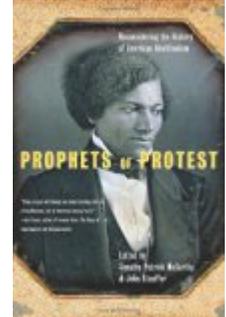


**Timothy Patrick McCarthy, John Stauffer, eds..** *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*. New York: The New Press, 2006. xxxiii + 382 pp. \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-56584-880-1.



**Reviewed by** Ed Rugemer

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Historians have developed a new narrative for radical abolitionism over the past two decades and it is thoroughly explored in the essays of this book. During the years after the American Revolution when a free black community began to grow in the northern United States, a "founding generation" of African Americans came to realize that white society would not apply the liberating rhetoric of the Revolution to Americans with African ancestors. In fact, slavery experienced rapid expansion in the South with the independence of the United States, and northern whites slowly but surely excluded African Americans from the political life of the early republic. The first generation of black abolitionists understood that if African Americans wanted to realize the aspirations of the Revolution, slavery would have to be abolished, white racism would have to be fought, and they would have to lead the effort themselves. The history of American abolitionism grew from this understanding of the political realities of the United States and throughout the antebellum decades black abolitionists were at the forefront of radical abolitionism. They used every tool in the arsenal of modern social movements

for change: newspapers, pamphlets, history, poetry, fiction, scientific argument, the law, the market, violence, photography, and commemoration. The essays in this book open a window into each of these dimensions of radical abolitionism.

Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer's volume explicitly draws from, and is in dialogue with, the rich tradition of historical re-interpretation charted by Martin Duberman's *Antislavery Vanguard* (1965) and *Antislavery Reconsidered* (1979) edited by Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman. Duberman's volume was deeply shaped by the civil rights movement then underway, and the essays announced the demise of the portrayal of the abolitionists as the "meddlesome fanatics" who caused the Civil War. Fourteen years later, Perry and Fellman's volume sought to distance abolitionist historiography from the presentism of the 1960s and treat abolitionism as "an historical subject."<sup>[1]</sup>

Duberman and Fellman have both written short pieces for the volume that situate *Prophets of Protest* in this decades-long conversation about the place of radical abolitionism in U.S. history.

Like the previous volumes, the contributors include both young and established historians at the cutting edge of the scholarship, and as with the previous collections, *Prophets of Protest* chronicles the most innovative shifts in abolitionist studies over the past seventeen years, specifically, the emphasis on the centrality of black protest to American abolitionism, and secondly, a fresh understanding of the violent abolitionism embodied by John Brown. Neither subject was ignored in the past two volumes, but both received slight attention. Brown was only mentioned in passing in the first volume, and in the second only Jim Stewart's essay on Wendell Phillips devoted any sustained attention to Brown. Assessments of black protest actually declined from 1965 to 1979, a shift that was pointed out by reviewers. *Antislavery Vanguard* contained two essays on the black abolitionists, one by Benjamin Quarles on Frederick Douglass and an essay by Leon Litwack that explored the relations between black and white abolitionists, while *Abolitionists Reconsidered* included only one essay on African American churches by Carol George. In stark contrast, an entire section of *Prophets of Protest* is devoted to Brown, and eight of the fifteen essays focus exclusively on African American abolitionists. Neither of the previous volumes had such a strong thematic concentration as the present volume on black abolitionists, suggesting the most significant transformation of abolitionist studies in the past forty years. [2]

As the editors point out in their introduction, acknowledgement of the influence of black abolitionists stimulates a reconsideration of the three debates that have shaped abolitionist historiography, which Stauffer and McCarthy describe as the "origins" debate, the debate over the "character" of the movement, and the "means and ends" debate on abolitionist tactics. The essays are organized into four sections of unequal length that explore the role of black protest in these debates. *Prophets of Protest* begins with a section entitled "Revisions," which includes two essays that ex-

plore abolitionist historiography beginning with the works of movement participants. A section on "Origins" follows, with five essays that explore the origins debate. Two additional sections explore the means and ends debate: "Revolutions," with two essays on Brown, and "Representations," which includes five essays that examine the tools of protest and a retrospective essay that looks at the treatment of abolitionists in movies.

