



# Lincoln Lore

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## MARIA CHILD IN HER LETTERS: "HOW MUCH LEAVEN IT WILL TAKE TO LEAVEN THE COLD DOUGH OF THIS NATION"

by Sarah McNair Vosmeier

The Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum has recently acquired two letters by Lydia Maria (Francis) Child (1802-1880), a prominent abolitionist from the 1830s to the Civil War, and a quiet advocate for women's rights. Child was first made famous as the author of *Hobomok* (1824), a historical romance, and *The Frugal Housewife* (1829), a cookbook and self-help manual, as well as the editor of *The Juvenile Miscellany* (1826-1833), a popular children's magazine. For the most part, her early writing met traditional expectations for women, and its values appealed to middle class society in general.

However, she lost most of this traditional middle-class audience, when in 1833, she published *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, a reasoned and logical criticism of the institution of slavery. The *Appeal's* call for immediate emancipation without compensation and an end to all racial discrimination was far too radical for most Americans in 1833. Although Child was rejected by the general public after the publication of this book, she gained a different audience and new influence as an abolitionist; and many prominent people, including Charles Sumner, were converted to abolitionism by her writings.

In addition to her public writing, Child wrote numerous letters. (Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland have edited *Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817-1880*, a representative grouping of her letters published in book form. Also, over two thousand of her letters are available on microfilm.) Child's letters are eminently readable — conversational and amusing, but also thoughtful, often including explorations of theological questions or vehement arguments for abolition. Her letters show that, like most abolitionists, once Child determined what was right, she would not compromise and she was unswayed by conventional wisdom or arguments of convenience. Child's letters are also helpful in understanding her part in the women's rights movement.

Child supported the post-Revolutionary ideal of "republican motherhood," that women should be educated (even about politics) so that they could raise virtuous sons to lead the republic, and so that they could be useful helpmeets to their husbands. She often referred to herself as a helpmeet, even when she supported her husband financially. She never gave public speeches and she once denigrated women's reform societies as "half a pair of scissors." Nevertheless, like many

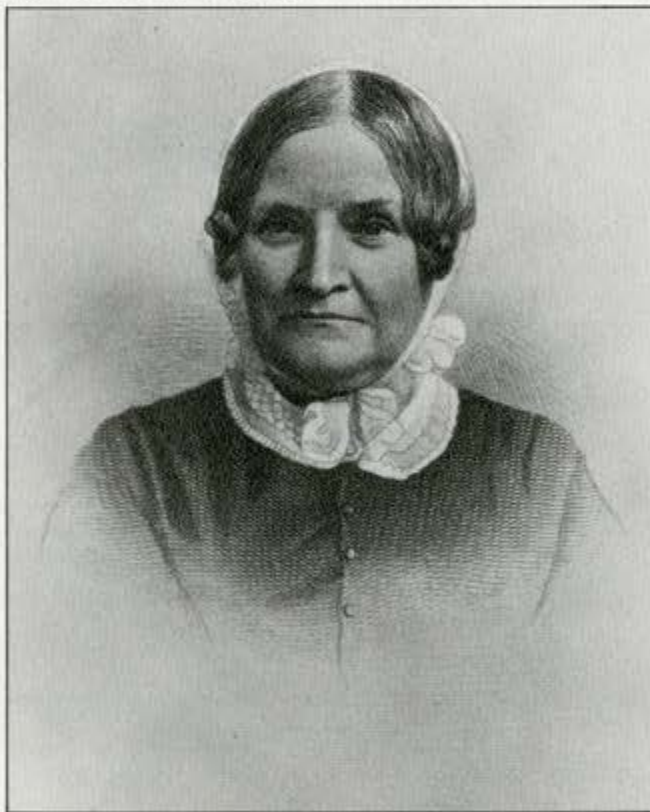
nineteenth century women, she had more education and intellectual energy than could be expended in the women's sphere, and by the 1850s she began to speak out privately against laws that made women economically dependent and began to support women's right to vote. Although Child was not an activist, in 1881 Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony recognized her as one of 19 women who were an inspiration to their fight for women's rights.

Child's intellectual energy and independence were apparent even as a young girl, and her early letters show remarkable intellectual independence. For example, at the age of fifteen, she admired Milton's "grandeur of description," but asked, "Don't you think that Milton asserts the superiority of his own sex in rather too lordly a manner?" (June 5, 1817).

