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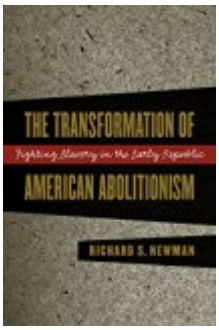

Richard S. Newman. *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xii + 256 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2671-3.

Richard S. Newman. *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xii + 256 pp , , .

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The Times, They *Were* a Changing

Richard S. Newman's *The Transformation of American Abolitionism* is an important new book that will help students and historians more fully understand the crucial early years of the antislavery movement. Focusing on the period between the Revolution's conclusion and 1840, he argues that abolitionism changed considerably in its aims, ideology, and organization. Although scholars will not be surprised by the story's general outline, Newman makes an enormous contribution to our understanding by so thoroughly and precisely revealing exactly how abolitionist tactics evolved over the decades. Historians have long grasped that the antislavery movement changed from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. But, like fog lifting from a field, we can now see the details of the landscape much more clearly.

The book is essentially the story of several antislavery organizations, including the elitist Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) and the more democratic Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (MASS). These organizations "dominated the first fifty years of organized abolitionism" (p. 4) with their different approaches reflecting the larger social and political changes that occurred within both the nation and the abolition movement itself. The PAS represented the "first wave" of post-Revolutionary antislavery activity. Composed of political and social elites, it fully embodied the values and principles of the late eighteenth century. Its leaders sought to end bondage gradually and in a reasonable fashion, always mindful of the need to preserve national unity and respectful of the property rights of slave owners. On the other hand, the MASS, founded in 1832, represented the "second wave" of abolitionism. More diverse, democratic, and radical in its approach, it called

for slavery's immediate end with absolutely no compensation given to owners.

The book's first three chapters focus in meticulous detail on the activities of the PAS. Although Newman repeatedly labels the organization "conservative" (pp. 32, 39, 58) because of its focus on high-ranking politicians, gradualism, and property rights, he clearly respects the tireless efforts of its members. For more than a generation after the Revolution, the PAS focused its labors on moderate strategies that would end slavery over time. Confident that the institution would eventually be done away with, the PAS petitioned state legislatures as well as Congress in Washington, D.C., calling upon representatives to enact legislation that would gradually eliminate bondage. Members also labored hard to protect those limited gains that had already been made. For instance, the PAS worked to ensure that Pennsylvania's 1780 abolition law was fully implemented without any backsliding. They toiled, moreover, inside Pennsylvania's courts to protect escaped slaves and to aid other African Americans with freedom suits against masters. Although the PAS never allowed black members into its ranks, African Americans always respected and counted on the organization's legal aid system. Most readers will find these to be valuable chapters. I was surprised not by the organization's conservative tactics and reliance on well-known politicians, but by its persistent energy and dedication. For example, the PAS's legal work was much more extensive and successful than I had previously realized. Despite these accomplishments, however, PAS leaders never moved beyond their original strategy of embracing modest goals and deferring to elite public figures.

The book's middle chapters (4 and 5) shift the focus away from the PAS to the rising voice of free black activists. Out of their writings and activities came the shift in abolitionism in terms of goals, aims, and tactics. Newman does a superb job here exploring the free African American protest tradition, which began decades before David Walker's famous tract *Appeal ... to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829). Black activists realized early on that the PAS's moderate strategy would only nip at slavery's heels and never truly end the institution. African Americans demanded a different approach. They believed that "everyday Americans needed to see bondage's horror" in order to be moved to end it once and for all. Thus "blacks sought to stir the 'feelings' of the public" rather than use "learned arguments to 'persuade the liberal mind'" (p. 87). Advancing these more radical tactics via the tools of mass democracy--newspapers, pamphlets, and public lectures--blacks played "a crucial role" (p. 104) in abolitionism's transformation.

African Americans especially employed these strategies to counter the grand scheme of early-nineteenth-century gradualists--colonization. Immediately recognizing that colonization was largely a racist proposal aimed at removing free blacks from the nation, they struck back with emotional pleas for white Americans to end the miseries of bondage and for the nation to live up to its founding ideals. Another result of African-American activism was to pull many whites into abolitionism's radical wing, including William Lloyd Garrison. The result of such activities was an antislavery movement that was diverse in both race and sex (as blacks and whites as well as men and women joined the fray) and possessing a very different end goal: the ***immediate*** eradication of slavery.

As with the earlier chapters on the PAS, I learned a great deal here, especially concerning black agency. Hardly passive observers, free black communities quickly realized that they needed to enter the public debate in order to advance their causes, which included not simply freedom, but also full equality within the American mainstream. Although I believe Newman overemphasizes African-American unity on the issue of colo-

nization, this is valuable material and scholars of the early republic should be aware of it.

