



"The Uncle Tom's Cabin of Nativism:" Anti-Catholic Novels, Politics and Violence in the Antebellum United States.

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Anti-slavery narratives and novels have remained prominent in the study of nineteenth-century American literature. In contrast the phenomenon of nineteenth-century anti-Catholic literature in the United States, widely read at the time, is much less well-known. The story of these works in the antebellum United States of the 1830s, 40s, and 50s is closely intertwined with violent No-Popery mobs and nativistic or anti-immigrant political movements. Anti-Catholic novels in the United States drew upon the European, often anti-Catholic, gothic works of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to set their tales in dungeon-like nunneries under the tyrannical authority of cruel superiors. The American anti-Catholic novel differed in that the stories took place not in the past and in the foreign lands of Catholic Europe but in contemporary North America. Furthermore, the narratives were those of actual individuals in seemingly genuine fear for their safety and, as well as offering fantastical and salacious plots, were intended as a didactic warning against the Catholic Church in the United States.

The pre-eminent and earliest literature of this type in the United States, were *Six Months in a Convent, or, the Narrative of Rebecca Theresa Reed*, which sold 10,000 copies in the first week of publication in 1835 and within a month an estimated 200,000, and the even more successful *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* by Maria Monk, which was published the following year and sold 300,000 copies. It has been described as “The *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of Nativism” and indeed until *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published in 1852, it was the most popular novel in American reading history (Schultz vii; Bennett 42; Billington, *Maria Monk and Her Influence* 296; Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 108.). The catalyst for the publication of both of these novels was the destruction in 1834 of the Ursuline Convent at Charlestown in Massachusetts by an irate mob searching for a young woman supposedly held against her will.

The literature of anti-Catholicism was not therefore the cause of the violence. Rather it was published in response to the knowledge that the public, as demonstrated by their actions at Charlestown, would be receptive to such works as confirmed their suspicions of the Catholic Church. The excuse for the mob’s assault and burning of the Charlestown convent had been the behaviour of a Sister Mary John (Elizabeth Harrison before taking the veil). On the 28th of July 1834, she had fled the convent and sought refuge at the home of an Edward Cutter in Charlestown. The Bishop met with her, and she returned to the convent. It seems to be generally agreed by historians of the sacking of the convent that Sister Mary John had suffered a mental breakdown and that under the influence of this she had briefly fled the convent (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 71-72; Schultz ix.).

The citizens of Charlestown and Boston, however, believed that something more sinister had occurred. Placards appeared under the name of ‘The Boston Truckmen’ that called for the destruction of the convent. The Reverend Lyman Beecher, father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, preached three violently anti-Catholic sermons in Boston on Sunday the 10th of August. The previous evening, the selectmen of Charlestown had called at the convent and asked to inspect the building. This request was refused but Edward Cutter, to whom Sister Mary John had fled, was allowed to speak to her and was convinced that she was not being held prisoner in a dungeon. On the Monday the selectmen were permitted to tour the convent. This did not, however, prevent a mob from gathering that evening and after eleven o’clock that night putting the Ursuline convent to the torch (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*. 71-75; Schultz ix- xi.). Historians of this incident have suggested that class antipathy, religious bigotry, and economic conditions motivated the mob to destroy the convent. The lower-class truckmen and brick-layers resented the upper-classes educating their children at the convent. These were the children of Unitarians who had abandoned Congregational orthodoxy for a less doctrinal form of Protestantism that became popular at this time amongst the well-educated but which was viewed with suspicion by others (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 68-69.). This has been described as a rivalry between “lower-class fundamentalist” and “wealthy liberal” (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 59; Bennett, *The Party of Fear* 37.). There were further tensions arising from Irish immigration. In 1833, the murder of a native-born American by an Irishman had caused a riot in Charlestown (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 45-46 70; Bennett, *The Party of Fear* 37.).

