Because they interpreted success according to its traditional notion, Wright's success, for Perkins/Wolfson, lay in the establishment of her Hall of Science, a "settlement" that they most likely considered as pioneering as Jane Addams' Hull House and Lillian Wald's Henry Street settlement.

It is not surprising with Perkins/Wolfson's 1930s world-view, with the apparent limitations that resulted from their reliance primarily on Perkins' snippets from her work with the "original" Wright papers, and with the fundamental difficulties that existed because of their "collaboration" that these two New Deal women came to what was most likely a compromise notion. It is understandable that Perkins/Wolfson indicated that the historically feminine field of

³⁷ *ibid.*, 384.

social service was the key to Frances Wright's life.

Almost fifty years later Eckhardt published a third and, to this date, the last biography on Wright. Commenting in recent correspondence on how she became interested in Wright, Eckhardt said, "it was Fanny Wright, indeed, who turned me in middle age into a feminist--both by way of the positions she argued so forcefully and because of the way she was treated in the United States of America."³⁸

According to Eckhardt, Wright spent her whole life advancing the radical thesis that justice would come only when "the two persons in human kind--man and woman--shall exert equal influences in a state of equal independence." Eckhardt interpreted Wright's words to mean that "Fanny believed women should not merely stay at home." "During a period infused by the powerful doctrine that men and women properly inhabited separate spheres--men, the public sphere and women, the private," Eckhardt stated, "Fanny Wright was arguing the contrary." "She insisted that they had to work politically and culturally together, and as equals, to shape a world that had any ... sense at all." "This position, at least for my part," Eckhardt advanced, "is at the core of her [Wright's] appeal today."³⁹

Clearly approaching her study from different interests than Waterman and Perkins/Wolfson, Eckhardt was most likely affected by the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and the 1970s Women's Movement.

³⁸Celia Morris Eckhardt, "Fanny Wright: The Woman Who Made the Myth" (Unpublished speech, 1987), 1. Eckhardt sent this speech to the author of this paper in response to a phone conversation in which Eckhardt and Organ discussed the notion of leadership as it related to Frances Wright.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 4.

She began her research on Wright's life in 1977, published her book in 1984, and in 1987 wrote, "I am honored to have had the chance to live for a decade with Frances Wright, and to do what I could to resurrect her claim to be numbered, as Wright put it, 'among those of the champions of human liberty and heralds of human improvement.'"⁴⁰

In light of Wright's disdain for religion, however, it is both interesting and curious that Eckhardt compared Wright to earlier religious champions of human liberty. It is particularly curious that in her book she compares Wright to the supposed "Herald" of human improvement--Jesus of Nazareth, the founder of the Christian religion.

Evidence shows that Wright charged that religion encouraged discord rather than universal charity and tolerance. Wright further advanced her notion that in no other country did religion have "so strong a hold upon women. Were it not for public worship, and private tea-drinking," stated Wright, "all the ladies in Cincinnati would be in danger of becoming perfect recluses."⁴¹ She especially fought against the power of the priest over the communicant. Yet, Eckhardt chose religious metaphors in which to define Wright. She described Wright as "the latter-day Saint Theresa" and referred to her messianic approach.⁴²

One other biographer compared Wright to the "Nazarene Reformer" and that was Amos Gilbert, Wright's contemporary, who in

⁴⁰Ibid., 29.

⁴¹FW, *Life, Letters and Lectures*, 36; FT, *Domestic Manners*, 75.

⁴²Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 168.

1855, three years after her death, wrote his *Memoir of Frances Wright*. Gilbert, a Quaker, who was Wright's friend and an associate printer, described in his dedicatory at least one motive in writing a memoir of Wright--"a craving [to have Wright] somewhat identified with one [the Nazarene Reformer] who was once the hated of a class." According to Gilbert, "eighteen centuries have not destroyed the reverential feeling ... [and] although posthumous justice cannot benefit the dead, it may encourage the living."⁴³ Clearly Gilbert attempted to engender in his 1850s Euro-American audience that same kind of reverential feeling for Wright that "may be found in the historical memoirs of the Nazarene Reformer."

While Gilbert placed Wright's ashes into "history's golden urn," Eckhardt emptied Gilbert's urn in the 1970s so that she could present Wright phoenix-like, so that she could re-present Wright messianic-like, so that she could present Wright as an alienated hero of epic proportions. Like Gilbert, Eckhardt realized that Wright was instrumental in the history of woman's rights and "now that women's rights, capacities, and proper sphere" were again important concerns, Eckhardt recognized the need to resurrect her name for the reformers of the Second Women's Movement.

Unlike Waterman and Perkins/Wolfson, Eckhardt had access to the 1975 published correspondence among Frances and Camilla Wright, their two American friends, Harriet and Julia Garnett, and a Swiss economist, J. C. L. de Sismondi. Eckhardt found them

⁴³Amos Gilbert, *Memoir of Frances Wright, The Pioneer Woman in the Cause of Human Rights* (Cincinnati: Longley Brothers, Printers, 1855), iii-iv.

extremely important in describing Wright's spirit, in revealing her thoughts and feelings about her vision.

These letters revealed as well Wright's contemporaries' thoughts and feelings about herself, her vision and her actions. Eckhardt probably found in J. C. L. de Sismondi's 1827 letter to Julia Garnett the inspiration for her use of the comparison between Wright and Saint Theresa of Avila. Sismondi wrote of Wright that "she is a new St. Theresa, in whom the love of principle and usefulness operates as the love of God did in the other."⁴⁴

Eckhardt's notion to compare Wright to Theresa was probably reinforced as well by her reading of the nineteenth century English novelist, George Eliot. Eckhardt suggested that Eliot "mused on the problems of women...." In remembering Theresa of Avila, for example, Eliot observed that her "passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life...." Eckhardt suggested that Eliot knew, however, that "the latter-day Therasas" seldom found an "epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action." "Their spiritual grandeur," advanced Eckhardt, were "ill-matched with mean oportunites, [and thus] their lives slipped obscurely by."⁴⁵

Wright's resemblance to the pragmatic Catholic saint did not escape Sismondi's notice nor did it escape Eckhardt's use. Eckhardt titled the chapter which delineates the beginnings of the period that she credits as the most significant part of Wright's journey--"The

⁴⁴J. C. L. de Sismondi to Julia Garnett, September 9, 1827, as quoted in Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 4.

⁴⁵George Eliot, *Middelmarch* (London: J. M. Dent, 1959), I, xiii, as quoted in Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America.*, 3.

Latter-Day Saint Theresa." In this chapter and in the chapter that follows, which narrate the story of Wright's activities during a two year period, 1828-1830, Eckhardt attempted to show just how far Wright's words resonated, just how "Fanny's excitement grew every step of the way, as bands of men and women gathered for her in each major town and wrote ahead to the next that she was coming."⁴⁶ She wrote as well of just how "mean" the opportunities were, just how ill-matched persons like Lyman Beecher and his daughter Catherine were for Wright's spiritual grandeur.

Beecher felt that Wright was part of "a conspiracy in our land against the being of God, and our civil and social, and religious institutions." Catherine Beecher, who according to Eckhardt "was the Phyllis Schlafly of her day," attacked Wright by asking, "who can look without disgust and abhorrence upon such a one as Fanny Wright with her great masculine person, her loud voice, her untasteful attire, going about unprotected ... mingling with men in stormy debate, and standing up with bare-faced impudence to lecture to a public assembly?"⁴⁷

Eckhardt concluded her study with a description of just how obscurely Wright's life slipped away. She wrote, "Fanny's death passed largely unnoticed...." Eckhardt suggested that only "a misplaced road marker for Nashoba" stands as a representation of Wright's life and her

⁴⁶ibid., 142.

⁴⁷Lyman Beecher, *Letters on Political Atheism* (Boston: John P. Jewett Co., 1852), 92-93, as quoted in Eckhardt, 215; Catherine E. Beecher, *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion* (Hartford: Belknap Hamersley, 1836), 23, as quoted in Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 249-50.

work.⁴⁸

Eckhardt's *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* is epic-like, almost hagiographic in the sense that it presents Wright as a central figure of heroic proportions who was actively engaged in a series of adventure-like developments important to the history of a nation, of a race, of a sex. Unlike Waterman and Perkins/Wolfson who in describing Wright's leadership style used Wright's own words, "efficient leader," Eckhardt introduced the notion that Wright was "self-styled," unique, distinguished, her own protege. Actively engaged in a series of adventure-like developments, Wright emerges in Eckhardt's work as an epic-like hero who is important to the history of the United States, blacks, and women.

Eckhardt observed that "on the near side of thirty-three and as a self-styled leader of the popular mind, Fanny Wright began the period that was the most vital in her life."⁴⁹ Wright's age of thirty-three as the age in which she entered her "public life" can of course be associated with Jesus' age of thirty-three, the age in which, according to Christian Scriptures, he concluded his "meteoric" public life. Eckhardt advanced her notion that Wright approached her audience with an eighteenth century commitment to tolerance and "with a nineteenth century belief in the saving grace of education." "And she approached it", Eckhardt stated, "as a messiah. . [who] seemed to look forward to years of fruitful labor in the vineyard."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ibid., 295.

⁴⁹ibid., 168.

⁵⁰ibid., 173.

Eckhardt relied on the artisan-poet, Walt Whitman, to affirm her notion that Wright "was a brilliant woman, of beauty and estate, who was never satisfied unless she was busy doing good--public good, private good." Whitman, stated Eckhardt, "thought Fanny the 'noblest Roman of them all.'" He remarked that Wright's "orbit was a great deal larger than theirs--too large to be tolerated for long: a most maligned lied-about character--one of the best in history though also one of the least understood."⁵¹

As a feminist in the 1970s Eckhardt looked to the "self-styled" woman writer, Virginia Woolf, and to Woolf's work, *Three Guineas*. Eckhardt wrote that "together [Wright and Woolf] ... saw that men had claimed the world, and the intellect for themselves and had relegated the hearth and heart to women."⁵² In interpreting Wright within an epic-like framework, she looked to the self-styled English novelist, George Eliot, and to her suggestion that "latter day-Theresas" seldom find an epic life. In looking for "a self-styled leader" whom she felt most resembled Wright, she looked to the epic hero of Nazareth.

Eckhardt finally took the position that Wright's story "is hard and disquieting." "It tells more about losses than the gains in the nineteenth century." "It tells how much people," stated Eckhardt, "love the rhetoric of equality and how little they are inclined to make equality possible." "It is a story of courage, boldness, and waste." "Most of all," stated Eckhardt, "it is a story not merely of the past: to

⁵¹Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: Appleton, 1908), II, 45; I, 80; II, 204-05, as quoted in Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 189.

⁵²Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 282.

learn it is to recover part of our democratic heritage, and to discover that the time for Fanny Wright has not yet come."⁵³

It is not surprising that Eckhardt, who viewed Wright as an alienated hero of epic proportions and as a woman whose life slipped obscurely by and whose "time ... [still] has not yet come," did not take seriously a study of Wright's contributions to the 1829 New York Workingman's Movement. Eckhardt saw Wright as a messianic hero not understood and thus as a woman who was unable to offer heroic leadership in her time .

In later correspondence Eckhardt wrote that "Fanny's insights into the special difficulties of women ... would make her problematic to the worker insurgency in New York."⁵⁴ She, like Waterman, advanced the notion that "in the fall of 1829, just as Fanny was leaving New York City on a circuitous route to Haiti ... the Working Men held an important meeting." Though Eckhardt stated that "evidence suggests that Fanny heard what had happened from Robert Dale," Eckhardt did not risk further statements about what Wright may have contributed to the N. Y. Workingmen's Movement as she travelled her "circuitous route to Haiti."⁵⁵

Eckhardt wrote that what Wright "may have" contributed to the beginnings of the American labor movement is an exercise in almost

⁵³Ibid., 4.

⁵⁴Celia Morris Eckhardt, "Fanny Wright and the 'Mechanics' of New York" (Unpublished speech, 1987), 5. Speech sent to author of this paper after a phone conversation occurred between author and Eckhardt, June 1989, regarding Wright's role in New York Workingmen's Movement.