In 1828 Maria married David Lee Child, an abolitionist, lawyer, and former diplomat; although they were happy together most of the time, their marriage was unusual in that Maria supported them both. David Child did not manage money well, and is perhaps best

known for what was a financial disaster to him personally — being the first American manufacturer of beet-sugar. As an abolitionist, he was interested in beet-sugar, because unlike cane-sugar, it could be processed without slave labor.

In 1829, only a year after her marriage to David Child, Maria published *The Frugal Housewife*. Although the book makes no mention of slavery or women's rights, it does reflect Child's



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FIGURE 1. Lydia Maria (Francis) Child, 1865.



uncompromising attitude and her belief that any problem could be solved if enough energy were put to it. Throughout the book, she suggests that poverty can be overcome by frugality and economy, coming very close to blaming the poor for their condition. On the other hand, her philosophy was also optimistic: poverty was neither inevitable nor inescapable. Perhaps this was comforting to her because, in fact, she and her husband were living in poverty when she wrote the book.

Child's letters are less optimistic than her book, and in real life, she recognized that frugality would not solve every financial problem. For example, at about the same time her book was published, she wrote to ask an acquaintance for a loan to allow her husband to continue publishing his newspaper. She described writing the letter as "the most painful task I ever imposed upon myself," and admitted that she would rather live on bread and water, but "Mr. Child's unwearied exertions, and my own rigid economy will avail us nothing now, unless somebody will assist us through present trouble" (undated, *Selected Letters* p. 15).

In 1854, twenty-five years later (when Child was known more as an abolitionist than as a frugal housewife) normal frontier rowdiness escalated into violence between the pro-slavery and abolitionist forces when the Kansas-Nebraska Act gave Kansas residents the right to determine whether or not slavery would be allowed in the territory. Child obviously sympathized with the abolitionist settlers and was frustrated by her inability to affect the situation there. Although she felt restrained and shut up in Massachusetts, she attacked the problem with all her energy — both with traditionally feminine

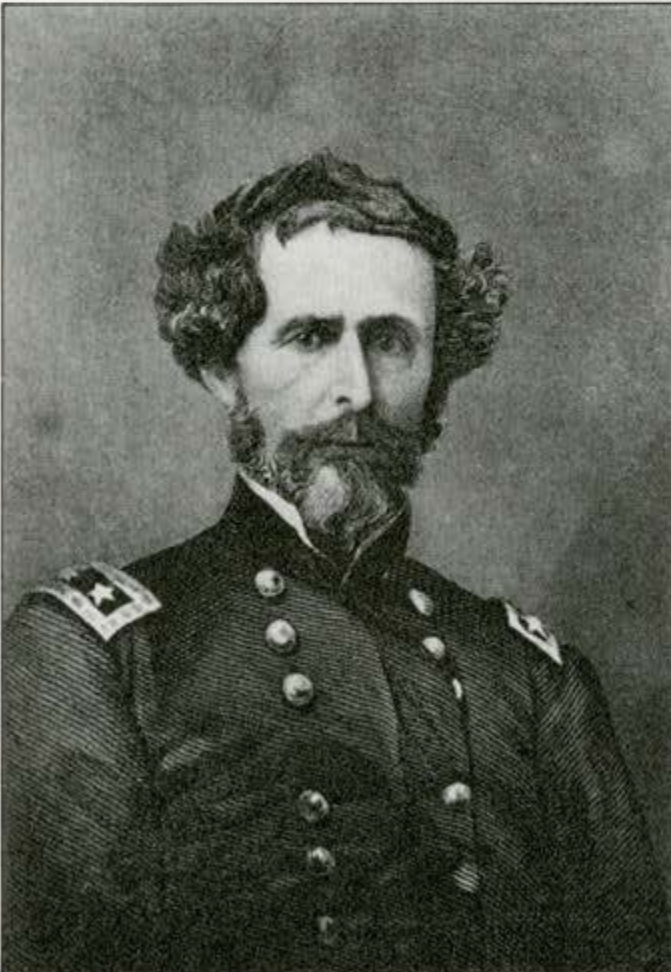
projects and by writing for the public. In a letter to her husband, she detailed her activities,

In the first place, there was the press waiting for that Kansas story. . . . Then I felt bound to stir up the women here to do something for Kansas; and, in order to set the example . . . I hurried night and day; sitting up here all alone till eleven at night, stitching as fast as my fingers could go. It was a heavy job to cut and make more than 60 yds of cloth into garments; but, with a little help . . . I completed it in eight days.

