

1840 London Anti-Slavery Convention

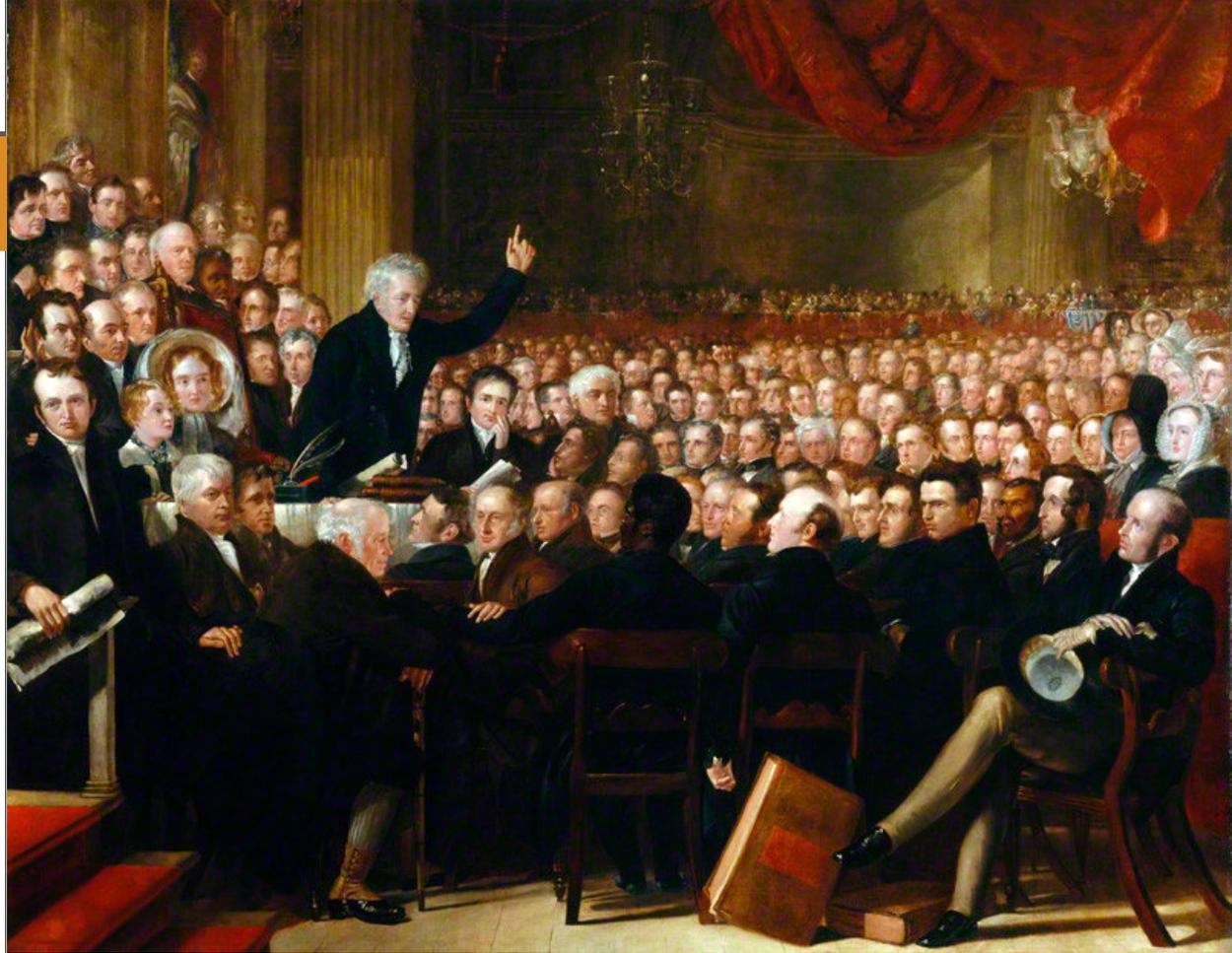
In the 1830s, many women acted on their religious conviction and moral outrage, and responded to William Lloyd Garrison's invitation to become involved in the American Anti-Slavery Society. They attended meetings and wrote petitions in support of the cause. Arthur Tappan and other conservative members of the society objected. Operating from different Christian principles, they believed it was against God and nature for women to engage in politics in public.

The issue of women in the movement came to a head in 1840, when an unprecedented World Anti-Slavery Convention was scheduled in London. At Tappan's request, the organizers made it clear that the meeting was for gentlemen only. But a number of American and British women delegates, including Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, appeared on the first day to take their seats as official delegates. Hours of contentious debate followed. In the end, only male delegates, seated on the main floor, were allowed to speak or vote. As the published report of the convention noted: "The upper end and one side of the room were appropriated to ladies, of whom a considerable

number were present, including several female abolitionists from the United States." The women could watch and listen from the spectators' gallery, but they could not take part.

Haydon's painting was produced the following year to celebrate this important landmark in the international effort to end slavery. It correctly shows a crowded main floor for the opening session at Freemasons' Hall, and a few women facing in from the sides. But it implies a more staid event than it probably was. The male delegates were passionate abolitionists—one of them said later they were "men of sharp angles." The women and their allies were just as sharp-angled and passionate, and they were also furious at being sidelined. Garrison was one of a small group of men who showed their dissent by joining the women in the gallery.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott met outside the hall after the meeting's first day. Mrs. Stanton recalled later that as the two "walked home, arm in arm, commenting on the incidents of the day, we resolved to hold a convention as soon as we returned home, and form



Benjamin Robert Haydon, *The Anti-Slavery Society Convention, 1840*, 1841. Oil on canvas. Primary Collection, National Portrait Gallery, London, Given by British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1880, NPG 599.

a society to advocate the rights of women." Eight years later, in Seneca Falls, New York, they did.

Sources: Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997); *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention . . . Held in London from Friday, June 12th, to Tuesday, June 23rd, 1840* (London: British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Convention, 1840), <https://archive.org/stream/oates71027137#page/n4/mode/1up> (accessed by M. Waters 1-14-2017); Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815–1897* (New York: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898), <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/stanton/years/years.html#V> (accessed by M. Waters 10-27-2016); special thanks to Susan A. Snell, Archivist and Records Manager, The Library and Museum of Freemasonry, London.

Discussion Questions

- ★ Why did some male abolitionists object to the participation of women?
- ★ How did the organizers of the World Anti-Slavery Convention handle the unwanted presence of female delegates?
- ★ If you were an American woman who had travelled to London to participate in the conference, how would this treatment make you feel? What could you do?