⁵⁵Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 207.

pure speculation. The material on which such an assessment must be based is meager, Eckhardt remarked, "consisting mainly of Fanny's ... *The Free Enquirer* , and a handful of letters amongst her friends." "Still," stated Eckhardt, "it is a question that has made me realize how limited her influence had to be: she remained 'the other' in a political upsurge that was basically male and working class."⁵⁶

Eckhardt wrote that "as a woman who believed that women were men's equals, and that society would be askew until they were educated as such and allowed to act as such in all the business of public life, Fanny was beyond the pale." Eckhardt further exclaimed that "it is a testimony to the Jeffersonian principles that she stood for and to her sheer presence that Fanny had any effect on the workingmen's movement at all."⁵⁷

Eckhardt commented that "Fanny herself ... would not have actually participated in a group of working men coming together in part for the purpose of winning greater electoral power." According to Eckhardt, "this was almost a century before women won the right to vote, and perhaps because she was denied it, the vote never ranked very high on Fanny's list of political and social priorities."⁵⁸ Evidence shows that Eckhardt is mistaken in her notion that Wright was not interested in the power that was available to the working men through the vote. Repeatedly, both on the public platform and in the *Free Enquirer*, Wright encouraged working men to come together, to elect

⁵⁶Eckhardt, "Fanny Wright and the 'Mechanics' of New York," 4-5.

⁵⁷Ibid., 5.

⁵⁸Eckhardt, "Fanny Wright and the 'Mechanics' of New York," 24-25.

representatives from their class who would advocate for their needs in the state legislature.⁵⁹

Though Eckhardt advanced the notion that Wright's "vision of human possibility was grand and that vision dazzled New York radicals and working people at the end of the 1820s," her interpretation of Wright's self-styled leadership is in fact limited by her focus primarily on the constraints that were placed on Wright because she was a woman in nineteenth century America. Though Eckhardt described Wright as a "self-styled leader," it seems that in her treatment of Wright's contributions, particularly her involvement in the workingmen's movement, she shares with Pessen his earlier notion that a leader was a man who held a legitimate, often a political position. According to Eckhardt, Wright was a self-styled leader, and because of this "self" appointment, she was not seen as a legitimate leader, but rather as an exception, a victim of her "impotence." "Her work is useless," wrote Eckhardt, "if one looks to it for ways to get politically from here to there." Eckhardt took the position, however, that "her commitment to democratic social and political relations remains a blazing inspiration to those of us who follow."⁶⁰

Eckhardt thus viewed Wright as leaving a legacy of words, of ideas that echo commitment and reverberate with the notion that it was not sufficient merely, to use Wright's words, "to will" equality, but it is

⁵⁹Frances Wright discusses the importance of working men electing representatives from their own class for the state legislatures in her "Introductory Address," delivered at the opening of the Hall of Science, New York City, April 26, 1829, printed in *The Free Enquirer*, May 13, 1829.

⁶⁰Eckhardt, "Fanny Wright and the 'Mechanics' of New York," 27-29.

necessary "to fight for it."⁶¹ Eckhardt brought Wright back as a phoenix-like symbol, as an epic-like literary hero with hopes to encourage the living sisterhood of the 1970s and 1980s to fight for change. Because Eckhardt fundamentally believed that Wright's potentiality was constrained by her sex, and because Eckhardt interpreted a nineteenth century leader as one who made changes through the political system, she, like Pessen, overlooked the context and the whole of all of the contributions to a particular political movement. Eckhardt acknowledged Wright's rhetoric and inspiration as significant to the individual legacy that Wright left. But she failed to legitimize this same rhetoric and inspiration as directly contributing to the ways individuals responded to their oppressions and the ways in which groups were inspired to take up the task of change.

To date, no one who wrote a biography of Frances Wright took the position that Wright's rhetoric and inspiration directly contributed in helping individuals, particularly workingmen, blacks, and women, realize and respond to their oppression. In their concentration on what Wright was doing, in their focus on how Wright was limited by her sex, in their over-attention to the ire that she ignited, in their interpretation of Wright out of the context of her time, Waterman, Perkins/Wolfson, and Eckhardt de-emphasized the ways in which Frances Wright inspired all kinds of individuals to take up the task of change and as such was instrumental in the changes that occurred.

⁶¹FW, *Life, Letters and Lectures*, 12.

CHAPTER TWO

It is not the purpose of this chapter to offer a complete biography of Frances Wright, but rather to turn some attention to the details of her early life, to the context in which Wright grew to define herself. After all, she did not reach her adult life under what were considered to be ordinary circumstances, nor did she pass her teen years and early twenties under what was then considered the usual conditions for a woman of her time, her place, and her socioeconomic class.

Frances Wright was born in Dundee, Scotland, on September 6, 1795, the second of three children of James Wright, a tradesman and merchant, and Camilla Campbell, daughter of General Duncan Campbell. In addition to being a Dundee merchant, her father was a serious student. His special interest was in coins and in his mid-twenties he is noted as having despised the aristocracy and those who used "the silly morsels of heraldry" in designing coins. He argued for representations of "emblems of industry and commerce," such as weavers at their work, mail-coaches, and whale-fishing.¹

Shortly before Wright was born, James Wright was the object of government investigation for promoting a cheap edition of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. Because of the recent French Revolution, the

¹Perkins and Wolfson, 4; Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 1-5.

English government was extremely sensitive about the ideas of that Revolution being imported into England, so they were reluctant to allow the circulation of any pro-revolutionary tracts, such as Paine's.²

Wright in her 1844 autobiographical memoir wrote that her father changed as well the motto on his family crest from "For the king sometimes" to "our country is dear, liberty dearer." She then wrote that it was a motto that she "seems to instinctively to have adopted."³ Whether James Wright's conflicts with the promotion of rationality and human liberty had any impact on Frances Wright's later thoughts or actions is a question best left to the psycho-historians. It is certain, however, that his life's work and attitudes were important enough for Wright to mention later that when she discovered some of his papers, she marveled at "a somewhat singular coincidence between a father and daughter, separated by death when the first had not reached the age of twenty-nine and when the latter was in infancy."⁴

Wright's parents died in 1798, when Wright was two and one-half years old, leaving three orphan children. The three children were divided among various family members for their future care. Her older brother, Richard was raised with his uncle James Mylne, professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow. Camilla, a year and a half younger than Frances Wright, was left with foster parents in Dundee, and later joined her sister in England where Wright had been

²Waterman, 15.

³FW, *Biography*, 7.

⁴*Ibid.*, 7.

taken and made a ward of the Campbell household.

Removed from the liberal atmosphere of the Wright household, Wright lived in London with her maternal grandfather, Major General Duncan Campbell of the Royal Marines, and his daughter Frances. It was in rebellion against her Tory guardians that Wright began to understand the life around her. Of her early childhood, Wright wrote in later years, "There I was raised in the bosom of a rich and haughty aristocracy, from which I separated myself at the age of seventeen, a democrat in principle and learning."⁵

It was in this traditional environment of her upper-class British army family that Wright's passionate interest for humankind was first sparked. The beggars of London inspired Wright to compassion for the poor. As she walked about the city with her grandfather, she saw thousands begging pennies to buy bread. When she asked her grandfather why these mothers and their children were so poor, he said because they were too lazy to work. Once, when he answered a knock at the door to find a man dressed in rags who said he had eaten nothing for three days and begged to work for "victuals," her grandfather turned him away. When Wright wished out loud that she had money to give the beggar, her grandfather called her "a foolish simple girl" who knew "but little of the world." When Wright asked Campbell why rich people who did not work did not become beggars, he answered that work was shameful: "God intended there should be poor, and there should be rich." When Wright wondered if the rich

⁵*Free Enquirer*, March 17, 1832.

robbed the poor, he replied that if she entertained such thoughts she surely would not be admitted into good society.⁶

Provided with the education afforded by tutors, Wright often found herself in conflict with the ideas she was told to support. To be sure, Wright's mind was not passively receptive. Very early Wright demonstrated an interest in philosophical questions, being concerned with the nature of truth and knowledge. "Can truth be dangerous?" Wright once asked her mathematics /physics teacher. "It is thought so," the teacher replied. From this encounter, Wright later wrote that she learned two things: "one, that Truth had still to be found, and the other, that men were afraid of it." What Wright did not know at this time was "where" to find Truth.⁷

When barely seven years of age, Wright asked "a good old lady " who had been charged with instructing Wright "in the elements of things sacred and profane," "You have told me a great deal about God's son, but [why have] you ... never told me anything about God's wife." In recounting the story ten years later to that same "good old lady," Wright asked if she [lady] remembered what she had replied. The lady said, "'Why--I believe I was at non-plus.'" Wright's inquiry of "why" did in fact leave people in a state of non-plus.⁸

Wright learned as she progressed in philosophical inquiry that to

⁶Joel Brown, unpub. memoir of Frances Wright, Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, 19-21. The memoir is handwritten on the backs of stationery with a letterhead dated September, 1893. According to a note signed "Alexis Brown, son of Joel Brown," the memoir was written about 1889. Joel Brown was a carpenter who worked for Frances Wright in Cincinnati in 1843.

⁷FW, *Biography*, 9-10.

⁸*Free Enquirer*, July 23, 1828.

ask "why" was to rock the very foundations of religious orthodoxy. She stated in later years that that "there awoke on my lips ... a little word most prophetic of future heresy, even a word which orthodoxy admits not in her dictionary, and to which masters give a frown in answer."⁹

"Experience taught her in very early childhood," Wright wrote, "how little was to be learned in drawing-rooms," and she thus was inspired to surround herself "at all times by libraries." It was in these libraries that Wright "applied herself to various branches of science, and to the study of ancient and modern letters and the arts."¹⁰

But the attention of her early years was not altogether confined to a closeted-type of library study. Wright's "sympathies were powerfully drawn [as well] toward the sufferings of humanity, and thus her curiosity was vividly excited to discover their causes." At the age of fifteen, Wright asked, "has man ... no home upon the earth; and are age and infirmity entitled to no care or consideration?" At the close of her soliloquy, Wright "pronounced to herself a solemn oath, to wear even in her heart the cause of the poor and the helpless; and to aid in all that she could in redressing the grievous wrongs which seemed to prevail in society."¹¹

At age sixteen, "while [still] engrossed, perplexed, and often depressed" about her inability "to unravel the complications and

⁹Ibid., July 23, 1828.

¹⁰FW, *Biography*, 9-10.

¹¹Ibid., 10.

evident contradictions existing alike in the opinions and practice of men," Wright visited her uncle James Mylne. During her visit, Wright had access not only to the library in his home but also to the library at the University of Glasgow. It was in the course of her reading that she "accidentally" discovered an account of the American Revolution which had been written by an Italian named Carlo Botta.

Fearful lest Botta's account be fiction, Wright did not rest until she had sought proof of the existence of the United States. Botta's book awakened a new interest in Wright, for here she finally noted the existence of a country which held the promise of permitting the fruition of liberal ideas. Fascinated by a land where liberty reportedly reigned supreme, Wright's ambition was to visit the United States. "To see that country was now, at age sixteen," Wright later wrote, "her fixed but secret determination." As soon as she became legally and financially independent, Wright planned to travel to the United States. In the interim she familiarized herself "with the character of the American nation in its origin and infancy ... thus to prepare her mind for its more accurate inspection..."¹²

When she "came of age," she was offered a trip to Europe but she refused saying, "that she had rather travel in ... a young country inhabited by freemen ... than countries in ruin, inhabited by slaves."¹³ The culmination to her plans came in August, 1818, when Wright and her sister Camilla embarked from Liverpool to New York for a two-year visit to the United States.

¹²Ibid., 12.

¹³Ibid., 12-13.

For the two-year period, Wright and Camilla travelled extensively both northwards and southwards and carried on what could almost be termed a "love-affair" with the country. During the course of their visit, Wright wrote a number of long epistles describing the enthusiasm with which she viewed this new nation and its inhabitants. Wright sent these epistles to her close friend in England, Mrs. Rabina Craig Millar, who had previously spent some time in the United States. When Wright returned to England, she edited these letters for publication, under the title, *Views of Society and Manners in America*.¹⁴

Described in Wright's book are her interactions with the people of the working classes, the mason going to his work, the woman coming home from the market with her basket of supplies, the small shopkeeper, the farmer whom she met by chance on a river steamboat. Her reactions to the country contained such descriptions as that Utica was "a wonderful little town" and that the American gentleman has "about him an urbanity, and a politeness, breathing from the heart which courts and cities never teach."¹⁵

During that two-year period, Wright travelled throughout New England. She spent most of her time, however, in the middle Atlantic states where she found in existence the more liberal viewpoint that came closest to her notion of what was characteristic of the American republic.