Nationally the anti-Catholic sentiment increasingly prevalent at the time and the reasons for the popularity of these novels were the growing numbers of Catholic immigrants to America and, influenced by the anti-Catholic reaction in England to Catholic Emancipation, a growing number of anti-Catholic newspapers, Protestant societies and No-Popery preachers who had begun in the 1820s and 1830s to revive the antipathy of the Puritans towards the Catholic Church. Those concerned with theology argued in public debates, newspapers and polemical works that the Church’s teachings and doctrine were not biblical but rather superstition, and that the Church might actually be the Anti-Christ foretold in the Book of Revelations. Historians have noted that the first public meeting of the New York Protestant Association addressed the question of “Is Popery That Babylon the Great Which John the Evangelist Has Described in the Apocalypse?” (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 59; Bennett, *The Party of Fear* 37.). Anti-Catholics also examined the Church’s teaching on the supremacy of the Pope and the history of the Church to warn that Roman Catholicism was incompatible with republican government. A later meeting of the New York Protestant Association was attacked by Catholics when it considered “Is Popery Compatible with Civil Liberty?” (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 60; Bennett, *The Party of Fear* 37). In the 1830s prominent figures such as Samuel F. B. Morse, the inventor of the telegraph and the Morse code, and Lyman Beecher argued for the existence of a Catholic plot directed from Europe to win control of the West and thereby the entire United States (Beecher; Morse). Those opposed to the extension of slavery would later make a similar argument that the slave power sought to win control of the West to enable the southern states to control the Union.

The rise of anti-Catholicism did not dissuade Rebecca Theresa Reed, the daughter of a poor Charlestown farmer, from entering the Ursuline convent in 1831 as a postulant. Before six months had passed, however, she abandoned her plans to become a nun and left the convent to return to a Protestant school. Reed spread the

tale that her departure from the convent had been to escape the cruelties of the Mother Superior and to save herself from being sent to Canada.

The stories of Rebecca Theresa Reed have been adjudged “instrumental in inducing the riot” (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 90.). Her story was well enough known for her to be called to testify at the trial of those accused of committing arson when the convent was sacked. Only one of those on trial was not acquitted, and although sentenced to life imprisonment, he was pardoned after a Catholic petition for mercy. Bostonian nativists and anti-Catholic clergymen realised that Rebecca Reed might provide them with the opportunity to spread their views of the Catholic Church as dangerously anti-republican, superstitious and immoral. Under the tutelage and probable authorship of such men in a Committee of Publication, chief amongst them the editor of the *Boston Advocate*, *Six Months in a Convent* was published in the April of 1835. This was before the trial of the arsonists had reached a conclusion. The cost of the work was fifty cents each, and within two hours the first supply of several thousand copies had been sold. (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 88, 90; Schultz, xi-xiii).

The defenders of *Six Months in a Convent* claimed that the narrative had been finished in the winter of 1833, before the Ursuline Convent had been destroyed, but that publication had been delayed on the advice of Rebecca Reed’s friends in order for her to make revisions to her account. Regardless, the work was a great success that served to confirm the common-place suspicions of Americans towards the “foreign” church that in their midst commanded the loyalty of increasing numbers of immigrants. It also stimulated a Catholic and Protestant controversy. The Mother Superior of Charlestown convent herself answered the accusation of cruelty offered by Rebecca Reed in *An Answer to Six Months in a Convent Exposing Its Falsehoods and Manifold Absurdities*. She attacked Reed’s character and answered her criticisms. This motivated two of Reed’s Protestant champions to publish their own volumes to vindicate her claims in *A Review of the Lady Superior’s reply to ‘Six Months in a Convent,’ Being a Vindication of Miss Reed* and *A Supplement to ‘Six Months in a Convent,’ Confirming the Narrative of Rebecca Theresa Reed, by the Testimony of More Than 100 Witnesses*. The former work countered the arguments of the Mother Superior and criticised the Church as a whole, whilst the latter included the story of Elizabeth Harrison, her tortures, and the subsequent burning of the convent (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 91; Schultz, xiii-xiv.).