"Revisions" begins with a historiographical essay by Robert Forbes, who traces some of the intellectual shifts in the writings on abolitionism from the eighteenth century through 1916 (although it is unclear to what the endpoint of 1916 refers). Forbes identifies three intellectual stages, which he carefully explains are not to be misconstrued as either linear or self-contained. The first generation of historians of abolitionism were actors in the movement, most were Evangelicals, and all saw the movement as "Providential," the work of God in the world. The providentials were followed by the "racialist progressive" writers who began to appear in the 1840s and 1850s and saw the abolition of slavery as emblematic of the progress of humanity, but more specifically the progress of the "white race." This group included such nineteenth-century writers as Thomas Carlyle, but it would also include such historians as Reginald Coupland, writing in 1933, who saw Britain's abolition of slavery one century earlier as the quintessential example of British moral achievement. The final intellectual transition has been to the "modern revisionists." This group was inaugurated by the West Indian writers Eric Williams and C. L. R. James and the black American W. E. B. Du Bois. These men were all materialist/Marxist historians as well as black activists deeply involved with the racial politics of their day. They distrusted the religious emphasis of the providentials and had nothing but disdain for racist notions of "progress." The modern revisionists put economic factors on the table as an explanation for abolition, and while historians now take religion far more seriously, we still work

from the suppositions of the modern revisionists. While Forbes's intellectual schema is invaluable, one wishes for more examples of writers whose interpretations fit within the phases he so clearly describes.

From this broad intellectual base Manisha Sinha moves to a focused investigation of historiography on African American participation in the abolitionist movement. Like Forbes, Sinha begins with those writers who were actors in the movement: William Cooper Nell, William Wells Brown, Martin Delany, Hosea Easton, James W. C. Pennington, Henry Highland Garnet, and Douglass, among others. This group was followed by such amateur historians as Archibald Grimke and George Washington Williams, who wrote in the late nineteenth century against professional white historians who fashioned the portrait of the abolitionists as unstable fanatics and completely ignored African American contributions to American life. Grimke and Williams were followed by Du Bois, Carter Woodson, Charles Wesley, and Dorothy Porter, professional historians and archivists who further developed a black abolitionist historiography that most white academics continued to ignore. Sinha draws careful attention to the work of Quarles, who spent a long career at Morgan State University in Baltimore. Quarles's dissertation was the first modern biography of Douglass, which he later condensed into an essay that appeared in Duberman's *Antislavery Vanguard*. Quarles's *Black Abolitionists* (1969) was the first comprehensive study of African American involvement in abolitionism, and despite the long tradition in which Quarles worked, most historians of abolitionism at the time still wrote of the movement as predominantly white. Sinha points out that *Black Abolitionists* is more chronicle than an analysis, but in light of the historiographical moment, Quarles's task remained very similar to the black writers who had gone before him. Quarles was thus a modern pioneer for historians still working today, as well as a bridge to past generations of black historians who sought to

remind readers that black abolitionists had always been involved.

With the exception of the first essay by T. K. Hunter, the five articles in "Origins" examine the first two generations of African American abolitionists. Hunter's essay does not really align with the themes of this section, but the essay itself is a fascinating comparison of the Somerset Case of 1772 in Great Britain with the case of the enslaved girl Med in Boston in 1836. Hunter shows that while these cases were separated by wide gulfs of time and space, they were both concerned with the same question: Where did the law enforcing slavery prevail? Hunter shows that while Judge Mansfield's decision freeing James Somerset was extremely narrow, it made "liberty contingent upon geography" (p. 50). Put differently, even though Mansfield had no desire to threaten the legitimacy of slavery in Great Britain or the colonies, he did value Great Britain as *a place* where liberty reigned, a value that could be expanded to limit the power of slaveholders to maintain their property. The case of the slave girl Med was remarkably similar. Brought to Boston from Louisiana by her owner, Med was discovered by members of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, who brought suit in a Massachusetts Court on the grounds that Med's enslavement could not be enforced in Massachusetts, a place that was "singularly conducive to liberty" (p. 50). Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw agreed and the Somerset case served as a precedent for his decision.