¹⁴Waterman, 30-55; Perkins and Wolfson, 26-53; Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 25-48.

¹⁵FW, *Views of Society and Manners in America* (New York: E. Bliss and E. White, 1821), 130, 184.

Relating her reluctance to visit the southern states, she expressed her disappointment that "the sight of slavery is revolting everywhere, but to inhale the impure breath of its pestilence in the free winds of America is odious beyond all that imagination can conceive."¹⁶ At this time, however, the incompatibility of slavery and the American ideal did not greatly disturb Wright for she was able to blame its existence on the British who she felt introduced slavery into the colonies.

During her stay in the United States, Wright realized a dream: her blank verse tragedy, *Altof*, was staged in New York City's The Park Theater on February 19, 1819. She wrote in commemoration of its American production: "America is the land of liberty. Here is the country ... where the words of Freedom are not only read in the closet, but heard from the stage."¹⁷

Following her brief dramatic experience, Wright and her sister resumed their travels, visiting Canada. From here they travelled back to New York City where they found a quarantine in effect as a result of yellow fever, so they travelled to New Brunswick, New Jersey, to the home of Mr. John Garnett, an English gentleman who had recently emigrated from Great Britain. Their stay here marked the beginning of both sisters' lifetime friendships with the Garnett sisters, Harriet and Julia. From the Garnetts' estate, Wright often visited Philadelphia, and before she left for England she even travelled to Washington

¹⁶Ibid., 267.

¹⁷FW, *Altof* (Philadelphia: M. Carey & Son, 1819), iv.

where she attended the sixteenth Congress and personally met President James Monroe.¹⁸

Wright's return to London and the subsequent publication of her *Views on Society and Manners in America* attracted the praise from pro-American reviewers and criticism by those opposed to such ideas as expressed in the book. With regard to her own criticism of her work, Wright wrote in later years, that "you will find ... high-wrought enthusiasm, natural to an observer so young, ... who was contrasting ... this world of comparative liberty with the old aristocracies...."¹⁹

It is important to note that Wright recognized some of the country's faults. She thought the press abused its freedom, and that farmers had to work constantly for mere subsistence. She pointed out the evils of slavery as well as the problems inherent in the condition of women in America. She saw a marked discrepancy between the quality of education the country's "sons" received and the lack of a "proper education" its daughters received. Wright felt that America should educate its daughters, "not merely to enjoy, but to appreciate those peculiar blessings which seem already to mark the country for the happiest in the world." "Married without knowing anything of life but its amusements, and then quickly immersed in household duties and the rearing of children," Wright wrote, women "command but few of those opportunities" afforded to their husbands. At the age of twenty-six Wright thus recognized the problems she would later

¹⁸Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 25-30.

¹⁹*Free Enquirer*, March 17, 1832.

confront.²⁰

Though the anti-British sentiment which she displayed in her commentary gave rise to critical comments, Wright's enthusiasm and vivid descriptions brought her unexpected praise. The attention which it drew from such champions of reform as Jeremy Bentham in England and Marquis de Lafayette in France were more significant in terms of Wright's development.

Bentham was especially pleased, for he saw in her description the picture of a country which embodied his principle of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number." In writing to Richard Rush, America's minister to the Court of Saint James, Bentham said, "I want to talk with you about Miss Wright. I am in love with her, and I suspect that you are."²¹ Bentham sent her book to the radical tailor Francis Place and by the time she left for Paris she was Bentham's accredited messenger to correspondents in France and Spain. Men like Bentham had recognized Wright -- not only because she had dared to visit America and to write about it, but because she had been the victim of Tory attack as a result. Dissenters were forced to welcome her, but the fact that she was a woman, however, presented a problem. She could neither apprentice herself to their professions nor share in their usual forms of male camaraderie--neither at their bar nor at their clubs. They would have to face the problem of what to do with a woman who was not looking to be a wife, and Wright would have to

²⁰FW, Views, 22, 25.

²¹Jeremy Bentham to Richard Rush, July 29, 1821, Bentham MSS., University College, University of London; John Colls Diary, August 13-29, 1821, Additional MSS., British Library, as quoted in Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 49.

decide what she was to do with these men.²²

In Paris, in the fall of 1821, on Bentham's business as well as her own, Wright met the Marquis de Lafayette, a man who profoundly affected her and her future. Wright's initiative and determination, her sense of knowing what she wanted and then seeking it out was evident upon her arrival in Paris. Anxious to meet Lafayette, she proceeded immediately to LaGrange, Lafayette's home, without writing first to ask if he was there. To her great dismay, she discovered that he had gone to Paris that same day and that they most likely passed each other on the road, so she hurried back to Paris where they finally connected.²³

Her letter to Bentham, written after her visit with Lafayette, noted that their meeting "was scarcely without tears" and that "this venerable friend of human liberty" shared with Wright the same emotion for the country of his youth.²⁴ Thus, a visit, which was to last for two and one-half years, began.

Much debate exists over whether Wright and Lafayette were lovers or whether they were on father-daughter terms. To date no conclusive evidence exists that confirms either position. It is certain, however, that they shared a common love for the United States, and both had cast aside their aristocratic privilege for the advancement of human liberty and equality.

²²Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 49-53.

²³Waterman, 63-64; Perkins and Wolfson, 60-66; Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 52-69.

²⁴Colls Diary, Add. MSS., British Library, as quoted in Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 52.

Evidence shows that during the next two and one-half years, Wright spent her time among those in Bentham's circle and those in Lafayette's circle. While in the London salon, she dined with James Mill and his wife, talked with Joseph Hume, struck up a friendship with Frances Trollope, and alternated between visiting the Trollope home in Bloomsbury and Bentham's in Westminster. Through Trollope Wright came into contact with a group of political exiles from the various European abortive revolutions.²⁵

While in Paris Wright engaged with the day's "fashionable republicans." Benjamin Constant, Lafayette's fellow-deputy, companion in exile of Schiller and Goethe, gifted novelist, Augustin Thierry, a promising historian who was just beginning to ponder the connections between British and French history, and Ary Scheffer, member of the clandestine Carbonari, were just a few persons mentioned in Wright's correspondence. Such correspondence indicated that Wright became a regular as well in Parisian salons.²⁶

Most of her time, however, Wright spent at LaGrange with her friend and confidante. In dedicating herself to Lafayette, she most likely believed that she was devoting herself to a great set of ideas as they were embodied in one person. She even tried, through him, to play her part in the fight against tyranny, as she involved herself in various uprisings throughout Europe.

The secret society Carbonari (charcoal burners) first appeared in Italy, where it had already been responsible for the liberal movements

²⁵Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 63.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 68.

in Naples and Piedmont. In 1821 lodges of the society were established in France, where they rapidly increased in number and in size, attracting chiefly the politically disaffected among the middle classes. The society soon included within its lodges many of the more prominent liberals, and among those to be found was Lafayette.

The object of the Carbonari in France was the expulsion of the Bourbons, and the setting up of a provisional government which would allow the people to decide for themselves the type of rule they really wanted. Evidence indicates that the French Carbonari efforts proved unsuccessful, however, and when Carbonarism collapsed in 1823, so did the efforts of the French liberals. In the elections of 1824 but nineteen liberal deputies were returned to the Chamber, and among the defeated was Wright's herald of human liberty and equality, Lafayette.²⁷

More than twenty years afterward, Wright summed up the causes of the liberal failure as they appeared to her. In her autobiography she wrote that "she had ... seldom anticipated success to efforts of which the object appeared ill-defined...." She noted that "the general want of political knowledge and political experience, the frequent vanity and frivolity of individuals, ... the absurd drawing room intrigues ... contrasted" with what she saw as the "serious character of a struggle in which human lives ... were the stakes of the game."²⁸

It is important to remember that she included these reflections

²⁷Waterman, 68-72, 77; Perkins and Wolfson, 69-71, 74-75, 80, 85-86; Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 57, 69.

²⁸FW, *Biography*, 19.

in what was in a sense her own revisionist history. Her thoughts connected to the Carbonari movement more than likely reflected her efforts to defend and to show that though her efforts at Nashoba had to be aborted, the idea behind Nashoba was not born in a drawing room, nor was its object ill-defined. In these reflections, Wright gave her thoughts on what was needed for a movement to be successful and what was required from the individuals who led such successful movements. Following his discreditation for his share in the Carbonari movement, and his defeat in the elections for the Chamber, Lafayette most likely accepted with relief and enjoyment the invitation of the Congress and President of the United States to visit in the summer of 1824. Furthermore, both Wright and Lafayette were probably overjoyed at the prospect of their seeing "the promised land again" and this time together.

Lafayette's family was not pleased, however, about the prospect of a non-related, unmarried female accompanying their father on his trip abroad. Wright proposed as a solution that Lafayette adopt both her and Camilla as his legal daughters. Her proposal was something that they had discussed between them, and for which she cited references he had made in letters to her, such as "How happy I am and how proud of your friendship and of this adoption which joins my fate to yours for life!" Lafayette's family was unwilling to accept this proposal, however, and thus a compromise ensued. Though Lafayette sailed for New York without Wright and Camilla in mid-July, 1824, they soon followed him.²⁹

²⁹Helen Beal Woodward, *The Bold Woman* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Young,

Wright and Camilla returned to the United States on September 11, 1824. One writer wrote that "only a prophet present at the dock that day would have realized that [Wright] would make such an imprint on the American mind that few living during the next decade would have been unaware of her existence...."³⁰ Part of the time she accompanied Lafayette. During her travels with Lafayette, however, Wright made the acquaintance of such men as John Quincy Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Sam Houston, and Andrew Jackson. With men such as Jefferson and Jackson, her major point of discussion focussed on the slave question.³¹

Though Wright had been critical of slavery in *Views*, it was during the months spent in the United States in 1824-1825 that she became increasingly concerned with the "horrible ulcer which now covers a large part of this magnificent country." Wright developed a purpose which was to motivate her next few years of work. For in seeking some solution to the slave question, Wright saw the formation of a worthwhile objective, which, if achieved, would result in fuller attainment of the republican ideal.

Determined to know as much about slavery as she once had been to know all about America, Wright set out to carefully study "extracts from the registers of all the laws of the slave states, bearing directly upon the labor and the government of the negro." Wanting to see the slave system at first hand, Wright and Camilla began to plan their own

1953), 29, as quoted in Parnell, *Educational Theory of Frances Wright D'Arusmont*, 15.

³⁰Parnell, 15.

³¹Perkins and Wolfson, 117-144; Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 84-89.

tour of America on the way to meet Lafayette in New Orleans on April 1, 1825. Through her discussions with many plantation owners, including Jefferson and Madison, Wright quickly realized that the solution lay not merely in the emancipation of slaves, but in the education of slaveholders as well as slaves so that they would be able to meet the demands of a free economy when they gained their mutual emancipation. Thus, although her first mention of education came in her demand for better female education, Wright's first defined educational program was designed for the ultimate preparation and freedom of the American plantation owner and slave.³²

Wright, who was convinced that there could be a gradual emancipation from slavery through education, was impressed by the success of both Robert Owen's communitarian society at New Harmony and George Flower's Birbeck community in Albion, Illinois. Determined to combine her educational notion with that of the Owen and Flower notion of cooperative labor, Wright set out to formulate her plan for the solution to the slave problem during the summer of 1825.³³

It is important to note that before Lafayette left for France, Wright explained her Nashoba plan to him and told him that people had encouraged her far beyond her hopes and had assured her that she was perhaps the only person, other than Lafayette himself, who

³²Gilbert, *A Memoir of Frances Wright*, 93; Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 84-89; Parnell, *Educational Theory of Frances Wright D'Arusmont*, 18-19.