Thus far the debate, whilst hardly sophisticated, retained an element of theological learning as controversialists argued over the correctness of supposed Catholic doctrine as evident in the religious life of a convent. *Six Months in a Convent* records that Reed’s requests for a Bible to read were ignored whilst “Many accounts of those who had become Saints were so disagreeable and even revolting, that I will not attempt to relate or describe them” (Reed 158-159). She claimed that a dying nun was only granted absolution by the Bishop on the condition that “you will implore the Almighty to send down from heaven a bushel of *gold*, for the purpose of establishing a college for young men on Bunker Hill” (Reed 127-128). The harsh routine of convent life was described at length, as were the cruel punishments inflicted on those who failed to adhere to them, such as having to kiss the floor and remain prostrate on the ground for hours on end. Reed also claimed to have heard the Catholic bishop speak of a planned Papal visit to America after the United States had succumbed to Catholic domination: “America,” he claimed, “rightfully belonged to the Pope ... his Holiness would take up his residence here at some future day” (Reed 130). Protestant suspicion of the confessional was encouraged when Reed recounted being asked

“various improper questions, the meaning of which I did not *then understand*, and which I decline mentioning” (Reed 140.).

Reed’s stated intention was to discourage Protestants from placing their daughters in Catholic institutions where republican ideals of motherhood might be undermined by superstition and cruelty. It was claimed by Reed that convents were ruled, like the feudal Old World, by a tyrannical Mother Superior with absolute power. The introduction to the novel stated that it “is high time that a little common sense was applied to the estimate of the motives and objects of Roman Catholic monastic institutions for educating Protestant children” (Reed 7). The European equivalent of Reed’s account had concentrated upon depicting devious priests and secret passages between monasteries and convents but this American work asserted that convent schools and education were to be the means by which Protestant America was to be subjugated. *Six Months in a Convent* ends with Reed overhearing the Bishop’s plan to spirit her away to Canada because of her friendship with a novice who had been expelled for her discontent at convent life and which Reed had been forced to reveal at confession. Reed fled the convent and on reaching a house “inquired if Catholics lived there; one answered, No” (Reed 174.). At this house she sought refuge. Not unlike a slave narrative, Reed described being sought by the Convent’s porters with dogs seeking her scent. Reed declared that she would not return to “remain subject to the commands of a tyrant” (Reed 181-182.).

The public appetite for anti-Catholic novels, or more properly supposedly autobiographical narratives that depicted the slave-like existence of a nun before her escape from the convent into Protestant and republican America, was established by the sales of this work. *Six Months in a Convent* was followed by the more outlandish *Awful Disclosures* of Maria Monk. Rather than undermining the anti-Catholic cause it raised it to new prominence, and whilst it certainly had detractors and opponents, it did not seem for some time to stretch the credulity of its readership.

The *Awful Disclosures* of Maria Monk, published in the January of 1836, abandoned any restraint in order to depict the Church and nunneries as seats of immorality. Just as sectarian newspapers in the early 1830s had increased their circulation by adding a more sensational tone to their assaults upon the Catholic Church and abandoned sober theological criticism, so this more lurid work was more popular still than the very widely read account of Rebecca Reed. Maria Monk was a Canadian and her tale took place at the Hotel Dieu convent in Montreal. Quebec, having been settled by the Catholic French, was a bastion of the Catholic Church in North America.

The account of her life that Monk provides in her *Awful Disclosures* is of a Protestant enticed to become a Roman Catholic and a nun by an education at the Hotel Dieu convent. This reiterates the accusation that Catholic schools posed a grave danger by seducing Protestant children, before they had reached the age of true reason, from their supposedly rational and biblical faith. After her education, Monk returns to the convent and takes her religious vows to become a nun. Once she was bound by these sacred oaths, the central accusation of the *Awful Disclosures* is revealed. This was that the nuns were at the mercy of the lecherous attention of priests whom they were bound to obey (Billington, *Maria Monk and Her Influence* 284). The Mother Superior told Monk that she was to “live in the practice of criminal intercourse with them” (Monk 24). Just as abolitionists depicted the plantation as being the scene of immorality which female slaves were powerless to resist, so the convent became a house of infamous practices. Any children that resulted from such unions were baptised and then murdered, before being buried in a lime pit hidden in

the cellar of the convent. Those nuns who refused to succumb to their seducers were also murdered. It is when Monk herself falls pregnant that she escapes. Later editions also recounted her flight, during which she attempts to drown herself when recaptured but is providentially rescued by two workmen. She continues her escape and has almost reached New York when, exhausted and on the verge of death, a party of hunters chance upon her and take her to a hospital where she asks for a Protestant clergyman to hear her tale. It is he who decides that the public must be alerted to such wickedness hidden behind the walls of a convent.

