

Beyond the Trumpery: A True, Progressive, Freethought Candidate



trumpery (Websters): worthless nonsense; from the Middle French *tromper*, meaning "to deceive"; synonyms: balderdash, baloney, blah-blah, blarney, blather, blatherskite, blither, bosh, bull [slang], bunk, bunkum (or buncombe), claptrap, codswallop [British], crapola [slang], crock, drivel, drool, fiddle-faddle, fiddlesticks, flapdoodle, folly, foolishness, fudge, garbage, guff, hogwash, hokeypokey, hokum, hoodoo, hooey, horsefeathers [slang], humbug, humbuggery, jazz, malarkey, moonshine, muck, nuts, piffle, poppycock, punk, rot, rubbish, senselessness, silliness, slush, stupidity, taradiddle, tommyrot, tosh, trash, nonsense, twaddle

I'm going to resist relating this colorful word to the current blathering humbuggery we hear from a particularly unpresidential and piffling Presidential candidate. You, however, don't need to resist the association.

To help us come up for fresh air in this season of hooey and humbug, how about resurrecting someone whose voice echoes to us from another season of tosh, twaddle and taradiddle?

I think I need a thinker. How about you?

The person who is commanding my attention at present is a woman. No, not that woman. This one lived two centuries ago and wasn't even an American—though maybe a good model for Americans. Her name was Frances Wright (you can call her Fanny and she won't mind). Fanny was a feminist before feminism, an abolitionist before abolition and a freethinker before freethought became free—if it ever did.

Without balderdash, let me introduce you to this no-bunkum secular reformer: **Frances Wright** (1795-1852) was born in Scotland just after Thomas Paine dropped *The Age of Reason* like a brain-bomb on the world of believers. She came to America in 1818 just before Walt Whitman was born (Walt called Fanny, “one of the best women in history. . . . There was a majesty about her”). She had a meetup with Jefferson, arguing against slavery, and was good friends with war-hero LaFayette. In 1825 she formed a community near Memphis for African Americans she had bought out of slavery (you read that right). By 1830 she was publishing the *Free Enquirer* and giving lectures in Philadelphia and New York. The best hint I can give you why I think she has to be remembered and honored is this fact: In 1829 she converted the former Ebenezer Baptist Church in New York City into a “Hall of Science.” Quite the conversion.

One of my favorite quotes from Fanny comes from her lecture on “Formation of Opinions” (boring title—revolutionary message!). She dared to say,

“What think ye, my friends? If Jesus, or his likeness, should now visit the earth, what church of the many which now go by his name, would he enter?” Great question. Then she answers herself:

“It seems to me, my friends, that as one who loved peace, taught industry, equality, union, and love, one towards another, Jesus were he alive at this day, would

recommend you to come out of your churches of faith, and to gather into schools of knowledge.”

“Crapola and horsefeathers!” I hear the faithful shout in anger. No surprise, Fanny got run out of a few lecture-halls (a badge of honor in my book). Maybe because her message was too common sense, and all too true.

In another stunning passage in a speech we hear a trumpet call above the trumpety:

“My friends, I am no Christian. . . I am neither Jew nor Gentile, [Muslim] nor Theist; I am but a member of the human family, and would accept [truth] by whomsoever offered—that truth which we can all find, if we will but seek—in things, not in words; in nature, not in human imagination; in our own hearts, not in temples made with hands.”

This is the woman who held up her copy of the *Declaration of Independence* at the conclusion of a speech with the words, “Let us lead all sects to this altar of union—this shrine of human liberty.” Our founding document was her secular scripture, written in revolution and bound with hope.

The wise voice of Frances Wright rings out across the centuries with a timeless truth higher, sweeter and so much more needed than the calls of church bells or minarets. Fanny died in Cincinnati 160 years ago and she’s been forgotten in the fogs and flappedoodles of history.

But maybe not.

Now you know her and won’t forget her.

In this season of crock and claptrap, it’s good to remember the brave, anti-baloney freethought “saints.” No amount of trumpety can silence the sincere and salient minds, in her age or ours.

One cannot help but give Fanny the last, no-nonsense word, to earn our vote—should she be running as a Fiddlesticks! candidate this year:

“Thus let us associate; not as Jews, not as Christians, not as Deists, not as believers, not as skeptics, not as poor, not as rich, not as artisans, not as merchants, not as

lawyers, but as human beings, as fellow creatures, as American citizens, pledged to protect each other's rights—to advance each other's happiness.”

Given all the blither and bosh, don't you wish her name was on the ballot?

Chris Highland

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References: Frances Wright, *Reason, Religion and Morals*; Celia Morris, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*.

Chris Highland was a Protestant Minister and Interfaith Chaplain for many years. He renounced his ordination in 2001. He is the author of *My Address is a River, Nature is Enough* and ten other books. Chris is currently a member of The Clergy Project, the American Humanist Association and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, while he blogs at [Secular Chaplain](http://SecularChaplain.com). He teaches a class on early American freethinkers at the Reuter Center, UNCA. Chris and his (reverend) wife Carol, live in the mountains of North Carolina. To learn more see www.chighland.com