³³Arthur Eugene Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950), 219. See also Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 92-107.

could make it work. When Lafayette worried about "the ignorant white population of the South who have so long prohibited the instruction and very generally the emancipation of the slaves," Wright did not discount the danger but thought her sex might guard her project against violence. Wright also argued that because she was "very generally known and ... looked upon as a friend by the American people," she would be protected by them. Furthermore, Wright thought success certain since Andrew Jackson had offered to help her choose the acreage of land for her experimental community. Hesitantly, Lafayette gave his blessing, and he left for France on September 6, 1825, the day he celebrated his sixty-eighth birthday, and ironically, the same day Wright turned thirty.³⁴

Through Lafayette, Wright communicated her interest to Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and John Marshall, as well. Jefferson encouraged her, commenting, "every plan should be adopted, every experiment tried, which may do something towards the ultimate object. That which you propose is well worthy of trial." "You are young, dear Madam," Jefferson said, "and have powers of mind which may do much in exciting others in this arduous task." Madison lauded her proposal for educating the slaves while preparing them for freedom, but cautioned her about the communitarian nature of her liberation plan, stating that in other such establishments much of the success resulted from a religious impulse on the part of the members, enforced by strong control from a religious leader. Monroe approved

³⁴FW to Julia Garnett, June 8, 1825, Garnett Letters, Houghton Library, Harvard University, as quoted in Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 103-107.

the plan on the understanding that it be undertaken in the South and that the slaves be colonized.³⁵

Encouraged and certainly inspired by such support, Wright joined in partnership with George Flower, a leader of the Birbeck community, and together they undertook the task of formalizing the new experimental community. The plan was basically simple: the purchase of land where from fifty to one hundred slaves could earn money for their emancipation, while simultaneously learning those skills and attitudes necessary for freedom. Wright intended to bring purchased slaves, allow them credit for their labor toward cancelling their purchase price, educate them for responsible citizenship as free persons and then if necessary colonize them in a suitable place such as Mexican Texas or Haiti.

In September, 1825, Wright and Flower departed on a trip to Nashville, Tennessee, in search of suitable land for their experiment. They travelled by horseback to see lands which had recently been acquired from the Chickasaw Indians along the Wolf River. Evidence shows that Andrew Jackson helped Wright with arrangements in her initial purchase of three hundred and twenty acres outside Memphis. Later, through additional purchases, she increased her holding to two thousand acres, and decided to name her first property in America "Nashoba," the Chickasaw word for wolf.

Wright published the plan for the Nashoba experiment in the

³⁵*The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1895), 343-45; *The Writings of James Madison*, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1900-1910), IX, 224-29, as quoted in Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 110.

local papers and wrote Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation* that "the principal people of the state concurred in it."³⁶ She announced that Nashoba would soon need carpenters, bricklayers, and other good artisans, and she was eager to have free people, white or black, as soon as houses were ready for them. Wright hoped to open the school "as soon as practicable" and expected to have the various businesses established at least by midsummer 1826.

Her hopes, however, were plagued with misleading rumors about her financial situation. Lundy's paper reported that Nashoba had "ample funds at command, as several wealthy gentlemen had contributed largely." She attempted to set people straight, to tell them that, in fact, Nashoba had little money and she described their funds as too limited to admit of any thing like a fair experiment of the 'Plan.'³⁷

The record of the Nashoba experiment which was kept in a folio titled "Journal of the Plantation" indicated that Nashoba exhilarated Wright. Journal entries show that in March 1826 Wright purchased eight adult slaves (five men, three women, and three children). By the spring of 1826 axes were ringing in the day, and the slaves were playing fiddle at night while others sang in chorus. In every letter that she wrote Wright talked about how busy they were. They cleared and fenced five acres and started an apple orchard. They put in potatoes,

³⁶FW to Benjamin Lundy, November 7, 1825, published in *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, December 17, 1825, quoted in Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 110.

³⁷*Genius of Universal Emancipation*, December 10, 17, 1825; FW to Benjamin Lundy, January 10, 1826, published in *Genius*, February 12, 1826, quoted in Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 112.

opened fifteen acres for corn, and planted two acres of cotton.³⁸

Wright spent much of the early summer months visiting the Owens in New Harmony, acquainting herself with many of the educational plans followed there, and forming many of the principles which were to guide her later educational thought. Important to Wright at this time was the friendship that developed with Robert Owen's son, Robert Dale.

Early in July, 1826, Wright, who had been visiting the New Harmony community, got back home exhausted, and unfortunately the next few months proved disastrous for her and Nashoba. Wright fell dangerously ill, due to "an attack of fever that went to [her] brain." In the meantime George Flower, who had administered Nashoba from its beginnings, and who had served as Wright's partner, co-planner, and co-dreamer had gone back to Illinois.

On December 17, 1826, Wright, who had nearly died, wrote a trust deed to clarify the legal and economic relationships that would prevail at Nashoba. She deeded Nashoba to ten trustees: Lafayette, William Maclure, Robert Owen, Caldwell Colden, Richesson Whitby, Robert Jennings, Robert Dale Owen, George Flower, James Richardson and Camilla, "to be held by them, and their associates, and their successors in perpetual trust for the benefit of the negro race." Wright made two conditions as well: that a school for black children always be maintained, and that slaves freed by the trustees be given opportunity to colonize outside the United States.³⁹

³⁸Eckhardt, 108-120.

³⁹*ibid.*, 130-140. See John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*

Speculation exists that Wright named ten unrelated people to the trust because she knew of no national institution uncorrupted by the feelings of a majority of Americans against black people. Of the two groups that formally addressed slavery, Wright believed that the colonization group by advocating removal of the most troublesome blacks merely sustained slavery and that the emancipation group, though "the real friends of the liberty of man," placed their emphasis on religion, and she thought them ineffective because they "tended rather to irritate than to convince."⁴⁰

In the schools of Nashoba, no distinctions would be made between white children and black. The sons and daughters of slaveowners would be educated to respect and accomplish physical labor, so that they could live independently of the labor of others. The children of the slaves would be educated to "fit them for the station of a free people." Wright's notion was that when those children grew up, they would together enjoy, "that complete equality of habits and knowledge, alone consistent with the political institutions of the country."⁴¹

To accomplish such ends, Nashoba needed help, and in the trust deed Wright asked people to give it, or to come themselves. No one responded to her appeals for help, however, and no students came to let Wright try what schools could do. Evidence shows that people told vicious stories as well about her and Nashoba. Her disappointment and

(1870; reprint, New York: Hillary House Publishers, Ltd., 1961), 69.

⁴⁰Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 136.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 137.

frustration was complicated by her poor health. Plagued by recurrences of fever, Wright left for New Harmony in March, 1827, looking no doubt for a boost of spirits.

Unfortunately, when she arrived in New Harmony, she learned that New Harmony was in discord as well. People were angry with Owen and with each other and despite his attempts to ameliorate the situation, anger had emerged as the victor. On March 28, Robert Dale and William Owen published a joint editorial in the *New Harmony Gazette* acknowledging defeat: "The experiment, to ascertain whether a mixed and unassorted population could successfully govern their own affairs ... was premature."⁴²

Robert Dale Owen wrote his mother that Wright had "much good sense, and no little degree of firmness," and speculated that the "community of whites" at Nashoba were "more likely to suit me in ideas and habits than any others that are now associating."⁴³ Owen left for Nashoba and on May 2, accompanied Wright, whose health was rapidly failing, to Europe where she would be able to rest more completely, and regain her strength. She hoped as well that she and Owen would be able to recruit residents for Nashoba.

During her absence Nashoba continued to fail and on her return from Europe on January 1, 1828, she proposed a change in the purpose of the colony. She now proposed that Nashoba become a cooperative community where whites and free blacks could live and

⁴²*New Harmony Gazette*, July 26, 1826, March 28, 1827.

⁴³*Robert Dale Owen's Travel Journal*, 1827, ed. Josephine Elliot, Indiana Historical Society Publications, vol. 25, no. 4 (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1977), 23, quoted in Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*. 139.

work together, while their children were educated in common as equals. Wright's aim was to raise the level of the black through mutual association, so that they could pave the way to an eventual amalgamation of the races.⁴⁴

The press criticized Wright's plan, decrying that Nashoba was a place of free love and racial amalgamation. Wright attempted one more change in the winter of 1828. She now proposed that Nashoba become a semi-capitalistic colony, whose sole communal advantage would come from the school and its training for life in a real community of equal property and mutual love. When this phase of her experiment failed as well, she left Nashoba under the direction of Richesson Whitby with the promise that when the time was appropriate she would return to accompany the remaining blacks to Haiti. She then joined Robert Dale Owen in New Harmony as co-editor of the *New Harmony Gazette*.⁴⁵

Despite the lack of notable success of Wright's Nashoba experiment, there is no indication that Wright ever regretted her efforts, or was ever dismayed. In fact, in commenting about Nashoba later, Wright wrote that she had "acquired no ordinary amount of varied experience, and of familiarity with questions upon which hinge the welfare of populations, and the grandeur and duration of empires." She believed that "at the practical efforts at reform, she had begun at

⁴⁴FW, "Explanatory Notes, respecting the Nature and Objects of the Institution of Nashoba, and of the Principles upon which it is founded. Addressed to the Friends of Human Improvement, in all Countries and of all Nations," published in *New Harmony Gazette*, January 30, 1828.

⁴⁵Perkins and Wolfson, 190-208; Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 141-167.

the wrong end." Wright was convinced, however, that "with a view to the accurate comprehension of the vital interests of the country, and of the world at large ... she had begun at the right end."⁴⁶

Wright concluded that her preparations for Nashoba, and the experiment itself had given her "the information and the experience ... to guide the efforts of a really efficient leader of the popular mind." She believed herself now ready to prepare "the popular mind for the exercise, with knowledge, of popular power."⁴⁷ The new interests which were to dominate Frances Wright's next two years centered on her determination to write and to lecture conveying her message of rationalism and freedom to the people of early nineteenth century America.

⁴⁶FW, *Biography*, 32-33.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 33.

CHAPTER THREE

By limiting themselves to a formal notion of politics, Wright's twentieth century biographers necessarily excluded her from consideration as a political leader because she was not male and did not hold an institutionally sanctioned position. Joan Wallach Scott aptly points out that "by studying power as it is exercised by and in relation to formal governmental authorities, historians eliminate whole realms of experience from consideration."¹ Like so many historians, Wright's biographers described their subject as unsanctioned and as a participant in activities that while seemingly provocative to political change were unsanctioned as well. In this act they have rendered Wright's political contributions nearly invisible.

Wright's biographers did not acknowledge her ways nor her importance as an opinion-maker who served both as a creator and as a leader in the political changes that took place in New York City between the years 1828-1829. They neglected Wright's "political being"--her attention to what was republican and unrepublican, her sense of what was possible and impossible to her cause.

By 1828 it was clear to Wright that in "winning the public ear" from her place on the public platform, she would "soon ... win the public reason." She did not believe that she could "convert the world"

¹Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 4.

to her opinions, but she did feel, however, that it was "in [her] power to influence it." Important to Wright was her notion that "composure," "fearlessness," and "explanation" were required "in declaring opinions, [that were] new to many." Equally important was her sense that she and her associates must "weigh well" their words in all their "communications with the world."²

Her awareness of the caution that was needed in communicating new ideas was present even in Wright's earlier commitment to her Nashoba experiment. It was not advisable, Wright warned her Nashoba associate James Richardson, "to launch our principles naked and defenseless in the midst of the enemy leaving to that enemy itself the task of developing them." Evidence from her correspondence with Richardson indicates that Wright was well aware that "all principles [were] liable to misinterpretation, but none so much as [theirs]." Wright knew that the success and triumph of their principles--in this case, of the gradual emancipation of black slaves by amalgamation--depended upon their use of "good taste and good feeling" in the expression and in the practice of these opinions.³

Wright's sense of caution, of what was possible and impossible related to her position as a lecturer was evident as well with her July 2, 1828, correspondence with George Houston. Houston, an English immigrant printer, founded in 1827 in New York City a freethought newspaper, the *Correspondent*, featuring scientific and anticlerical essays. Houston shared Wright's interest in eighteenth-century

²*New Harmony Gazette*, July 2, 9, 23, 1828.