In 1835, Maria Monk had emerged in New York under the tutelage of the Reverend William K. Hoyt, president of the Canadian Benevolent Association. The account of her life in a convent is thought to have been written whilst she was in New York by a number of anti-Catholic clergymen and nativists, including Theodore Dwight, great-grandson of the theologian Jonathan Edwards. The anti-Catholic press announced the imminent publication of Maria Monk's narrative. Such publications served the No-Popery cause like their abolitionist counterparts and exact contemporaries. The manuscript was offered to Harper Brothers to publish but considering it might harm their reputation to publish such a scandalous account, the publishers established a new company under the name of Howe and Bates, two of their workers (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 101-102; Billington, *Maria Monk and Her Influence* 286-287; Schultz xvi-xvii.).

Monk, supposedly being protected not from kidnap by slave-catchers but by the Jesuits, was feted by respectable members of New York society with nativist sympathies. In the 1830s, when abolitionists were beyond the pale of polite society and risked attack from mobs in northern cities, few would have been prepared to receive an escaped slave into their home. Anti-Catholicism was actually the more respectable cause and enjoyed more support amongst all classes. Monk was even offered marriage by Samuel Morse, who had stood for election as mayor of New York as a nativist. Morse's friend, the novelist James Fenimore Cooper, actually wrote to Morse advising against such a match. If Morse was concerned for his respectability, then this was sound advice indeed for it is almost certain that Maria Monk had actually earned her living immorally and that whilst she had never been a nun in Montreal, she had according to her mother been an inmate of the Catholic Magdalen asylum, an institution for the reform of prostitutes (Bennett 42; Schultz, xv, xxxi.).

The publication of the *Awful Disclosures* precipitated a tide of claim and counter-claim. Anti-Catholic newspapers and societies, even the more sober and respectable, increasingly endorsed the work as the Catholic Church press responded to it with indignation. Typical of the literature produced by this controversy was the helpfully self-explanatory *Awful Exposure of the Atrocious Plot Formed by Certain Individuals against the Clergy and Nuns of Lower Canada, through the Intervention of Maria Monk*. This was answered by a *Reply to the Priest's Book, Denominated, "Awful Exposure of the Atrocious Plot form by Certain Individuals against the Clergy and Nuns of Lower Canada, through the Intervention of Maria Monk."* Maria Monk herself appeared at a public meeting where her cause was debated by her champions and her detractors. Eventually the New York Protestant Association sought to send a committee to the Hotel Dieu convent in Montreal to prove the truthfulness of her claims. It was finally agreed that two impartial Protestant clergymen should inspect the convent for evidence of hidden passages and murdered infants. When they reported that the convent did not at all resemble the description of Maria Monk, it was asserted by her defenders that the very structure of the nunnery had been altered and

that the clergymen must be secret Jesuits (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 102-103; Billington, *Maria Monk and Her Influence* 288-289; Schultz, xviii.).

In Philadelphia another supposedly fugitive nun appeared and claimed to be Saint Francis Patrick, one of the nuns depicted in the *Awful Disclosures*. An account of her escape was also published that repeated the accusations of Maria Monk and confirmed that workmen had altered the convent to fool the investigators, whilst two strangled babies had lain unseen in a cupboard that was not opened. Maria Monk and Saint Frances Patrick even met and embraced at a public meeting. However, the tide of popular opinion now began to turn against Maria Monk. The respected Colonel William Stone, the editor of the New York *Commercial Advertiser*, was not unsympathetic to the No-Popery cause but after himself visiting the convent he published an account that dismissed the claims of Maria Monk as false. This led, amongst others, a poet to dismiss Stone's evidence in verse:

I come! Prepare. Dead babe hope not to hide,
 Nor friar's sandal, where this wand is guide!
 Aided by which, shall pierce your very stones
 My eagle eyes, and find those little bones?
 (Osborn, quoted in Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 106.).

