

IX. BAIRD'S LATTER YEARS--AND SOME REFLECTIONS

Robert Baird suddenly resigned his position as Corresponding Secretary of the American and Foreign Christian Union May 8, 1855. Why he did so remains a mystery. His son, Henry, wrote with proper Victorian circumspection in his father's biography, "the considerations that impelled him to the adoption of this step, being in great part of a private character, need not find a place here."¹

The step was a drastic one. Baird not only left the Union, he left the active service of organized benevolence for the first time in his public career. While it is impossible to determine the ultimate cause, one may speculate. First, it is doubtful that his abrupt departure was a consequence of any fundamental disagreement with the other managers concerning the direction of the programs. The Union did not change its philosophy or methods in the years following his resignation. Baird continued to serve on its Board of Directors and made liberal contributions in its support.²

Second, it is not likely that he left out of a desire for a less strenuous life. While he had complained from time to time about his "arduous duties" and the "vagabond life" he had led for "25 years of general labour for the Cause," he did not "look for a position in which [he could] be at home for the remainder of life."³ He

¹H. M. Baird, Robert Baird, p. 284. ²Ibid.

³Robert Baird to E. R. Fairchild, New York, August 24, 1852. Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

travelled as much in "retirement" as he had in active service.

Finally, it is not likely that he left the Union for financial reasons. The method he chose to support himself in the years after leaving the American and Foreign Christian Union hardly offered him much security. Turning down teaching positions and offers of college presidencies, he chose to support himself by free-lance lecturing on European affairs.

Perhaps the personal freedom such a position offered was the principle enticement that lured Baird from the service of organized benevolence. From time to time throughout his career he had chafed at his subordination to superior officers and boards of directors whom he felt knew less about the affairs of their organizations and the proper means of prosecuting them than he did. Perhaps he simply tired of being forced to explain and defend his actions before the managers of the societies, and likewise grew weary of defending their mistakes in the field. Like all professionals, he probably resented having his initiatives restrained by amateurs and laymen. As a public lecturer, he would be responsible only to himself.

By 1855 Baird had become an old hand at titillating the American public with "behind-the-scenes" accounts of European affairs. He began giving his lecture series on "Europe as It Is" as early as 1845. The program of lectures did not vary much over the next ten years.⁴

⁴There is an announcement of the lecture series in the Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The announcement, in Baird's handwriting, is dated November 29, 1845. Prepared for insertion in the local papers, it advertises a series of nine illustrated lectures, containing "interesting notices of the physical, political, moral, religious, & literary state of that portion of the world."

In 1859 he brought his series to Cleveland, Ohio, having previously delivered it in "nearly all the principal cities of the Union and before the Smithsonian Institute, Washington." The first lecture was given November 1, free of charge. Those who were stimulated by the free sample could purchase tickets for the remaining seven lectures for \$1.50--"Clerks and Apprentices \$1.00," "pupils of schools 50 cents."

In the course of his lectures Baird introduced his audience to the wonders of Europe from Turkey to Scandinavia, illustrating his remarks with "large and excellent maps."⁵ Judging from the newspaper accounts, the lectures were largely anecdotal and superficial. Baird's lecture notes have disappeared, except for a possible fragment on "the Jews" of Europe in the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. If the speeches were anything like his book recounting his travels in Northern Europe, they did not give their auditors much insight into European society and culture.

Baird was no American de Tocqueville. For all the time he spent in Europe, he never seemed to develop any insight into the nature

⁵An account of the Cleveland lectures can be found in the files of the Cleveland Leader, the issues of November 1-5, 7, 8, 10, 14, 15, 18, and 19, 1859. Judging from the amount of coverage in the paper, the lectures were among the year's high points in the lives of Cleveland's culture hungry. The space devoted to Baird dwarfed that devoted to competing events, and at the close of the series the editor urged that he be invited to return soon and give a course of lectures on European history, "going over the countries just as he has now done, and with his large and admirable maps. Shall we not have that course, if not this winter, at least next? We can have it if proper efforts be made; and it is just what we all need, especially those of us who have not time to read much." Cleveland Leader, November 19, 1859.

