

## OUTLINE FOR TV SHOW ON "A VERY DANGEROUS WOMAN"

1. Briefly explain who Martha Coffin Wright was. Include that she was a major leader in the women's rights and abolition movements, was to a lesser extent active in the temperance movement, was a Quaker, was a busy wife, mother and grandmother, was a writer, that she is a figure in the life size set of bronzes at the Women's Rights National Historical Park, and was the sister of Lucretia Mott (one of the big 3 of the Women's Rights Movement).
  - A. What relationship is she to Jim?
- 2(a). She lived most of her life in Auburn, New York. Explain where Auburn is. That general area became the home of numerous leading reform figures, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglass (formerly Bailey), Wright, Harriet Tubman (briefly explain who she was) and William Seward (briefly explain who he was). It also was the beginning of the Chautauquas (briefly explain what they are). Why did this area become home to these people and movements?
  - A. Yet the area, or at least, Auburn, was basically quite conservative, wasn't it? Explain why her neighbors considered Martha to be "a very dangerous woman."
    - i. Discuss the relationship with Frederick Douglass in this regard.
- (b). Explain the role of the Quakers in the industrialization of America, and why they came to western New York (water power, the Erie Canal, etc.)
- (c). Were there, in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century or today, any geographic areas that were similar in that they attracted or were home to a group of major reformers? And, if so, why? How about New York City during the progressive or Rooseveltian eras? Or Atlanta in the 1950s and 1960s, during the heyday of civil rights? Or the San Francisco area today? Any other possibilities?
- 3(a). Explain the background and factors that had an effect on Martha's thinking. Include:
  - A. Her Quaker religion, with its emphasis on all persons having the light within themselves, with Quaker girls consequently getting more education than other girls.
    - i. Have there been any religious or other groups, in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century or

today, which played the same role as the Quakers?

- B. Her experiences with ex slaves when she was younger.
  - C. The role model provided by her mother.
  - D. The drudgery of the household work that she had to do. (Discuss the pre-machine age tasks of sewing the clothes, cleaning the house, taking care of the kids -- and bearing a host of them, cooking for the family, etc.)
    - i. Do you think her views of the differences between men's and women's work were fair to men who were, for example, agricultural workers or factory workers? Didn't her views in effect reflect, with respect to men, the life of the white collar professional class?
  - E. The effect, if any, of the revolutions of 1848 in Europe.
- 4(a). Discuss the intellectual and professional support she received, and gave, by constantly being in touch with fellows reformers like Stanton, Anthony, Mott, Douglass, Tubman, the Swards, the Garrisons, etc.
- A. There seem to have been a number of marriages between members of these families. Would this be, in part, due to intellectual sympathy? Lack of other alternatives? Other reasons?
  - B. Where do reformers or others with unconventional views receive such support today? Does the Internet play a role here and, if so, how much of one?
- (b). I think I heard you say at the Atheneum that Wright antedated the views expressed in the 1960s by Betty Friedan. Did she?
- A. What if anything has changed today? To what extent, if any, are things the same today?
- (c). Didn't Martha have a lot of household help? -- maids and servants and that kind of thing, who were paid little but helped make her life more comfortable? (A sort of American upstairs, downstairs?) Have things really changed today? -- don't we benefit today from the cheap labor of Americans who are poor and, via "globalization," from really impoverished cheap labor abroad?
- 5(a). Explain that Martha Wright rejected formal religion, including Quakerism, I gather, because the pulpit and bible were used to support conservative status quo views

approving of slavery and of the suppression of women. (Her sister, of course, knew the Bible well, could use quotes for the opposite purpose, and consequently even had a decent experience in Maysville, Kentucky.)

- (b). Would it be accurate to say that organized religion in this country has usually been a force for status quo conservatism except for northern churches during the 10 years or so before the Civil War and various churches in the late 1950s and early 1960s with regard to civil rights?
- (c). In terms of reform, what is the current position (by and large, of course) of organized Protestantism in America today? Of organized Catholicism? Of organized Judaism? Of organized Muslimism?
- (d). Explain that Martha Wright believed in free speech, not suppression, as a corrective, even when her own organizations were harmed by speech such as Victoria Woodhull's. Discuss episodes of such harmful speech (including the Woodhull incident, and explain who Woodhull was and what she did), and tell what Martha said. (Didn't some of Woodhull's arguments -- e.g., that women should have control over their own bodies -- antedate similar or identical arguments made in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?)
  - A. Was Martha Wright a forerunner of the free speech views of Brandeis and Holmes -- that counter speech is the corrective for harmful speech?
- (e). Explain that what Wright wanted was freedom and equality for *all*, men and women alike.
- 6. Explain that it could be physically dangerous in Martha Wright's day to be a reformer. Lovejoy was killed by a mob. Garrison was threatened, was he not? Mayors and police had to protect conventions of abolitionists and women's righters.
  - A. Are there more modern analogies? How about civil righters in the south in the 1950s and 1960s, the labor movement in Detroit and elsewhere in the 1920s and 1930s, doctors who perform and people who favor abortion in the 1990s and today? Other examples?
- 7(a). Explain the ways in which women were kept down in Martha Wright's day, and what legal changes, if any, were made in these matters during her lifetime. Include the following: married women's lack of property rights, divorce and custody laws, lack of suffrage, unequal salaries, exclusion from business and the professions.

