

## **1832- 1860 William Cullen Bryant, Poet and Publisher**

Source: Charles Brown, *William Cullen Bryant* (New York: Scribner, 1971)

William Cullen Bryant, a famous American poet, was the editor of the *New York Evening Post*, and a founder of the Republican Party. A White man, he was born in 1794 in Massachusetts and died in 1878 at his home in New York City. His poem, "The African Chief," attacked the inhumanity of slavery and the slave trade, however, his primary concern in the era before the Civil War was preservation of the Union. Bryant opposed both the expansion of slavery in the west and radical calls for the abolition of slavery. During the Civil War, he argued that while it was "not a war directly aimed at the release of the slave," saving the Union required that Lincoln emancipate the slaves.

### **A. Bryant responds to William Lloyd Garrison and the Radical Abolitionists, 1832**

"Garrison is a man who, whatever may be the state of his mind on other topics, is as mad as the winds on the slavery question. . . . As to the associates of Garrison in this city, some of them may be of good intentions, but they are men whose enthusiasm runs away with their judgment - and the remainder are persons who owe what notoriety they have to their love of meddling with agitating subjects. . . . They are regarded as advocating measures which, if carried out, would most assuredly deluge the country in blood, and the mere discussion of which has a tendency to embroil (pit) the south with the north, and to endanger these relations of good will which are essential to the duration of the Union. . . ."

### **B. Bryant defended the right of abolitionists to free speech, 1837**

"The right to discuss freely and openly, by speech, by the pen, by the press, all political questions, and to examine and animadvert (speak out) upon all political institutions, is a right so clear and certain, so interwoven with our other liberties, so necessary, in fact to their existence, that without it we must fall at once into depression or anarchy. To say that he who holds unpopular opinions must hold them at the peril of his life, and that, if he expresses them in public, he has only himself to blame if they who disagree with him should rise and put him to death, is to strike at all rights, all liberties, all protection of the laws, and to justify and extenuate (worsen) all crimes."

### **C. Bryant's description of slavery in the South is unsympathetic toward Blacks, 1843**

"The blacks of this region are a cheerful, careless, dirty, race, not hard worked, and in many respects indulgently treated. It is of course the desire of the master that his slaves shall be laborious; on the other hand it is the determination of the slave to lead as easy a life as he can. The master has the power of punishment on his side; the slave, on his, has invincible inclination, and a thousand expedients learned by long practice. . . . Good natured though imperfect and slovenly obedience on one side, is purchased by good treatment on the other."

### **D. Bryant wants to bar slavery in the western territories, 1847**

"A man who does not approve of slavery . . . may tolerate it where it exists, from want of constitutional authority to extinguish it, . . . and the difficulties of change; but how can he justify himself in instituting it in new communities. . . . The federal government represents the free as well as the slave states; and while it does not attempt to abolish slavery in the states where it exists, it must not authorize slavery where it does not exist. This is the only middle ground - the 'true basis of conciliation and adjustment.'"

### **E. Response to John Brown's call for a Slave Rebellion and the attack on Harpers Ferry, 1859**

"The great body of the northern people have no desire nor intention to interfere with slavery within its present limits, except by persuasion and argument. They are unalterably opposed to the spread of it, as the south ought to be, but they are willing to leave the extinction of it in the states to the certain influences of commerce, of good sense, of the sentiment of justice and truth, and the march of civilization."

### **F. Bryant endorses Lincoln and the Republicans, 1860**

"The slave interest is a spoiled child. . . . The more we give it the louder it cries and the more furious its threats . . . if we exercise the right of suffrage, and elect a president of our own choice, instead of giving it one of its own favorites."