of European institutions. He lacked the ability partially to suspend his commitment to his own culture, and without such ability he was seldom able to go beyond making gossipy comments about European morals and sanitary conditions. Such discussions of European institutions as he did make served primarily as the counterpoint against which the theme of American superiority played. Baird's writings on Europe tell the readers more about America and Robert Baird than they do about their ostensible subject. One does not gain much insight into the nature of Europe by learning that Norway has "a greater prevalence of yellow and reddish hair" than other European countries do, and consequently the Norwegians "cannot be called as handsome a people as the Germans or Dutch!"⁶

Baird spent the greater part of four years on the lecture circuit, supporting himself and his family exclusively off the proceeds of his meetings. Very little information exists about this period in his life. One gains the impression that the years following his resignation from the American and Foreign Christian Union were years of decline and dissatisfaction. The backwaters of the evangelical movement could hardly have been a congenial environment for a man used to being in the mainstream. During Baird's self-imposed exile he followed Benevolence through its ups and downs, and wrote

⁶Robert Baird, Visit to Northern Europe: Or Sketches Descriptive, Historical, Political and Moral, of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, and the Free Cities of Hamburg and Lubeck, Containing Notices of the Manners and Customs, Commerce, Manufacture, Arts and Science, Education, Literature, and Religion, of Those Countries and Cities (New York: John S. Taylor & Co., 1841), p. 64.

articles and delivered papers on it on both sides of the Atlantic. Four years seems to have been the longest Baird could tolerate being out of harness, for in 1859 he again attached himself to a benevolent organization--one in whose service he suffered his only unqualified failure--the Southern Aid Society.⁷

The organization represented one last brave attempt on the part of conservative evangelicals to forestall the alienation of the South and avoid the disastrous consequences of secession and civil war. Among its principal supporters were the merchants William H. Aspinwall and James Boorman, and the industrialists Anson G. Phelps and William E. Dodge.⁸ It claimed to be the only "pulsation of Christian fraternity towards the South." Hoping "not to enter at all into the absorbing question of slavery and anti-slavery," it worked to fill the gap in religious supply caused by the general withdrawal of the American Home Missionary Society from the southern field.⁹

⁷Perhaps Baird found the financial insecurity of free-lance lecturing more than he had bargained for. He did not work on a guaranteed-fee basis. Should the crowds prove sparse, or the weather or illness force a cancellation, ticket sales hardly covered expenses. Sometimes he was reduced to writing humiliating letters to friends, begging them to do what they could to insure the success of a lecture series. "Now will you, my dear Dr. Murray, be so kind as to take hold of this enterprise for my sake. I really need to succeed well in Elizabethtown, for if I should not I shall be much embarrassed," he wrote to Nicholas Murray. New York, April 25, 1855. Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁸Griffin, Journal of Negro History, XLIV, p. 198.

⁹[Southern Aid Society], The Southern Aid Society: Its Constitution, and Address to the Christian Public. Together with Some Notice of the Convention which Resulted in Its Formation, and Extracts from Its Correspondence (New York: Printed at the Day-Book Female Type-setting Establishment, 1854), pp. 14-15.

Anyone familiar with the nature of Robert Baird's concerns might have expected that he would have been in the thick of the Southern Aid Society's affairs, nor would they have been disappointed in their expectations. He was present at the preliminary organizational meetings held September 28-29, 1853,¹⁰ and chaired the first public meeting of the Society, October 27th of the same year.¹¹

Although the Southern Aid Society principally aided New School Presbyterianism,¹² it promised help to worthy individuals and churches of any evangelical denomination, and demonstrated its non-sectarian character by placing its direction in the hands of representatives of the Old School Presbyterian, New School Presbyterian, Congregational, and Dutch Reformed denominations.¹³ The Society received the support of individuals from all the major denominations. Even "serious Unitarians" were concerned enough about the spiritual welfare of the South (or the domestic tranquility of the nation) to take an interest

¹⁰Fletcher M. Green, "Northern Missionary Activities in the South, 1846-1861," Journal of Southern History, XXV (May, 1955), pp. 161-62.

¹¹[Southern Aid Society], Southern Aid Society: Its Constitution, and Address to the Christian Public, p. 3. Between the organizational meeting and first public meeting Baird corresponded with evangelical leaders throughout the country, enlisting public endorsements of the new society. See the letter from Leonard Wood to Robert Baird printed in the pamphlet on p. 17. Baird was re-elected annually to the organization's Board of Directors.

¹²Robert Baird to Dr. Van Rensselaer, New York, November 29, 1853. Collections of the Presbyterian Historical Society.

