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Jonathan H. Earle. *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xii + 282 pp. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2888-5; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5555-3.

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The Rehabilitation of David Wilmot's Free Soilers

The Free Soilers have not enjoyed positive evaluations in recent decades. Scholars, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, typically pictured them, especially those who left the Democratic party, as political opportunists bent on revenge against the southern-dominated party for denying Martin Van Buren his legitimate place of leadership. They have been described as racists interested in preserving newly acquired territories for small white farmers, excluding not only slaves but free blacks as well. In this important revisionist study, Jonathan H. Earle has effectively challenged this view and helped to re-establish the third party as one committed to the incorporation of the Jacksonian ideals of political equality and the abolition of slavery.

In recent years historians of the political antislavery movement have concentrated on the Liberty party-evangelical element, which stressed the immorality of slavery and, to a lesser extent, the Conscience Whig faction centered in Massachusetts and Ohio's Western Reserve. What attention they have paid to the Barnburners of New York has, for the most part, stressed the less admirable characteristics of political revenge and racism. They have pointed out that with Zachary Taylor's election as president in 1848 these Free Soilers deserted the antislavery cause and rushed to return to their positions as Democrats in the two-party system, even accepting the Compromise of 1850s rejection of the Wilmot Proviso. The remaining, more committed Free Soil factions struggled on until the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 initiated the revolution in the political system which included the birth of the Republican party using an essentially Free Soil platform. Earle largely ignores the Whig and Liberty factions of the third party and suggests a new and more positive way of viewing the Democratic element's actions and motives. The result is a convincing interpretation which will cause historians to re-evaluate their negative views of the Free Soilers.

Earle puts much of his emphasis on New York, but not on the "Burned-over District" of evangelical reform and Liberty party origins; rather he studies those parts of the state most hurt by depression, areas that were isolated and off the mainstream of western migration. These were counties dominated by free-thinking farmers who led the revolt against the state Democratic party, feeling it was dominated by aristocratic elements closely tied with southern planters who controlled the national party. Unlike many studies of Free Soil origins which center on the schisms of the Polk era, Earle delves into the 1820s and 1830s to find the roots of their despair. He shows that the old Jacksonians were sharply divided between antislavery interests inclined toward egalitarianism, and more prominent proslavery Southerners and their numerous northern allies who included the Barnburners' New York rivals, the Hunkers. In William Leggett's attacks on the "Money Power" and conversion to abolitionism, and George Henry Evans's proposal for free western lands for homesteaders (lands free of slavery), poor New York farmers found a cause to rally around as they sought to improve their status. While few became abolitionists like Leggett, they nonetheless adopted the cause of free soil. Increasing talk of a Slave Power conspiracy to deny them land, a concept pioneered by Democratic Senator Thomas Morris of Ohio in the 1830s, further fueled the revolt that would follow in the 1840s.

Earle was strongly influenced in his training by prominent historians Eric Foner, James McPherson, and his dissertation director, Sean Wilentz. Earle is now an associate professor at the University of Kansas. His study moves from a look at the roots of egalitarian commitment to a description of the Barnburner revolt in New York and an analysis of the key individuals who would be part of the movement outside of New York. They include John P. Hale of New Hampshire, Marcus Morton of Massachusetts, and David Wilmot of Pennsylvania, as

well as the Ohio leaders, Morris, Gamaliel Bailey, and Salmon P. Chase. All had strong Jacksonian Democratic roots leading them to urge their party toward antislavery and, when that failed, toward leadership in the third-party movement. All showed a commitment to equality of opportunity in the struggle against the Slave Power. The author concludes with an account of the third-party campaign of 1848 followed by the Free Soil role in the formation of the Republican party in 1854.

