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Frederick J. Blue. *No Taint of Compromise: Crusaders in Antislavery Politics.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. xiv + 301 pp. $54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2976-0; $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8071-3205-0.

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Crusaders, Not Compromisers

Frederick J. Blue's new work on antislavery politics, *No Taint of Compromise: Crusaders in Antislavery Politics*, combines good storytelling with a controversial thesis to achieve a desirable end: a good read with intellectual staying power.

No Taint of Compromise is structured around ten chapter-length biographies of antislavery political activists. Blue is a skilled biographer, having already chronicled the lives of Salmon P. Chase and Charles Sumner, and he knows how to tell a life well and succinctly.[1] He has chosen figures who enjoyed more notoriety in their day than they do today; indeed, one of his selection criteria was that none of them has been the subject of a full-length study in the last fifteen years.[2] As a result, he selects men and women "who undertook the yeoman's work" (p. 3) of American politics rather than the innermost circle of party leaders. The men and women he chooses do the speaking, writing, traveling, and organizing that made antislavery politics viable. It is an interesting "Cast of Characters," as he calls them. He starts with six people who joined up first with the Liberty party: Alvan Stewart, John Greenleaf Whittier, Charles Langston, Owen Lovejoy, Sherman Booth, and Jane Swisshelm. The book closes with five figures from the Free Soil and Republican years: George W. Julian, David Wilmot, Benjamin and Edward Wade considered together, and Jessie Benton Fremont.

As with any such book, much depends on who is chosen. Blue has clearly set out to write an engaging book, and his readers will find characters who more often than not find themselves immersed in riots and chaos in addition to more mundane partisan battles. Scholars may well appreciate his decision to include figures who have not commanded a great deal of recent attention. For example, I have often wondered while reading Liberty party newspapers or Lydia Maria Child's correspondence why John G. Whittier was so revered. I thought he must have known people socially or, perhaps, that there was something in his seemingly obvious antislavery poetry that I was missing. I now know that Whittier was an important Liberty party activist and partisan editor in addition to his poetic efforts. Likewise, *No Taint of Compromise* will clarify for readers the range of David Wilmot's life beyond his proviso and what Owen, not Elijah, Lovejoy did to hasten the end of slavery. In the course of these tales we also get clear, well-told versions of events only briefly mentioned or skipped over entirely in many standard histories. Other accounts of the founding of the Liberty party (Alvan Stewart), the Oberlin-Wellington slave rescue case of 1858 (Charles Langton), and the Glover rescue's constitutional implications (Sherman Booth) have been published, but only rarely with Blue's mix of brevity, detail, and flare. In short, even specialists can pick up details, stories, and better understandings of people who made the news repeatedly in the 1840s and 1850s but who now show up usually as soundbites and supporting players if at all in many histories of the period.

Blue's volume often proves to be an engaging and informative read, but do his eleven subjects provide us with new interpretive frameworks for understanding antislavery politics and its place in the broader movement to end slavery? Blue seeks to evaluate the level of abolitionist commitment of each of his people, and by inference, the radicalism of antislavery politics in general. Often seen as the watered-down, sold-out cousins of the radical, apolitical abolitionists, antislavery politicians have enjoyed only occasional defenders over the past few decades. They have been widely critiqued both by the abolitionists themselves and by recent historians for focusing on halting slavery's westward expansion while failing call for its immediate end where it already existed. Likewise, critics then and now have faulted the Free Soil and Republican parties for deserting the cause of black equality in their quest for votes and majority-party status. My own book finds their gender politics to be far more moderate than

those of radical abolitionists. However, Blue, whose first book focused on the Free Soil party, champions the politicians.[3] As his title indicates, he finds little or no compromise of antislavery principles in the men and women he studies, and as such the book seeks to change the way we remember the different parts of the broad antislavery spectrum.