¹³Green, Journal of Southern History, XXI, p. 163.

in the Society's work.¹⁴

Support for the Society grew apace with fears of the impending crisis. Contributions increased every year, and, though meager when compared with the donations given to the antislavery American Missionary Association, reached \$13,000 in 1859. By then the situation had become serious enough to call Robert Baird back to active duty. The Society appointed him Corresponding Secretary with broad authority over its field operations, but, needless to say, he was not able to stem the tide. Slavery shattered the consensual approach. On the eve of the Civil War, large segments of the northern community could not abide an organization which even seemed to tolerate, if not approve, slavery. During the last two months of 1860 the Southern Aid Society was unable to keep a collection agent in the field, and hostile public opinion forced the closing of its New York office.¹⁵ Baird resigned his commission in February, 1861, and returned to the American and Foreign Christian Union's fold.¹⁶

Robert Baird was an old man in 1861. His major work and successes were behind him. He managed one final trip to Europe that year, on which occasion he attended the Geneva Conference of the Evangelical Alliance and delivered his customary paper concerning American religious affairs. It was his last major effort. He returned to the United States and prosecuted the work of the American and Foreign Christian Union to the extent that his feeble health allowed.

¹⁴ibid., p. 168. ¹⁵ibid., p. 172.

¹⁶H. M. Baird, Robert Baird, p. 308.

Throughout much of the winter of 1862 he was confined to bed, but he still carried on a lively correspondence with others in the work, making suggestions and urging them on to efforts which his lack of strength would not allow him to make himself.¹⁷ He partially recovered in the summer, but took ill again in the fall.

The Civil War greatly disrupted the American and Foreign Christian Union's work. It nearly broke Baird's heart. Not only were his great hopes for Christian union frustrated, but the national union which he valued so highly seemed irreparably shattered. His friends were dying one by one, and he seemed to long for his own death. "Alas, what shadows we are!" he wrote one of his friends. "How loudly the call comes to us: Work whilst the day lasts, for the night cometh! Certainly to do good, to glorify God by promoting His kingdom & doing His will, is all that is worth living for."¹⁸

Baird made his last public appearance March 1, 1863, preaching twice on foreign missions in Elizabeth, New Jersey.¹⁹ He took to his bed immediately afterward, and died two weeks later, apparently of pneumonia. Appropriately enough it was a Sunday when he fell "asleep in Jesus, at a few minutes before eight o'clock," March 15, 1863, "after a life of sixty-four years, spent in the service of his Redeemer."²⁰

¹⁷Robert Baird to Dr. S. S. Prime, Yonkers, New York, January 27, 1862. Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁸R. Baird to Dr. S. S. Prime, Yonkers, January 31, 1862. Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁹H. M. Baird, Robert Baird, p. 318.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 321-22.

His funeral, like his life, was an ecumenical affair. Five ministers of different denominations took part.²¹

Robert Baird could hardly have chosen a less opportune time to die, as far as his reputation was concerned. The Civil War was, of course, the national preoccupation. Men are forgotten quickly enough in times of peace. Furthermore, the war partially eclipsed and partially redirected organized benevolence. Baird was too old, too tired, and too sick to make his mark felt upon such agencies as the United States Sanitary Commission, the United States Christian Commission, or the American Missionary Association, all of which were engaged in work for southern relief.

Robert Baird drifted into obscurity, remembered only by an ever-diminishing circle of aging friends and co-workers. His impact on American society did not die with his name, however, and lately there has been a revival of interest in the man and his work, as historians have gained a new appreciation of the influence of evangelical Protestantism on American institutions.

It is not now possible to write a well-rounded biography of Robert Baird, and the prospects for such a work in the future are not promising. While documents relating to most facets of his public life are available, not many sources pertaining to his private life have come to light. Tantalizing references of the type which cause researchers endless frustration appear from time to time in his biography. Baird kept a letter-book throughout much of his career.

²¹ ibid.

Essays he wrote while a student in college remained in the hands of his heirs after his death. He maintained a diary. He was an indefatigable correspondent with family and friends. Much of this material was lost, and may have been destroyed.²² Thus the historian is forced to rely almost entirely upon inference in his attempts to outline Baird's personality.

Robert Baird was able to win the friendship and confidence of an amazing variety of individuals. As Merle Curti has written, he associated easily with "monarch and peasants alike"--a practical example of democracy in action.²³ William B. Sprague remarked in a "commemorative discourse" that Baird "had a gentleness and loveliness of temper for which the dove or the lamb was not more than a match."²⁴ A man who could count among his friends such diverse figures as Bernadotte, King of Sweden, Henry Clay, Jenny Lind, and Phineas T.

