

William Wells Brown (c.1814-84)

From 'Anti-Slavery Meeting' [Speech by Brown, August, 1854]

William Wells Brown's 1854 anti-slavery speech in Manchester, transcribed and included in a larger report for the local newspaper *Manchester Examiner and Times*, typified his oratory in its critique of Black vulnerability in his home country, as well as in his challenge to British listeners to be bolder in their activism than their American counterparts. The rousing address Brown gave in Manchester was only one in a series he delivered in the UK as an official representative for the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) of the US. Having begun his lecturing in America, Brown extended his appearances as a compelling anti-slavery speaker to France, England, Scotland, and Ireland.

Brown's eloquence as a lecturer complemented his productivity in print. Besides his novel, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), Brown extended his oeuvre into play-writing and dramatic readings of his melodrama, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom*.

*See also Rev. Mathews's related address and his salute to Brown on this website, as well as Brown's 1849 London Anti-slavery Speech in the print anthology, Transatlantic Anglophone Literatures, 1776-1920.*

From 'Anti-Slavery Meeting' [Speech by Brown, August 5, 1854]

Mr. W. W. Brown, a fugitive slave, next addressed the meeting. He said: Mr. Chairman, and ladies and gentlemen, I would much have preferred that my friend Mr. Pil[l]sbury should

have occupied the time that is intended for myself.<sup>i</sup> As has been said, he is not only thoroughly acquainted with the working of slavery in the United States, but he is one of its oldest and best pioneers. He has had the advantage of early education, he has the advantage of me at the present time, and I feel confident could not only claim your attention, but could give you better information in a better manner than I could possibly hope to do. I stand to-night without ever having had a day's schooling in my life. You have been called together to hear men speak to-night—I am here as a piece of property. I am a slave according to the laws of the United States at the present time. Something has been said this afternoon about my having been purchased by the liberality of the English people; I know not that such a purchase has taken place; I know it is in contemplation, and many suppose it may have been accomplished by this time, but I do not know that such is the case.<sup>ii</sup> I stand here, this evening, therefore, not only a slave, a piece of property according to the laws of the United States, but I am here without education or without having received a day's schooling in my life, and what education I have has been of my own seeking in my own way; and, therefore, I can hope to say but little that shall go to aid in making up the testimony that is intended by the holding of this conference. (Applause.) No one can read, Mr. Chairman, the declaration of the American independence, and compare that document with the history of the legislation of the federal government of the United States, without being struck with the marked inconsistency of the theory of the people and their acts; the one declaring that all men are created equally, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the other is the history of the encroachment of slavery upon liberty, or legislation in favour of slavery in that country against the cause of freedom. From the very hour that the convention that was held to form the constitution of the United States down to the present time, the acts of the government have been

for the perpetuation and the spread of slavery in that land. As has been said, slavery was introduced into the constitution by allowing the African slave trade to be continued for twenty years, making it lawful and constitutional, which it had never been before; and then the slaveowner was allowed representation for this slave property, and every man that would go to the Coast of Africa, and steal five negroes and bring them to the United States, was allowed by the constitution, then, three votes for the five slaves. And it is carried down to the present time, as the American congress has more than twenty-five representatives based upon this slave representation. And that is one of the reasons why in the national congress the slaveowners have the power of carrying so many of their measures, and the twenty-five, I need not say, who are slaveowners themselves, do not represent, but misrepresent, their “property,” and these slaveowners go for the purpose of spreading the system of slavery over the land. America is called a free and independent country, and yet there is not a single foot of soil over which the stars and the stripes wave upon which I could stand and be protected by law. (Sensation.) There is not a foot of soil in the United States upon which I could stand where the constitution would give me any protection; and let me return to the United States, I am liable to be seized at any moment and conveyed in chains to the southern states, and there handed over to a man who claims me as his property, and to be worked up as he may think fit. Such is true as regards even the early history of slavery. It is true that the congress of the United States, or the constitution, agreed to abolish slavery in 20 years, but the internal slave trade is carried on, and I aver that it is even worse—setting aside the middle passage—than anything connected with the foreign slave trade. In the old states, slaves are raised for the market; they have their family attachments, and they are probably, to some extent, more enlightened and not so much degraded by heathenism as the negroes upon the coast of Africa, and, as men become more enlightened, the separation of

