

# Sojourner Truth



Nell Irvin Painter



W · W · Norton & Company  
New York London

Copyright © 1996 by Nell Irwin Painter

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

First published as a Norton paperback 1997

*For Glenn  
love of my life*

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to

Permissions, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue,  
New York, NY 10110.

The text of this book is composed in 12/14 Berthold Bodoni Light  
with the display set in Garamond Roman and Italic.  
Composition and manufacturing by the Hudson Craftsmen, Inc.

Book design by Margaret M. Wagner

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Painter, Nell Irwin

Sojourner Truth, a life, a symbol / by Nell Irwin Painter.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-393-02739-2

1. Truth, Sojourner, d. 1883. 2. Afro-American abolitionists—Biography.

3. Abolitionists—United States—Biography. 4. Women abolitionists—United States—

Biography. 5. Social reformers—United States—Biography. 6. Women social

reformers—United States—Biography. I. Title.

E185-97.T8P35 1996

305.5'07'092—dc20

[M]

95-47595

CIP

ISBN 0-393-31708-0 pbk

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110

www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd.

Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

5 6 7 8 9 0

## 14

resigned his agency and took up farming. In early 1851, as Truth was entering the western antislavery arena for the first time, Robinson was president of the Western Anti-Slavery Society, which encompassed western New York and Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan.<sup>6</sup>

The Robinsons had moved to Salem only in April 1851, when Marius had hesitantly agreed, despite lack of experience in journalism, to become the editor—Emily the publishing agent—of the only antislavery paper west of the Alleghenies, the Salem *Anti-Slavery Bugle*. A clarion of temperance and women's rights as well as antislavery, the *Bugle* preached Garrison's peace and antislavery convictions. During the Robinsons' eight years, the paper achieved a very respectable circulation of 1,400.<sup>7</sup>

The *Bugle* regularly covered feminist gatherings. In March 1851, it began running a call for the second annual Ohio women's rights convention, to meet in Akron in May. The call reached out to "all the friends of Reform, in whatever department engaged," and mentioned by name several evils that invites regularly denounced: slavery, war, intemperance, and sensuality.<sup>8</sup> In answer to the call, hundreds of reform-minded women and men turned up for women's rights on a hot day at the beginning of a southern Ohio summer. Among them was Sojourner Truth.

---

## Akron, 1851

The Ohio Woman's Rights Convention, now so closely associated with Sojourner Truth, convened in the Stone Church in Akron at 10:00 A.M. on 28 May 1851. The stifling church was packed, so crowded that Jane Swisshelm—the prickly, nationally recognized editor of her own newspaper, the Pittsburgh *Saturday Visitor*—had to push her way in. The only place left for her to sit was on the steps of the pulpit.<sup>9</sup>

Presiding was Frances Dana Gage, a writer from McConnellsville whose work had appeared regularly in the *Saturday Visitor* since 1849. They were an odd pair: Gage tall and earnest, Swisshelm tiny and vain. They had clashed often over the true meaning of women's rights. Gage insisted on women's complete equality with men, filling her essays with hardworking, poor women who toiled in adverse circumstances, while Swisshelm savored differences between the sexes as expressed in the genteel middle class.

Swisshelm preferred to imagine the existence of a "great law of nature, which says he [the man] is the stronger, and owes her [the woman] assistance." She cherished "all the beautiful amenities of life, which make it proper for a woman to receive one kind of attentions from the other sex, and repay them with another." She



Frances Dana Gage daguerrotype. Photo courtesy of J. B. Devol.

dedicated many a column inch to dress and congratulated the women at Akron on their appearance. She had expected feminists to "dress and behave like frights," but was delighted to find the women there "attired with peculiar elegance and taste." Women's cause was strengthened, Swisshelm thought, because many speakers "would have been singled out in any drawing-room as a spec-

imen of female loveliness."<sup>3</sup> Women's outward appearance was not one of Frances Dana Gage's vital concerns.

Swisshelm and Gage also disagreed fundamentally on whether issues of slavery and race had a place in their movement, even whether African Americans belonged in women's rights meetings at all. Gage said yes, emphatically, but Swisshelm said no, for her concept of women's rights extended only to rights denied women like herself. Swisshelm had no interest in poor and black women's most pressing concerns; those were not women's issues, even if they were uppermost in other women's minds.