²² In the course of research, I was able to locate a living great-grandson, Robert Baird Brown, now retired and residing in Hawaii. In a letter dated February 15, 1968, he informed me that Baird's personal effects were distributed among his heirs upon his death. Mr. Brown had lost his share in moving to Hawaii. Many of the rest were sold and have disappeared into private autograph collections. Other descendants may have bits and pieces of memorabilia. I hope to locate some of them in the future. The greatest irony of the situation from the historian's point of view is that the two sons of Robert Baird which worked most closely with him were academics and historians, as was Thomas De Witt, President of the American and Foreign Christian Union. De Witt served as President of the New York Historical Society. His personal papers and the papers of the American and Foreign Christian Union have also disappeared.

²³ Merle Curti, "The Reputation of America Overseas (1776-1860)," American Quarterly, I (Spring, 1949), pp. 71-72.

²⁴ Cited in H. M. Baird, Robert Baird, p. 330.

Barnum must have had personal qualities which have left only faint impressions on the printed page.²⁵

Baird was completely assured of the correctness of his goals and the means of attaining them. On the subject of religious freedom he was a monomaniac. He was amazingly stubborn on any question relating to that issue, and construed almost everything to relate to it. He could be as imperious in his relationships with his co-workers, both superiors and underlings, as he was accommodating to those whose friendship he sought. It might not be too far from the truth to suggest that those he worked upon enjoyed him more than those he worked with.

Baird's son wrote of him as a loving father and husband. He was also an absentee father and husband, as was so often the case with evangelical clergy. Only four sons of his eight children survived him, yet the deaths of the others were hardly mentioned in the existing documents, nor did he ever retire into private grief for any length of time. Perhaps the most tragic event in his life occurred in 1850. His oldest son and namesake, Robert Jr., drowned at the age of twenty-five while swimming in the Hudson River. His body was not recovered for two days. To compound the tragedy, he was "not a professor of

²⁵Robert Baird corresponded with Jenny Lind and watched the religious progress of her husband with deep interest. He sent her autographed copies of his books, and begged autographs from her for his friends. Jenny Goldschmidt (nee Lind) to Robert Baird, Northampton, England, March 30, 1852. Miscellaneous papers, New York Historical Society. Baird probably met P. T. Barnum through Jenny Lind. Barnum wrote a commemorative anecdote following Baird's death. I doubt whether any American clergyman has ever received a tribute from a less likely memorialist.

religion," although "he had not been without serious concern for his soul from time to time."²⁶

The occasion of this tragedy provided the only recorded instance in which Baird deeply questioned his non-denominational mission. Perhaps he missed the emotional support that close ties with a single church would have provided. He wrote Nicholas Murray, a Presbyterian minister in Elizabeth New Jersey, on that occasion, deploring the estrangement their different commitments had caused, and confessing "a stronger desire than ever to associate my assertions & labours more & more with the Church in which I was born & which I have ever preferred to all others." He had "laboured 22 years to promote the Cause of Christ in a general way:" he proposed "(if such should appear to be the will of God) to labour more in connexion with our honoured Presbyterian Church."²⁷ Regardless of Baird's professed desires, his interpretation of God's will kept him in the benevolence movement. The reason why he had to write Murray indicates the strength of the hold benevolence had upon him. He had not been home when Murray paid a visit of condolence. Less than two weeks after the death of his son he was back on the road.

For all Baird's many absences, he remained as close to his family as his profession permitted. His wife quite often travelled with him, and he must have been pleased when two of his sons associated

²⁶Christian Union and Religious Memorial, III (July-August, 1850), pp. 386-87.

²⁷Robert Baird to Nicholas Murray, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, August 30, 1850. Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

themselves with his work. All his sons turned out well. Charles W. Baird and Henry M. Baird became ministers and professors. Edward entered the law, and the youngest, Willie, in some ways his father's favorite, entered business after graduating from New York University.²⁸

Baird made no claims to intellectual originality. His friends recognized that he did not possess "the more brilliant and imaginative qualities." After all, "he was too much absorbed in what was purely practical to have any time to spend in the regions of abstract thought."²⁹ As far as Baird was concerned, being practical meant spreading evangelical ideas in the most efficient and economical manner possible. A few key words which might outline his attitude are reason, prudence, and moral suasion.