families, and the buying and selling of them to slavery, is so much the worse. They feel it the more, and therefore, I think that when we look and see that 100,000 slaves are annually taken from the slave-raising states, to supply the southern markets—the cotton, sugar, and rice plantations of the far south—we must be satisfied that the internal slave trade that is carried on by the people of the United States is as grievous in its effect as the African slave trade when carried on by the people of that country. I know that some suppose that the evils of slavery are exaggerated; I have been asked again and again if certain portions of “Uncle Tom's Cabin” were not exaggeration. Of the working of slavery, in my opinion, I don't think anything can exaggerate that infamous system. When we look and see that there are at the present time enslaved between three and four millions of God's children, who are put upon the auction stand and sold to the highest bidder, no language which we can use can exaggerate the workings or the evils of the system of slavery as it is carried on in that country. (Applause.) The fugitive slave law,<sup>iii</sup> that by many people here is considered a great evil, is at present the law in America, and it is the most atrocious law ever concocted by the human brain or human legislation—a law that sets every other statute in existence in the shade when we look at the barbarous enactments that it contains. By the fugitive slave law every coloured person in that country is liable to be arrested and carried off to the far south and made a slave of, no matter whether born in New York, Massachusetts, Vermont, or any free state. The gate of separation which has hitherto kept the inhabitants of the northern states from participating in slaveholding, is now thrown down; and every man who wishes to go into the slaveholding business, has now only to find some one who shall participate in the gain, and to swear that the coloured person whom he means to enslave, is the property of that man whom he has brought forward for that purpose, and so the poor coloured man is carried away to the south. In the state of Illinois, during the past few months, a coloured man was

arrested under this fugitive slave law, who had lived in the same town some fifteen years, and had by his industry accumulated 1,500 or 2,000 dollars worth of property; and the man who came upon this man, and claimed and seized him as a slave, was not only a professing Christian, but was a minister of the gospel, and one who belonged to the same denomination as the man whom he claimed for his property. It was in vain this coloured man asserted that he was a free man, and had a right to be free; that no one had any right to take him away, that he was free born, and from the state of Ohio. The only respite he could obtain was, that he was allowed, as a favour, to go to prison, and to stay there for a while, until he could get his property and other affairs in the place disposed of; and in the meantime he was obliged to find security, and to pay an officer three dollars a day to watch him and see that he did not run away. He agreed to this, but after a while he had collected evidence by which he proved himself to be free, and was enabled to demand his release. But a debt had been accumulated during his detention, to the amount of some \$3,000, so that, although he had thus escaped being sent into slavery, he was utterly ruined. This is the history of a free coloured man in the state of Illinois. There is a more atrocious case I can tell you. Within the last year, two villains from a southern state arrived in a certain town of Pennsylvania, and attempted to seize a coloured man, who was employed there as a waiter, in one of the inns. They approached him in a clandestine manner, and threw their chains upon his limbs; but the man, whom they would have made a slave, escaped from his pursuers; he ran out of the house, he ran to the nearest stream, and plunged into it, and there stood at bay, immersed up to his neck in the running water. The slave-hunters came up, and many people gathered around, sympathising with the hunted fugitive. He exclaimed to his persecutors, "If any of you come near me here, I will drown him in this water that flows about me." The slave-hunters answered him, "If you don't come out of the river, and surrender, we will

shoot you where you are.” And then, suddenly, to the horror and astonishment of all the bystanders, one of the slave-hunters raised his gun or pistol, aimed it at the fugitive, and fired at him. We are told how the water then ran red with the blood of the slave; and how a crowd of four or five hundred people, who stood by and saw this thing done, did nothing more than cry “Shame” upon those who had done it, because it was the law. Sir, I do feel confident, that if in this country such a law existed, and if any two persons came into a town of England, and dared openly to ill treat a human being in that way, there would not be three or four hundred Englishmen standing by so cold to the feelings of humanity as to let such a thing be done in their presence, and content themselves with crying “Shame!” I feel certain, that, in England, the villains who should do such an outrage would instantly be compelled to fly the spot. (Cheers.)