³FW to James Richardson, August 18, 1827, Wolfson Papers.

freethought classics. Like Wright he held special appreciation for the work of Thomas Paine, and like Wright, he promoted rationalism.⁴ The late 1820s Sabbatarian controversy, however, added new significance to both Houston's and Wright's freethinking work.⁵ While Wright took to the road with her warnings of the ecclesiastical threat to republican liberties, Houston stayed in New York City, attempting "to bring man back to the path from which he has deviated" by dipping his pen in ink.

First recognizing Houston as "a co-laborer in the same vineyard," and then acknowledging the predictable pelts he incurred every day from the Sabbatarians and the regular New York press, Wright expressed her concern over the amount of "artillery" he used in his paper against "those whose foolishness is not worth the cost." She proposed that Houston deal with those "church and state" attacks, not by turning his left cheek when his right "be smitten," but by protecting both cheeks with a mask. She further recommended that he protect himself from hearing "ignorant clamor" by stuffing his ears with cotton. These suggestions, Wright stated, would keep Houston's "cheek unflushed," "his pen undipped in gall," and thereby enable him to devote his time and his space to writing about "principles not men."

⁴FW to George Houston, published in the *New Harmony Gazette*, July 2, 1828; See Waterman, 144, 217-18; Perkins and Wolfson, 200, 202, 235, 249; Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 185, 196-97 for additional information related to George Houston.

⁵Between 1825 and 1826 New York City's well-to-do missionaries, led by the New School Presbyterian silk merchants Arthur and Lewis Tappan and by their associates in the New York Tract Society, concentrated on a Sabbatarian drive to pressure politicians into prohibiting all business on Sunday, from postal delivery to the sale of alcoholic spirits.

Wright felt that they should not "spend [their] breath in scolding, nor [their] ink in disputing; [but they should] rather declare [their] own views than quarrel with other people's." Wright's "business" was to improve understandings, to correct errors, to confound priests, to overthrow blind belief. She felt that freethinking correspondents who mixed "too much vinegar with their ink" interfered with their purpose of leading men and women "to think."⁶

Free-press tracts, Wright suggested, must be "suited to open the eyes of the world to the deception practiced upon them--to give birth to reflection--to lead to a rational train of thinking." Wright was convinced that she could "alter [only] things that were alterable ... examine [only] what in the frame of society may be changed, [only] what in our institutions may be amended."⁷

Wright clearly understood that she would be excluded from primary policy-making due to her lack of suffrage. Her assessment of her circumstances did not deter her, but simply altered her course. She knew the importance of being an active opinion-maker and chose that context. Writing in the July 30, 1828, *New Harmony Gazette*, Wright said that "however far removed from existing fashions and opinions may be mine or those of other reformers, who shall say that our now impertinent novelties may not some day, and that not far removed, gain the ascendant in the revolutionary process of change?"

Wright certainly analyzed and took advantage of the occasion in which social and political change occurred. Wright was a remarkable

⁶*New Harmony Gazette*, July 2, 1828.

⁷*New Harmony Gazette*, July 9, 1828.

"other" whose uniquely direct and inspiring ways of sensing, calling attention to, and offering remedies for individual/group injustice were certainly political.

Vital to an understanding of Wright's sense of the political is a description of the context in which the working class emerged in early national and Jacksonian New York City. For more than seventy years political historians and labor historians have attempted studies of class and politics in New York. Yet no history, Progressive or consensus in orientation, exists that offers contextual interpretations of labor radicalism, of the process of class formation, and of recurrent conflict in early nineteenth-century New York City.⁸

It is understandable that Progressive historians did not offer expansive treatments of changing social relations and the process of class formation when they utilized in their studies a series of flat, fixed social categories (capitalist "haves," proletarian "have-nots"). It is understandable as well that consensus historians who interpreted a past in which similarities overwhelmed differences did not explain the interactive processes of the development of the 1829 Workingmen's movement. It is no surprise that they did not accent the conflict created by the radical 1829 opinion-maker Frances Wright--a woman

⁸See Dixon Ryan Fox, *The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York, 1801-1840* (1919; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1950); John R. Commons et al., *History of Labour in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1918), I; Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York: MacMillan, 1928); Richard Hofstadter, "William Leggett, Spokesman of Jacksonian Democracy," *Political Science Quarterly* 58 (1943): 581-94; idem, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Knopf, 1928), 56-85; Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961); Walter E. Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class: A Study of the New York Workingmen's Movement, 1829-1837* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960).

who dared to publicly ask, "all men ... may be 'born' free and equal, but do they so 'live!'"⁹

As has been noted, historian Edward Pessen examined "some" of New York's "uncommon" Jacksonian labor leaders, but an exploration of the political aspects of history "from the bottom up" was left to recent historians such as Sean Wilentz. Wilentz's 1984 work, *Chants Democratic*, is a study of working-class republicanism in the antebellum era. In it he wishes "to enlarge ... to correct ... and to rewrite the history of the formation of the metropolitan working class...."¹⁰

Among other things *Chants Democratic* tells how the coming of metropolitan industrial capitalism was involved in the transformation of the economy, politics, and culture of New York City. Wilentz particularly delineates the rise of New York City's working class and the dramatic changes in class relations that occurred in response to the disintegration of the artisan system of labor. To date, it is one of the best studies in that it offers a truly contextual interpretation of the transformative circumstances and changing expectations of the early nineteenth century.

Wilentz takes the position that "in the early nineteenth century, to be an American citizen was by definition to be a republican, the inheritor of a revolutionary legacy in a world ruled by aristocrats and kings." He is quick to point out as well that "what it meant to be an

⁹*Free Enquirer*, January 21, 1829.

¹⁰Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 6-7.

American republican ... was by no means self-evident."¹¹

With the social, economic, and political transformations of the first half of the nineteenth century, the versions of American republicanism multiplied, as persons of different backgrounds and conflicting social views came to see themselves and each other by their adduced adherence to republican principles. Eastern merchants and western farmers, slaveholders and abolitionists, evangelicals and infidels, had their own notion of what it was to be a republican.¹² It was in this context that Wright's public statements about her view of what it was to be a republican take on particular political significance.

She openly called attention to what she saw as unequal relationships and to the distribution of power that resulted from their inequality. "Are men educated as equals," asked Wright. "Do not the rich command instruction," implied Wright, "and they who have instruction, must they not possess the power, and when they have the power," concluded Wright, "will they not exert it in their own favor?" Wright saw inequality as the result of ignorance and indifference, and she observed that this inequality was maintained through the "accustomed teachers [who] instead of seeking improvement have triumphed through ignorance."¹³

Wright also saw the "ignorance of the female sex" and the resulting unequal distribution of power between male and female as a

¹¹Ibid., 61.

¹²Ibid., 61-103.

¹³*Free Enquirer*, January 21, 1829.

way of ensuring women's "subordination and utility" to men. "Tis the same argument," stated Wright, "that is employed by the ruling few against the subjects of many in aristocracies; by the rich against the poor in the democracies." Wright exclaimed that "until power is annihilated on one side, fear and obedience on the other, and both restored to their birth-right equality--let none think that affection can reign." She publicly attended to what she observed as unequal relationships in her nation--in class, in race, and in sex, and she publicly announced how unequal distributions of power were maintained. "Actuated from her earliest youth," she refused to move from her position that "until equality prevail, it is towards the oppressed and depressed that I every where especially and anxiously incline."¹⁴

By the summer of 1828 Wright noticed that "... the artisan to whom we owe all the comforts and conveniences of life ... [is] condemned to the most severe physical privations and the grossest mental ignorance." She then proclaimed that "surely it is time to enquire, to examine into the meaning of words and the nature of things...."¹⁵ Surely it was time, Wright thought, to ask why small masters and journeymen artisans, blacks, and women were condemned to ignorance in a country that was intended to be a republic. Surely it was time, Wright announced, to enquire into the meaning of the word republic and to ask if America was a republic in fact, or in name only.

¹⁴*Free Enquirer*, January 21, 1829.

¹⁵*New Harmony Gazette*, July 9, 1828.

In daring to ask "is this a republic--a country whose affairs are governed by the public voice--when the public mind is unequally unenlightened," in daring to wonder whether the United States was in fact a "republic where the rights of all are equally respected, the interests of all equally secured, ... the services of all equally rendered," Wright called attention to polemics that struck to the core of nineteenth century America's political beliefs. She saw a republic where "... one drop of colored blood shall stamp a fellow-creature for a slave ... [where] one half of the whole population is left in civil bondage, sentenced to mental imbecility" and she demanded to know in 1828 the meaning of republicanism.¹⁶

Wilentz advances that "artisan republicanism" which was first evident in the pre-Revolutionary crisis, formalized into an ideology in the 1790s as the artisans came to terms with what the Revolution meant to them. Key concepts of the notion of artisan republicanism were independence, virtue, equality, cooperation and a shared part in the work process.¹⁷

From the 1790s until midcentury, the craft workers were at the heart of American metropolis' emerging working class, and their economy included a diverse collection of occupations, from light consumer crafts like tailoring and shoemaking to heavier local industries like sugar refining. For artisan republicans, independence signified independence from Britain, "the freedom to ply their arts without foreign interference." Independence connoted as well

¹⁶*Free Enquirer*, January 21, 1829.

¹⁷Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 14.

"personal" independence--the preservation of the "rights of man" and the resistance to all attempts to turn "American mechanics into vassals and slaves."

As they spoke of independence, the artisans also endorsed the notions of commonwealth, equality, and citizenship. According to artisan beliefs, each citizen must place the community's good before self. Equality connoted the right of all independent, virtuous citizens--including artisans--to exercise their will without interference from a nobility of privilege, wealth, or title. Citizenship, by extension, according to the eighteenth century artisan republican, stood for men's obligations to exercise their natural political rights.

Gradually but decisively, the artisan republic as conceptualized in the 1790s disintegrated. Merchant capitalists and "craft entrepreneurs" restructured the social relations of production, transformed wage labor into a market commodity and established the basis for new sets of class relations and conflicts. This "metropolitan industrialization," which took place most noticeably in that "highly unusual place" of New York City, challenged fundamental assumptions about craft work and workshop relations that had been the heart of "the Trade."¹⁸

Faced with profound changes in the social relations of production, faced with the disruption of artisan labor, the craft workers and their employees began to reinterpret their shared ideals of commonwealth, virtue, independence, citizenship, and equality. With this re-interpretation emerged an ideological crisis over the

¹⁸Ibid., 107-142.

meaning of artisan republicanism.

Wilentz takes the position that two main lines of argument developed, "one tending toward defenses of capitalist entrepreneurship, the other advancing one of several radical critiques of the emerging order." The craft entrepreneurs were interested in advancing their own interests for the good of the entire trade. They were interested in making America and the New World safe for craft capitalists, by ending "aristocratic" mercantile abuses and awakening "the spirit of American Independence." Their fresh interpretation of artisan republicanism was "thoroughly" informed by the Sabbatarians or the new evangelicals.¹⁹

In a short time, the evangelical temperance cause attracted a following among some of New York's most eminent master craft employers. These master craft employers believed that temperance was vital to the peace and good order of their firms and that temperate employees worked harder.

Present was the fusion of the artisan republican emphasis on rights, virtue, independence, and the masters' obligations with the evangelical temperance argument. What formed as a result of this fusion was a powerful idealistic defense of the masters' position and a clarification of a new individualistic ethic of discipline, responsibility and self-improvement. "The masters still claimed to be the paterfamilias of the trades who protected the mechanics' interest, ... be it against unrepublican speculators or the tyranny of drink."²⁰

¹⁹Ibid., 145-153.

²⁰Ibid., 152.

Each master capitalist insisted that by maximizing his commercial opportunities the public good--moral and economic--would be served. No master capitalist suggested, however, that any inequities in the workshops threatened the trades.

The world in which the propertied master capitalist lived was certainly at variance with the world in which "the plain city mechanics" lived. The majority of small masters had little or no property, and "the widening sphere of the cheap and nasty trade," of the multiple degradations that went with "slop" and contract work made a mockery of the small masters' expectations of independence, virtue, commonwealth, and equality. For early national journeymen as well, who formed a distinct and growing propertyless stratum in the trades, advancement to independence, a sense of equality with their employers was far from assured.