Baird's supreme objective was the creation of an American consensus dominated by evangelical Protestant ideas. He believed that extremes had to be avoided at almost any cost. He was the Great American Moderate. He was cautious even pursuing those causes he favored.

²⁸Joseph M. Wilson, The Presbyterian Historical Almanac and Annual Rembrancer of the Church for 1864 (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1864), p. 89. Evidently Willie was less than a perfect scholar. Baird entered him in Princeton and he did not do well there. Baird wrote John Maclean time and again asking him to take Willie in hand. Finally, he brought him to New York City, where his older brothers could more closely supervise him. He graduated from New York University a few weeks after his father's death. See letters from Robert Baird to John Maclean, dated Peekskill, New York, July 5 and September 19, 1859; and Yonkers, New York, January 31, and May 12, 1860, all in the Maclean Papers, Princeton University Archives.

²⁹William B. Sprague, cited in H. M. Baird, Robert Baird, p. 329.

Baird favored revivalism, but did not endorse such "new methods" as the protracted meeting, the "anxious seat," and the professional revivalist.³⁰ Baird thought that revivals should be permanent fixtures on the American religious scene, but that ideally they should be low-keyed affairs, conducted by "permanent, well-instructed" ministers. They should avoid "injurious accompaniments, such as great physical excitement, manifesting itself in sobbing, or crying, or ineffectual efforts to retain one's composure." Such excesses were social, not religious phenomena, being exhibited most often among the "rude and uneducated."³¹

Baird also favored social reform. He spoke highly of the work of Dorothea Dix.³² He applauded efforts at prison reform, and urged that sentences for all but capital crimes be shortened. He had the evangelical's typical distaste for war. But in reform as in revival, Baird was the picture of caution.

Like most pious conservatives of his time, Baird felt that true reform could only come through the regeneration of individuals.

³⁰R. Baird, Religion in America, pp. 487-89. He called the anxious seat a "reprehended measure" and extremely protracted meetings an "abuse." Professional revivalists, who disturbed the established order, were "the worst of all" and "subversive to the regular ministry." It must be remembered that Religion in America was written for a European audience, and that Baird was sensitive to attacks on American indecorum from that quarter. He was a friend of Charles G. Finney, who used the measures Baird sought to excuse. Baird helped arrange Finney's New York meetings in 1832. R. Baird to Charles G. Finney, Philadelphia, February 3, 1832. Finney Papers, Oberlin College Library.

³¹R. Baird, Religion in America, p. 483.

³²American and Foreign Christian Union, 1 (May, 1849), p. 233.

The softening influences of Christianity held the greatest promise for the amelioration of social ills. Yet Baird did not believe that man was incapable of improving his earthly lot through his own efforts. To a surprising degree he was a cultural determinist. Circumstances had a great influence on character, Baird believed. Vice bred in vicious surroundings. In order that individuals be reformed, it was necessary that vicious "relationships and circumstances be changed." Without social reform, "every species of moral means may be employed in vain."³³ Thus Christianity had a great work to perform in society as well as in the individual. The only concrete plans Baird offered for the improvement of the human environment were universal education and temperance, however, so his hopes became mostly wishful thinking.

Change had to come gradually. Baird was firmly convinced that few of mankind's earthly blessings exceeded social stability. Revolutions were almost always evil, being "subversive of all well-ordered society." Social progress could not be advanced by revolutionary means: rather, "through the progress of wholesome reforms, of popular education, and a pure Christianity, the causes of discontent will be removed--gradually, if we are not permitted to say speedily."³⁴

The "pure Christianity" which Baird expected to reform society was evangelical Protestantism--the "simple truths" easily discovered in the pages of the Bible. Yet once again Baird advised caution. While firmly believing in "Bible Christianity," he had severe doubts about the

³³Christian Union and Religious Memorial, II (May, 1849), pp. 279-80.

