



Slavery / Abolitionism in Ednah Dow Cheney (1824–1904)

Therese Boos Dykeman

Ednah Dow Cheney based her opposition to slavery on her foundational theory of human nature. Her Transcendental philosophy influenced by her Unitarian beliefs argued that all human nature is divinely inspired—soul or spirit, mind, and body or matter. So, fundamentally, as one human being to another, equal in their humanity, neither sex nor race should be live or be treated unequally. Benevolent human action being “a precept of humanity,” Cheney determined first the philosophical basis for taking action, and then she took action. Cheney wrote compositions on anti-slavery in grade school, taught members of the Black regiment preparing to enter the Civil War, and read aloud the diminished roll call when they returned. When slavery was abolished, she encouraged education in the Freedmen schools in the South, visiting them and writing reports, and later, encouraged the medical profession to train and hire “colored women” for their qualities of “patience, sweetness, and affection.” No matter the topic, Cheney related it to slavery and abolition. The most important topic was education: To be free means to be free to inquire. The soul and mind, deprived of education cannot gain earthly fulfillment of their nature. Following African-American advance in education over many years, she was dismayed to find in their churches in the South the preaching of anti education with an imbalance of emotion over thought. She believed that nature requires balancing thought with feeling. Friend of Harriet Tubman and Harriet Jacobs, Cheney’s lectures often quoting them and Frederick Douglass. In other words, in every way Cheney put her philosophy of human equality and belief that “each day to Good (or Love) be given” into action to ameliorate the great injustice of slavery and its aftermath. She contemplated in 1868, the “dead weight of slavery lifted,” on to the “march of humanity!”

Primary Sources:

Cameron, Kenneth Walter (ed.) 1976. *Sixty Years of Concord: 1855–1915*. Hartford: Transcendental Books.

Cheney, Ednah Dow 1862-1878. *Freedman's Aid Society Records, 1862-1878* (3 boxes of documents, notes, and correspondence). Massachusetts Historical Society.

_____ 1866. *The Handbook of American Citizens*.

_____ 1867. Springer's Period of Revolutions, in *The Christian Examiner* 83 (September), 157-75.

_____ 1872. Religion at the South, in *The Index* (January 13), 13.

_____ 1902. *Reminiscences*. Boston: Lee & Shepard.

Secondary Sources:

Cameron, Kenneth Walter (ed.) 1976. *Sixty Years of Concord: 1855-1915*. Hartford: Transcendental Books.

Cobbe, E. (ed.) 1863-69. *Theodore Parker's Collected Works*. London: Trubner.

Dykeman, Therese Boos (ed.) 1993. *American Women Philosophers 1650-1930: Six Exemplary Thinkers*. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Howe, Julia Ward 1899. *Reminiscences 1819-1899*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Sanborn F. B. 1909. *Recollections of Seventy Years*, vols. 1-2. Boston: Richard G. Badger.

Keywords:

abolition, education, human action, human nature, race, religion, slavery, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Ann Jacobs, Frederick Douglass