Despite such efforts support for Monk began to wane. She disappeared in the August of 1837 before reappearing in Philadelphia where she claimed to have been kidnapped by Catholic priests. This, and a further work by Maria Monk describing an island in the St. Lawrence River where nuns were sent when pregnant, did not revive the popular interest that she had once enjoyed. When in 1838 she gave birth to a further illegitimate child very few believed the claim that Jesuits had schemed for her to be seduced and unlike anti-Catholicism she soon fell into obscurity, perhaps now a discredited embarrassment to those for whom she had once been a useful weapon (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 103-108; Billington, *Maria Monk and Her Influence* 290-296; Schultz xviii-xix.).

I do not think it would be too controversial to state that as with many abolitionist novels there is little of intrinsic literary merit in the accounts of Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk, nor the works that they spawned. There is some influence of the gothic in these accounts of sinister churchmen and hidden chambers. Despite the interesting parallels with escaped slaves and abolitionist literature, the accounts of Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk might be dismissed as a brief fad that momentarily generated popular excitement but was of little consequence, especially compared to the later and indeed continued prominence of slave narratives and the political influence of abolitionists. However, whilst it is certainly true that anti-Catholic novels never gained quite the same prominence as they did in the 1830s, nativist political movements grew in prominence in the following two decades; the 1840s and 1850s witnessed a number of nativist riots in which churches were attacked by Protestant mobs. Nativists won power in a number of states and in Massachusetts dispatched a Nunnery Committee comprised of state legislators to inspect convents for signs of wrong-doing. In 1854 nativists elected the largest number of representatives of any one party to the Congress of the United States, and in 1856 offered a credible campaign in the presidential election after nominating former president, Millard Fillmore.

This cannot of course be ascribed to the influence of two fictional but supposedly biographical accounts of anti-Catholicism, which were themselves taking advantage of existing No-Popery sentiment. These works did, however, provide

further ammunition to those attacking the Catholic Church. Indeed, when further immigration in the later nineteenth century revived the nativist movement, the *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* was republished by the American Protective Association. In the 1920s when similar concerns arose the Klu Klux Klan published new tales of convent life, and even in the 1980s one obscure figure on the American far-right published a number of books in which he claimed that nuns were held against their will by Jesuits who murdered the babies they were forced to bear (Bennett 175 218 346).

Neither Rebecca Reed nor Maria Monk were to gain from their brief infamy. Reed died in 1838 from consumption at the age of twenty-five. In an obituary, one newspaper claimed that she had contracted this in the cruel conditions of the Charlestown convent. Maria Monk entered into a legal conflict, which she lost, with her publishers for a greater share of royalties from her *Awful Disclosures*. She married the father of her second child, but he left her because of her drunkenness. She died in 1849, at the age of thirty-two, in a New York prison having been arrested for stealing from her companion in a brothel. In 1874, her fame must have endured long enough for her daughter to publish a work entitled *Maria Monk's Daughter: an Autobiography*. She used this account to apologise for her mother's actions. Maria Monk's daughter had converted to Roman Catholicism (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 108.).

Anti-Catholic literature provided sensational confirmation of the suspicions held by many Americans of the increasingly powerful Catholic Church. It confirmed to some that a diabolical conspiracy was at work in their midst, provided vicarious excitement and titillation in the figures of Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk, before respectable and less gullible support was lost by the growing improbability of their stories and in Monk's case her increasingly wretched figure. Anti-Catholic novels, whether new variations on the common theme of the nunnery as a prison or simply re-prints of these existing works, continued to be published throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. After the 1830s active political anti-Catholicism became more prominent than the novels which had encouraged its growth, whilst the similar slave narrative and ensuing anti-slavery movement was eventually to gain greater popularity. By the close of the 1850s and the approach of the Civil War, political events and the fear of its spread into the west were to cause slavery to be viewed as the greater and more threatening evil. In the 1830s this would not have seemed inevitable to those hundreds of thousands of Americans reading and apparently believing the fantastic tales of Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk.

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