Essays by Richard Newman, Julie Winch, Sandra Sandiford Young, and McCarthy make excellent contributions to our understanding of the origins of American abolitionism. Newman explores the role of the "Black founders," a group that includes Phyllis Wheatley, Prince Hall, Paul Cuffee, Lemuel Haynes, Easton, and Thomas Paul of New England; Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and James Forten of Philadelphia; Peter Williams and William Hamilton of New York; Daniel Coker and William Watkins of Maryland; and the slave rebel

Garbriel Prosser of Virginia and the un-named slaves who joined him. The Black founders were free and enslaved, most of them lived through the Revolution and some of them fought in it. But all of them witnessed the simultaneous expansion of the enslaved population in the South and the free black community in the North. Their task was to build the institutions of the northern free black community as a bulwark against slavery, and abolitionism emerged from that community. Newman draws from the recent work of Steven Hahn, who in *Nation Under Our Feet* (2003) emphasizes the political importance of community among slaves and then freed people in the rural South. The Black founders saw community from a similar perspective; community had both a material and ideological role. The material success of the free black community could undermine racist, proslavery arguments that blacks were incapable of achievement. Community also laid the foundation for later generations of black abolitionists to continue the struggle.

The essays by Winch and Young are biographical sketches of a first and second generation black abolitionist, respectively, Forten and John Brown Russwurm. Winch's brief essay concentrates on Forten's "reflections on revolution and liberty" (p. 80). Forten fought in the American Revolution and was in Philadelphia when streams of white and black refugees swarmed the city in the wake of the Haitian Revolution; he is thus the ideal subject to illuminate the founding generations' perspective on the Age of Revolution. Winch shows how Forten used his service to argue that black Americans deserved the "liberty" that should have come to all with the independence of the United States. With respect to Haiti, Forten was uncomfortable with the extreme violence, but he saw it as the result of liberty denied. Forten also admired Haiti's leaders; he saw that nation's success as emblematic of black achievement in the fight against slavery, and on the momentous question of emigration, Forten suggested that if African Americans felt compelled to migrate, they

should go to Haiti where they could continue the struggle against slavery, rather than to Liberia. Russwurm came to a different conclusion and in 1829 at the age of thirty he made the stunning decision to emigrate to Liberia under the auspices of the American Colonization Society (ACS). His decision shocked African Americans, for as co-editor of *Freedom's Journal*, Russwurm had played an important role in the political mobilization of the black community in the North against the ACS. Young roots this decision in Russwurm's relatively privileged childhood in Jamaica, Canada, and Maine. Born of a white father who recognized him and provided for him, Russwurm did not grow up in a black world. When he moved to Boston and then to New York City, Russwurm felt the burden of racism with particular acuity. Young argues that while Russwurm's political development was in sync with his contemporaries, his failure to fulfill his social aspirations through friendships with the black elite made American racism unbearable, leading to his decision to emigrate.

McCarthy takes the title of his essay, "To Plead Our Own Cause," from the opening editorial of *Freedom's Journal*, the first newspaper edited by black abolitionists. With one of the best essays in the volume, McCarthy argues for the centrality of print culture in the making of black abolitionism. Drawing from the work of Benedict Anderson and Michael Warner, McCarthy shows that black abolitionists created an "imagined community" of abolitionism within the early "republic of letters" (p. 117). This community was palpably evident in the list of subscription agents printed every week, which demonstrated to readers both the reach of the paper as well as the breadth of the black community. And African American writers used the pages of *Freedom's Journal* in accordance with the political tradition of such writers as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Jonathan Swift, to advance an unpopular cause for liberation within the broader society. McCarthy delves into the content of *Freedom's Journal*, exploring how authors used history, poetry, and essays to establish a "tex-

tual equality" (p. 130) with whites that undermined racist argument. McCarthy closes his essay with a careful analysis of David Walker, a subscription agent for *Freedom's Journal* who McCarthy describes as a second-generation black abolitionist. Working from the foundation built by the founders, Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829) announced the maturation of black abolitionism.