- (b). To what extent have these disabilities *not* been cured in our own day?
- 8(a). Explain why abolitionists were initially unhappy with Abraham Lincoln's actions as President. Explain also Martha Wright's ultimate change of mind about Lincoln, and her willingness, despite her fears for her son, to see the Civil War continue until slavery was dead and gone. (She thought it a holy war between freedom and slavery.)
- A. She defacto renounced, as it were, Quaker pacifism with regard to the war.
- B. Explain "Double canister at ten yards".
- (b). Explain what non-resistance was, and how her view about this changed because of the war.
- A. Was non-resistance a forerunner of Gandhi's or King's ideas of peaceful civil disobedience, albeit without the breaking of law and reliance instead solely on suasion?
- B. What were Martha Wright's views on John Brown's actions in Kansas and at Harper's Ferry?
- C. Brown was denounced by the South as a terrorist, and regarded by the North as a martyr (church bells pealed upon his death, etc.). Tubman said he accomplished more by his death than 100 men did by living. And I understand that a new biography treats him far more sympathetically than has been the practice. What are your views on all of this?
- i. Have there been any subsequent figures in American (or world?) history like John Brown? -- people who martyred themselves for a cause, perhaps even killed for it as a prelude to or coterminous with martyrism? How about the Irish leaders executed in 1916, I think it was? Or Mau Maus? Or Haganah or Irgun members who were hung? Or Muslim suicide bombers? Can these cases be distinguished from John Brown's?
- (c). Describe Wright's participation in the Underground Railroad.
- (d). Martha Wright's dislike for the South became so strong during the war that she wanted to see it depopulated if necessary. (This was perhaps understandable, especially after her son suffered a really awful wound.) Wasn't her view of this somewhat similar to, a forerunner of, the Morgenthau plan for Germany after World

War II? Was it in some ways similar, but without the murders, to what has become known as ethnic cleansing by population transfers?

- 8(a). Explain why the women's movement split in 1866 or so -- the question of black male suffrage only, or black suffrage *and* women's suffrage simultaneously. Include who the players were, the anger of women reformers who had strongly supported abolition, distrust of the Republican Party and other reasons for fearing (correctly) that women's suffrage would be forgotten about if not combined with black suffrage, the thinking of Lucy Stone and her colleagues as to why they would be willing to see black suffrage first and women's only later.
- A. Discuss the free love controversy, and George Train.
- (b). Have there been other periods when reform movements split this way because of belief that it was possible to get half a loaf now and the rest later, whereas all might be lost if reformers held out for the whole loaf now?
- 9(a). Describe Martha Wright's growth to the point where she was regularly heading or at least being highly prominent at conventions. Describe how she started out, the tasks she assumed, how she began to be a little more comfortable in speaking, how she headed conventions, etc.
- (b). Describe how the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls came to be held (including the failure to be treated as delegates in London in 1840).
- A. Describe the Declaration of Sentiments.
- (c). It seems as if, thereafter, there was a convention a year, except for the war years. Would that be possible today? Why was it done then? -- For publicity? To change minds? To keep up a drumbeat of support? Fear that the movement might otherwise lapse? Other reasons?
- A. Describe the role played by the press in this entire process. Is anything different today in your opinion?
- 10(a). Explain the role of family correspondence in keeping families apprised of relatives' doings in Martha Wright's day, and in keeping families together.
- (b). Explain Martha's relationships with the Pelham family, including John Pelham.
11. There are a large number of matters that are relevant to the life of Martha Wright but

weren't asked about above. You may wish to bring them in when answering questions set forth above. And lots of them clearly could be brought up "on their own," so to speak. They include:

- A. How Lucretia came to be a fine and sought after speaker.
- B. The fact that, at first, *men* presided over women's rights conventions.
- C. Martha Wright loved learning though she disliked the regimentation of school.
- D. Who Peter Pelham was.
- E. Martha's expulsion for marrying outside the faith.
- F. Who David Wright was and what he did.
- G. The fact that Martha attended the 1833 founding convention of the AASS.
- H. The colonization idea.
- I. The school run by Theodore Weld and the Grimke sisters (and who these individuals were).
- J. David Wright's attitude towards women's rights.
- K. Martha's view that men were slow of perception.
- L. Teaching her sons to knit and thinking one of her daughters would have been a fine lawyer.
- M. Explain all the deaths of children, husbands, suitors, relatives, etc. This was common in those days.
- N. Describe William Seward's comments about a higher law and an irrepressible conflict.
- O. Explain that Martha used the initials of her maiden name and Stanton used her maiden name itself. Describe the inscription on Martha's grave.
- P. Describe Martha's initial and subsequent views of and relationship with Susan B. Anthony.

- Q. Describe the emancipation petition that had 400,000 signatures.
- R. Martha's view toward the fact that her son Frank had the opportunity to go to Harvard. Also his "majoring" there in baseball.
- S. The effect on abolitionists of the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act.
- T. The effect of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and the Dred Scott decision.
- U. William Pelham, the short-lived governor of New Mexico.
- V. The work done for her people by Harriet Tubman, both before and after the war.
- W. The vote cast by Susan B. Anthony in the 1872 election, and the unenforced fine resulting from it.
- X. Shaw's comment about reasonable and unreasonable persons.