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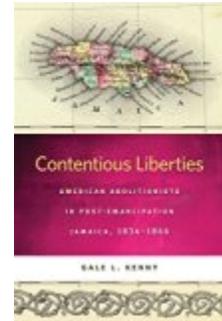
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gale L. Kenny. *Contentious Liberties: American Abolitionists in Post-Emancipation Jamaica, 1834-1866*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010. xi + 257 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3399-1.

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American Abolitionist Missionaries in Jamaica

In 1834, Britain ended slavery in Jamaica but created an apprenticeship system that seemed little better to most observers and participants. On August 1, 1838, the end of the apprenticeship system began the great experiment in liberty. Would former slaves work for wages? Would they adopt English civilization and Christianity? For decades thereafter and particularly after the American Civil War broke out, American missionaries in Jamaica drew on their experiences there to articulate a model of what Americans could expect from freed slaves. Their experience shaped the American Missionary Association's work with freed slave communities during Reconstruction. Gale L. Kenny's book traces the complex relationships among white American abolitionist missionaries and black Jamaican Christians in a transnational context linking U.S., Jamaican, and British politics from 1834 to 1866. While sensitive to the Jamaican and British context, the book is primarily framed by discussions of the role of Jamaica as an example to the United States.

The book is divided into three parts. It opens with a discussion of the central role of Oberlin College in forming and then exporting missionaries trained in Christian purity, manual labor, manly independence, and female domesticity (or propriety). The second chapter contrasts the Oberlin experience with black Jamaicans' visions of independence, land ownership, and family practices, and their pluralist, Afro-Jamaican, "Myal" Christianity. Kenny clearly wants to move the discussion beyond whether missionaries were "good" or "bad" to a

more complex reality of how black and white people in Jamaica engaged with one another and defined freedom. These early chapters examine the costs and benefits for Jamaicans of adopting the missionaries' vision of strict Christian purity and patriarchal family arrangements. However, in later chapters, Jamaicans appear primarily when they enter the households of white abolitionists and become the subjects of child-raising experiments and missionary debate over proper interracial interactions. While black Jamaicans are clearly actors, the focus of the book is the white missionary community.

The book's best parts sensitively explore the disagreements among missionaries. The second and third sections focus on how the cultural development of missionaries in the United States changed from the 1830s to the 1850s and varied dramatically by gender and marital status. Early missionaries focused on male independence and manly labor, stressing strong patriarchal families. While deeply concerned with sexual license among black Jamaicans, the early missionaries found their work most challenged by a sexual scandal among their own. That experience only strengthened their ultimate support for strict, pure Christianity and regular policing of the gender and racial boundaries. Later missionaries brought with them a new understanding of female domesticity that gave women in the United States strong justification for work in reform movements and churches. These later arrivals also supported a more egalitarian relationship within the family and between missionaries and black Ja-

maicans. Kenny makes rich use of sources on her limited pool of actors to suggest how single and married white men and women adapted across a generation in complex interactions. It would be interesting to see a comparison of these Oberlin missionaries to missionaries from Oberlin in other locations or to other American abolitionist missionaries. Some of Kenny's data is based on letters from only one or two individuals, making it hard to draw larger conclusions.

Kenny's work adeptly addresses a hole in the literature made manifest by the 1994 publication of Amy Swerdlow's 1976 Berkshire conference paper, "Abolition's Conservative Sisters."^[1] Historians of American antislavery have been prone to focus more attention on those women and men who, when the antislavery movement began to shatter over questions of religion, politics, and women's appropriate role, sided with William Lloyd Garrison and women's equality. This focus has left the evangelicals or conservatives somewhat in the shadows. The American Missionary Association, while founded as an antislavery organization, has usually fallen between the disparate fields of antislavery and missionary studies. Kenny's work is a welcome bridge across that gap and helps to reconnect the "radicals" at Oberlin (who actually held quite conservative views on gender) with the "conservative" Tappanites who funded their abolitionist missionary work.

This book also contributes to the building of a second, transnational bridge connecting the American Missionary Association's efforts abroad to British history in Jamaica and then back to its own domestic efforts in Reconstruction schools at the end of the Civil War. This

second bridge still wobbles a bit underfoot as Kenny tries to make the reader familiar with the political culture of three nations over four decades. Any reader coming from the literature on the American antislavery movement may find the references to British politics, Crown colonies, and regular Jamaican rebellions insufficiently clear. Those coming from missionary studies may find the brief discussions of antislavery politics and ideology too limited to understand the complicated divisions.

Overall, this book raises fascinating questions about how radical abolitionists focused on black independence had to adapt their mission given black Jamaicans' own ideas and the economic realities of white land ownership. Missionaries' increasing conservatism led them to stress the limits of race and gender far more than black freedom and shows how missionary commitments to domesticity and patriarchy undermined their antislavery work. This is not a radical conclusion, but Kenny's careful, detailed analysis of the process is worth duplication elsewhere. She also makes clear the role these missionaries played in shaping some activists' attitudes toward the possibilities and problems of black freedom. This finding continues a trend of providing an international context for the American Civil War.

Note

[1]. Amy Swerdlow, "Abolition's Conservative Sisters: The Ladies' New York City Anti-Slavery Societies, 1834-1840," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994): 31-44.

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