Long before 1829 New York's craft entrepreneurs and temperance men discovered that a small but growing number of artisans did not see things their way; radical critiques challenged their emerging order of capitalist entrepreneurship. The catalyst for the rationalist resurgence was a new element in artisan New York. This new element in New York was composed of "an extraordinary collection of recent emigres who had long been active in the clandestine enclaves of English deism." They included such persons as the printers George Houston, George Henry Evans, and the Scot rationalist Robert L. Jennings. All looked forward to resurrecting Paine's reputation in his and their adopted country.²¹

²¹ *Ibid.*, 153-157.

On January 29, 1825, about forty self-professed freethinkers gathered in Harmony Hall, New York City, to drink toasts and to deliver eulogies in honor of Paine's birthday. In January 1827 the ceremony was repeated and so greatly had the number of Painites increased that they were able to organize a permanent group of Free Enquirers "to bring man back to the path from which he has deviated."²²

By the January 1829 Painite birthday celebration, Wright was already famous for her freethought and her admiration of Paine and that she too had certainly won a following among these freethinkers. Not only was her name on the list of toasts presented by the Painite freethinkers on this anniversary of his birthday, but also mentioned were her "Hall of Science" and her freethought newspaper, *The Free Enquirer*. Present among the list of toasts bestowed as well was her notion that "education [must] be bestowed upon our daughters as on our sons."²³

Even more than the earlier British deists, the freethinking movement drew support from small master and journeymen artisans as well. Freethinking journeymen, such as shoemakers, printers, tailors, and watchmakers, had no interest in promoting respect for an obedience to a religious moral code. They sought rights that they claimed the Creator had bestowed to all, not to a select few, rights the evangelicals were trying to take away.

²²Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 153; Waterman, 145; Perkins and Wolfson, 248-49.

²³Perkins and Wolfson, 249.

The late 1820s evangelical revival added a new significance to both the freethinkers' work and to Wright's work. Instead of promoting only rationalism, the free thinkers began to warn of this new ecclesiastical threat to republican liberties. Jennings wrote "our country is saturated with ... vile pernicious tracts" intended to "prepare the minds of our now politically free citizens" for passive submission to "lawless and ambitious puritans."²⁴ According to the Painite freethinkers, Sunday schools, missionary societies, and Sabbath regulations were all breaches of republican values and the constitutional separation of church and state. Houston in his *Correspondent* stated that Sabbatarian rules were designed "to reduce the citizens of this country to abject slavery." To avert the threat of an attack by men of privilege on the people, the freethinkers posed their own cultural and educational institutions as deistic, egalitarian alternatives to the schools and libraries of the evangelicals. With these efforts, the freethinkers would hasten a truly rationalist world, where one would find, according to a freethinkers' toast, "soldiers at the plough, kings in the mines, lawyers at the spinning genney, and priests in heaven." With the world turned reason-side up, Americans would enjoy, according to deist Edward Thompson, "not the independence we now nominally have, but the independence we may, and of right, ought to enjoy, by virtue of declared and existing charter."²⁵

²⁴*Correspondent*, July 7, 1827.

²⁵*Correspondent*, February 9, June 14, 1828, April 25, 1829; Edward Thompson, "An Oration" Delivered on the Anniversary of the Declaration of American Independence (New York, 1829), 6, quoted in Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 156.

With equal trenchancy, Wright scored religion as a divisive and wasteful servant to power. Sensing that "the errors made by the advocates of [evangelicalism were] not confined to one town or to one state," and sensing as well the urgency that was needed to counter their voiced views, Wright travelled throughout the summer and fall of 1828 invigorating freethinkers in towns and cities. Over to Cincinnati, up to Pittsburgh, down the Ohio River to Wheeling, West Virginia, and Louisville, down the Mississippi River to St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans, across the Alleghenies to Baltimore, and Philadelphia, Wright, who sometimes travelled by horseback, other times by coach, by wagon, and by steamboat, encouraged the "thousands" to whom she spoke to examine "all existing opinions."

Her purpose, she said, was to outline "the field of truth" and "to expose such existing errors as must tend to blind the intellectual sight to its perception." Wright knew that as the first woman lecturer she was challenging America's assumption that women, in Mrs. Trollope's phrase, should be "guarded by a sevenfold shield of habitual insignificance." It was her "endeavor," nevertheless, "to encourage ... the examination of all existing opinions, and to assist in the development of ... just knowledge and just practice ... to the extent permitted by [her] abilities and [her] circumstances."²⁶

Wright believed that "in the progress of human improvement, the few who go ahead ... are always objects of astonishment; and sometimes, in the case of a pioneer of unusual daring, of absolute terror." Wright realized that in fighting against the power of the priest

²⁶FW, "On the Nature of Knowledge," in *Life, Letters and Lectures*, 1-21.

over the communicant, the power of the male over the female, of slave owner over slave, of employer over worker, she was an object of astonishment, of absolute terror. Perceived to be different, to be a threat to the status quo, Wright recognized that she might necessarily be the target of much criticism.

She took the position, nevertheless, that "the best method ... a bold pioneer can follow is to go 'straight forward.'" "Clear the way," Wright stated, and soon after, though "slowly and unconsciously" at first, the "whole mass" will follow.²⁷

As such a pioneering leader she knew that she was earning her obscurity. "In this hierarchical world," historian Mark A. Lause writes, "most of us are born to obscurity...." But the right combination of a sense of justice, intellectual honesty and courage can lead, Lause suggests, to a deeper sort of obscurity--one that is earned instead of inherited.²⁸ Wright earned her obscurity in a nation where to be obscure is no vice and to earn obscurity is to enter into the best of company.

Responding to "Thomas Tranquil's" concern about becoming an infidel, about becoming what he perceived to be "a black swan when he [would] have much preferred to be white," Wright wrote that she agreed with Tranquil that "it is always pleasing to find ourselves in sympathy with others." She continued, however, that "they ... who love the little word so astounding to ... blind believers of all kinds--they

²⁷"Reply to Thomas Tranquil," *New Harmony Gazette*, July 23, 1828.

²⁸Amos Gilbert, *A Sketch of the Life of Thomas Skidmore*, ed. Mark A. Lause (1834; reprint, Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1984), 4.

in short who ask 'why' must school themselves into indifference under the stare of wonder...." Wright wrote that pioneers will be "'black swans' in spite of their teeth, so they may as well wear their unfashionable plumage easily which will be to wear it gracefully." She concluded on the more positive note that the followers of the black swan, "all changing imperceptibly to [its] hue, [will] in the process of time and under the process of their own metamorphosis ... wonder less ... and abuse less...."²⁹

Because she was a woman, because she scored religion as a divisive and wasteful servant to power, and because she attempted to rout the forces that pulled America from its republican revolutionary ideals, Wright's "unfashionable plumage" came under the ministers' and the conservative press' attacks. Indifferent to their stare, to their naming her "the Red Harlot of Infidelity," "the Priestess of Beelzebub," Wright continued to charge that churches fought serious social reform. She asked whether "any improvement suggested in our social arrangements, [was] calculated to equalize property, labour, instruction, and enjoyment."³⁰

Despite those slower and duller moving elements, Wright pleaded to her audiences to turn their attention "to your victims lost in vice and hardened to profligacy, to childhood without protection, to youth without guidance, to the widow without sustenance, to the female destitute and female outcast."³¹ She always ended her lectures

²⁹*New Harmony Gazette*, July 23, 1828.

³⁰*Free Enquirer*, January 7, 14, 21, 28, 1828.

³¹*FW, Life, Letters and Lectures*, 36.

by calling for each community "to turn their churches into halls of science," where three to five thousand people could gather to build the institutions of republican culture. The change that she hoped would bring America back to the ideals of its founders could not be made by people working and living in isolation from each other. They needed a place that would nourish a radical culture, a nerve center for radical freethought activities. Each center, she hoped, would include an all-purpose lecture room for sympathetic speakers, a day school, a deist Sunday school for children, and a reading room for adults. After each of her town/city appearances, Wright encouraged committees to take contributions towards a Hall of Science.

Evidence shows that Wright had won a following among city freethinkers and antievangelicals and that her calls for examination, for change, for human improvement were heard. A letter, which appeared in the August 20, 1828, issue of the *New Harmony Gazette*, signed only with the initial, "W," and addressed to Wright, stated that Wright in standing "forward upon untrodden ground, the pioneer of the weak, the timid and the unfortunate," and in risking "all," "scattered [seeds that] ... have already found a resting place...." "W" suggested that "the sentiments" which Wright promulgated, and defended had begun to "force discussion." No longer were persons able to remain simply "idle spectators;" they "must take part," "W" wrote, "in the contest...." "W" thanked Wright for presenting him/her with "the necessity of declaring my sentiments, to those who, although ... were my intimate acquaintances, were ignorant of my opinions."

Robert Dale Owen wrote in 1828 that "whatever may shorten the period of darkness is an instrument of happiness to mankind." "Such

will be the visits," Owen wrote, "of one who dares to speak what she [Wright] thinks, and dares to think what her reason dictates...." Owen suggested that in her attempts to shorten the period of darkness, Wright "will be welcomed ... [by] the honest enquirer [who is] after truth."³²

As the disputes between the craft entrepreneurs and the small masters and journeymen became more evident, ideological tensions and social crisis thus took shape. It was not until that "extraordinary year" of 1829 that circumstances changed drastically and that the crisis of artisan republicanism became apparent.

In the aftermath of the 1828 election, those who had voted for Andrew Jackson found that they had cast their lot with Democrats who were extremely interested in consolidating their party's power and in strengthening its ties with bankers and financiers. To nominally Jacksonian small masters and journeymen with their own special interests, Tammany and the new men in Washington began to look no better than the corrupt aristocratic Republicans from the previous Adamsite administration.

As Jacksonian Democrats demonstrated their lack of clarity on issues related to the small masters and journeymen artisans, and as the crippled Adamsites stumbled about for a political foothold, the freethinking radicals, who had already exhibited dissatisfaction over fundamental republican issues, began to help direct ordinary small masters and journeymen artisans to radicalism and to politics. Throughout 1829 these agitators engaged the public in debates that no

³²*New Harmony and Nashoba Gazette*, December 10, 1828.

politician, heretofore, Federalist or Republican, Adamsite or Jacksonian, had yet dared to mention.³³

In early January, 1829, Wright decided to "pitch [her] tent" as well in New York City, "the head seat, as Wright called it, "of popular energy ... wealth and power, and financial and political corruption." Wright sensed "that in the social frame of civilized society 'all [was] not right." She asked how anyone "landing in this city [New York] from some remote region" could not wonder about "the morals" they saw in the streets, "the happiness" they experienced in the houses, "the plainest goodsense" they heard in the churches, and "the simplest, most consistent rules of fair and equal justice" they read in the laws. "That anyone not absolutely blind, deaf, or insensible" can walk through the streets of New York, Wright wrote, "without perceiving at every step the triumph of strength over weakness, wealth over poverty ... I hold to be impossible." The timeliness of Wright's move to New York, her intent on reaching more urban workingmen, her recognition that she could extend her sphere of influence by moving the office of the *New Harmony Gazette* to New York certainly indicate Wright's political insights.³⁴

Wright recognized that "to impugn the justices of irregularities in ... instruction, rights, privileges, and conditions, ... [was] "to arouse a deafening clamor of infidelity, absurdity, impiety, sedition, disorganization, and confusion." Yet, Wright conceived *Free Enquiry* so important to human improvement that she was determined "to

³³Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 172-76.

³⁴*Free Enquirer*, February 18, 1829, May 30, 1830.

prosecute it with steadiness and fearlessness."³⁵ Wilentz takes the position that "almost immediately" Wright transformed the New York freethinkers by adding depth to their narrower interpretations of America's social ills and by providing a positive program for reform.

Early 1829 correspondence stated that Wright's arrival in New York City "was the commencement of a new era." "Liberal opinions [were] fast gaining ground" in New York City due to Wright's "electrifying presence," a presence "unmatched by any previous New York [freethinking speaker], ... by any American speaker of the day."³⁶

On January 3, 1829, Wright began a series of six lectures at Masonic Hall to a capacity audience of between fifteen hundred and two thousand people. She believed that the circumstances under which she met "this assemblage, of the people of New York," were "unparalleled in the history of the world." "Conceiving the people of New York ... as most willing ... to set a first example of a popular union for the objects of common instruction and common happiness," Wright felt "a desire to settle down among them with a view to [furthering] ... these same objects." "Truly the signs are novel, which mark this hour," Wright exclaimed in her introductory address, "and truly the place assigned to myself by the clamor of men, trembling for privileges and profits ... might cower the strength of one less confident in her cause, or less ardent for its success."³⁷

Wright was, however, confident in "the strength of the ground

³⁵*Free Enquirer*, February 18, 25, 1829.