Swisshelm criticized the 1850 women's rights meeting in Worcester, where Douglass and Truth had spoken, for "the introduction of the color question. The convention was not called to discuss the rights of color; and we think it was altogether irrelevant and unwise to introduce the question."<sup>4</sup> She saw the women's rights movement as a small boat in choppy waters that "may carry woman into a safe harbor, but it is not strong enough to bear the additional weight of all the colored men in creation." Colored men, not women, Swisshelm was not very concerned with black women: "As for colored women," she wrote, "all the interest they have in this reform is *as women*. All it can do for them is to raise them to the level of men of their own class." She was just as indifferent to poor whites: "We only claim for a white wood-sawyer's wife that she is as good as a white wood-sawyer—a blacksmith's mother is as good as a blacksmith. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Swisshelm's conservatism met keen contestation from other feminist abolitionists, even in her own pages. Parker Pillsbury noted in the *Saturday Visiter* that the mere presence of black speakers at the Worcester women's rights convention in 1850 had not made race an issue. He contended nonetheless that the existence of race within questions of sex must be acknowledged: "That *any* woman has rights, will scarcely be believed. But that *colored* women have rights, would never have been thought of, without a specific declaration."<sup>6</sup> Doubtless other feminists shared Swisshelm's aversion to race matters in women's rights conventions, but she by no means spoke for a dominant constituency.

Exhorting women to unite in a bloodless revolution for their rights, Gage's keynote compared the drive for women's rights with

the American conquest of the West. This self-confident speech so stirred Marius Robinson that he printed it in its entirety in the *Bugle*. The opening speech was Cag 's main contribution, for the novelty of trying to chair a lively meeting required all her attention.<sup>7</sup> Other women picked up where she left off.

Emma Coe, an experienced lecturer on women's history and greatness, took to the floor repeatedly with "brilliant" speeches that "thrilled the audience." Swisshelm's interventions were also numerous, though less trenchant; a neophyte speaker, she found it difficult to clarify her points. (One reporter said: "Mrs. Swisshelm is an odd genius. She lives amid opposition, and seems to have a constitutional tendency to antagonize.")<sup>8</sup> Coe and most of the others who spoke were more radical than Swisshelm, who continually sought—in vain—to water down the resolutions and insist that men's intentions toward women were noble. From opposing positions and in contrasting styles, Coe and Swisshelm dominated the debate, though many other able women like Sarah Coates and Mary Ann Johnson also played spirited roles.<sup>9</sup>

At one point in the discussion, several men spoke up; then another man suggested that men should not speak, for this was a women's convention. Mary Ann Johnson defended men's right to participate. This was a women's *rights* convention, she said, and whoever supported women's rights was welcome to take part. During the second day's deliberations, according to Robinson's report in the *Bugle*, "Remarks upon the subject of the education and condition of women were made by Mrs. Coe, Sojourner Truth and Rev. Geo. Schlosser and Miss Coates."<sup>10</sup>

Marius Robinson's editorial expressed the general view of the meeting, a satisfaction that

[t]he business of the Convention was principally conducted by the women, as will be seen by a reference to the list of officers.—The manner in which they acquitted themselves, must, we think have convinced the most skeptical—not of the propriety or rightfulness merely, of the participation of both sexes in deliberative bodies; but of its very great advantages in facilitating business and sustaining interest and decorum.

Others praised the convention's female "army of talent."<sup>11</sup> "[T]his meeting has never been surpassed or equalled in point of talent and importance," the *Liberator* concluded; "no person could have attended this Convention, and then said that woman was unqualified to sustain an equal position with man."<sup>12</sup>

A much later report would attribute a dominant role to Sojourner Truth. In fact she was only one of several self-possessed, competent, and experienced antislavery feminists who conducted this meeting so boldly—and with the support of the men who were there. Her remarks did not bring the meeting to a halt or even change its course, but they engrossed the audience. Her friend and host, Marius Robinson, was used to her way of speaking and was also serving as secretary of the convention. He printed his report of her whole address:

One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the Convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gestures, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. She came forward to the platform and addressing the President said with great simplicity:

May I say a few words? Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded; I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and man a quart—why cant she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much,—for we cant take more than our pint'll hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and dont know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they wont be so much trouble. I cant read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The

lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept—and Lazarus came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and woman who bore him. Man, where is your part? But the women are coming up blessed by God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.<sup>13</sup>

Robinson introduces Truth as an ex-slave, but without the use of dialect or other rhetorical techniques to emphasize her blackness. He characterizes her in expressions that would reappear often in Truth imagery: power, soul, earnestness, and gesture. Truth is simple and honest, in an implicit contrast with speakers who had mastered the conventions of public declamation. Robinson has Truth moving forward to speak, as though she had been sitting or standing somewhere away from the front of the church. According to Robinson, Truth did not seize the floor, she asked permission to speak; and as though doubting her right, she announces that her intervention will be brief.

