

Submit



March 9, 2023
Current Issue

The Remarkable Grimkes

David S. Reynolds

A new multigenerational history of the abolitionist Grimke family is a sobering reminder of the complicated nature of race relations in America after the Civil War.



Angelina Grimke Weld and Theodore Dwight Weld with their children Sarah, Theodore, and Charles Stuart, circa 1846

The New York Review

Reviewed by David S. Reynolds:

The Grimkes: The Legacy of Slavery in an American Family

by Kerri K. Greenidge

Liveright, 404 pp., \$32.50

Nineteenth-century America teemed with social reformers like the fiery abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who called the Constitution “an agreement with Hell” because of its compromises on slavery. But none were like the sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimke. What made them unique was that they had been raised in a South Carolina slaveholding family but became famous for denouncing slavery and defying conventional gender roles.

Their parents, the rice planter John Faucheraud Grimke and Polly Smith Grimke (the daughter of a wealthy slave trader), owned hundreds of Black men, women, and children. The pious Sarah

and Angelina, witnessing the suffering of their family's bondspeople, grew morally outraged at the injustice of slavery and decided to leave the South. Sarah, thirteen years older than Angelina (who called her "mother"), moved from Charleston to Philadelphia in 1821, when she was twenty-eight. Angelina followed eight years later. There the sisters joined a Quaker group that opposed slavery.

Riots in the North against African Americans and abolitionists impelled Angelina to write *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, published as a pamphlet in 1836, in which she declared that if southern women stood up en masse against slavery they could "overthrow this horrible system of oppression and cruelty, licentiousness and wrong." The first widely distributed abolitionist work by a southern white woman, the *Appeal* caused a sensation, as did Sarah's *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, which appeared the following year. Sarah also attacked slavery and rejected the belief that women were inferior beings who should shun the public sphere. Her "fundamental principle," she announced, was "the perfect equality of man and woman," based on the notion that "whatever is right for man to do, is right for woman."

Small wonder, given these views, that the Grimke sisters have attracted a lot of attention. Not long after Angelina's death in 1879, the first biography of her appeared, followed over the years by several excellent studies.

The newest, Kerri K. Greenidge's *The Grimkes*, greatly enhances our understanding of these remarkable sisters and their legacy. Greenidge, a history professor at Tufts and the author of *Black Radical* (2019), on the activist William Monroe Trotter, describes members of the Grimke family and their descendants in an ambitious cross-generational biography that provides a scintillating panorama of slavery, protest, and race relations in nineteenth-century America.

F. Holland Day/Library of Congress

Angelina Weld Grimke, circa 1895

Covering many people over several generations creates narrative zigzags, but Greenidge accomplishes this gracefully and engagingly. She follows the lives of Sarah and Angelina Grimke; Angelina's controversial abolitionist husband, Theodore Dwight Weld; their three children, Charles Stuart, Theodore, and Sarah; and their grandchild Angelina Grimke Hamilton, an Illinois doctor. Greenidge interweaves the stories of others as well: Angelina and Sarah's brother Henry Grimke, who brutalized bondspeople; Nancy Weston, the enslaved servant with whom Henry had three children, Archibald (Archie), Francis (Frank), and John; Archie's daughter, Angelina Weld Grimke, who became a poet and playwright; and Frank's wife, the teacher and author Charlotte Forten Grimke, whose family background in Black abolitionism Greenidge traces in detail.

A theme that runs throughout *The Grimkes* is the underlying conservatism of many seeming radicals. Even the outspoken Grimke sisters were tinged with elitism. Early on, neither thoroughly empathized with the Black people whose cause they espoused. "For all of her sensitivity and compassion," Greenidge writes, "Sarah Grimke's belief in the sinfulness of

slavery rarely included a recognition of the lives of the enslaved,” while Angelina thought that “white people were more harmed by the South’s ‘peculiar institution’ than the enslaved people they exploited.”

Greenidge describes Angelina’s turn toward a more radical position in the late 1830s, when she alienated her former Quaker friends and even, for a short time, her sister Sarah by embracing the militant abolitionism of Garrison, whose call for the immediate emancipation of America’s enslaved millions made many fear a forthcoming racial upheaval in America. In May 1838 Angelina, now “the most infamous woman in the country,” arranged her progressive marriage ceremony with Weld, the “most mobbed man in the country.” The wedding cake was made by African American bakers and contained no sugar produced by enslaved labor. The couple’s clothing was purchased from local Black businesses, and the invitations were designed by a Black engraver.