³⁶Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 176.

³⁷*Free Enquirer*, March 4, 1829.

which [she had] assumed." She believed in the success of her message that "things known" constitute "just knowledge," that just knowledge leads to "just opinions" and that from just opinions come "just practice." For Wright, respect for human liberty and equality depended upon the exercise of such just practice.

As the bell from St. Paul's Chapel announced the time for Wright's first lecture, "there was a general turning of heads [as] she came up the aisle, and attained the platform...." Wright, who appeared in the tunic costume adopted by the New Harmony Owenists in 1826, so moved her audience that one observer recorded, "all my expectations fell far short of the splendor, the brilliance, the overwhelming eloquence of this extraordinary orator." Though Wright paused briefly "to receive the spontaneous burst of applause," she continued for she had her sights set on the championing of human liberty and of the heralding of human improvement in the nation's metropolis.³⁸

Wright repeated the series on knowledge in late January and early February at the Park theater and later published these lectures in the *New Harmony and Nashoba Gazette*, which when relocated to New York City, became the *Free Enquirer*. Young Walt Whitman, who had accompanied his Brooklyn carpenter father to one of Wright's lectures, later said that he had never felt so glowingly toward any other woman. He remembered her as "one of the sweetest of sweet memories: we all loved her: fell down before her: her very appearance seemed to

³⁸*American*, January 4, 1829; FT, *Domestic Manners*, 97-100; *Commercial Advertiser*, January 4, 1829.

enthrall us."³⁹

Evidence shows that Wright became "familiar [as well] with the noisy but innoxious fire of words, as launched from an angry pulpit and a venal press...." "Let opposition be what it may," Wright wrote, "the impulse now imparted to the human mind ... cannot be checked." Wright wrote that "within the last twelvemonth [she had] publicly addressed assembled multitudes in the most extreme quarters of this vast country." Yet, "everywhere ... young and old, man aye, and even woman, have betrayed enthusiasm natural to the human mind when the great principles of human liberty, instructional equality, and human improvement are presented...."⁴⁰

Writing from her position in New York, as coeditor of the newly relocated *Free Enquirer*, Wright noted that the vain hope of reward which led crowds to Washington for services rendered during Jackson's campaign spoke ill for the virtue of a republican people. Speaking from the public platform, Wright advanced the notion that inequality of condition "divides all the community into classes--distinct from, and hostile to each other." "That the wealthy and professional classes alone are 'effectually represented,' and that their interests [are] consulted by legislatures," that honest journeymen toil for atrocious wages and that their interests go unvoiced are just two examples of what she saw as evils that resulted from inequities. Wright observed that "while shut up in so many partition walls, [human

³⁹Horace Traubel, *Conversations with Walt Whitman*, II, 204-6, as quoted in Wilentz, 182.

⁴⁰*Free Enquirer*, February 15, 1829; FW, *Life, Letters and Lectures*, 1.

beings] cannot see and cannot feel for each other." She took the position that the only reasonable step "to give them feeling and make them fellow creatures," was the implementation of a truly equal, national, and republican educational system--administered by the state and untainted by religion--to provide complete schooling for all American children from infancy.⁴¹

The Jacksonian triumph in New York created a political vacancy into which a new movement could enter to replace "the crippled, ineffectual Adamsites." It was this political vacancy combined with the small masters' and journeymen's initial restiveness about the direction of Jacksonian rule, about what Wright saw as "the inequalities of condition," that encouraged the New York working men in April, 1829, "to turn into a political insurgency from below."⁴²

On April 15, just eight days before a group of journeymen mechanics met to discuss for the first time their course of action related to rumors that their master employers were about to lengthen their work day from ten to eleven hours, Wright delivered the fifth part of her lecture series on the causes of existing evils. In this lecture, Wright stated that "this country hath declared herself a republic, but she hath not 'made herself a republic." She pointed to the one measure which even "the boldest enemy of improvement in this country, 'dare not openly' object." Wright then called on her audience "to bestir themselves--to enquire and to examine how they may best ... prepare their minds for a judicious exercise of the elective

⁴¹*Free Enquirer*, March 4, 11, 18, 1829, April 1, 1829.

⁴²Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 172.

franchise." She exhorted her listeners "to study, until they discover their real interests, and then to send men to their legislative assemblies, who shall be interested to devote the peoples' fund to the people's benefit...."⁴³

Instead of men who sanctified fasts, protected sabbaths, chartered theological seminaries, and endowed exclusive colleges, these newly elected legislative representatives, Wright advocated, must "organize a system of equal and universal instruction, supported by the public money, and protected by the public care." Wright claimed that it was in equalized, nationalized, and republicanized education that "distinctions of sect [would be] annihilated," that "distinctions of class [would be] despoiled...."⁴⁴

Partially at the urging of machinist Thomas Skidmore, the first public meeting of a group of journeymen took place on April 23. These journeymen met with the purpose to propose appropriate measures, other than the calling of a strike, that might intimidate those employers who intended to lengthen the work day. Alarmed by this beginning of the Workingmen's movement, the "high toned organ of the aristocracy," the *Commercial Advertiser*, claimed in an April 25 issue, that the "numerous mechanics" voiced principles and resolutions that would surely lead "to the dissolution of society into its original elements." The resolutions bid all journeymen to refuse to work for more than ten hours and if employers withhold employment or give it "in such a manner as to exact excessive toil ... such persons

⁴³*Free Enquirer*, April 15, 1829.

⁴⁴*Free Enquirer*, March 25, 1829, April 15, 1829.

contravene the first law of society, and subject themselves to the displeasure of a just community."⁴⁵

Though Wright was not present at the journeymen's meeting, it is clear from the *Advertiser's* sarcastic note that her persuasions were well-known and felt throughout: "it [was] a pity [that] they had not obtained the assistance of some competent person such as 'Fanny Wright' to write their resolutions and then to discourse upon them."⁴⁶ George Henry Evans, a Wright supporter, printer of the *Free Enquirer*, and later editor of the Free Enquirers' organ of the New York Workingmen's Movement, the *Working Man's Advocate*, wrote that "the Aristocracy knew that if they could connect the Working Men's movement with the celebrated name of a reformer [Frances Wright, who was] under the ban of the church, they could throw a firebrand" onto the movement that would distract the people's attention "from their true interests." Thus, from the movement's start, city masters and the mercantile newspapers, such as the *Commercial Advertiser*, attempted to discredit the workingmen's movement, to cast aspersions upon what they termed the "anarchial character" of this new, "sans-culotte" "Fanny Wright" movement.

While contrary to the established press' accusations, Wright was not directly involved in the organization of the Workingmen's movement. This is not to say, however, that she did not attempt to coordinate her efforts with those of the journeymen, nor is it to say

⁴⁵*Radical*, ed. George Henry Evans, January 1842; *Commercial Advertiser*, April 25, 1829.

⁴⁶Quoted in *Radical*, January, 1842.

that she did not arouse the interest of the small masters and journeymen. Clearly she did provide the occasion and the Hall of Science where small masters and journeymen both inside and outside the radical freethought milieu could meet.

Consistent with Wright's notion of establishing a secular alternative to churches, Wright established in April, 1829, her Hall of Science which was located in the heart of the small masters and journeymen neighborhoods. She paid \$7,000 for the old Ebenezer Baptist Church on Broome Street near the Bowery and then remodeled it in a design that advertised hers as well as the freethinkers' devotion to rationality. On April 26, 1829, just two days before the working men were to meet for their scheduled second meeting, Wright delivered the opening address for her Hall of Science.⁴⁷

Dedicating it to "sectarian faith" and devoting it to "universal knowledge," Wright insisted that the omens of knowledge's dawn were now present in the air. She sensed that ears were opening, that understandings were awakening, that the spirit of enquiry was abroad, and that the truths which were initially startling would long sink into the heart. "All things may we hope for man," Wright spoke, "should our efforts in this [Hall of Science] prevail."⁴⁸

Located in the front of the building were the Free Enquirer's office and a bookstore which showed the heroes of heterodoxy--Paine,

⁴⁷Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 191; FW, "Opening Address" delivered in Hall of Science on April 26, 1829, published in *Free Enquirer*, May 13, 1829.

⁴⁸*Free Enquirer*, May 13, 1829,

Shelley, Godwin, Richard Carlile--and the pamphlets and books Wright and Robert Dale Owen printed themselves. Sunday nights were reserved for the major weekly meetings. At other times the hall's all-purpose auditorium, which held about twelve hundred people, was used for lectures. The Hall of Science also consisted of a day school, a deist Sunday school for children, a reading room for adults, and later a free medical dispensary was added by Wright's supporters.⁴⁹

In her Hall of Science, Wright gave as eloquent a plea for human fellowship as she would ever make. Located but a few blocks from Tammany Hall, the Hall of Science offered great improvement over earlier freethinkers' institutes and was in fact "the first formal radical lyceum to serve the various physical, intellectual, and spiritual needs of its desired constituents." Regularly filled--largely, it seemed by small masters, journeymen artisans, and women--the Hall of Science served as a a nerve center for radical freethought activities, and as a gathering place as well for "some who could care less about piercing the mysteries of the universe."⁵⁰

Wright recognized that what was needed for the success of a movement, whether it was the Free Enquirers' movement and/or the Workingmen's movement, was the maintenance of momentum and the opportunity for planning. Wright saw to it that there was a place where discussion and activist planning could occur. Her speeches provided the occasion for thousands to listen; her writings provided the chance for thousands to read, and her Hall of Science provided the

⁴⁹Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 191-94, 205, 214, 222, 236.

⁵⁰Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 181-82.

place and the opportunity for thousands to actively participate in discussion and planning.

Evidence shows that Wright and Owen won admirers among "ordinary" city artisans. Self-proclaimed "Fanny Wright mechanics" began to turn out pamphlets and cartoons, though crude by the deists' standards, yet certainly evident of their solidarity with the Free Enquirers. In lampooning such persons as Lewis Tappan and Reverend Ezra Stiles Ely, Fanny Wright mechanics, most likely for the first time, had the opportunity to attack what they considered to be hypocrisy, arrogance, and unrepugnacious intentions of entrepreneurial evangelical reform.⁵¹

Simultaneously, the link connecting the workingmen strengthened. On April 28 a crowd estimated at between five and six thousand small masters and journeymen met in the Bowery for a second meeting. At this meeting these workingmen resolved among other things that "the Creator has made all equal" and that the rights of the rich, or in the mechanics' words, the "employers," were no greater than those of the poor. They thus deemed any employer who demanded an excessively long workday as aggressors against the rights of their fellow citizens, and determined as well to strike any master who demanded more than ten hours of work per day, to publish the names of all wage earners who worked longer hours, and to appoint a committee of fifty men who would offer direction to the Workingmen's movement. Evans recalled that "very great care was taken to have no 'Boss' on the committee [Committee of Fifty] who employed a large

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 180-81.

number of hands, and a large majority of the committeemen were journeymen."⁵²

Shortly after April 28th the suspected master employers renounced their intentions to lengthen the workday. Evans recalled, however, that "the maintenace of the Ten Hour System" was not the only object that united the workingmen in 1829. "The ultimate object," Evans said, "was a 'Radical Revolution,' which would secure to each man the fruits of his own labor."⁵³

The Committee of Fifty continued to meet and to discuss what future actions they might take. By the summer, the Committee had resolved to run a ticket of journeymen and small masters in the upcoming local legislative elections, and through the autumn the members debated various issues related to their proposed platform.⁵⁴

What appeared to be a problem for the Workingmen's movement, according to Evans, was that "every one could see that labor was cheated, but few could see exactly how the cheat was effected, and fewer still could point out the remedy." Evans claimed, however, "that some faint glimmerings of the causes of their wrongs, and of the proper mode of redress had dawned upon them."⁵⁵

One of those persons who attempted to articulate causes was committee member, Thomas Skidmore, who offered his proposed solution of an Equal Division of Property, and advocated "a stern

⁵²*Radical*, 1842; Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians*, 15-18.

