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Sandra Harbert Petrulionis. *To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau's Concord.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. xi + 233 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4157-8.

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A Different Face of Concord

Concord, Massachusetts, already enjoys a distinguished historical reputation. It is remembered, for one, as the village where British soldiers, seeking to capture an arms cache of the Massachusetts militia, were repelled by American colonists in early 1775. The Battle of Concord, along with the conflict at nearby Lexington, has long been enshrined by historians and poets as the opening salvo in the American war for independence. In 1837, for example, Concord's own Ralph Waldo Emerson penned a salute to the town's revolutionary role, writing, "Here once the embattled farmers stood / And fired the shot heard round the world."[1]

Emerson, in turn, raises a second reason that Concord looms large in our historical imagination: it nurtured a number of the thinkers, authors, and poets associated with the Transcendentalist movement and the American Renaissance. Indeed, Concord was home not only to Emerson but also to Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, and Nathaniel Hawthorne at various points in the mid-nineteenth century. A town of just several thousand residents in the 1830s, Concord was arguably the most important intellectual community of its size in antebellum America.

Sandra Harbert Petrulionis's fine new book, *To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau's Concord*, seeks to add a third feather to Concord's cap. Her narrative opens on an early December morning in 1859, when Transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau helped smuggle "one of the most wanted men in the country" out of town (p. 1). After borrowing a wagon from his friends Ralph Waldo and Lidian Emerson, Thoreau picked up a pale young man traveling under the name "Lockwood" and carried him a short distance to a local train station, where the fugitive boarded a train bound for Montreal. Implicated in John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry, "Lockwood" was but one of many fugitives from justice that Thoreau and other Concord citizens assisted in the 1850s; he was distinctive only because he was white. For, by the late 1850s, Thoreau's hometown of Concord had become a major site of antislavery agitation and a significant stop on the Underground Railroad. *To Set This World Right* chronicles the origins and evolution of this different face of Concord.

Petrulionis points to a number of explanations for Concord's antislavery sympathies. The town's proximity to Boston–just an eighteen-mile trip, connected by forty stagecoaches a week–certainly had something to do with it. Boston, after all, had been a major center of antislavery activity since the early 1830s, when William Lloyd Garrison began publishing his weekly newspaper, *The Liberator*, in the city. Over the next few decades, many of Boston's leading abolitionists, including Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Maria Weston Chapman, traveled the short distance to Concord. So, too, did well-known national abolitionists, such as Angelina and Sarah Grimké, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown, when they visited the Boston area. But proximity to Boston is just part of the answer. Although several of the town's leading citizens were hostile to abolitionism, Concord also benefited from the fact that both of its ministers were predisposed to the antislavery cause.

More importantly, beginning in 1837, the community had the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society (CFASS). Like many local female abolitionist organizations, the CFASS took the lead in grassroots agitation against slavery in Concord. In the late 1830s, CFASS members helped gather nearly two hundred signatures on antislavery petitions submitted to Congress, calling for the abolition of the domestic slave trade and protesting the potential annexation of Texas, among other issues. More generally, the CFASS steadily nurtured the antislavery conscience of the community, while also serving as a social outlet for its members and a vehicle to earn and raise money. Members of the society, for example, sold a variety of items at both local fairs in Concord and at Boston's annual merchandise fair, which Petrulionis calls, "the most

famous abolitionist fundraiser in the country" after 1834 (p. 20).

Among the leading members of the CFASS were Sophia and Helen Thoreau (Henry's sisters), Lidian Emerson (Ralph Waldo's wife), and Mary Merrick Brooks. These four women did much to convert both Emerson and his protégé Thoreau to the antislavery cause. Although scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to how and why Emerson and Thoreau abandoned their inhibitions about abolitionism and social reform in the 1840s and 1850s, Petrulionis convincingly argues that this story is incomplete without acknowledging the influence of these women.[2] Mary Brooks, she writes, "pursued Waldo Emerson with a vengeance," and along with his wife Lidian, his aunt Mary Moody Emerson, and his friend Elizabeth Hoar, helped to convince the Transcendentalist to take a more active stance on the issue (p. 24). Petrulionis gives Henry Thoreau's sisters similar credit for cultivating his antislavery commitment.

But Petrulionis is not chiefly interested in Thoreau or Emerson, at least not in their ideas. To understand how Concord became an antislavery hub, she insists, one must push beyond the social and political theories of Concord's Transcendentalist residents to recreate "the civic context in which their abolitionism evolved and took place" (p. 3). And viewed from this perspective, Mary Merrick Brooks, wife of Concord politician Nathan Brooks and daughter of a former slaveholder, becomes the central protagonist. If Sophia and Helen Thoreau and Lidian Emerson can be given credit for convincing their more famous family members to take up the cause of the slave, then Brooks likewise should be acknowledged for doing the same for the town of Concord as a whole. "The de facto director of the society's ceaseless endeavors over the next thirty years," Brooks helped transform a Concord that was indifferent towards abolitionism in the early 1830s into a town that sheltered numerous fugitive slaves in the 1850s, raised money for Free Soilers in Kansas, and eventually held a large memorial service for radical abolitionist John Brown (p. 19).

