

All on Fire

William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of American Slavery

By Henry Mayer

St. Martin 's Press

Reviewed by Daniel Akst

San Jose Mercury

"All on Fire is a book about an agitator," Henry Mayer informs us in the very first words of his massive and glorious new biography, "and its argument can be simply stated. William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879) is an authentic American hero who, with a Biblical prophet's power and a propagandist's skill, forced the nation to confront the most crucial moral issue in its history."

Garrison has fallen out of favor in the latter half of the twentieth century. An unbending Yankee in an age with little sympathy for rigid white men, his reputation has suffered from changing fashions, his own political odyssey and the mere passage of time. The intriguing task his latest biographer has assigned himself is to rehabilitate the abolitionist firebrand in light of current ideas about social justice and political change. Mayer talks about Garrison and his "movement" in terms reminiscent of the antiwar and civil rights agitation of the 1960s, seeing the great abolitionist as an early avatar of the New Left who advocated not just an end to slavery but fully equal citizenship for the freed slaves, a radical notion at the time.

On the evidence Mayer presents, it's easy to see Garrison in this light. Long before it was fashionable to do so--long before it was even considered sane--Garrison excoriated his country not just for enslaving blacks but for robbing the Indians, depriving women of rights and cloaking itself in a hypocritical constitution that guaranteed its vaunted freedoms for only a small group of residents while guarding and legitimizing the noxious institution of slavery. He spared the rod without spoiling his children and interacted with black Americans in ways few white ones ever did, living as close to a color-blind social life as anyone could and even agitating to desegregate the Boston public schools. A pacifist and early feminist, he also advocated freedom for the Irish and, like so many reformers of his day, temperance.

One approaches a book like this with skepticism. Thanks perhaps to word processors as much as to tenure, American publishing churns out bloated biographies with reckless disregard for reason or the patience of readers, and the New Left, though much of what it advocated has become commonplace, has lost much of its luster. Politically correct revisionism has given us multicultural math (getting the right answer is less important than working together) and history skewed by a host of considerations (mostly selling textbooks) unrelated to truth or narrative.

Not to worry. Henry Mayer has given us a heroic example of the biographer's art, bringing his subject vividly to life seemingly from the moment of his birth until his very last breath on earth. All on Fire is an obsessively readable work of prodigious scholarship and enormous narrative power, marked at every turn by subtlety and insight. Its subject emerges as a complex and deeply moral man of astonishing fortitude and foresight

In Mayer's view, Garrison is a man you've just got to love. The son of a devoutly Baptist mother and itinerant seaman father whose desertion left the family destitute, his heart-breaking childhood left little room for

formal education. In the great tradition of Benjamin Franklin, Garrison was not only an autodidact but had the good fortune to be apprenticed as a printer's devil in Newburyport, Mass., where he learned the trade that would later enable him, with a stick of type, to launch fusillades more devastating than any he might have fired from cannons.

Garrison became an abolitionist in his early 20s under the influence of the Quaker Benjamin Lundy, and in 1831, at the age of 25, started a little newspaper in Boston called *The Liberator*, which he was to publish every week, continuously, for a remarkable 35 years. When Garrison started his venture, abolitionism was a fringe belief that seemed to grow more dangerous even as it gained legitimacy, and during the years of his advocacy he and his fellow abolitionists risked social condemnation, tarring and feathering, prison and even lynching. Garrison himself withstood poverty, mob violence, and a stint in a Baltimore jail on trumped up libel charges.

Throughout, Garrison never gave up and never bowed to propriety. "I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation," he said in the opening issue of *The Liberator*, which was supported by right thinking rich people and middle class subscribers as well as the nickels and dimes of free blacks. "I am in earnest--I will not equivocate--I will not excuse--I will not retreat a single inch--AND I WILL BE HEARD."

Reviled by slaveowners and Northern conservatives alike, the more his enemies tried to suppress him, the louder his voice seemed. His newspaper, pamphlets and tracts were intercepted by hostile postmasters and considered contraband when smuggled south by abolitionist sympathizers. The state of Georgia even offered a bounty for his capture and extradition.

Garrison's genius was understanding that someone had to insist on some absolute right, regardless of expedience, and that it was his role always to be out in front, showing where the path of morality must inevitably lead when most people found it invisible. Yet in the course of his career he saw his central moral idea--that slavery was sin--move from the extreme fringe right into the United States Constitution (a document he publicly burned in 1854). The very last issue of *The Liberator*, in 1865, recorded the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment ending slavery.

Mayer expertly places Garrison's activism in its religious context (the ultimate Protestant, Garrison protested all his life, knew the Bible intimately but rarely went to church) and provides a fascinating portrait of the role early 19th century printers played in the spread of new ideas. Even the smallest country weeklies participated in an "exchange" system whereby they swapped editions by mail with other editors and then clipped and reprinted whatever struck their fancy, often debating the unseen writers of these clippings in print.

And unlike so many historians who numbly pile fact upon fact and fill page after page, this one can write. Mayer's sense of dramatic pacing is as good as any novelist's, and his vigorous, at times even lyrical prose surely would have excited his subject's admiration. This is not to say the book is entirely without flaws. Mayer is probably too generous (but only a little) in overlooking Garrison's flaws, and dwells in too much detail on the eye-glazing doctrinal infighting that characterized the abolition movement as much as it seems to mark other reform efforts.

Yet these are small imperfections in grand piece of work. William Lloyd Garrison created a magnificent life, and it can fairly be said of his biographer that he has done likewise.