THE BURNING OF THE URSULINE CONVENT ON MOUNT BENEDICT BY PROTESTANT LABORERS, CHARLESTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS, AUGUST 11 & 12, 1834

Joel Allegretti

IMAGE: Andy Nguyen

Joel Allegretti is the author of *Platypus* (NYQ Books, 2017), a collection of poems, prose, and performance texts, and *Our Dalpiteh* (Tinfish Publishing, 2016), a novella. He is the editor of *Rabbit Care: 79 Poems* (NYQ Books, 2015).

PAPISTS!

We passed the ruins of the Ursuline Convent this morning. They were, indeed, a melancholy and a mortifying sight. We hung our head in shame, whilst our spirit was indignant.

"The Convent,"
Boston Evening Transcript, August 12, 1834

The circumstances which have led to the commission of this horrible outrage need not be discussed at length. We shall confine ourselves principally to a statement of facts, ascertained from witnesses of the scene, and from personal observation, and application to all the authorities in whom most confidence may be placed.

"Burning of the Charlestown Convent,"
Boston Evening Transcript, August 12, 1834

Mother Mary Edmund St. George,
Superior of the Charlestown Convent
An Inquiry Conducted through a Searchlight Science,
February 27, 2015

Q. Is it true your orchards were savaged?
A. Yes. May God have mercy on the transgression.

Q. Is it true your gardens were uprooted?
A. Yes. May God have mercy on the transgression.

Q. Is it true your pianos were smashed to pieces?
A. Yes. May God have mercy on the transgression.

Q. Your harps, too?
A. Yes. May God have mercy on the transgression.

Q. Is it true your students were threatened?
A. Yes. May God have mercy on the transgression.

Q. Is it true the sisters were threatened?
A. Yes. May God have mercy on the transgression.

Q. Is it true the Holy Bible was torched?
A. Yes. May God have mercy on the transgression.

Q. Is it true three Communion wafers were stolen?
A. Yes.

The whole party, we should observe here, were disguised. All of them, so far as we can learn, had their faces blackened with soot, or wore masks, or had disguised their dress. The Sheriff, with commendable zeal, devises and disguises of various other descriptions, adapted to conceal the individuals concerned in the outrage, from recognition, at the time of its execution, and of course from punishment hereafter.

"Burning of the Charlestown Convent,"
Boston Evening Transcript, August 12, 1834

Date

August 13, 1834

Location

Newburyport, Mass.

Name

Henry Cromp

Age

19(?)

Occupation

Laborer

Cause of Death

Slit throat,
Self-inflicted

Found on His Person

3 Communion wafers

The Bishop then complimented the City Authorities and others for the stand they had taken in defence of the rights of the Catholics, and he assured his hearers that they had the sympathies of all respectable citizens. The destruction of the Convent, he said, was an act of the most degraded of the human species, and it met with no favor from the intelligent people of Boston.

"The Outrage,"
Boston Evening Transcript, August 13, 1834

To the Public. Whereas *erroneous* statements have appeared in the public papers, intimating that the liberty of a young lady was improperly and unlawfully restrained at the Convent in this town, and believing that said publications were intended to excite the public mind against that Institution, and might result in unpleasant or serious consequences, the Selectmen, considering it their duty to endeavor to allay any such excitement, have at the request of the Superintendent of the Institution fully examined into the circumstances of the case, and have satisfied themselves that the young lady referred to was not improperly or unlawfully restrained, and that the Institution is in every respect what it has been represented to be, a Nunnery, and that the inmates of the place—the whole of which is in good order, and nothing appearing to them to be in the least objectionable, and they have the satisfaction to assure the public, that there exists no cause of complaint on the part of any one, and that the Institution is now in a state of quietude and with her present situation, it being that of her own choice, and that she has no desire or wish to alter it.

"Burning of the Charlestown Convent,"
Boston Evening Transcript, August 12, 1834

Rebecca Reed
Author of
Six Months in a convent, or,
The narrative of Rebecca Theresa Reed,
who was recently a pupil of the Roman Catholics
about two years and an inmate of the Ursuline convent
on Mount Benedict, Charlestown, Mass.,
nearly six months, in the years 1831,2
Died Feb. 28, 1838
Age 20 yrs.
Consumption

+

Dear Rebecca,
poor Episcopalian daughter,
to whom the Ursulines gave an education
without charge

Did you chuse
for the tyranny of flame?

Did you rejoice
in the rush of charity incinerated?

Did you *jeer*
the other girls, whom Terror possessed?

Did regret flood your eyes
when your spirit renounced blood & breath?

Great numbers of people were attracted to the scene of destruction in the course of the night, most of whom probably arrived too late to prevent much of the harm which was done, had they been disposed and able to interfere to advantage.

"Burning of the Charlestown Convent,"
Boston Evening Transcript, August 12, 1834

"There was a very pretty moon that night."
—Sarah E. Bunnell, eyeglasses,
recalling the Charlestown riots half a century later[1]

Resolved, That in the opinion of the citizens of Boston, the late attack on the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, occasioned only by debauchee females, was a base and cowardly act, for which, the perpetrators deserve the contempt and detestation of the community.

Resolved, That the destruction of property and danger of life caused thereby, calls loudly on all good citizens, and religious individually and authoritively the abhorrence they feel for this high-handed violation of the laws.

Resolved, That we, the protestant citizens of Boston, do pledge ourselves, collectively and individually, to unite with our Catholic brethren in protecting their persons, their property, and their civil and religious rights.

"Great Meeting at Faneuil Hall,"
Boston Evening Transcript, August 12, 1834

[1] Schultz, Nancy Lusignan. *Fire & Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (New York: The Free Press, 2000).

I envy the sky its imperviousness to fire,

its permanence.

!