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Rawson [*née* Read], Mary Anne

(1801–1887)

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Mary Anne Rawson (1801–1887), by Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1841
[detail from ‘The Anti-Slavery Society Convention, 1840’]

Paul Fearn / Alamy Stock Photo

Rawson [*née* Read], Mary Anne (1801–1887), philanthropist and slavery abolitionist, was born in Green Lane, Sheffield, Yorkshire, on 22 November 1801, the eldest daughter of Joseph Read (1765–1837), owner of a gold and silver smelting works in Attercliffe, and his wife, Elizabeth, *née* Smith (1778–1865), of Chesterfield. Both parents were participants in the evangelical revival of the late eighteenth century. Her father was a member of Queen Street Congregational Chapel (1784) and was a supporter and member of Rotherham College (1795), while her mother, whose father, Ebenezer Smith, had trained for the ministry before taking over the family’s iron foundry, taught a Sunday school class at Soresby Street Congregational Chapel in Chesterfield. From their marriage in 1800, Mary Anne Read’s parents became leading members of the new inter-denominational evangelical culture in Sheffield.

The family lived firstly in Attercliffe, where they supported the building of Zion Congregational Chapel, and where Mary Anne and her sisters Eliza (1803–1851), Catherine (1804–1865), Sarah (1806–

1829), and Emily (1807–1883) taught Sunday school classes. In the 1810s, the family supported a range of philanthropic initiatives, including the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, the Society for Superseding the Necessity for Climbing-Boys, the Aged Female Society, Girls and Boys Lancasterian Schools, the Hibernian Society, the Bible Society, the Sunday School Union, and the Missionary Society.

In 1816 the Reads moved to Wincobank Hall, a rambling house on Sheffield's rural northern edge. The parents had a pulpit built in the laundry room and hosted religious services for the local poor. Their daughters and son Edmund (1815–1873) ran a Sunday school and engaged in neighbourhood visiting. Visitors to Wincobank Hall in the 1820s included many prominent evangelicals, including Joseph and Ann Gilbert, John Angell James, and William Wilberforce.

In 1825 Mary Anne Read and her mother, Elizabeth, became founder members of the Sheffield Female Anti-slavery Society. Their activities included fundraising for the national campaign, writing and distributing pamphlets and tracts, and house-to-house visiting in support of the campaign for abstention from slave-grown produce. The Sheffield Female Anti-slavery Society was the first to take up the Leicester abolitionist Elizabeth Heyrick's call in *Immediate not Gradual Abolition* (1824). The women asserted the importance of women's actions in this field and countered arguments that they were overstepping their sphere. 'We ought to obey God rather than man', they wrote in the 1827 report. 'Confidence here is not at variance with humility. On principles like these, the simple need not fear to confront the sage; nor a female society to take their stand against the united wisdom of this world.'

In February 1828 Mary Anne married William Bacon Rawson, an iron manufacturer in Nottingham. They had a daughter, Elizabeth. Following her husband's death in July 1829, Rawson returned to Wincobank where she resumed her abolitionist activities. She supported the activities of the moral radical Agency Committee, established in 1831 to enlist popular support for the anti-slavery campaign, and she collected signatures for petitions against slavery. In 1834 she edited *The Bow in the Cloud; Or, the Negro's Memorial* (1834), a collection of poems and short stories written by prominent supporters of abolition. Like many abolitionists, she was disappointed with the terms of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which adopted a gradualist policy and committed enslaved men and women to four further years of unpaid labour as 'apprentices'. She was a founder member of the Sheffield Ladies Association for the Universal Abolition of Slavery in 1837 and corresponded with Sophia Sturge, sister of the Birmingham abolitionist Joseph Sturge, who travelled to the West Indies to gather evidence against apprenticeship. After emancipation, Rawson coordinated national support for the Thompson Normal School in the 'free village' of Kettering, Jamaica, run by the missionary William Knibb, his wife, and their daughters to train Jamaican girls and women as teachers. In 1840 she attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London. She hosted William Lloyd Garrison at Wincobank Hall in 1840 and Garrison and Frederick Douglass on their lecture tour of the UK in 1846.

During these years, against a backdrop of Chartist agitation, Rawson became more involved in domestic philanthropy. She formed the Wincobank Total Abstinence Society (1840) and a day school at Wincobank funded by the British and Foreign School Society in 1841. During the 1850s Wincobank Hall was also a small boarding school for girls from middle-class nonconformist families. In the 1850s and 1860s Rawson and her daughter Elizabeth Rawson travelled in continental Europe. Like many English radicals, they developed a particular interest in Italian nationalism, especially the campaign for religious and civil liberties. Alessandro Gavazzi, the leader of Italian Protestants in London, stayed at Wincobank on his lecture visit to Sheffield in 1853. With her daughter, Rawson raised funds for a Free Bible School for girls in Turin; she visited the school in 1856. Rawson later met Garibaldi in Capri, where Elizabeth died from tuberculosis in 1862. In her later years, while maintaining her interests in Italy and in anti-slavery (William Lloyd Garrison visited her again in 1877), Mary Anne Rawson focused her energies on local concerns, particularly the day school at Wincobank. She died at Wincobank Hall on 11 August 1887 and was buried at Zion chapel, Attercliffe.

Sources

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James Montgomery Collection, University of Sheffield

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Likenesses

B. R. Haydon, oils, 'The Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840', 1841, NPG [see illus.]

J. A. Vinter, two lithographs (after oils by B. R. Haydon, 1841), 'The Abolition of the Slave Trade', c.1846–64, NPG

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Wealth at Death

£3,957 10s. 5d.: probate, 18 Oct 1887, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

