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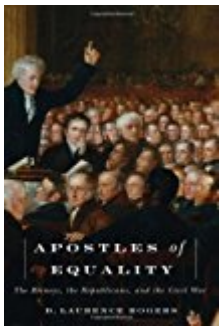

D. Laurence Rogers. *Apostles of Equality: The Birneys, the Republicans, and the Civil War.* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011. 250 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61186-015-3.

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Any reference to emancipation elicits thoughts of Abraham Lincoln. Yet, this president did not act alone in destroying American slavery. Although he was responsible for the Emancipation Proclamation as well as the Thirteenth Amendment, Lincoln's accomplishments were the culmination of a battle waged for decades by a group known as the Apostles of Equality. As D. Laurence Rogers details in his latest work, ***Apostles of Equality: The Birneys, the Republicans, and the Civil War***, many people labored to bring freedom and equality to African Americans before 1860. According to Rogers, no other family dedicated more to that cause than the Birneys.

James Gillespie Birney's own story accounts for two-thirds of the three-part *Apostles of Equality*. Rife with irony, Birney's story is captivating since it reveals a complete transformation of character and lifestyle. Born in 1792 on a successful Kentucky hemp plantation, Birney gradually converted from slaveholder to supporter of African colonization and eventually became a staunch abolitionist. As Rogers points out in his preface and introduction, Birney remains a forgotten and underappreciated figure in American history. Condemned by President Theodore Roosevelt, Birney has frequently and inexplicably been neglected in histories of abolitionism and the Republican Party.

Only two works have hitherto recognized Birney's sacrifices and accomplishments. In 1890, his son, William Birney, published a biography of his father, and, in 1955, Elizabeth Fladeland expanded her dissertation into ***James Gillespie Birney: Slaveholder to Abolitionist***. Until the publication of Rogers' book, over five decades had passed without a fresh reinterpretation of Birney's significance, which the author notes as having helped lay "the political groundwork for the most massive shift in public opinion in the nation's history, from a pro-slavery to an antislavery consensus" (p. 29).

To tell Birney's story, Rogers uses both of these works while marshalling a collection of primary sources, the most important of which is the

Letters of James Gillespie Birney. Rogers begins by discussing Birney's early relationship with slavery in Kentucky during the turn of the nineteenth century. Rev. David Rice, known as the "Apostle of Kentucky," became one of Birney's earliest influences. Rice, a Presbyterian minister, gained support from Birney's father and grandfather at the 1792 Kentucky constitutional convention to prevent the territory from joining the Union as a slave state; however, both of Birney's kin and Rev. Rice owned slaves. Birney's early perceptions of slavery, then, were rooted in contradictions and inconsistencies.

Wealth garnered from slavery gave Birney the opportunity to study at Transylvania University, Princeton University, and in Philadelphia. Ironically, however, those educational experiences convinced Birney to turn his back on the institution and initiated his quest to eradicate it. Interestingly, Birney's experience in the North served as a stark contrast to the experiences of other Southern men. As highlighted in Lorri Glover's article "'Let Us Manufacture Men': Educating Elite Boys in the Early National South," many young Southerners returned home from Northern universities with hardened attitudes towards abolitionists and Yankees--a development that contributed to the hostility that climaxed in the Civil War. [1] Unlike these men, however, Birney chose to surrender a future of wealth and family tradition for the prospect of social equality.

Apostles of Equality boldly portrays Birney as much more than an antislavery advocate; rather, Rogers casts Birney as a humanitarian. In chapter 5, "Defending the Cherokee, Launching Abolition," Rogers describes Birney's time in Alabama during the 1820s and 1830s. Birney despised President Andrew Jackson and his agenda for Indian removal. Enraged by what he perceived as great injustice, Birney carried his anti-Jackson platform into the Alabama state legislature and attempted to overturn the president's design to relieve the Cherokee of their rights to Alabama soil. Although "Old Hickory" stood by his decision, Rogers claims that *Worcester v. Georgia* proved significant in the abolitionist movement. As the author notes, historians have recently "identified the defense of Native American Indians as the beginning of the abolitionist movement that led to the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution" (p. 72).