The third section entitled "Revolutions" is entirely devoted to the career of Brown. Karl Gridley writes about the community of radical abolitionism in the Kansas territory that supported Brown, and Hannah Geffert (with Jean Libby) highlights the participation of the black community of Harper's Ferry in the famous raid of 1859. Both essays are primarily concerned with dispelling the common notion that Brown was a radical loner, admired for his dedication to abolition and racial equality but isolated because of the tactics he chose. For Gridley, this portrayal of Brown stems in part from the emphasis in past historiography on Kansas to downplay the role of abolitionism as motivation for Kansas migrants. But Gridley points out that Eastern Kansas (where Pottawatomie took place in 1856) was a central corridor of the Underground Railroad linking Texas to Nebraska and points north. Moreover, Gridley has investigated the considerable correspondence between Boston abolitionists and Kansas migrants. Gridley describes a highly mobile abolitionist community, rethinking the distinction between "Eastern" and "Western" abolitionists, and shows that Brown was an acknowledged leader in this community. Remarkably, Gridley finds that "Brown's following and magnetic strength increased exponentially after the massacre" (p. 155).

Likewise, Geffert's careful examination of the recent local history of Harper's Ferry in 1859 provides valuable context for Brown's raid. Populated mostly by migrants from Pennsylvania and Virginia, Harper's Ferry was politically diverse and maintained a white to black ration of about two to

one. About half of the African American population was free and the mountains in the area (which you can still walk through on the Appalachian Trail) were an important part of what was known as the "Great Black Way" often traveled by Harriet Tubman. Brown had lived in the region and Geffert plausibly argues that he would have been well connected in the black community. In the months before the raid, Brown used these contacts, particularly the AME minister Thomas W. Henry and the barber Henry Watson, whose shop was a center for the Underground Railroad. And while the sources conflict on how many participated in the raid, Geffert deduces that between seven and seventeen were blacks from the local community. While this was hardly the slave rebellion Brown hoped to ignite, it is very different from stating (as one widely read account does) that the only local blacks to join Brown were some hostages brought in by his men.[3] It is equally significant that a rash of arsons in the aftermath of Brown's trial caused serious damage to the farms of several of the jurors who convicted him.

The final section of the book, "Representations," employs the methodologies of American Studies and Literary Studies to explore the old debate over abolitionist tactics. Essays by Patrick Rael and Dickson Bruce, for example, investigate two different genres of writing that abolitionists employed to counter racism and advance abolitionist beliefs. Rael's essay on the scientific writings of black abolitionists makes an intervention in the interpretive debate that Rael describes as a split between historians, such as Joanne Pope Melish, who argue a "hegemony thesis," (p. 346) which posits that when African American writers sought to write against the new racial science of the antebellum decades, they actually internalized some of racial science's central premises. Other scholars, such as Stephen Howard Browne, argue that African American use of racial ideas should be seen as an "appropriation" (p. 185) rather than an unconscious embrace. Rael ex-

plores five different literary strategies to racial science employed by African American writers, "concession, living proof refutation, arguments from history, the idea of racial genius, and negative environmentalism" (p. 188) and concludes that hegemony and appropriation should not be seen as distinct approaches, but rather as "poles separated by a range of possibilities" (p. 196). Bruce's essay explores the importance of abolitionist poetry. Most abolitionists wrote poetry and such poets as John Greenleaf Whittier and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were quite prominent. Bruce argues that abolitionists believed that poetry enabled both poets and readers to use their powers of imagination in a manner that revealed the barbarity of slavery and racism and actually change the public mind on the question of slavery. Abolitionist poets took their art seriously, occasionally playing with classical and popular poetic forms that opened poetic conversation within the abolitionist community, as well as introducing abolitionism to readers who may have read primarily out of a love of poetry. Poetry thus had a dual role. It strengthened the connection among poet/abolitionists while adding lovers of poetry to the community of abolitionism.

Bruce's attention to the "play" in poetic technique and to the value abolitionists placed on the imagination echoes themes in the essays by Julie Roy Jeffrey and Stauffer. Play can be a serious endeavor, and Jeffrey's exploration of First of August celebrations reveals a festive event that had important ramifications. Beginning in 1834, American abolitionists celebrated 1 August as an annual commemoration of Great Britain's abolition of slavery in the West Indies. Jeffrey draws from the scholarship of historians, including Susan David, Simon Newman, and David Waldstreicher, who have expanded our understanding of national politics to include parades and public celebrations, such as the Fourth of July.[4] Jeffrey argues that First of August celebrations, and especially the newspaper coverage describing them, were one of the most important abolitionist tactics for