³⁴Ibid., I (September, 1848), pp. 530-31.

radical evangelical denominations which claimed to hold only the Bible as the basis of their beliefs and eschewed any formal creeds whatever. It was only with deep reluctance that he finally placed the Campbellites and Free-Will Baptists among the evangelical denominations.³⁵

Baird was not held captive by Biblical literalism. In the eighteenth century tradition, he believed "revelation and science harmonize with reason." While it is useless to speculate how he would have handled Darwinian biology, he had no difficulty at all reconciling his faith with contemporary geological discoveries. He accepted the age of man on earth as six or seven thousand years. He believed that the creation of man finished an epoch of creation which "extended through a period of six ordinary or natural days." Yet the geological evidence of the earth's antiquity troubled him not at all. The earth's shell showed "an unknown series of ages, in which creation appeared to have followed creation at the distance of mighty intervals between." Other species--other races--had "run through their ages of existence and ceased." Mankind stood on "ground so immeasurably far back in the night of time, as to fill the mind with awe." Yet Baird remained convinced that back of it all remained the Creator, the "First, or Efficient Cause."³⁶ Clearly, Fundamentalists cannot claim Baird or other evangelicals like him among their antecedents.

Baird, like so many of his fellow evangelicals, was an

³⁵R. Baird, Religion in America, pp. 530-31.

³⁶Christian Union and Religious Memorial, III (October, 1850), pp. 506-07.

ardent nationalist. He gloried in his country's material and "literary" progress almost as much as in its spiritual growth.³⁷ While too much of a realist to expect that American political institutions could be exported wholesale throughout the world, he nevertheless felt that they were the purest and most beneficial that had ever existed. He gloried in American political institutions in the abstract: he was personally apolitical, again a characteristic of so many of the conservative clergy of the day. He had a deep distrust of politicians and political factions. He seemed to feel that their only contribution to American society was social turmoil; how American government could be "pure" and the men who held its offices be "corrupt" at the same time was an anomaly that he never resolved. He was far too wise to offend American political sensibilities by making political pronouncements. He continually dissociated the movements in which he took part from political programs with the same ends. The few private political opinions he voiced fell as heavily on the Whigs as they did on the Democrats.³⁸ It was the Union that mattered. With God's help, it could survive misrule arising from any quarter.

Finally, Robert Baird believed that reason and moral suasion were the only effective agencies that men could apply toward achieving spiritual or social ends. With the single exception of a brief foray

³⁷American and Foreign Christian Union, 1 (April, 1850), pp. 189-90. Religion in America, pp. 381-82.

³⁸For example, Baird wrote C. C. Camberleng, "I hope that Gen. Harrison may be better in ruling than in speech-making. We must at all events hope for the best." Paris, April 14, 1841. Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

into the Sabbatarian movement early in his career,³⁹ he never attempted to use political coercion to effect moral ends. In the case of the slavery issue, this position allied him with conservative elements in opposition to the evangelical abolitionists. The differences between them concerned means, not ends, but since he rejected almost all means to end slavery except the mildest of verbal criticisms, he was in effect an unwilling ally of the slavocracy. Baird was unequivocal in his opposition to slavery. It was a great evil. His attitude toward blacks was friendly, if paternalistic. He had no fears of the old bugbear, miscegenation. He seemed to almost welcome it as the ultimate cure for America's racial problems. He wrote,

The United States seem to be destined to be the scene in which a more complete fusion of the races is to take place than the world has hitherto seen. I know an excellent man, born in Virginia, who represents the four Continents, as it were; for in his veins is the blood of the European, African, Asiatic, and American (aboriginal) races!

Conditions in which such race mixing could occur, far from being shameful, seemed to be "the best arrangement in the long run."⁴⁰

³⁹In 1830 Baird forwarded a petition against Sunday mail transportation to John Maclean at Princeton. While Baird's writings are replete with references to the sanctity of the Sabbath, the only reference to political enforcement which I found in the documents I examined occurs as a postscript in the Maclean letter: "Our petitions against the transportation of the Mail on the Sabbath will be sent on, it is expected on Thursday. A tumultuous and disgraceful meeting of those friendly to the existing law on the subject was held in the District Court-room last night. It exceeded any thing for confusion that I ever heard of, & was so perfectly ridiculous that one man who was there said that the 'Devil himself must have been ashamed of it.'--few, if any respectable people were there." R. Baird to John Maclean, Philadelphia, February 16, 1830. Maclean papers, Princeton University Archives.

⁴⁰R. Baird, Progress and Prospects of Christianity . . ., p. 31.

The expectation that race-mixing would eventually end America's racial problems may have been little more than a convenient excuse for inaction, but the acceptance of amalgamation as a positive good was a more enlightened, optimistic attitude than that of anti-slavery free-soilers who were also anti-black.