In Robinson's report, Truth addresses three aspects of women's identity: work, mind, and biblical precept. She demands rights for women by virtue of her own physical equality with men. Her experience as a worker validates her claim, and the work in question, as well as the criterion for equality—muscular strength—are masculine. She does not mention her household work: the laundry, cooking, and cleaning that she had been doing in New York and Northampton, and that she would have contributed to the families, such as the Bensons, Posts, and Robinsons, with whom she stayed for extended periods.

Her examples come from her time in rural slavery, and her work is the work of the farm, which even in the industrializing 1850s Americans saw as the symbol of their economy. Along with masses of other Americans, including other rural women, she idealizes farm work as the embodiment of real work.<sup>14</sup> She enumerates the stages of production (plowing, reaping, husking, weeding, and mowing), transportation (carrying), and consumption (eating)

of crops that sustain life. At every step, she is the bodily equal of a farming man.

Turning from the body to the mind, Truth pulls away from personal experience to concede that "woman's" (not necessarily her own) mental capacity may not measure up to man's. As if to reinforce sexual difference, she switches to feminine metaphor and employs measures associated with cooking—pints rather than bushels. Employing the sarcasm for which she would become famous, Truth allots to man a quart of intellect and to woman a pint, physical measurements that are virtually craniometric. Knowledge and rights, she insists, are not a zero-sum game. As women are in physique or essence smaller than men, they cannot take "too much."

She belittles men who are completely perplexed by women's demands. As though confusion were an illness demanding a cure, Truth prescribes a remedy: Grant women the rights that men are wrongfully withholding. She insinuates that rights are like burdensome objects, or perhaps bowels, which can be moved without causing deprivation or crisis.

Having used pints and quarts to mock the American pretense that intelligence can be measured quantitatively, Truth turns from mental capacity to her own knowledge. She enters the argument over the Bible as a basis for or against women's rights, confident of the soundness of her wisdom. Hearing but not reading, she knows the Bible better than over-educated ministers who blame Eve for sin. Even if Eve caused original sin, which Truth doubts, the story of Adam and Eve is no place to look for the meaning of the Bible's role for women. Look not in Genesis, but in the New Testament, in John and Luke, for the story of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, and Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Americans should heed the example of Jesus, who respected women and took pity on two sisters who beseeched him to return their brother to life. The story of the resurrection of Lazarus also reinforces the class dimension of Truth's message, for poor Lazarus stood opposite Dives, the rich man. A dead Dives goes to hell, while dead Lazarus lies in the bosom of Abraham.<sup>16</sup>

Going to the synoptic gospels for Jesus' lineage, Truth demonstrates further biblical authority. What are the origins of the greatest man of all? she asks. God and woman, she answers. She compares man's absence from the creation of the saviour to man's

role in the present antislavery and women's rights agitation. As simulating "man" to pro-slavery and antifeminist white men, Truth casts this character as peripheral, passive, and doomed. The poor slave and blessed woman together consign white men to torment in the beak and talons of predators and consumers of carrion. Only a few (white) men are on their way to regeneration through women's rights; presumably others may reform and save themselves from the birds of prey.

MARIUS ROBINSON presented Truth's words in standard English, though he mentioned the impossibility of capturing all her dimensions in print. A novice journalist, he was too innocent of convention to dwell on Truth's body. He says nothing of laughter as an audience response.

The reporter for the Boston *Liberator* similarly confessed to the inadequacy of words: "Sojourner Truth spoke in her own peculiar style, showing that she was a match for most men. She had ploughed, hoed, dug, and could eat as much, if she could get it." Then the *Liberator* report adds a comment that would practically become standard: "The power and wit of this remarkable woman convulsed the audience with laughter."<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the 1850s, audiences responded to Truth's speaking with amusement, which jars our sensibility. Had we been there, would laughter have been our response? From this vantage point it is not possible to know. Our response, a century and a half later, is closer to awe than to jest.

