

The Progress of Fifty Years by Mrs. Lucy Stone (1893)

The commencement of the last fifty years is about the beginning of that great change and improvement in the condition of women which exceeds all the gains of hundreds of years before.

Four years in advance of the last fifty, in 1833, Oberlin College, in Ohio, was founded. Its charter declared its grand object, - "To give the most useful education at the least expense of health, time, and money, and to extend the benefits of such education to both sexes and to all classes; and the elevation of the female character by bringing within the reach of the misjudged and neglected sex all the instructive privileges which have hitherto unreasonably distinguished the leading sex from theirs." These were the words of Father Shippen, which, if not heard in form, were heard in fact as widely as the world. The opening of Oberlin to women marked an epoch. In all outward circumstances this beginning was like the coming of the Babe of Bethlehem -- in utter poverty. Its first hall was of rough slabs with the bark on still. Other departments corresponded. But a new Messiah had come.

Get but a truth once uttered, and 'tis like
A star new born that drops into its place;
And which, once circling in its placid round,
Not all the tumult of the earth can shake.

Henceforth the leaves of the tree of knowledge were for women, and for the healing of the nations. About this time Mary Lyon began a movement to establish Mt. Holyoke Seminary. Amherst College was near by. Its students were educated to be missionaries. They must have educated wives. It was tacitly understood and openly asserted that Mt. Holyoke Seminary was to meet this demand. But, whatever the reason, the idea was born that women could and should be educated. It lifted a mountain load from woman. It shattered the idea, everywhere pervasive as the atmosphere, that women were incapable of education, and would be less womanly, less desirable in every way, if they had it. However much it may have been resented, women accepted the idea of their intellectual inequality. I asked my brother: "Can girls learn Greek?"

The anti-slavery cause had come to break stronger fetters than those that held the slave. The idea of equal rights was in the air. The wail of the slave, his clanking fetters, his utter need, appealed to everybody. Women heard. Angelina and Sara Grimki and Abby Kelly went out to speak for the slaves. Such a thing had never been heard of. An earthquake shock could hardly have startled the community more. Some of the abolitionists forgot the slave in their efforts to silence the women. The Anti-Slavery Society rent itself in twain over the subject. The Church was moved to its very foundation in opposition. The Association of Congregational Churches issued a "Pastoral Letter" against the public speaking of women. The press, many-tongued, surpassed itself in reproaches upon these women who had so far departed from their sphere as to speak in public. But, with anointed lips and a consecration which put even life itself at stake, these peerless women pursued the even tenor of their way, saying to their opponents only: "Woe is me, if I preach not this gospel of freedom for the slave." Over all came the melody of Whittier's

"When woman's heart is breaking
Shall woman's voice be hushed? "

I think, with never-ending gratitude, that the young women of today do not and can never know at what price their right to free speech and to speak at all in public has been earned. Abby Kelly once entered a church only to find herself the subject of the sermon, which was preached from the text: "This Jezebel is come among us also." They jeered at her as she went along the street. They threw stones at her. They pelted her with bad eggs as she stood on the platform. Some of the advocates of the very cause for which she endured all this were ready to drive her from the field. Mr. Garrison and Wendell Phillips stood by her. But so great was the opposition that one faction of the abolitionists left and formed a new organization, after a vain effort to put Abby Kelly off from the committee to which she had been nominated.

The right to education and to free speech having been gained for woman, in the long run every other good thing was sure to be obtained.