Although Baird sympathized, in an off-handed way, with the plight of slaves and disapproved of the institution itself, he found himself unable to take or to recommend any effectual steps leading to its destruction. No doubt an element of self-interest determined his attitude. He needed nation-wide support if his ends were to be achieved. Yet self-interest cannot be the only, or even the principal factor. Powerful moral restraints must have been operating to keep Baird from acting in behalf of emancipation. One factor lies in Baird's understanding of the nature of evil.

Robert Baird, like all evangelicals, believed in the objective reality of evil, divorced from any particular manifestation of it. Evil was a unitary thing--no single aspect of it was less evil than another. The consequences of a given act might be more or less harmful, but this had little or nothing to do with the act's sinfulness. Slavery was evil, but so were civil strife, disunion, and war. It made little sense to a man like Baird to employ steps which promised to create an evil in order to eliminate another one. The moral dilemma may have been self-created, but it was real, nevertheless. The agony it created was real. The reaction to it was also real and totally human. Faced with unacceptable alternatives, the normal reaction was to take no action at all--an option that most Americans

took until the Civil War came. One would not have to search beyond the recent past to notice similar reactions in similar circumstances.

Robert Baird is gone and largely forgotten. Yet large segments of the American population still profess to believe many of the ideas he promulgated. Some of them have become so commonplace that it is almost impossible to separate them from the American "ground of being" for the purpose of analyzing them.

Baird and others like him set out to create a consensus behind a set of religious and social beliefs and attitudes. To a large degree they succeeded. Historians have been showing increased interest in the religious and social ideas of evangelical Protestants and an increasing appreciation of their immense ideological power. Perhaps such consensus as has been achieved in America can be attributed to it. It is important to remember that whatever hegemony was achieved under evangelicalism was accomplished by men who consciously and systematically worked at it.

Much work remains to be done before a final assessment of the impact of evangelical Protestantism on contemporary society can be made. For one thing, historians may have to give up their fascination with the extremes and concentrate on understanding contemporary American mass attitudes. It is a strange comment on American scholarship that often more is known about deviant sects and quixotic theologies than is known about what most Americans actually believe. Perhaps what is needed is the historical equivalent of sociology's Middletown. When contemporary mass ideology is understood in greater detail, its historical antecedents can perhaps be more accurately fixed.

Many of the ideas Robert Baird expounded have a contemporaneity about them which suggests that his Protestant moral order still holds the allegiance of many Americans. Americans still believe in common school education as a social panacea. Sunday schools are still held responsible for the spiritual and moral instruction of many American children. Religion is still considered by many to be a factor assuring America's material progress and physical safety. Many Americans still expect their country to take a neutral position among the various denominations, yet remain a friendly benefactor to the cause of religion in general. Many still seem to feel most comfortable dealing with persons ascribing to religious beliefs, without caring which formal religious organization claims their allegiance. Atheism is considered not only a religious deviation, but a cultural subversion as well. American Protestants still make friends and acquaintances among their Roman Catholic neighbors, while worrying about the evils of the Church of Rome in the abstract. The United States still embarks on periodic benevolent crusades, although many of them have been thoroughly secularized.

Robert Baird and his fellow evangelicals need no apologists. They were not misunderstood and persecuted saints. In many ways they were narrow men. Many of their unctious social pronouncements are now understood for the petty moralisms they actually were. Their cultural smugness and social elitism roundly deserve the criticism they have received. Nevertheless, they were not evil men. The social values they promoted had their positive side. If American society had developed according to evangelical hopes, few would have found it

an undesirable place in which to live.

If the social vision of the evangelicals was inadequate, in many ways the inadequacy could be ascribed to an optimism which today seems amazingly naive. Robert Baird placed supreme reliance in the powers of moral suasion. If any Enlightenment attitude seeped into his ideational makeup, it was his unfailing belief in reasonableness of virtue. It seems incredible that a person could so firmly believe that goodness was self-evident, and that the United States, if not the world, could be reasoned into pursuing it. Perhaps more incredible is the fact that many Americans came to accept and pursue the vision of goodness defined for them by Robert Baird and his fellow evangelicals. Enough Americans came to accept the evangelical definition of a good society to force most of the rest to conform to it outwardly, at least. The evangelicals created, and Robert Baird articulated, a Protestant moral order--a moral order which still has a place in the pantheon of American controlling ideas. What we as Americans are, and what we can expect to be in the immediate future, is partly the legacy of men like Robert Baird.