Angelina entered the marriage as a “femme sole,” keeping her own property, rights, and obligations—highly unusual in that era of coverture, or the denial of a wife’s legal identity. After 1840 the Grimke-Welds retreated from public appearances, and domestic life consumed not only Angelina and Weld but also the unmarried Sarah, who lived with them and helped care for their children. The family’s activism dissipated until the Civil War, when Angelina and Weld gave lectures in support of the Union and racial equality.

Advertisement

Although Greenidge adeptly traces the vagaries of the reformers’ lives, she underplays their intense radicalism by failing to delve into *American Slavery as It Is* (1839), which Sarah and Angelina cowrote with Weld. The book, which Greenidge mentions but does not analyze, shows that any lack of empathy the Grimkes may have once displayed had dissolved before their rage over the South’s cruel treatment of enslaved people. In their introduction, the authors shattered racial barriers by arguing that Black people deserved rights that were violated by slaveholders, who

rob [bondspeople] of *themselves*,...their bodies and minds, their time and liberty and earnings, their free speech and rights of conscience, their right to acquire knowledge, and property, and reputation.

The Grimke-Welds asked their white readers how they would feel if they were enslaved. Flogged slaves, they reported, “have red pepper rubbed into their lacerated flesh, and hot brine, spirits of turpentine, &c., poured over the gashes to increase the torture”; “they are often stripped naked, their backs and limbs cut with knives, bruised and mangled by scores and hundreds of blows with the paddle, and terribly torn by the claws of cats, drawn over them by their tormentors”; “they are maimed, mutilated and burned to death over slow fires”; and so on for more than two hundred pages. *American Slavery as It Is* stands as one of the most powerful exposés of human bondage ever published.

Although Greenidge minimizes this landmark book, she communicates the horrors of slavery in other ways. Her portrait of Henry Grimke is harrowing. A wealthy planter who owned nearly a hundred people, the sadistic Henry had a perverse penchant for beating slave boys on the head so hard that they often passed out. He took special pleasure in slamming the family's butler, Stephen, against walls, doorjambs, and stairwells. Stephen was injured so often that he eventually began having seizures and wandered about drooling, mumbling to himself, and shouting at passersby. He became a "broken victim of slavery," a shell of a man who was taken in by Angelina, her husband, and her sister, who lived together on a New Jersey farm. Greenidge writes, "Stephen was the sisters' cross to bear, a burden that issued from their family's original sin."

Henry Grimke was not only violent but also, like countless other male enslavers, sexually exploitative. After the death of his wife, Selina, he purchased Nancy Weston as a nurse and concubine. Nancy and the three children she had with Henry—Archie, Frank, and John—were left enslaved when he died in 1852. In his will, he bequeathed to his white son Montague "my Mulatto Servant girl named Nancy, with her present and future issue and increase, to him and his heirs forever."

Montague, like his father, was a ruthless master. Luckily for Nancy, he moved north for four years to become a druggist, leaving her in Charleston. Living on the fringes of the Brown Fellowship Society, an exclusive cadre of free Black people in Charleston, Nancy passed on to her children the group's aspirations and proper manners. When Montague returned to Charleston, he assumed control of Nancy's family. During the Civil War he joined a local unit of the Confederate Army. He tried to make Archie and Frank work for him, beat them, and had them tortured in a workhouse, but they resisted vigorously. He inflicted so much pain on his half brothers that they rarely spoke of him for the rest of their lives.

After emancipation, Archie and Frank focused on getting ahead. They attended freedmen's schools, got support to attend Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and came to the attention of their aunt Angelina, who paid for their further education. Archie graduated from Harvard Law School and became a prominent attorney, newspaper editor, American consul to the Dominican Republic, and cofounder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Frank earned a divinity degree at Princeton Theological Seminary and later established himself as one of the leading Black ministers in the nation. His Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., attracted many of the city's most prominent Black professionals and politicians.