Blue argues that the people in his study were devoted antislavery activists. Their life histories show, he notes, how much they risked by involving themselves in the war against the status quo. Six of these politicians "knew the fury of angry rioters bent on denying equal rights" (266). The other five people in the study, he adds, "were no less concerned over civil liberties or the plight of escaping slaves" (p. 266). What drew them to politics, Blue writes, was "their acceptance of the political process as the most desirable and effective way to bring change and the eventual abolition of slavery" (p. 269). While Blue does not himself draw conclusions about how his subjects differ from the apolitical abolitionists who have attracted so much recent scholarly attention, his book infers that the differences between the two camps were based more on tactics than on goals or ideology. George Julian became a Free Soiler because he believed in politics as the best way to end slavery, not because he was any less devoted to emancipation than, say, Abby Kelley. Even David Wilmot is remembered here–after many pages of noting his "moderation" and also "conservative" tendencies–as a person whose political work "helped point finally to slavery's destruction" (p. 212). If they sometimes sound less committed than their apolitical abolitionist peers, it was only because their choice of political tactics meant that they had to pursue their abolitionist ends within the often narrow confines of the Constitution and the limits imposed on radicalism by the northern electorate.

Blue develops this controversial thesis in his conclusion, and he gets more radical in his interpretation the farther he goes. Some might wonder if Blue's choice of subjects might be inclined towards the radical wing of the parties he is studying. Indeed, more than half of the politicians studied here embraced the Liberty party, easily the most radical of the antislavery parties. But Blue has an answer to that objection: when a person joined an antislavery party should not, he argues, be used to judge the depths of his or her antislavery commitment. His chapter on Benjamin and Edward Wade makes this point most clearly. Edward enlisted in the Liberty party early in the 1840s, while his brother Benjamin waited until the mid-1850s to desert the Whig party for the Republicans. But we should not, Blue warns, take this as proof that Edward hated slavery more than Benjamin. They were, he says, "equally committed to antislavery goals, [but] they rarely agreed on political tactics" (p. 218). Benjamin was devoted to racial equality before the law, as his record in the Ohio State Senate in the 1830s demonstrates, but learned to moderate his speech when he lost re-election in 1839. From then on, he may seem weak on antislavery for not joining his brother in a third party, but one sees his wisdom in saying that he was an antislavery voice in the U. S. Senate as a Whig after his election there in 1851. In the end, choosing a political path is about tactics, Blue argues, not about depth of commitment.

There are two questions that one could ask about this. One is the old chestnut about the choice of subjects. Blue may well be right about the radical nature of Benjamin Wade or Jessie Benton Fremont, but what about others who came late to the Republican party, such as Gideon Welles or William Fessenden? My second question is broader: if a man or woman's choice of which antislavery tactic to pursue is not determined by their degree of abolitionist fervor, what causes them to choose antislavery politics over radical abolition? Does a person's choice of tactic–their engagement or rejection of partisan politics–tell us something about them as people? Both abolitionists and antislavery politicians needed allies to survive, but did signing up for party politics signal a deeper willingness to see the wisdom in the majority of the people? Thinking about Lawrence Friedman's *Gregarious Saints*, did radical abolitionists' rejection of politics denote a more aloof, even arrogant personality?[4] In other words, while a person's choice of political tactics may not measure the depth of their antislavery commitment, it may tell us things such as their conception of themselves and their place in a democratic society surrounded by their fellow citizens. Perhaps their willingness to see themselves connected to other voters, and even to humbly moderate their speech to the voters' level (at least temporarily) makes them a model for civic engagement with their peers and for egalitarianism in practice.

This book is important because it can serve to introduce readers at many different levels to the interesting personalities, actions, dilemmas, and ideas of antislavery politicians. It would be ideally suited for undergraduate readers if it is issued in paperback. But most importantly, it puts forward a case for the true antislavery credentials of politicians who have been increasingly disparaged by historians who probe their equivocations and find in them only racism and other weaknesses. If Blue is right, and his case is persuasively argued, than we need to re-think a wide range of issues such as the differences between Douglas Democrats and Lincoln Republicans, the

ability of the northern electorate to embrace change and reform when they went to the polls, and whether the South was perhaps right when they thought they had to secede in order to save slavery.

Notes

[1]. Frederick J. Blue, *Salmon P. Chase: A Life in Politics* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1987); and Alan M. Kraut, Frederick J. Blue, and Jon L. Wakeman, eds., *Charles Sumner and the Conscience of the North* (Arlington Heights, Il.: Harlan Davidson, 1994).

[2]. An exception to this criteria is Blue's inclusion of Jane Swisshelm. Sylvia Hoffert's fine biography, *Jane Grey Swisshelm: An Unconventional Life, 1815-1884* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), was published while Blue's work was in press.

[3]. Frederick J. Blue, *The Free Soilers: Third Party Politics, 1848-1854* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973).

[4]. Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

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