

Lucretia Mott Speaks: The Essential Speeches And Sermons

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Review

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Mott, Lucretia and (eds) Densmore, Christopher, Faulkner, Carol, Hewitt, Nancy A., Beverly Wilson Palmer. *Lucretia Mott Speaks: The Essential Speeches and Sermons.* University of Illinois Press, \$75.00 ISBN 9780252040795

Full Range of Lucretia Mott's Life Brought Together in New Collection

How refreshing and inspiring are the words of Lucretia Mott (1793 – 1880). Reading the thoughts of this passionate, pious, dedicated Quaker—abolitionist, minister, and woman's rights and peace advocate—causes one to reflect on the many American reformers in our past who worked to uplift our nation. Quakers like Mott were often at the forefront of those efforts.

Four eminent scholars have edited this collection of some sixty representative selections of Mott's words. They have chosen a balanced range of her stirring speeches and sermons, offering insights into the several causes she fought for, including some new material not found in previous publications. All of Mott's addresses were extemporaneous. Like fellow-abolitionist and woman's rights advocate Lucy Stone, she spoke from the heart, using no notes. Her speeches were either paraphrased by journalists and co-workers or recorded word-for-word by stenographers.

Reform was basic to Mott's very being, and for over sixty years her voice never stilled, continuing to lecture until months before she died. In all these selections, one senses both her calm demeanor and her ardent commitment in promoting various causes. Though diminutive in stature and feminine to the core, she was blisteringly effective with words. In addition to anti-slavery and women's rights, Mott advocated temperance, prison reform, the rights of Native Americans, and opposition to the death penalty. As one of the most famous women of her day, she spoke at Quaker meetings and in large, public halls. Many in her audiences agreed with every word she uttered; others hissed and jeered at her radical ideas, offended, too, by a woman speaking on a public stage.

Faith was at the heart of her words and actions. Evident here is a woman who knew the Bible well, frequently citing scripture to argue her points. But Mott judiciously selected its truths, insisting that the Bible could be used most effectively by reflecting current times rather than some of the outmoded ideas from the time when it was written. For instance, she insisted that a perverted understanding of the scriptures and the influence of the church were in part responsible for women's oppression. She quoted passages that celebrated and honored women.

Mott understood the perpetuation of slavery better than many Americans, then and now, blaming not only southerners but northerners as well--manufacturers, financiers, and consumers—who shared responsibility for the vile institution. Northerners “ought not to use the products of slaves’ unrequited toil,” she maintained, for in doing so, they were promulgating slavery’s existence. (142)

Mott was very much a part of history, in both her speeches and actions. She was a peace advocate and a critic of Abraham Lincoln and of the Civil War. She urged her own country as well as all nations to adopt an anti-war stance, insisting that arbitration and the spoken word, rather than the sword, could resolve global problems. She worked for equal pay and celebrated the opportunities gradually opening to women, including Philadelphia’s women’s medical college, the city’s design school, and various professions formerly closed to women. She was present at the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833; among eight women excluded from London’s 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention; one of five women who, in 1848, organized the Seneca Falls Woman’s Rights Convention; a major presence and speaker at many women’s suffrage conventions, and a founder of Swarthmore College in 1864. Like a number of abolitionists, she remained an active member of the American Anti-Slavery Society after the Civil War, urging the nation and the federal government to counter southern whites’ cruelty against former slaves.

As a Quaker, Mott sensed an inner light in every human being, insisted on racial and gender equality, and rejected racist sentiments, such as those expressed by her friend, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who opposed the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. To Mott, life should be lived simply but purposefully. She set high standards for women, decrying those who embraced the latest fashions, thus becoming “frivolous” appendages of society. Mott

continually encouraged women to be combative, to demand their rights rather than wait for them to be granted. She believed woman was man's equal, but having been "so long crushed," she was too often "enervated, paralyzed, prostrated by the influences by which she has been surrounded." (111) Frustrating to her were the many women who saw no need to fight for their rights. "So circumscribed have been her limits, that she does not realize the misery of her condition," she argued in one of her most-often quoted insights. (112) Women deserved access to education and to all the opportunities and rights that men enjoyed, including equal pay.

In a final public utterance, as she did so often throughout her life, she offered wisdom and inspiration. "I want that we may all show our faith by our works, by our honesty and justice and mercy and love." Would that everyone today could live by that thought and profit from her wisdom.

Sally G. McMillen, Professor Emeritus, Department of History, Davidson College. Her most recent books include Lucy Stone: An Unapologetic Life and a third edition of Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South.