Greenidge writes that the brothers became leaders of the "colored elite"—the upper echelon of African Americans who were eager to put slavery behind them and who distinguished themselves from what they called "the negro masses." Although Frank and Archie saw themselves as agents of social change in the tradition of their aunts Angelina and Sarah, they remained alienated from the everyday problems of less privileged Black people in the post-Reconstruction era, a time of segregation, lynching, and disenfranchisement. The brothers were

associated with the conciliatory Booker T. Washington, who saw hard work and moral improvement as the best weapons against racial discrimination and white violence.

Advertisement

Archie, though at times more radical than Frank, settled into accommodation with mainstream white values. His acceptance of US economic imperialism explains his support, as a diplomat in the Dominican Republic, of Ulises Heureaux, a brutal dictator who assassinated his enemies. As a pastor, Frank did little to help Black victims of Jim Crow. To the contrary, he excluded many less-well-off (and darker-skinned) Black people from membership in his church, accomplishing what Greenidge calls a “purge” to maintain the respectability of his congregation. Frank’s message was one of conservative racial uplift and self-improvement, not protest or rebellion. He was also a male chauvinist who believed that married Black women should not teach in public schools, and he assisted Washington’s Board of Commissioners in having two African American women teachers fired after they got married.

Frank’s hidebound attitudes, Greenidge demonstrates, put a damper on the progressive spirit of his wife, Charlotte (Lottie) Forten Grimke. Lottie had a family background in abolitionism and women’s rights. Her grandfather James Forten was a free Black man who served in the American Revolution and then went into the sailmaking business. His sail loft in Philadelphia was so successful that he accumulated a fortune large enough for him to devote much of his time to the abolitionist cause and to funding other reformers. Although an economic downturn hurt the firm, he left a substantial inheritance.

His first son, Robert B. Forten, was brilliant and committed to abolition but became financially strained as sailmaking declined with the rise of steamships. He married the formerly enslaved Mary Wood, the daughter of a North Carolina planter and one of his chattels. Their daughter Lottie was born in 1837. Three years later Mary died at twenty-five. Robert then married the affluent Mary Hanscome, who came from a family of Black slave traders in Charleston, a city, Greenidge tells us, that was not only British North America’s largest slave port but also a center of African American slaveholders (a group rarely mentioned by historians). She notes the irony of Robert Forten’s “forging an abolitionist career while marrying a woman whose wealth came from the slave system.”

Occupied with his new family, he proved to be a cold, distant father to Lottie, who wrote in her diary, “I long for a parent’s love, for the love of my only parent, but it seems denied to me—I know not why.” She was sent to be educated in Salem, Massachusetts, where she lived among a circle of authors and reformers and became the first Black woman to graduate from the Salem Normal School. From then on, she stifled her personal pain behind a veil of public achievement, battling physical problems and what she called a “strangling feeling of melancholy” even as she forged a career as a public intellectual.

During the Civil War Lottie served as a teacher of freedmen in South Carolina’s Sea Islands, an experience she recounted in an 1864 essay for *The Atlantic*—the first article by a Black person

published in that distinguished periodical. After the war she continued her teaching and became involved in the women's rights movement. But she was disillusioned when she witnessed shocking instances of racism among white reformers.

Greenidge provides an illuminating account of the rift between women's rights and advocacy for African Americans. Several white suffragists opposed the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave the vote to Black men but not to women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton called freedmen "the lowest strata of manhood" and said that the Fifteenth Amendment was "an open, deliberate insult to the women of the nation." Resorting to stereotypes, Stanton challenged her critics to

think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Ting who do not know the difference between a Monarchy and a Republic, who never read the Declaration of Independence or Webster's spelling book, making laws for [women leaders like] Lydia Maria Child, Lucretia Mott, or Fanny Kemble.

Lottie herself felt the sting of racism. When she applied for a teaching job at a school in Massachusetts, she was turned down because of her color. Parents threatened to withdraw their children from the school if a Black woman set foot on the campus. She was hurt not only by the school's rejection of her but also by the silence of white friends like the poet-activist John Greenleaf Whittier, who failed to intervene on her behalf.