While working within the woman's sphere, sewing clothing for Kansas immigrants, Child could not help but note the difference in the way men and women could affect national issues like slavery. She supported John C. Frémont in the presidential campaign that year, and teased her husband that if he was not home on election day, she would "put on your old hat and coat, and vote for you." More seriously, she continued, My anxiety on the subject has been so intense. It seemed as if my heart would burst, if I couldn't do something to help on the election. But all I could do was to write a Song for the Free Soil Men, and scatter a dozen copies of it about (October 27, 1856).

On the same day she also wrote a letter to her closest female friend, Sarah Blake (Sturgis) Shaw, who, with the rest of her family, also supported abolitionism. (Sarah's son, Robert Gould Shaw, later became a Civil War hero when he was killed leading a regiment of black soldiers in an assault on Fort Wagner.) Like Child's letter to her husband, her letter to Sarah Shaw included a discussion of the coming election. Child laughed about a neighbor who

announced his intention to deposit his "virgin vote" for Frémont. It was pleasant to learn that he had anything



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FIGURE 2. John C. Frémont. Child's friend, Sarah Blake (Sturgis) Shaw, thought he looked "good, high-principled, energetic, and up-to-the occasion."



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FIGURE 3. Robert Gould Shaw (son of Child's friend, Sarah Shaw) was killed leading a regiment of black soldiers in an attack on Fort Wagner, July 18, 1863.



"virgin" left to swear by. What a Rip! to lie sleeping fifty years, dreaming of kid gloves, embroidered vests, and perfumed handkerchiefs, taking it for granted that his country was all the while going forward in a righteous and glorious career.

Then turning serious, she continued, "Isn't it too bad that such parasol-holders should have the right to vote, while earnest souls like you and me must await the result in agonizing inaction?"

Four years later, in 1860, David Child must have voted for Lincoln, but Maria Child had strong reservations about him: he was too conservative for her. The two letters recently acquired by the library reflect her opinions on this. They are both written to her niece, Mary Elizabeth (Preston) Stearns, who was married to George L. Stearns, an abolitionist who had given substantial financial support to John Brown. Later, during the war, George Stearns recruited many black soldiers for Massachusetts's 54th and 55th regiments.

The first letter was written on December 15, 1861. It shows that Child was still working energetically on projects for Kansas. "My finger-tips fairly ache with knitting. I want to get as much done as possible. Perhaps I should not have spared time to write this, though it is 'Sabber Day.'"

Turning to politics, she bemoaned the slowness of the administration. "It seems as if some wizard paralyzed our government and commanders by an evil spell. Lincoln says, 'We must let things drift.' What else could we expect from King Log?" (King Log referred to an Aesop's fable in which a community of frogs asks Jupiter to send them a king. Amused, he drops a log into the pond to be their king. Complaining that the log did nothing to lead them or to command their respect, the frogs ask for a different king, whereupon Jupiter sends them a more active leader, a stork, who eats them. Perhaps Child intended King Log to have a double meaning, as "King Log" could also refer to Lincoln's being known as the "Rail Splitter.")

On a more positive note, Child admitted that Lincoln's inactivity might serve a purpose, and related the opinions of Sarah Shaw's husband.

Frank Shaw says Lincoln's *Providential*; for if we had a more energetic man at the helm he would rouse all the pro-slavery in the country to violent activity whereas now they are lulled by his slow and timid course, and will not fairly wake up till the current of events has carried them too far out to sea to steer for the port they intended to make, and supposed they were making. That idea had previously occurred to me, and I found a crumb of comfort in it.

In comparison to the slow-moving Lincoln, General Frémont seemed more attractive, and Child could not resist telling her niece about Sarah Shaw's seeing the celebrity in person in New York. Child, quoting Sarah Shaw's letter, continued,

We went to see General Frémont, when he was in New York; and if that face belongs to a man who is anything but a good, high-principled, energetic, and "up-to-the occasion" man, then I am very much mistaken. I wish in my heart he were President.

Child's low opinion of Abraham Lincoln made her less than sympathetic to Mary Todd Lincoln, as well. Sarah Shaw had sent a Child a photograph of Mary Todd Lincoln, and so Child sent it on to her niece, laughingly suggesting, "I suppose you will frame it, and carefully train vines around it, in some place of honor." Then, comparing Frémont's wife to Lincoln's, she continued, "I reckon the presence of 'our Jessie' in Washington will make her a little uncomfortable." Finally, in the postscript of the letter, she gave an unflattering commentary on Mary Todd Lincoln's appearance.