According to Rogers, "Birney was an idealist in the land of realists, a dreamer who took refuge in the words of the Declaration of Independence 'all men are created equal' to underpin his opposition to injustice against both white and black citizens" (p. xii). Essentially, the foundation of Birney's opposition to slavery rested on his belief that the practice was immoral. Birney had witnessed Rev. Rice declare that slavery was a sin against God's natural law of human freedom. Furthermore, Rogers gives credit to Birney for coining one of the original "higher law" speeches, which he made to the New York legislature in 1840. The same theory was made famous by William H. Seward and Abraham Lincoln, while both men campaigned for the 1860 Republican nomination.

Although Birney made his name as an abolitionist, he also supported the colonization of American slaves to Africa. In chapter 6, "The Colonization Debacle," Rogers describes the difference between Birney's motives and those of his colleagues in the colonization movement. Henry Clay, Kentucky statesman and Whig presidential candidate, and the majority of pro-colonizers sought to eliminate the problem of slavery from American politics. Birney, however, viewed colonization as a first step that would eventually lead to emancipation. Nonetheless, Birney's support for colonization was short-lived, as he quickly realized that the endeavor was flawed.

By June 1834, Birney finally became an all-out abolitionist. During that year, Birney returned to Kentucky and freed the remainder of his slaves. Remaining in Kentucky, Birney chose to fight slavery as part of a grassroots movement that incor-

porated churches and other ministries. He rose to the vice presidency of the Kentucky Anti-Slavery Society in 1835; however, both he and his family began to receive threats. From Kentucky, he moved north to Cincinnati the following year to begin his abolitionist periodical, ***The Philanthropist.***

One of ***Apostles of Equality***'s strengths is the emphasis on Birney's heroism and courage. Birney's was one of very few white Southern, abolitionist voices. Not only was Birney hated in the South, but, as Rogers clearly points out, most Northerners also detested Birney's agenda. Rogers reminds readers of the racism that was prevalent in the North; whites in both the North and South saw complete equality for African Americans--Birney's ultimate goal--as a serious threat. Throughout his adult life, Birney relocated repeatedly to avoid violence and keep his movement alive.

Birney could easily be considered a political failure. As America's first third-party candidate in the 1840 and 1844 presidential elections, Birney received only a miniscule .03 percent and 2.3 percent of the popular votes for the Liberty Party. Nonetheless, Rogers refers to Birney as "'Lincoln's Prophet'--his candidacy in 1840 [and 1844] forecasting the antislavery position the nation would take by electing Lincoln in 1860" (p. 121). In addition, Rogers blames Horace Greeley and other leading Whigs for besmirching Birney's reputation: "the fierce approbation of Whigs like Horace Greeley and others against Birney--which persisted into the Republican era and buried him in historical irrelevance--appears to have been misplaced as well as patently unfair" (p. 143).

Sadly enough, in August 1845, Birney suffered an injury while horseback riding; partial paralysis removed him from the political scene. Despite his condition, Birney had made his impact on the American antislavery vote. In less than two decades, Birney's 7,453 popular votes in the 1840 election had risen to 1,391,555 for John Fremont in the 1856 contest. Ultimately, the American abolitionist movement had made incredible gains, and the stage had been set for Lincoln to claim the prize in 1860.

Part 3 of ***Apostles of Equality*** focuses on the service of Birney's four sons and one grandson in the Union Army during the Civil War. Although their father died in 1857, the Birneys continued their patriarch's quest by joining the Union Army. What stands out most about the Birneys' service is that they joined the military to end slavery. Reuniting the Union did not serve as their primary motivation; rather they chose to risk their lives to bring an end to the practice that their father and grandfather detested most. Rogers reminds readers that approximately four-fifths of the Union generals at the start of the war were proslavery Democrats. Therefore, the Birneys, who fought to end slavery from the onset, were actually very unusual.

The greatest strength of ***Apostles of Equality*** involves Rogers's ability to weave the Birney story into the larger history of the American abolitionist movement. All the while, Rogers gives due credit to Birney's fellow Apostles of Equality, such as William Lloyd Garrison, the Grimke sisters, and Harriet Beecher Stowe,dedicating a whole chapter to the impact of ***Uncle Tom's Cabin*** (1852).