Earle provides a traditional description and analysis of the Barnburner-Hunker schism in New York. He adds the little-known Herkimer County farmer, Abijah Beckwith, who typified the Jacksonian Free Soilers, to his cast of characters of more familiar names. Especially revealing here is Beckwith's "Autobiographical Record" which he penned in 1847 to explain to his grandson his break with the Democratic party. Earle also stresses the importance of poet-journalist Walt Whitman. Rather than seeking revenge, the Van Buren candidacy represented the ideals of Morris and Leggett. John P. Hale was the rallying figure not so much as the Liberty candidate but rather representing the ability of antislavery Democrats to create coalitions to forward their goals. Earle stresses Hale's Jacksonian Democratic background rather than his Liberty party role as he furthered the cause in the Senate following the refusal of the Ohio legislature to re-elect Morris in 1838. In Massachusetts, Marcus Morton struggled against the well-entrenched Whigs weathering charges of abolitionism by stressing the fear of a monied aristocracy allied with the Slave Power. More radical than most, he endorsed the principle of equality, but as an old Jacksonian, could not bring himself to support the election of former Whig Charles Sumner to the Senate in 1851.

Perhaps Earle's most significant chapter is that in which he successfully rehabilitates the reputation of David Wilmot, the much-maligned author of the famous Proviso. Refusing to be drawn into the debate of who actually originated the concept of keeping slavery out of Mexican war territories, Earle instead places Wilmot in the tradition of the Barnburners. His isolated district in northeastern Pennsylvania suffered, even as much of the rest of his state prospered. The small farmers there knew little of blacks, free or slave, but knew they could benefit from free soil. Yet for Wilmot, the containment of slavery would not only halt its spread but would be the first step toward abolition. Wilmot had consistently opposed abolitionists and had little interest in racial equality, but believed that if slavery could not spread it would deplete the soil and eventually fail. While other historians have emphasized his concept of land free for whites only, Earle stresses the eventual demise of slavery should it be contained. We must, he argues convincingly, go beyond Wilmot's racism to see the seeds of the new Republican party based on the principles of his Proviso. While not as advanced on race as Leggett and Morris, he was not as blatant a racist as often depicted. He reveals instead the inner conflicts that Free Soilers represented on the issue of racial equality, leaving them as a group, far more egalitarian than the major parties.

Earle goes on to look at the divisions among three Ohio antislavery factions: antislavery Whigs led by Joshua Giddings, Garrisonian abolitionists, and antislavery Democrats led by Morris, Gamaliel Bailey, and Salmon P. Chase. The latter group is Earle's interest, and it was Bailey and especially Chase who fashioned a Democratic-Free Soil coalition which placed him in the Senate in 1849. This occurred after Chase had helped to create the new Free Soil party and fashioned its platform in a movement dominated by New Yorkers of his own Democratic leanings. While the platform ignored northern racism, it did not pander to racists as the major parties did. Rather it appealed to Liberty and Conscience Whig factions who reluctantly accepted the old Jacksonian, Martin Van Buren, as the party's candidate rather than one of their own. Most free blacks fell in line as well, albeit without enthusiasm, given the lack of a viable alternative.

Earle might be criticized for showing only limited interest in the period between 1848 and 1854, years of Free Soil decline in which most former Barnburners reluctantly returned to their old party. Their inconsistency in their failure to adhere to antislavery principle deserves more attention and explanation than Earle provides. Even David Wilmot quietly supported doughface Franklin Pierce for president in 1852. Yet the remaining Free Soilers, renamed Free Democrats through Chase's on-going efforts, waged a lackluster campaign under Hale in that election, and with their largest element having defected, their vote was only half that of 1848. Their House delegation was reduced to three (not one as Earle suggests), Giddings and Edward Wade of Ohio and Gerrit Smith of New York. More important, as Earle rightly indicates, were the events of 1854 when Free Soilers of all backgrounds rushed to join the new Republican party. Not only was its platform essentially the same as that of the third party in 1848 but old Jacksonian antislavery leaders like Hale, Wilmot, and Chase played leading if not dominant roles.

These minor reservations not withstanding, Jonathan Earle has provided a significant corrective to the long-

prevailing view of the role of the Democratic element in the Free Soil coalition. While some might point out that he gives the Liberty and Conscience Whigs too little attention and women of all persuasions none at all, Earle has effectively shown that there was more to antislavery Democrats than racism and revenge. He has put the issues of party ideology in the perspective of mid-nineteenth-century politics and has judged events and motives by the standards of those times rather than ours. This is the way political history should be written. We might all hope that Earle's next project would be a much-needed biography of David Wilmot.

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