The Boston Traveller is out with another description of Mrs. Lincoln's new bonnet; her winter one, I presume. She looks more like a dowdy washerwoman, in the photograph, than like the "representative of fashion." . . . The countenance seems to me mean and vulgar, but perhaps I am prejudiced. The second letter, written to Stearns a few weeks later (January



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FIGURE 4. Mary Todd Lincoln. Child described her as looking "like a dowdy washerwoman" with a "mean and vulgar" countenance.

30, 1862), reflects similar concerns. By this time she had finished all the articles for the "Kansas box," but her frustration with the Lincoln administration's slowness had not abated, nor, apparently, had her dislike of Mary Todd Lincoln.

As for public affairs, I have grown so weary with long waiting and watching, that I try not to think of them. . . . It would amuse you to hear David [Child] anathematize Old Abe. He exhausts the vocabulary of contempt. A fortnight ago there was one of the sensation rumors that there had been "treason discovered in high-places, that ought to be above suspicion, and that a woman was connected with it." I suggested that it might be Mrs. Lincoln. David siezed the idea with delight. "I hope it is," said he; "I'd wear out my best boots walking to Washington to see her hanged, and old Abe made a *widder*." I never see old Abe's *pictur* without thinking that his lanky neck looks as if he was made to be hanged.

Next she made a reference to a recently published book, called *The Rejected Stone* by Moncure Conway. In it, Conway describes the slaves as the "rejected stone" or Christ-figure of American politics. Child wondered whether Conway's book stirred [Lincoln's] stagnant soul at all. I should think it would make a door-post tingle; but I doubt whether the faintest idea of its mighty import got into his wooden skull.

Concluding her letter, Child remarked on some of the good signs and discouraging aspects of the war, summarizing, "But dear me, how much leaven it will take to leaven the cold dough of this nation!" She used this phrase on other occasions, and it reflected her personality. First, it reveals her attitude toward life and politics. Like all abolitionists, she had to believe that the small number of right-thinking people could change the whole nation, just as a small amount of leavening could change a whole loaf of bread. If she did not believe this, staying up



all night to make clothing for Kansas immigrants or distributing songs about Free-Soilers would be meaningless. Second, this image from the *Bible* reflects her interest in literature and theology and her belief in the righteousness of her cause. Finally it illustrates how she used traditionally feminine images and activities in ways that might not be considered feminine. As a "frugal housewife," Child understood very well that yeast does not rise unless it is warm, and as a writer she could use that understanding to make a point memorable.

Similarly, she skillfully used women's concerns about the private sphere and women's perspectives to make her anti-slavery arguments more convincing. One example of the way she did this was her letter to Margaretta Mason. Mason had written an open letter attacking Child for criticizing the slaveholders and yet supporting John Brown and his violence. Child's reply to Mason (December 17, 1859) included a rational refutation of Mason's points and a reasoned attack on slavery, using Southern laws as evidence against slavery, but she also used a more emotional argument, referring obliquely to the sexual exploitation of black women by white men.

When Lafayette visited this country in his old age, he said . . . that in the time of the Revolution nearly all the household slaves [had been] black, but when he returned to America, he found very few of them black. . . . This could not be unless their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers had been white men. . . . The sale of one's own children, brothers, or sisters, has an ugly aspect to those who are unaccustomed to it; and obviously, it cannot have a good moral influence, that law and custom should render licentiousness a profitable vice.

The American Anti-Slavery Society published Mason's letter and Child's reply in pamphlet form, and sold three hundred thousand copies of it.

Later, when Child agreed to edit Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) she again recognized the power of the theme of sexual exploitation. Significantly, Jacobs had not experienced physical abuse as a slave. Rather she was subject to constant sexual harassment, which was so intolerable that she hid for seven years in a tiny garret rather than return to her master.

Child's abolitionism allowed for no compromise and thus kept her from supporting Lincoln in 1860. Usually, once she formed an opinion she did not change it, but as the war continued, her feeling toward Lincoln did change gradually. When he announced the Emancipation Proclamation, she was pleased, but still reserved. As she explained to Sarah Shaw,

I was thankful for [the proclamation], but it excited no enthusiasm in my mind. With my gratitude to God was mixed an under-tone of sadness that the moral sense of the people was so low, that the thing could not be done nobly. However we may inflate the emancipation balloon, it will never ascend among the constellations. The ugly fact cannot be concealed from history that it was done reluctantly and stintedly . . . was merely a war-measure (October 30, 1862).