A reading of reports of Sojourner Truth's speeches, including the one at Akron in 1851, shows clearly that she was saying what needed to be said, sometimes indignantly. But her manner of speaking undercut the intensity of her language. To capture and hold her audience, she communicated her meaning on several different levels at once, accompanying sharp comments with non-verbal messages: winks and smiles provoking the "laughter" so often reported. This complex medley of tough talk and humorous delivery generated diverse estimates of her character, as the depictions by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frances Dana Gage would later attest. The humor was shrewd, for it allowed her to get away

with sharp criticism, but it permitted some of her hearers to ignore her meaning. Even today, when Truth can symbolize the angry black woman for most in her audience, others can see her as a kind of pet.

Truth's multiple meanings cannot be reconciled. Part of what makes us laugh is incongruity, here of words and gestures. With the passage of time, too, a change in Truth's relative status has altered her audience's response. Today, Truth is a highly respected figure; her stature equals that of her constituents. In the deeply white-supremacist mid-nineteenth century, by contrast, her white comrades in reform would have seen themselves as her superiors, and laughter has long functioned as a means of reinforcing hierarchical relations. If the laughter that Truth prompted annoyed her, she did not allow her chagrin to be committed to writing.

CONTRARY to legend, Truth had not braved a hostile white crowd, for the crowd was friendly. She had not stopped a malicious male attack on women, for the men supported women's rights. Nor had she saved a mass of cowering white women, for the women spoke with confidence. But Truth did see her presence in the meeting as a rousing success. Writing to her friend Amy Post, she said she had met "plenty of kind friends just like you & they gave me so many kind invitations I hardly knew which to accept of first." The convention also fulfilled Truth's expectations in a second respect: "I sold a good many books at the Convention and have thus far been greatly prospered."<sup>18</sup>

In 1851, Truth was pleased to have made numerous valuable contacts and fulfilled her bookselling mission. She was anxious to pay off her \$500 debt to her printer, and by late summer she had sent Garrison at least \$50. Women's rights conventions represented a golden opportunity to sell the *Narrative* and reduce a debt that included precious dollars spent for shipping books from Boston.<sup>19</sup>

IN THOSE days, Truth seldom addressed the political questions of the time, preferring to speak the lessons of the Bible as a woman



who had been a slave. Others, however, including other women, found national politics alarming in the wake of the Compromise of 1850. One convinced crusader was Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had been writing professionally since the mid-1830s. The shocking revision of the Fugitive Slave Act and the death of one of her children galvanized Stowe into writing her first novel, which became the nineteenth century's most famous American work of fiction: *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*.

The 1851-52 serial publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Gamaliel Bailey's moderate, antislavery Washington *National Era* proved wildly successful, and when the book appeared in March 1852, its sensational reception transformed Stowe's career. Breaking sales records throughout the world, the book sold 10,000 copies on the first week of publication, 300,000 in its first year.<sup>40</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made Stowe highly sought after—and Sojourner Truth became one of the seekers.

Truth's personal appearances created a lively market for the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* in audiences she could reach directly, but her obscurity blocked the way to a wider public. To gain a greater readership, she needed the endorsement of notables. Garrison had helped Truth along by introducing the first edition of her book in 1850, but when Truth parsed the politics of the literary marketplace a few years later, the testimony of the world's most famous author promised to deliver higher visibility and more sales of her own *Narrative* than reliance on face-to-face appeals and Garrison's earnest authentication.

In 1853, Truth seized the initiative. Joining the legions of authors and publishers seeking advantageous "puffs," she journeyed to Andover, Massachusetts, and asked Stowe directly for a puff, which she received. As Stowe wrote it out by hand, the blurb began like this:

The following narrative may be relied upon as in all respects true & faithful, & it is in some points more remarkable & interesting than many narratives of the kind which have abounded in late years.

It is the history of a mind of no common energy & power whose struggles with the darkness & ignorance of slavery have a peculiar interest. The truths of Christianity seem to have come to her almost by

a separate revelation & seem to verify the beautiful words of scripture "I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not, I will make darkness light before them & crooked things straight."<sup>41</sup>

Stowe's puff surely boosted Truth's sales. More importantly, this encounter began a literary relationship that portended far greater notice for Truth than any blurb could generate. But not right away.