Brooks worked hard to maintain close ties with like-minded immediate abolitionists in Boston, especially Chapman, a leading member of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. Despite strong opposition among the Concord's conservative residents, she was instrumental in arranging for Phillips to address the community on several occasions in the 1840s. Indeed, as Petrulionis puts it, Brooks "fashioned a strategy dependent on presumption and persistence…repeatedly press[ing] Phillips, Garrison, and other prominent figures to speak in Concord" (p. 38). Unlike some radical abolitionists, however, Brooks also reached out to more moderate antislavery voices. She and her fellow Concord abolitionists were quite conscious of the power of celebrity, seeking to convert local luminaries such as Ralph Waldo Emerson for the weight of their reputation. Yet Brooks demonstrated a keen sense of the limits of such celebrity endorsements as well. Just a month before Emerson's first significant antislavery address, she wrote, "I hope Emerson will say a word….But we want some good speakers whose souls are fired with genuine anti Slavery" (p. 42). Brooks knew that Emerson might make a good cameo appearance, but she had reservations about whether he was yet ready to be counted as a full-fledged member of the antislavery cast.

Beyond highlighting the important efforts of Brooks and her fellow Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society members, *To Set This World Right* offers a compelling narrative of the evolution of the antislavery movement from the 1830s through the Civil War. Tracing the rise of abolitionism in Concord chronologically, the book provides local color for a number of well-known national antislavery developments. Petrulionis explains how the 1839-40 schism over the role of women in the movement and the efficacy of political agitation had a ripple effect in Concord. Similarly, her narrative details the local reactions to the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law; several famous fugitive slaves cases; and the capture and execution of John Brown following his raid at Harpers Ferry. Yet, like most microhistories, the book truly shines when it burrows deeply into events with local roots. Petrulionis lends behind-the-scenes drama to familiar incidents, such as Emerson's famous August 1, 1844 address, given in the Concord courthouse on the tenth anniversary of West Indian Emancipation. Similarly, she captures the local import of less publicized events, such as the hostile reception that leading townsman Samuel Hoar received when he traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, to "register an official objection to the southern state's policy of imprisoning free blacks who entered Charleston aboard northern ships" (p. 47). Hoar's humiliation by Southerners sparked an unprecedented wave of outrage among Concord citizens, conservative and radical alike.

Although Petrulionis's meticulous research lends depth and texture to these antislavery developments, it also proves something of a stumbling block for her study as a whole. Having unearthed a rich trove of private letters, journals, pamphlets, and newspaper accounts, Petrulionis admits that she is unwilling to "paraphrase or excerpt from these documents," hoping thereby to im-

merse her readers in the sources (p. 4). This strategy works quite well in certain sections of the book, especially when a particular source speaks directly to the issue at hand. Over the course of the entire narrative, however, the myriad block quotations–there is one every third page by my rough count–can be as distracting as they are illustrative. And a number of the longer examples, some of which approach a page in length, beg further interpretation. One long Thoreau journal passage, for example, brilliantly skewers the cloying presumption of familiarity displayed by three abolitionist visitors, raising intriguing questions about both antebellum social behavior and antislavery tactics. Yet Petrulionis says surprisingly little about the journal entry, quickly concluding that "encounters with abolitionists of this ilk sustained Thoreau's predispositions against organized reform" and then hurrying on to another example (pp. 95-96). Such passages left this reader wishing that Petrulionis had unpacked her sources further rather than leaving them to speak for themselves.

Petrulionis also could have done a better job of sketching the full extent of the political landscape in which her major players operated. Although Concord certainly had "radicalized" to some degree by the end of the 1850s, the book's terminology at times fails to provide the sort of precision one needs to appreciate the degree of this shift. Too often, political labels such as "conservative" and "moderate" appear in the text without further qualifiers, leaving the reader unsure of the exact contours of Concord's political map. Moving from what Petrulionis calls a "conservative" position in the 1830s to the ranks of the town's "abolitionists" by the mid-1850s, Samuel Hoar, for example, seems to exemplify the degree to which Concord had become an antislavery town by the eve of the Civil War (pp. 13, 109). Yet even while, as she puts it, "conservatives and moderates worked alongside former adversaries toward a common goal of immediate emancipation," a portion of the town remained well outside this political spectrum (p. 6). One wonders what label Petrulionis would apply to the town leaders who refused even to allow the bells of Concord's First Church to toll in honor of John Brown after his 1859 execution.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, *To Set This World Right* is an impressive work. Demonstrating mastery of a range of primary materials and secondary literatures, Petrulionis has produced a fascinating study for scholars interested in abolitionism, American literary studies, or antebellum U.S. history. Her book makes a significant contribution to a growing literature on the critical grassroots role that women played in the most important reform effort in nineteenth-century America, while also contextualizing the emerging antislavery commitment of several of the period's most eloquent voices. At the very least, Petrulionis has highlighted yet another reason scholars need to pay careful attention to Concord, Massachusetts.

Notes

[1]. Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 262.

[2]. See Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Richard F. Teichgraeber III, *Sublime Thoughts/Penny Wisdom: Situating Emerson and Thoreau in the American Market* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Albert J. Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); T. Gregory Gilmore, ed., *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); and David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

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