

Lydia Maria Child 1802–1880

Early Success

Two icons appear in the story of nineteenth-century American women. One is the idealized middle-class wife tending to her home, family, and religion. The other is the reformer, energetically working to address social ills. Lydia Maria Child represented both, and the clash between them.

Born in Massachusetts in 1802, Lydia Maria Francis went by her middle name, and pronounced it Ma-RYE-a. Her older brother, Convers, was aware of Maria's intellectual gifts, and introduced her to important literary works. In her early 20s, Maria lived with Convers, then a Unitarian minister, and converted to Unitarianism. Through her brother, she met many of the top writers and thinkers of the day. She was only 22 when she wrote her first novel, and her second appeared the following year. At 24, she began writing and publishing America's first periodical for children, *Juvenile Miscellany*.

Maria was well on her way to an unusual career as a well-known American writer, but the work that made her famous was still to come. In the 1820s, the United States suffered its first major economic depression, and Maria worried about how families would get by, especially poor and average families who could not afford servants. In 1829, she published *The Frugal Housewife: Dedicated to Those Who Are Not Ashamed of Economy*. Mostly a book of recipes, Maria



Lydia Maria Child, 1883. *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*, frontispiece. Engraving. New-York Historical Society Library, PS1293.Z8 1888.

included other advice for young housewives: “If you are about to furnish a house, do not spend all your money. . . . Begin humbly.”

Raising Her Voice

Maria was newly married herself when she published *The Frugal Housewife*. Her husband, David Child, was a well-educated, well-traveled lawyer, eight years older than Maria. As her brother had broadened her literary taste, David brought reform-minded politics into her life. He introduced her to the work of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who argued for immediate emancipation on the grounds that slavery was morally wrong and against all Christian principles. Maria was entirely won over to the moral argument against slavery, and her life changed forever.

In 1833, after she had written two more books on domestic subjects, Lydia Maria Child published *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*. One of the first Americans to speak out against slavery, she pushed hard against prevailing attitudes. She wrote, for example, that “the intellectual inferiority of the negroes is a common, though most absurd apology, for personal prejudice.” The colonization plan, she said, was both wrong and impractical: “While one hundred and fifty free blacks have been sent to Africa in a year, two hundred slaves have been born in a day. To keep the evil just where

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it is, seventy thousand a year must be transported.” The cost, she said, would bankrupt the treasury of the world.

Paying a Price

But Maria’s primary argument in the *Appeal* was this: All slaves must be freed immediately, and their owners should not be paid. The abolition movement was young when Maria wrote her *Appeal*. It was her attempt to end slavery through “moral suasion,” convincing slave owners that slavery was morally wrong. But her argument was beyond what most Americans were thinking, and she came to be seen as an extremist who should not give advice to mothers. Maria’s audience, especially in the South, turned against her. *The Juvenile Miscellany* closed down after parents cancelled subscriptions, and her book sales dropped. David Child was not a reliable breadwinner, so the loss of her income created hardship for the couple. Their marriage struggled.

Maria continued to write domestic books, and she wrote the poem that, set to music, is now a holiday staple: “Over the River and Through the Woods.” In the mid-1840s, she published *Letters from New York*, which improved her standing with readers: “Home—that blessed word,” she wrote, “which opens to the human heart the most perfect glimpse of Heaven.” But Maria’s passion was abolition. In 1841, she became

the editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. The American Anti-Slavery Society, which published the paper, was in disarray following a mass defection over the role of women (see **Resource 15**). Maria left the post after two years. Dismayed by the infighting, she was reluctant to join other reform groups and did not become involved in women’s rights until after the Civil War.

In 1850, after more than thirty printings, *The Frugal Housewife*—then titled *The American Frugal Housewife*—went out of print, partly because it was dated, and partly because the author was viewed as a radical troublemaker. Maria and David moved to Wayland, Massachusetts, where they sheltered runaways trying to escape the Fugitive Slave Law, and where she wrote several more works against slavery. At her funeral, Wendell Phillips spoke for many abolitionists who had known her: “We felt that neither fame, nor gain, nor danger, nor calumny had any weight with her.”

Sources: *A Lydia Maria Child Reader*, Carolyn L. Karcher, ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Joan Goodwin, “Lydia Maria Child,” *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, <http://uudb.org/articles/lydiamariachild.html> (accessed by M. Waters, 11-18-2016).

Discussion Questions

- ★ How did Lydia Maria Child establish herself as a successful writer?
- ★ What act earned Lydia Maria Child’s the reputation of a dangerous radical?
- ★ What does Lydia Maria Child’s experience tell us about the challenges faced by women who were outspoken about their beliefs?