The two final chapters (6 and 7) explore the course of radical abolitionism during its first decade or so of existence. Just as the PAS reflected the times in which it was born, so too did radical abolitionism mirror the more open and participatory Jacksonian period. Large and broadly based in their membership, organizations such as the Massachusetts Antislavery Society (initially called the New England Antislavery Society), repeatedly employed "mass action strategies" (p. 131) designed to generate grassroots pressure from below rather than appealing to the great men at the top of the political hierarchy. Utilizing widespread support from the citizenry, abolition leaders hoped to end the internal slave trade, outlaw bondage in the territories, and ultimately eradicate the institution altogether. While William Lloyd Garrison receives due credit for his deeds, Newman wisely broadens the cast of characters who made critical contributions to the cause at this juncture.

The last chapter, "A Whole Lot of Shoe Leather," is a fascinating examination of "the agency system" in Massachusetts which "helped spawn an abolitionist revival throughout the North." In the 1830s, the MASS hired "a host of lecturers" (p. 152) who traveled to all corners of the Bay State and spoke in numerous towns, villages, and hamlets. In the process, these individuals exposed the larger population to the many awful realities of slavery. Although Newman admits that these itinerants often met with hostility, they also energized and mobilized thousands of citizens for the cause, some of whom were prominent figures. Thus, by the decade's end, abolitionism was democratic, radicalized, and spreading rapidly.

The Transformation of American Abolitionism is an important addition to antebellum scholarship. It is succinctly argued and expands our general understanding of the nature of change in the early republic. The book should also open up new avenues of research, as some scholars may wish to explore antislavery patterns in other northern states and regions. Indeed, Newman's study leaves open the question of how and why abolitionism spread beyond Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.

As an historian of the South (like most members of this list), I found *Transformation* to be particularly valuable in providing context for the growing conservatism of antebellum southern leaders. Newman's story will help scholars of the South more fully grasp what the region's great planters and elite politicians were up against. Not only were abolition groups of the 1830s larger, better organized, and more sweeping in their demands, but they were also integrated in terms of race and gender. Thus members of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and other such organizations were not only challenging the central labor institution of the South, but they were also flouting long-established racial hierarchies and gender conventions. Conservative southerners must have been profoundly frightened: should these "second wave" abolitionists one day gain control of the federal government, southerners probably believed that they would overturn the institutions, compromises, and values that had sustained the Union since 1776. Indeed, to preserve their plantation culture and traditional republicanism, secession likely seemed a reasonable alternative.

In short, with this book in hand, historians of the South can more fully comprehend the reactionism that ultimately swept the planter class. *Transformation* could be read in conjunction with Larry Tise's *Proslavery* in order to understand more completely how and why these two regions pulled apart socially and ideologically.[1]

Despite its strengths, the book does have several weaknesses. First, although Newman properly places African Americans in the front and center of "second wave" abolitionism, he treats the free black community as monolithic, especially on

the issue of colonization. In actuality, antebellum African Americans were divided on the idea. Most did oppose the scheme and judged it in its proper light. Still, a significant minority supported the idea and many African Americans did emigrate in the early nineteenth century, especially to Haiti. Acknowledging this diversity of opinion and action would more accurately portray the complexities of the free black population.

I also question elements of Newman's analysis concerning the PAS. For instance, he repeatedly refers to the organization as "conservative." However, such labels are moving targets. In the late eighteenth century, the PAS was hardly conservative in its approach. Indeed, he explains that the PAS's calls for emancipation "often provoked intense opposition during the early republic" (p. 32). Although it eventually *became* conservative (largely by standing still in terms of tactics and ideology), I question whether the PAS was as anachronistic by 1840 as Newman implies. As he himself points out, the more radical MASS converted only a tiny portion of the Massachusetts population to its cause by the end of the 1830s, and its agents frequently met hostility at meetings and lectures. Antiabolitionism obviously remained a potent force. In fact, most northerners at that point may well have still agreed with the PAS's calls for "moderation" and its warnings about the dangers of disunion if abolitionism was pushed too far, too fast. Newman has marvelously caught the shift that took place in abolitionist tactics and attitudes, but I wonder if he overplays his hand a bit here.

Finally, Newman gives only a passing nod to the influence of the Second Great Awakening on radical abolitionism. He clearly understands the importance of Protestant revivalism, but contends that the link between evangelicalism and abolitionism has already been thoroughly explored in other scholarly monographs. True. But without a more complete and explicit review of the religious motives that infused many of the abolitionists he examines, I think we lose a key component in this volume to understanding *why* (and not simply how) ideologies and goals changed.

These points are really only minor criticisms and, when weighed against the accomplishments of Newman's book, they pale in comparison. This is a work that should be read not simply by historians of abolitionism and the early republic, but by scholars of the South as well.

Note

[1]. Larry Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

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