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Julie Roy Jeffrey. *Abolitionists Remember: Antislavery Autobiographies and the Unfinished Work of Emancipation.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. xii + 337 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3208-0; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5885-1.

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Reform through Memory

Julie Roy Jeffrey takes up the study of American abolitionists at the point where many scholars have left off. She focuses on reformers after 1865, examining the ways in which advocates engaged in a renewed debate with a nation inclined to forget, evade, or mythologize the recent past, eager to put sectional quarrels aside, and content to accept a menacing climate of racism in the interests of sectional peace. In the last third of the nineteenth century–as in the second third–abolitionists found themselves deeply embroiled in discussions about the experience of human enslavement, the meanings of freedom, the possibilities of equality, and the responsibilities of the Republic. The memoirs abolitionists wrote to engage in this renewed debate represented a double-edged return to the past. Purposefully, the writers presented historical accounts of the antislavery movement's origins. Tragically, reformers retraced earlier ground as a way to confront resurgent racial fears and resentments in their own time that echoed those of the 1830s.

The context for Jeffrey's exceptionally fine study rests in the scholarship on historical memory in the post-Civil War period. Building on works by David Blight (*Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* [2001]), W. Fitzhugh Brundage (*The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* [2005]), Mitchell A. Kachun (*Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* [2003]), Nina Silber (*The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* [1993]), and others, Jeffrey explores how the abolitionists' reading of history contrasted with a "reconciliation" version of the past, one that located the roots of war in abstract and idealistic political ideals rather than the grim calculus of slavery, celebrated the sacrifices of both Union and Confederate armies, romanticized the paternal care masters extended over presumably childlike slaves, and chastised "divisive" advocates of social reform who had brought America to such a bloody impasse. Jeffrey acknowledges that chronicles of bravery, honor, and racial hierarchy eventually prevailed in popular historical consciousness. But she reminds readers that efforts to shape the collective memory of the Civil War began as highly contested debates. Individual reformers and abolition organizations offered a range of autobiographies, institutional histories, short stories, images, and collective rituals that formed a "counternarrative" focused on the horrors of the chattel system, the calculating motivations of secessionists, the oppression of African Americans, the justification of reform, and the powerful forces arrayed against advocates of freedom (p. 21).

Jeffrey examines some twenty-five memoirs by reformers, arranging the works in chronological order and exploring how late nineteenth-century struggles over the meaning and purpose of the Civil War shaped the shifting recollections that advocates held of early nineteenth-century events. The study opens within the institutional base of abolition, examining debates between reformers who believed that Civil War amendments had fulfilled the campaign's goals and those who feared that racial prejudice would leave African Americans at risk of further degradation and dispossession. As antislavery societies ceased operations, reformers were left with little organizational support and turned to ruggedly individual means of continuing moral agitation. Samuel J. May's 1869 autobiography was one of the first efforts,

setting the tone for many subsequent works by focusing on the national problem of race prejudice, Southern resistance to constitutional reform, and calls for expanded and strenuous federal intervention on behalf of freed people. Three years later, William Still's book, *The Underground Rail Road*, offered a potent antidote to racial stereotypes by foregrounding the work of black men and women in their own struggle for self-liberation. Early memoirs such as these commonly stressed the harmony of antislavery efforts and the varied but complementary paths taken on the road to liberation. Reformers' writings took a different direction in the 1880s as abolitionists tended to become more quarrelsome, reviving older debates about the relative merits of politically and morally based approaches to social reform. By the end of the century, however, as the nation witnessed systematic restrictions on black rights and escalating racial violence, the divisive tone of memoirs eased and surviving abolitionists addressed one another on more conciliatory and respectful terms.

Such a sweeping summary fails to do justice to Jeffrey's nuanced and thoughtful reading of antislavery reformers in the late nineteenth century. Her analysis of their memoirs touches on a wide variety of themes, exploring the different roles authors fashioned for themselves in reform activity, their thoughts on the possibility of moral progress in a modern age, and their responses to the historical amnesia they detected in American society. Jeffrey examines abolitionists who reevaluated the role of Abraham Lincoln in the work of emancipation, placed the work of antislavery in a gendered frame of reference, commented on the role of churches in the struggle for emancipation, and debated among themselves over the capacities of the people they had worked to free. In the case of reformers who provided multiple accounts of their abolition experience, Jeffrey explores revisions made in memoirs (as in her discussion of Mary Grew) and the comments advocates made on the historical reflections of their colleagues (in a section on Frederick Douglass).

The richest quality of Jeffrey's work rests in the multiple contexts through which she views her subject. The study deftly examines reformers' memoirs in terms of the personal experiences of advocates who had to deal with their own affairs, their livelihoods, their health, and, in several cases, their own financial sacrifice in order to publish works that would set the record straight on the work of abolition. Jeffrey also examines the writings from a literary perspective, focusing on memoirs as a distinct genre set apart by both critical norms and by popular expectations. In addition, the author examines the business of publication in the late nineteenth century, calling attention to influential periodicals and presses, the contractual arrangements made with authors, and sales figures for the volumes that reformers produced.

Throughout the study, Jeffrey takes a frank and critical view of her subjects. While acknowledging both the abolitionists' bravery (in the face of broader cultural resistance) and their energy (in terms of the endurance of their reform commitments), she recognizes that the memoirs under review seldom displayed literary flair, often revealed self-serving motives, and rarely reached wide audiences. The absence of vigorous abolition organizations after the 1860s weakened even further the reformers' ability to sustain interest and support in their campaigns.

Abolitionists Remember is an engaging and resonant work that suggests how reform communities have often focused their attention on the illumination of the past as a means of guiding the alteration of the future, recognizing recollection as a powerful form of agitation. The memory invoked in the arguments of advocates can commonly clarify, affirm–and in the abolitionists' case–compel the altered direction society should take. In this way, reform projects may be viewed as simultaneously retrospective and prospective, grounding the possibility of what might be on a careful recovery of what had been. As they revisited the origins of their reform effort, the subjects of Jeffrey's study stand not only as purposeful chroniclers of the past but also, in a sense, as some of the first "reenactors" of the period, returning to the ground of their social commitments, retracing the route of their reform engagement, and reaffirming the necessity of their program for social change.

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