

# H-Net Reviews

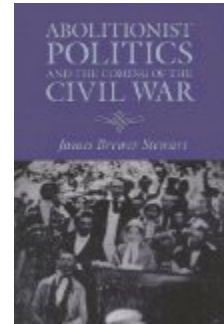
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Brewer Stewart. *Abolitionist Politics and the Coming of the Civil War*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008. xiii + 236 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-634-7; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-635-4.

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Published on H-CivWar (October, 2010)

Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason



## Locating Abolitionism's Meaning

In this volume, James Brewer Stewart, dean of abolition historians, assesses the antislavery movement's impact on the political crises that led to the American Civil War. Along the way, he poses several questions that he acknowledges as "historical perennials." What were the abolitionists up against? What motivated and sustained them? What larger contexts influenced their choices and behavior? What roles did leaders play in shaping the movement? What were the contributions of the movement's "foot-soldiers"? What political agency did abolitionists exercise? What factors determined their impact and the realization of their goals (p. x)? In answer, he offers eight previously published essays, arranged under four major headings: "Narratives," "Contexts," "Commitments," and "Consequences." The result, reminiscent of Russian nesting dolls, is a series of reflections on abolitionism's multiple meanings.

The first essay (under "Narratives") provides an overview of abolitionism in the North from 1831 to 1861. Specifically, it considers how the immediatist movement responded to a hardening of racial boundaries after 1830, the process of which is also the subject of the chapter in the next section, "Contexts." This second chapter, "Modernizing Difference," would work well in both college and graduate courses, because of its clear and accessible way of showing how racist ideologies change over time. The "Commitments" section pairs a study of a multigenerational family of mixed-race activists in Massachusetts with an essay comparing the efforts of

William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips to unite their "private worlds" with their "public missions" (p. 94). Both pieces focus on what motivated individual activists, and the meaning that their activism held for them on a personal level. The first, on the Roberts case and the Easton family (coauthored with George R. Price), further highlights the influence of an understudied mixed African American and Native community on the course of equal rights activism in New England over several generations. The study of Garrison and Phillips offers imaginative insights about the influence of gender and domesticity on their leadership styles.

In the final section, "Consequences," Stewart returns to the question of abolitionists' impact on the politics of the sectional conflict. The portrait of Ohio antislavery Whig Joshua Reed Giddings, drawn from Stewart's 1970 biography (*Joshua R. Giddings and the Tactics of Radical Politics*), highlights the tension between the congressman's "wholehearted abolitionist conscience" and loyalty to his party, which demanded that he support slaveholding candidates for president (p. 122). Until he retired in 1858, Giddings continually pushed against those constraints, going so far as to proclaim, from the House floor, the right of the enslaved to violent resistance. Similarly, "The Orator and the Insurrectionist" is a chapter from Stewart's 1986 study of Wendell Phillips (*Wendell Phillips: Liberty's Hero*), about links between the Garrisonian leader's oratory and John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. It reiterates some of the points made in the ear-

lier chapter on Garrison and Phillips. The penultimate essay tells the story of the New Haven Negro College, an interracial venture to establish a manual labor school for young men of color in 1831. The project collapsed almost immediately due to white opposition. This essay also reprises some material from chapter 3 on the Roberts and Easton families. One strength of this seventh chapter is its contrasting portraits of some of the people involved in the New Haven Negro College: “White Moderate” Leonard Bacon, “White Radical” Garrison, and “White Benefactor” Lewis Tappan. In particular, Stewart asserts that lessons Tappan learned from the failed New Haven experiment enabled him to succeed in subsequent attempts to establish integrated schools—briefly with his Oneida Institute and more permanently with Oberlin College.

In the concluding essay, “Reconsidering the Abolitionists in an Age of Fundamentalist Politics,” Stewart compares today’s evangelically oriented activists with the abolitionists as a way to assess the latter’s “political leverage” in the years before the Civil War (p. 205). He finds the two groups to be polar opposites. As for the

abolitionists’ influence on politics, in another insightful metaphor, Stewart observes that they and the Northern Whigs treated one another as “co-dependents ... that is, with a volatile mixture of enablement and abuse” (p. 215). He concludes that “abolitionists’ activism led [Northern] evangelicals to confirm that opposing slavery was a prime responsibility of Christian citizenship” and that this had important consequences for the trajectory of sectional politics (p. 224).

Readers just discovering Stewart’s work through this volume may want more sustained analysis of some issues; they might wonder, for instance, why the author here renders the phrase “‘immediate’ emancipation” with quotation marks around only the first word. Fans of long standing might wish for more on the movement during the war and the Reconstruction years—about which Stewart has written perceptively elsewhere (in *Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison and the Challenge of Emancipation* [1991]). Thus this volume will doubtless increase interest in his larger body of work overall, among both familiar and new audiences.

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**Citation:** A J Aiseirithe. Review of Stewart, James Brewer, *Abolitionist Politics and the Coming of the Civil War*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. October, 2010.

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