Mr. Pillsbury: My friend will allow me to interrupt his narrative with the addition of one of two circumstances which he has forgotten to mention. While that poor fellow stood up to his neck in water, they fired three rifle balls at him, two of which took effect upon him, and dyed the river with his blood. He escaped across the river, however, but fainted and fell, from the wounds he had received, the moment he reached the opposite shore. Some of his friends assisted him, and he was delivered; but those ruffians who shot him were arrested and tried, and were acquitted of having committed any crime in what they had done.

Mr. Wells Brown (continued): Well, now, you will recollect that all this was perpetrated in the state of Pennsylvania, in one of those which are called the free states. We hear people speak of free and slave states; but I hold that there is no such distinction; for now there are no free states in the United States of America. There are none of them free, because that cannot be a free state which cannot protect the freedom of its inhabitants; and there is no state in the union now which can give liberty, or even secure his liberty, to the coloured man. His rights are

nothing if the slaveholder pursues him. The courts of justice in some of those “free states” have been converted into prisons, in which the fugitive slaves of the southerners have been kept for them; and very recently, in Boston, a slave was arrested, and confined for six or seven days in the court house, which was guarded by muskets and cannon to prevent his rescue; thence he was put on board a vessel in the harbour and carried away to the far south, to a life of slavery. The boast of the “free states,” that people there enjoy perfect freedom is most untrue; for under the fugitive slave law, the slaveowners of the south are empowered to enter those “free states,” and employ not only the marshals of the union, in arresting any of the coloured people whom they choose to claim, but compel the inhabitants of the place, under severe penalties, to abet the seizure of the slave. I cannot exaggerate, sir, the effect of this fugitive slave law, and indeed, of everything else that is connected with slavery in the United States. If you had been, as I have been, for twenty years of your life in the southern states of America, and had seen there, as I have seen, the workings of slavery, the trading in human beings, the buying and selling of them, the whipping and abusing of them, as I have seen all that carried on there,—and if you had seen the dear ones torn from you, and taken to be sold [on the] auction block, and handed over to the highest bidder, as I have seen my dear ones taken, never to see them again—if you had seen all this, you could not think anything, in the statements made at this conference, or in the publications you may have read, was at all exaggerated. (Cheers.) I know you read, with palpitating hearts, the history of the Bloody Assize in this country;<sup>iv</sup> you loathe the name of Judge Jeffries, when you remember that Reign of Terror in England. Now, go to the United States, and you will see, that acts as cruel as ever were done in England, in that age, are done in America now,—done every day in the southern states, and done almost every week in the northern states; you will see there judges who sit on the bench, giving their sentence in favour of

slavery, and condemning freedom; judges who knew, too, that the persons whom their sentence orders thus to be seized and carried back into the southern states, will be cruelly tortured there. It was asserted not long since in Boston, by Theodore Parker,<sup>v</sup> that one of those slaves, who had been seized in the north, and carried back to slavery, had been flogged to death, or nearly to death; and such will be the fate of many of them. Then, ought not facts like those to be known throughout this country? I am glad these meetings are held, and that this association has been formed. I hope it will do something to instruct the people here, and to maintain anti-slavery principles, so that Englishmen, when they visit the United States, may not do henceforth, as many of their countrymen have done, give their influence to the side of the oppressor, instead of the oppressed. (Cheers.) That is now most important to the cause; for thousands of persons, emigrants and others, are going to the United States every year, and they ought to understand this matter. If nothing else could be accomplished yet, meetings like these and lecturing would be worthy objects of the efforts of this association.