A year and a half later, discussing the coming 1864 election in a letter to Gerrit Smith, Child defended Lincoln, arguing that he would make a better president than Frémont.

Lincoln is a man of slow mind, apparently incapable of large, comprehensive views. It is his nature to potter about details; in the doing of which he wastes valuable time and golden opportunities. But he is an honest man, and conscientiously hates Slavery (July 23, 1864).

Although Child's defense of Lincoln to Smith was restrained, by the time Lincoln had won the election, she could say, "I am a happy woman since the election. It makes me feel that our republican form of government rests on more secure foundations." She was especially pleased because Lincoln had won without flashy demagoguery:

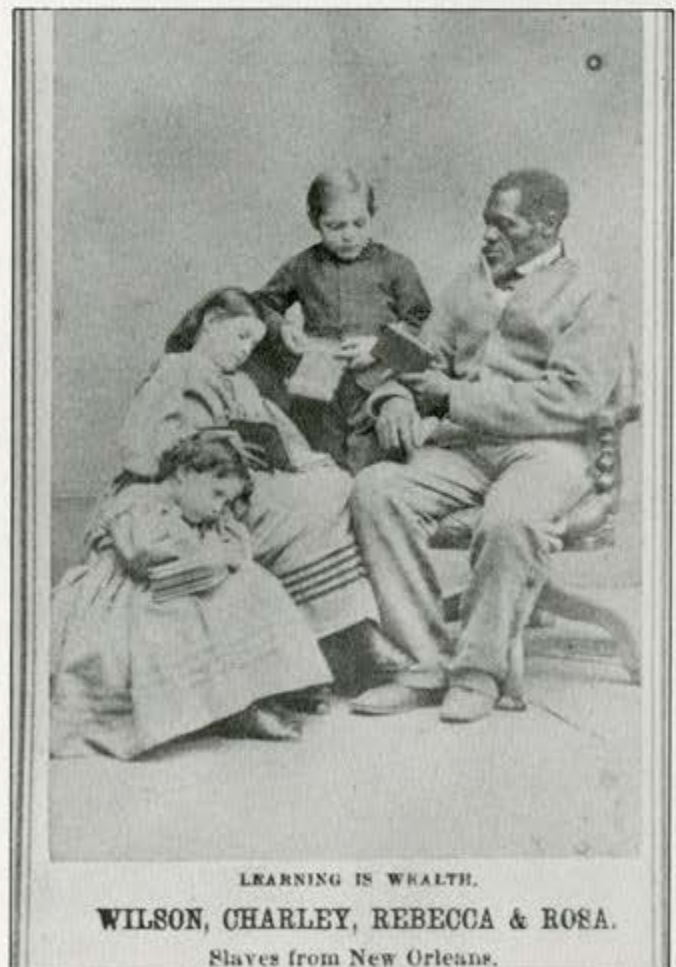
There is no beauty in ["honest old Abe"], that men should desire him; there is no insinuating, polished manner, to beguile the senses of the people; there is no dazzling military

renown; no silver flow of rhetoric; in fact, no glittering prestige of any kind surrounds him; yet the people triumphantly elected him, in spite of all manner of machinations, and notwithstanding the long, long drag upon their patience and their resources which this war has produced. I call this the triumph of free schools; for it was the intelligence and reason of the people that reelected Abraham Lincoln.

Child went on to explain that her opinion of Lincoln changed.

He has his faults, and I have sometimes been out of patience with him; but I will say of him that I have constantly gone on liking him better and better (undated letter to Eliza Scudder).

Maria Child's letters reveal an educated woman with strongly-held political convictions, and a woman with wit and literary flair. They show that she was comfortable with some of the traditional roles for women, but she resented injustice, both for slaves and for women, and she was not afraid to go into the public sphere of politics and the press to fight against it. When writing for the public, she could use reason and logic in traditionally "male" ways, as in her *Appeal*, but she could also use imagery and ideas that were more feminine, as in her imagery of "leaven", or her attack on slavery for destroying sexual morality in the south. She was not one of Lincoln's ardent admirers, especially at first, because he did not move quickly enough to emancipate the slaves. Still, she was pleased with the Emancipation Proclamation, and by 1864 she supported him as the best man for the presidency.



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FIGURE 5. Carte-de-visite photograph sold in an Anti-Slavery Festival. The hidden message of the photograph is the sexual exploitation of slave women. Although the children's mother was a slave, the man pictured with them is apparently not their biological father.