⁵³*Radical*, 1842.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 1842.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 1842.

policy" that only "actual working men" were to be included in the Workingmen's movement proceedings. While Skidmore advanced his "agrarian" notion, many movement members embraced Wright's and Owen's position that the state-education plan provided the best possible remedy for the inequities that existed among the laboring poor.

Cornelius Blatchly, and Edward Webb, who were among the eleven men selected by the workingmen as candidates for the state assembly, joined Wright's and Owen's cause. In fact, Blatchly, as did Evans, assumed leadership positions in the newly formed Association for the Protection of Industry and for the Promotion of National Education.

Established in early September by Owen, the purpose of the Association for the Protection of Industry and for the Promotion of National Education was to agitate for a state law system of equal republican education. Associations of a similar character soon appeared in other towns and cities, becoming affectionately known as "Fanny Wright Societies." Into these societies all were welcomed who signified their intention "to assist in defending the rights and promoting the interests of the people, and in carrying through the State Legislatures a system of Equal Republican Education." It was expected, however, that the true friends of equal rights and popular instruction would be found chiefly among the working classes.⁵⁶

In the fall of 1829 radical ideas spread throughout the artisan wards. Skidmore announced in June the forthcoming publication of

⁵⁶Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 193; see also Waterman, 197-210.

Rights of Man to Property, and by October on the eve of the delivery of the Committee of Fifty's report the Skidmorites had begun to hold agrarian public meetings in the Bowery. Concurrently, Owen organized his own lectures and meetings specifically for workingmen and for the promotion of the Wright-Owen state guardianship plan of education. He directed as well his editorials in the *Free Enquirer* to all discontented small masters and journeymen, supported the Workingmen's movement's ten-hour day resolution, and acknowledged the efforts of the Committee of Fifty.⁵⁷

Sensing that working men in other towns and cities looked to New York for current precedents, Wright set off on a lecture tour to make the Wright-Owen proposal known. First to Philadelphia, over to Boston, then to Baltimore, New Wilmington, Delaware, stopping in various towns and cities in between, Wright travelled throughout the summer of 1829 calling on her audiences to look to a 'rational education' as the equalizing force. Without this educational reform, Wright advanced "all other reforms are but idle or temporary; ... [it is] the 'only' effectual remedy...." At the conclusion of each of her lectures, money was collected for the support of the local "Fanny Wright Society."⁵⁸

On October 19 five thousand workingmen attended the long-awaited public session held by the Committee of Fifty for the purpose of selecting the party platform. Owen, "who was spotted by the crowd and greeted as a friend," agreed to serve as secretary of the meeting,

⁵⁷*Free Enquirer*, June 17, September 23, 30, 1829.

⁵⁸*Free Enquirer*, September 23, 30, 1829.

convinced that the small masters and journeymen mechanics would "require enlightened friends to aid them in prudent suggestion....."⁵⁹

The Committee of Fifty's demands included abolition of private commercial banks, first and foremost, and then of chartered monopolies, licensed auctions, and imprisonment for debt; passage of a lien law and a law taxing clerics and church property; and reform of various electoral procedures. Evidence indicates that, although the committee did not endorse the Wright-Owen plan, they no doubt had their share of support from among the committee members. The committee's report at least mentioned equal education and demanded suppression of clerical tax exemption. Wilentz suggests, however, that "in setting the context and aims of the insurgency's politics, Skidmore and his followers prevailed."⁶⁰

Not satisfied with the committee's report, in fact, quite alarmed by it, the leaders of Owen's association (the New York Fanny Wright Society) met to discuss the campaign and "tepidly endorsed peaceful measures to equalize property as 'eminently useful to society.'" Yet, the association insisted that the worst forms of inequality were those produced by unequal education. Although banks, monopolies and the rest were unrepugnant, they seemed, the association reported, "partial, ineffectual, temporary, or trifling" compared to the dire need for national education.⁶¹

⁵⁹*Working Man's Advocate*, October 31, 1829; *Free Enquirer*, October 31, November 14, 1829, March 30, 1830; *Commercial Advertiser*, October 26, 1829.

⁶⁰*Working Man's Advocate*, October 31, 1829; Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians*, 68; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 195.

⁶¹*Free Enquirer*, October 31, November 7, 1829.

As the momentum behind the New York Workingmen's Movement increased, those city masters and mercantile newspapers who were opposed to the movement's efforts sensed that they could continue in their belittlement of the workingmen and their efforts by constantly connecting their efforts to that of the influence of the "Red Harlot of Infidelity." A few, in fact, later described the workingmen's ticket as the "Fanny Wright ticket," and even singled out Cornelius Blatchly, one of the eleven workingmen's candidates, as a known friend of the Red Harlot. Recognizing that her name, her very presence in New York City came to be used as part of the tactics levelled by opinion-makers of the "aristocracy," by these opponents of the New York Workingmen's Movement, Wright decided in early October to remove herself from New York and thus from the center of attention. She had stirred popular opinion and now opted to nurture the credibility of that popular opinion by removing herself from its center and returning to Nashoba to complete her earlier commitment to her ex-slaves. .

In her farewell address, delivered at the New York Hall of Science, on the eve of the October 19th Committee of Fifty meeting, Wright stated that "having left my people in Tennessee under the protection of a friend ... until the season favorable for their removal, I have now made arrangements for embarking with them from New Orleans to Haiti."⁶² She did not leave the Free Enquirers and the Fanny Wright mechanics feeling abandoned; she left them with a clear indication that she purposefully chose this time to take "the western

⁶²Free Enquirer, October 18, 1829.

route to New Orleans ... [endeavoring] to awaken the popular mind to the same subject of rational [education] ... which [is] now obtaining so rapidly here." Wright felt that "it is most urgent ... since the servants of faith are so active that the advocates of knowledge ... not slumber." "The object of the laborers in this place [Hall of Science], Wright said, is ... equal liberty, among all members of the human family."⁶³

Wright exclaimed that "the trumpet of alarm hath sounded, and ... every foe, open or secret, of human enfranchisement and human improvement will be stirring and daring." She exhorted her supporters to "stand fast ... friends ... be of good courage.... I too shall labor with you even while absent." Before she left for Haiti, she travelled to upstate New York, over to Pittsburgh, down to Louisville, St. Louis, Memphis, and finally to New Orleans advancing the cause of the Workingmen's movement and the notion of rational education as the equalizing force that would improve the condition not only of working people, but also of women, and blacks.⁶⁴

The final returns from the November 1829 election proved to be "an impressive debut" for the Workingmen's movement. One Workingmen's candidate, a journeymen carpenter named Ebenezer Ford, was elected to the assembly, and most of the eleven candidates of their "avowedly radical workingmen's ticket" had won more than six thousand votes each. Returns indicated that some men even voted for a range of radical heroes, from Robert Emmet and Simon Bolivar to

⁶³*Free Enquirer*, October 18, 1829.

⁶⁴*Free Enquirer*, October 18, 1829, November 14, 21, 1829, December 19, 26, 1829, January 30, February 6, 1830.

Frances Wright. Seven men voted for Frances Wright, seven for Fanny Wright, two for Miss Frances Wright, two for Miss Fanny Wright, and one each for Miss F. Wright and Frances Wright, Esq. Wilentz suggests that "a new artisan political radicalism, in various forms, had begun."⁶⁵

To be sure, in demanding to know the meaning of republicanism, Wright contributed to the process that took place, to the reinterpretation of the notion of artisan republicanism that began specifically during the year 1829. The events of 1829 proved that thousands of small masters and journeymen learned that to ask, as Wright had asked, "why" was not only appropriate but was required for their change and their improvement.

By the end of 1829 these journeymen were asking, as Wright had asked in the beginning of 1829, "Why in a republican city were inequality and political corruption so evident?" "Why were honest mechanics out of work?" What was even more remarkable was that they were not only asking why, but they were also actively seeking answers. As an opinion-maker, as a creator and leader in the political changes that occurred in New York City Frances Wright worked toward transforming and broadening the notion of republicanism.

⁶⁵*Working Man's Advocate*, November 14, 1829; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 200.

CONCLUSION

As established earlier Frances Wright has not been given her proper place in history. Wright is not seen as a leader in most historical accounts of social and political movements because the assumption has been that the most appropriate and often only model for "effective leadership" was a male in power, with an out-front political position. It is an obvious consequence from this assumption that historians, such as Edward Pessen, who interpreted leadership as synonymous with "held position," passed over Frances Wright, who in 1829 was without suffrage, and who was thereby prevented from holding a sanctioned political position.

Similarly, Wright's biographical interpreters either missed completely or ill-defined her "leadership style"--her ways of participating in change. Neither Waterman, Perkins/Wolfson, or Eckhardt took the position that Wright's rhetoric and inspiration directly contributed in empowering individuals, particularly workingmen, blacks, and women, to realize and to respond to their oppression. In the biographers' concentration on what Wright was doing, in their focus on how Wright was limited by her sex, in their notion that Wright's career was "meteoric," they de-emphasized the ways in which Frances Wright inspired and served as a catalyst for all kinds of individuals to take up the task of change. Instead of viewing Wright within the context of her time as a fully active participant of the radical milieu that was being created in the early nineteenth century, Waterman, Perkins/ Wolfson, and Eckhardt chose to describe

her in almost elitist heroics. In attempting to make her a leader of opinion, instead of a contributing leader of popular opinion, they tried to make her either an honorary famous man, or an epic hero. In either case these traditional biographers appear to select biographical subjects as those who clearly and singularly cause social stir. In the case of Frances Wright their reason for selecting her shaped their view of her and thus seems to have embroiled them in the activity of making her a traditional hero. By doing this they failed to discover Wright's leadership style as a nineteenth century woman, who worked through her social context as an advocate for change, who chose to instigate, to nurture, to call for action and then to blend again. They misrepresented her life and her role in the nineteenth century social milieu. As a result the best that each work can offer Wright is a mere heroic niche in social history, and as such she is passed over as a visionary leader of popular opinion.

In this paper a case study of two years in the work of Frances Wright has been offered as a context for examining an alternative view of leadership. The thesis of this paper has been to claim that when historians use a pre-established screen for selecting that and those who are worthy of historical study, e.g., out-front leaders of opinion, that the richness of context is not appropriately explored and thus historical studies tend to distort rather than inform our understandings of social movements and social events.

By examining Frances Wright through the context of such social conditions as women without suffrage, women as privatized and women as pioneering when they moved into public sector activity, we gain a contextual understanding of the significance of her work. To

study how she participated in, how she responded to and interacted with, how she developed her responses to that which contributed to popular opinion helps us to further appreciate her influence in altering popular opinion. It has also been noted that this nineteenth century woman, in addition to pushing the barriers to women, challenged the economic establishment and the moral base of a slavery system which had been protected by the out-front male opinion. Third and of tremendous importance to our understanding of this nineteenth century leader's context was the role and dominance of organized religion in all of its display of power through out-front opinion. To look as we have at the dynamics of these conditions is to add a dimension beyond the interests of earlier historians who would have us look to the personalized heroics which flatten and isolate Frances Wright as having had a meteoric and personal achievement in her efforts on behalf of women, blacks, workers, and those who had not yet achieved a right to free public education. In that this is intended only to raise the issue of historical method through a case study example it has not been a project which would yet do a nineteenth century history or a richly deserved contextually sensitive biography of one of its most visionary leaders.

Clearly, as it was shown in Sean Wilentz's, *Chants Democratic*, American historians have begun to change the ways in which they understand social development and consciousness. In place of such static historical selectors as events and periods, instrumental economic determinism, heroic pioneers, great military events, etc., they have begun to treat processes as well as factors of change in inter-relationship. Class, for example, is now more often being

addressed as a dynamic interactive social relation. Wilentz while showing us a richer contextual interpretation remains in a minority among historians.

We are not yet seeing a sufficient amount of sensitivity to the limitations placed upon and therefore the methods used by women, blacks, American Indians, and other politically disenfranchised groups. In addition we have yet to see the most privatized of social behaviors openly considered as factors and conditions in human behaviors, e.g., sexual orientation as they interplay in social and political behaviors.

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