It is true, there is already in England an anti-slavery society established. But I must say, and with great respect for the excellent persons who belong to it, that society is so inactive it scarcely does anything throughout the year but hold an anniversary meeting; and it is a fact, sir, that speeches like those which were made in the conference to-day, or to-night upon this platform, would not be tolerated on the platform of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in London. (Cheers.[.]) It may be said of us, that we have used very strong language. Why, sir, has not the time come for strong language? Those who want milk and water, let them go to London at anniversary time, and they will get it there, in homeopathic doses. (A laugh.) Probably, the fact of my having once been a slave, and of my feeling upon this subject so intensely, having relations of my own, still dragging out the life of slavery, has made me feel,



that something strong should be uttered. (Cheers.) People want something strong,—they are willing to hear it; then I say, why not give it them? There is need I think, of an association in this country, which shall expose to the British nation the working of slavery in America and the fact as it is; which shall give a true representation also, and not merely a partial account, of what the abolitionists in America are doing. (Cheers.) I am identified, as you may well believe, with the most ultra of the abolitionists, who are, I consider, speaking the truth more effectually than any other party or association in the United States; and I consider also, that the greatest of the champions of human liberty there is the present leader of the anti-slavery movement in the United States.—William Lloyd Garrison. (Great cheering.) I know there are some who would be afraid to utter that sentiment, because they would be afraid of losing caste. I, sir, have nothing to lose, but everything to gain. (Cheers.) I have now been five years in this country. I have traveled through Great Britain, and am almost an Englishman. I think I know something of the public sentiment here; and I say, the people want to know the truth, and to know what they can do for us. I tell them, that those ultra abolitionists in America, to whom I have referred, are those who in America are considered to be the greatest foes of the fugitive slave law, and of all the acts of the pro-slavery party; *those* are the persons of whom slaveowners speak with most malignity, and who are more vilified by the American pro-slavery press than all other parties and associations put together. This may be, unless I can comply with an invitation to speak on Thursday (and I am afraid that I cannot do so), my last opportunity of speaking publicly in this country; but I shall return to the United States, after being five years in England, conscious that I may safely give to the free coloured people of the north, and to the abolitionists of the United States, the assurance that something is being done here for their cause, and that the English people only want to know what they can do, and they will set about it and do it. (Cheers.) We do

not ask you to take up arms; we do not ask you to do any act, or utter any language, unbecoming Christians; but we ask you to learn the facts and the truth of this matter, and honestly and strongly to speak out upon it. (Mr. Brown resumed his seat amidst very cordial cheers.)

Source text:

Brown, W[illiam] W[ells], [Speech reported in] 'Anti-Slavery Meeting', *Manchester Examiner and Times*, 5 August 1854, 10-11.

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<sup>i</sup> Parker Pillsbury, an official representative of the American Antislavery Society (AASS), had spoken prior to Brown. A skilled orator, Pillsbury was also an active supporter of women's suffrage.

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<sup>ii</sup> British enthusiasm for Brown indeed led to fundraising to purchase his manumission, allowing him to return to the US a free man.

<sup>iii</sup> The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law galvanized many in the US North who had been personally opposed to enslavement but who had held back from supporting abolition. The fact that the law required anyone in the North to aid in the return of escaped slaves to their owners created a new moral burden—one that helped prompt Harriet Beecher Stowe to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

<sup>iv</sup> In referencing the English Bloody Assize[s], Brown invoked a notorious episode of the seventeenth century, when, King Charles II having died without a legitimate heir, his brother James (a Catholic) became the monarch. Protestant supporters of the Duke of Monmouth, a bastard son of Charles, staged a rebellion which was brutally punished by Lord Chief Justice George Jeffreys.

<sup>v</sup> Theodore Parker (1810-60): New England Unitarian minister, author, and abolitionist.