Soon Lottie found herself in an elite circle of African Americans. When she married Frank Grimke in 1878, he was well on his way to becoming a star preacher among the nation's "colored aristocracy." The couple's only child, Theodora, died within six months of her birth. Ready to put her painful past behind her, Lottie became absorbed in the life of gentility that Frank offered, although she managed to continue her advocacy of women's suffrage and civil rights.

Meanwhile, Frank's brother Archie was rising professionally in Boston even as his marriage to a white woman created great turmoil around him. In early 1879 he proposed to Sarah Stanley, the daughter of a midwestern Episcopal clergyman who was skeptical of the pro-Black Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which he called "an award for the least intelligent rather than a reward for Anglo-Saxon virtue." When Archie wrote him a letter asking for Sarah's hand in marriage, Reverend Stanley replied that he could not allow his daughter to marry someone "beneath her intelligence and station in life." To Sarah, he wrote that all members of her family were in mourning over the prospect of her marrying a Black man: the idea of "my beautiful and accomplished daughter" united to this "brute fellow" was "perfectly abhorrent." After the marriage took place that April, Sarah's father told her that she was now dead to everyone who had always loved her. None of her family members attended the wedding, nor did most of the allegedly liberal-minded reformers among Archie's wide circle of friends. A Milwaukee paper reported the marriage under the headline "Miscegenation" and wrote that the bride and the groom "are said to be educated and refined, but it is extremely doubtful that her tastes are."

Within a year of their wedding, Archie and Sarah had a daughter, Angelina (Nana) Weld Grimke. The private and public disapproval of the marriage proved too much for Sarah, who in 1882 moved to Michigan to live with her parents, taking with her the two-year-old Nana. Her formerly hostile father grew close to the girl and even began to admire the high-achieving Archie from a distance. But Sarah came to believe that Nana needed the “love and sympathy of one of her own race” and must be raised “among her own people.” She sent her back east, where she was raised by Archie and, when he was abroad as a consul, by Frank and Lottie. Nana, whose parents remained separated, never saw her mother again.

Nana Weld Grimke is one of the most interesting figures Greenidge describes. On the one hand, she set a striking example of empowerment for Black women. Adventurous in her life and career, she rejected conventional domesticity. Although she had a brief romance with a Black musician, Hinton Jones, she was mainly attracted to women; some of her poems lyrically heightened the language of same-sex love that was common in her time. Greenidge uses a few of Nana’s poems to illustrate points in her biographical narrative, but one wishes for a more extended consideration of Nana’s place in literary modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. Fortunately, Greenidge pays close attention to Nana’s powerful drama *Rachel*, one of the first plays written and produced by a Black woman. The play’s Black protagonist longs to marry and have children with the man she loves but abandons the idea when she recognizes the inescapability of racism; she learns that her father and brother were lynched years earlier, and the foster children she is caring for face harassment and ostracism at school.

Despite her independence and creativity, Nana absorbed the elitism of those around her. Greenidge writes:

Nana embodied all of the contradictions of the era’s politically neutered yet culturally pretentious colored elite.... She was a spoiled Black aristocrat so heavily policed by the culture of racial respectability that she would never use her relative privilege to meaningfully uplift the “negro masses” from whom she remained so personally estranged.

The Grimkes is a sobering reminder that progress on race relations has been a tortuous journey, with spurts forward, reversals, and restarts. Prejudice was not unidirectional. It swept in crosscurrents and created many conflicts. The American story is not just the oft-told one of white versus Black. It’s also a story about African Americans excluding other African Americans, about social reformers pitted against one another, about marginalized people struggling to advance and sometimes succeeding while leaving others behind.

This Issue

March 9, 2023

Submit

More by David S. Reynolds

Throngs of Unseen People

In the Houses of Their Dead, Terry Alford's history of spiritualism during the Civil War era, suggests an unexpected link between the Lincoln family and that of John Wilkes Booth.

October 6, 2022 issue

In the Shadow of Slavery

Merging memoir, travelogue, and history, Clint Smith evokes the horrors of slavery.

February 24, 2022 issue

He Was No Moses

While he opposed slavery and southern secession early in his career, as president Andrew Johnson turned out to be an unsightly bigot.

December 16, 2021 issue

David S. Reynolds, a Distinguished Professor at the CUNY Graduate Center, is the author or editor of sixteen books, including, most recently, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times*. (March 2023)