spreading the abolitionist message and bringing new people into the movement. Jeffrey finds that black and white abolitionists "created different rituals" (p. 201) to celebrate that day, but also offers evidence of interracial celebrations that reveal the significant impact of the First of August in northern communities. In 1856, for example, one abolitionist described an audience of one thousand people, mostly white and half of them women at the celebration organized by the African American community in New Bedford, Massachusetts. For Jeffrey, such evidence points to the "changing status of abolitionism" (p. 218) in the North, brought about in part by these celebrations. Stauffer's essay explores the attitudes of such black abolitionists as Douglass and Sojourner Truth toward the new technology of photography. Both former slaves paid careful attention to the manner in which their portraits were replicated in their famous narratives. Truth displayed herself as a "respectable, middle-class matron" (in the words of Nell Painter) who would be attractive to potential readers, and Douglass reacted critically when an engraver portrayed a far gentler face than Douglass preferred. Douglass favored photography because of its "truthfulness" (p. 260) to the being represented. He believed that pictures had the power to cultivate the human imagination by portraying what was real, and thus dispelling falsities like racism and defenses of slavery. Like poetry, Douglass hoped that photography would be an art at the service of abolitionism.

The impressive size of the First of August celebration in New Bedford in 1856 suggests the participation of a significant portion of northern society, large enough to create a market that could sustain professional abolitionists. Augusta Rohrbach studies this relationship between abolitionism and the larger society through an analysis of the "market strategies" (p. 235) of Louisa May Alcott and Truth. Both women used their writing, their gender, and their ideas to "sustain the substance" of daily life, as Truth famously put it.

Rohrbach is mostly concerned with how these women were able to use the market to make a living and advance their literary careers without being forced by market forces to compromise their integrity. She explores the strategies of both women in detail, and while the comparison of the two writers is undeveloped, the essay is an intriguing analysis of this understudied component of abolitionist life.

The final essay by Casey King explores how the abolitionists have been portrayed in American cinema. Surprisingly for a group that was long blamed for instigating civil war, American movie makers have devoted very little attention to the abolitionists. King writes with a wry humor on five films that have featured abolitionists: *Birth of a Nation*, *Souls at Sea*, *Santa Fe Trail*, *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*, and *Amistad*. He skillfully combines scene and dialogue analysis of abolitionist portrayal with a rich contextualization of the forces shaping the movie industry over the course of the twentieth century.

*Prophets of Protest* is an impressive volume that should become required reading for graduate students of abolitionism and for scholars who wish to stay on top of the literature. This said, there remain two important historical questions about American abolitionism that are touched upon, but inadequately explored in this volume. What was the relationship between abolitionism and the major political parties of the antebellum decades? What was the relationship between American abolitionism and the transnational struggle between slavery and abolition that began before and lasted longer than the struggle in the United States? Both *Antislavery Vanguard* and *Antislavery Reconsidered* included essays that explored these questions. More recently, such scholars as Jonathan Earle, Frederick Blue, and James Brewer Stewart have dug deeper into the annals of political abolitionism; and the global dimensions of the struggle over slavery has been explored by David Brion Davis, my own work, and

that of Caleb McDaniel.[5] In light of these still burning questions, we can expect in twenty years or so another volume reconsidering antislavery. Surely the editors would have it no other way.

#### Notes

[1]. Martin Duberman, ed., *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), vii; Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman, eds., *Antislavery Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Abolitionists* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), xv.

[2]. Lawrence Friedman wrote a valuable review essay of the two previous volumes in "Abolitionist Historiography 1965-1979: An Assessment," *Reviews in American History* 8 (June 1980): 200-205. Two other reviewers who noticed the decline in essays on black abolitionists include James M. McPherson, review of *Antislavery Reconsidered*, edited by Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman, *Journal of American History* 67 (September 1980): 416; and Tilden G. Edelstein, review of *Antislavery Reconsidered*, edited by Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman, *American Historical Review* 86 (October 1980): 928.

[3]. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 206.

[4]. Susan G. David, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); and David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[5]. On political abolitionism, see Jonathan Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Frederick Blue, *No*

*Taint of Compromise: Crusader Antislavery Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); and James B. Stewart, "Reconsidering the Abolitionists in an Age of Fundamentalist Politics," *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (Spring 2006): 1-24. On the transnational dimensions of abolitionism, see David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Edward B. Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (forthcoming, Louisiana State University Press); and W. Caleb McDaniel, "Our Country is the World: Radical American Abolitionists Abroad" (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 2006).

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