In addition, the first two sections of the work serve as a mini-book on the coming of the Civil War, as Rogers places Birney's story within the context of the politically and regionally heated nineteenth century. High school history teachers and college professors who instruct classes on American history (to 1877), Southern history, Jacksonian America, or the Civil War could make great use of Rogers's contribution. Rogers covers the legal and constitutional discrepancies of slavery, the Texas issue, the Compromise of 1850, and the ***Dred Scott*** decision. Other topics include emphasis on Southern culture and society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, Rogers claims that "Birney's opposition to dueling may have come from the realization that the

violent culture of dueling, systemized by the Code Duello ... was at the root of the brutality of slavery and was causing Southerners to adopt a dangerous and overconfident strain of aggression" (p. 34).

Only one problem should be noted of Rogers's research. In his chapter on the impact of African American troops in the Union Army, "The U.S. Colored Troops Tip the Balance," the author states: "An almost totally ignored factor of the Civil War is that the Confederate Army was the first to enlist Negroes. Two weeks after Fort Sumter a Negro unit was reported marching through Atlanta on the way to Virginia. In June 1861 the legislature of Tennessee had authorized enlistment of Negroes, and seventy free Negroes joined the Confederate Army in Lynchburg, Virginia" (p. 213). Rogers's assertion has long been a controversial issue, in which primarily only neo-Confederates have attempted to defend the claim. Rogers's footnote that accompanies the claim cites a reputable source--Robert F. Durden's ***The Gray and Black: The Confederate Debate on Emancipation*** (1972). Although reputable, Durden's work is well outdated in comparison to Bruce C. Levine's ***Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War*** (2006). In November 2010, Levine gave a presentation at Norfolk State University titled "The Myth of Black Confederates," in which he clearly proved that the Confederacy did not authorize the enlistment of African Americans until the spring of 1865. Levine does note that some slaves joined home guards or militia units in the South; however, they did not serve as true soldiers in the Confederate Army.[2]

Although not a primary focus of Rogers's work, the author's epilogue clearly views Reconstruction in a negative light. Rogers maintains that although the Civil War amendments (Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth) were passed during Reconstruction, they proved worthless for another century. He refers to the Freedmen's Bureau as a "flawed agency" that accomplished little (p. 237). Rogers's disapproval continues in his reference to the Fifteenth Amendment, "which supposedly guaranteed suffrage of black Americans" (p. 241). Rogers concludes that the era ended disgracefully with "the corrupt deal in 1876 that put Hayes in the White House in exchange for the withdrawal of federal troops from the South," which ceased "federal efforts to protect civil rights of Negroes" (p. 248). Although Rogers's viewpoint is understandable, revisionist historians of the last decades have cast Reconstruction as less of a failure and more of a success. Beginning with famed Southern historian Francis Butler Simkins in the mid-twentieth century, many Southern and Civil War historians have highlighted various accomplishments of the era, particularly their role in laying the political groundwork for the civil rights era of the 1960s.[3]

Overall, Rogers should be applauded for his efforts in authoring ***Apostles of Equality***. His contribution has brought to the forefront a largely neglected, yet important figure in American history, while simultaneously providing readers with insight into the travails of the nation's abolitionist movement. Rogers combines thorough research, creativity, and thoughtful organization to offer a valuable as well as fascinating piece of scholarship. Ultimately, the story of James Gillespie Birney should encourage those who feel passionately about an issue. At one stage in the book, Rogers refers to Birney as a "teetotaler ... 'once converted to a principle himself, he became impatient with others who could not or would not admit its truth'" (p. 60). All readers can gain inspiration from Birney's resilience--a resilience responsible for generating human equality in our nation.

Notes

[1]. Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover, eds., ***Southern Manhood: Perspectives of Masculinity in the Old South*** (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

[2]. See Levine's presentation at Norfolk State University using the following URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZEbhnOKRas.

[3]. For discussion of Simkins and the accomplishments of Reconstruction see James S. Humphreys, ***Francis Butler Simkins: A Life*** (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008).

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