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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard S. Newman, James Mueller, eds. *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011. 264 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3991-2; ISBN 978-0-8071-3992-9; ISBN 978-0-8071-3993-6; ISBN 978-0-8071-3994-3.

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Published on H-Law (January, 2013)
Commissioned by Ethan Zadoff

The Legacy of Abolition in Philadelphia

In the United States' current post-civil rights era, the term "integration" is typically used in public discourse in unspecific ways. A picture of what genuine integration might look like is, for most of today's Americans, fuzzy and shallow, lacking any substantive details that might make tangible differences in people's day-to-day lives. In *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia*, Richard Newman and James Mueller have assembled a collection of original essays from leading scholars that delivers a series of sharp images of what integration actually did look like when black and white Philadelphians engaged one another in action and discourse over more than a century. This kind of integration was no rainbow dream; it was complex, onerous, sometimes ugly and discordant yet oftentimes a noble and synchronous struggle to make the promise of racial justice and equality a reality.

It would be mistake to think that this is a book of urban history. Philadelphia serves as the tie binding together an impressive breadth and depth of inquiry into how and why antislavery and abolition developed in Philadelphia and became such a powerful national and international movement. Newman and Mueller state in the introduction that "in the current scholarly moment" the study of slavery, emancipation, and black life in urban areas has reached a new prominence (p. 5). Their sources, however, belie that assertion, or at least stretch the "moment" considerably by demonstrating that urban areas have received significant attention from historians of African American communities for at least the past twenty years. The only other critique of the volume is that there is little attention to the thinking of ordinary African Americans. They are for the most part in the background; a varied cohort of black leaders represents the wider context of African American thought analyzed here. While it is certainly legitimate for urban histories to focus primarily on more prominent urbanites, much of urban history over the past few decades has become more inclusive.

But ultimately this volume is not a study in which the primary lens of analysis is the particular demography, spatial configurations, or developing economics of labor in urban areas. It is a creative anthology that makes a strong and convincing case that the discourse and actions of diverse black and white Philadelphians–free black activists, white abolitionists, Ben Franklin, religious reformers, playwrights, and even a Jeffersonian apologist, made Philadelphia an important player in regional, national, and international emancipation movements. Urban areas were pivotal centers of the transatlantic emancipation movement. Because of its own history with slavery, and its proximity to the largest slave population in the world, Philadelphia was perhaps at the forefront of key transformative urban moments in antislavery and abolitionism. Virtually every aspect of the evolution of abolition and antislavery was shaped by or mirrored in Philadelphia. The collective argument of the essays makes clear that a student of abolition and antislavery can understand the national and international movement by understanding Philadelphia, and that in turn, one cannot analyze the national and international movements in their totality without grasping what transpired in Philadelphia from the mid-eighteenth century to the eve of the American Civil War. Philadelphia led the colonies of the Atlantic world not only in producing the first radical antislavery leaders (though one could debate with the authors what constitutes "radical") but also in being the first polity on mainland North America to wrestle with how black people, once freed through a statewide abolition act, would be integrated into the polity.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 is a single essay by Ira Berlin. Part 2 deals with abolitionism's internal debates and tactical shifts from the late eighteenth

century into the antebellum era. The essays of the final section are less obviously organized under a single rubric, but work well to explicitly connect Philadelphia to national and international social, cultural, and intellectual trends. Berlin's useful overview sets up the volume's key themes via a quick and comprehensive walk through the city's diverse antislavery and abolitionist history, with particular attention given to the experience and impact of black Philadelphians. The changing composition and growth of the black population produced a range of opinions on what strategies would be most effective for achieving black freedom and equality.

David Waldstreicher, whose essay opens part 2, provides a nuanced reconstruction of who and what influenced Benjamin Franklin's slow pragmatic march through the intellectual trails of abolitionism and antislavery. Franklin's master, Thomas Tryon, had a profound impact on Quaker abolitionism and on Franklin. Waldstreicher's conclusion implies that abolitionism and antislavery might have been a more significant social and political force in the Revolutionary era, at least in Pennsylvania, were it not for Franklin's rejection and taming of the earlier, more potent forms articulated by Tryon and some other Quakers. If Franklin is a type, he is a fitting one. If the nation, during the early republic era, can be envisioned as a body, Franklin's struggle between abolitionism's radicals and antislavery's moderates pushed hard from within against the skin at multiple points, nearly always on the verge causing life-threatening ruptures. The essays masterfully capture this tension. Abolitionism and antislavery were internally complex social, political, and intellectual movements. Understanding their complexities renders a much clearer picture of the external effects of abolitionism on the nation.

Newman and Mueller provide a concise synopsis of each essay in the introduction. Rather than repeat that here, suffice to say that the manner in which Berlin and Waldstreicher seamlessly connect their essays both to the overall argument and to the other essays epitomizes what each historian does in the book. The smooth sophistication with which all of the essays interlock is a model of how such anthologies should be constructed and makes this one intellectually stimulating as well as a pleasure to read. For instance, Heather Nathans's brilliant cultural analysis of theatre productions such as *Othello* and race riots reveals how Philadelphia's nineteenth-century public performances both fed and mirrored white northerners' shifting sentiments toward abolition, antislavery, and postwar race relations. Her essay connects smoothly with Caleb McDaniel's mapping of antislavery cosmopolitanism that situates Philadelphia intellectualism within a transatlantic context, as Philadelphia's public performances were influenced by performances across the Atlantic in London and shaped by events in the West Indies and Haiti. McDaniel's essay, which includes analysis of cosmopolitan thinking about obligations of national citizenship within a larger context of global responsibility, in turn meshes easily with Gary Nash's examination of the evolution–though for some it was a devolution–of black and white Philadelphians' conceptions of how or if race should affect citizenship in the United States.

The interlocking essays and the clear explication of the complexities of black and white thinking regarding abolition, antislavery, and the constructing of a post-emancipation, multiracial society make this book valuable for upper-level undergraduate courses. One need not be well versed in historiographic discussions about the intellectual, political, or social developments of nineteenth-century America to grasp the thrust of the essays. As a whole the volume provides a solid grounding in the basic terms of abolitionist debates by dealing with issues ranging from black self-help ideologies to colonization. At the same time, Newman and Mueller have assembled a collection entirely suitable for graduate level courses. The volume is not simply the next stage of argument about abolitionism, but also represents a transformation of the argument. For example, Richard Newman, Julie Winch, and Dee Andrews all show unflinchingly the ways in which the tensions within organizations and leadership pulled leaders apart–both intraracial and interracial divergence occurred. Though the authors do this with greater conciseness and sophistication than many others, this is not entirely new ground for historians of abolitionism and antislavery. But the authors also make clear how the tensions and splits operated as a kind of endogenous process that ultimately produced a more radicalized movement, typically with African Americans as key instigators. The heightened radicalization made Philadelphia's movements a far more potent force on the national scene. Elizabeth Varon perhaps sums the thrust of the book best. Her final essay, which transforms William Still's tactical decision to publicize Underground Railroad activism at a critical time into a vital mobilizing and inspiring force for the abolitionist vanguard, mentions an 1873 petition drafted by black Philadelphians for emancipation in Cuba. Varon captures the entire volume well by noting that the petitioners "linked the global struggle against slavery to Philadelphia's own distinct status as a beacon of freedom.... [T]his for them was the legacy of Philadelphia's long antislavery history: that 'the instinctive love of liberty' knew no geographical boundaries" (p. 243).

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Citation: Scott Hancock. Review of Newman, Richard S.; Mueller, James, eds., *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love.* H-Law, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34934

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