

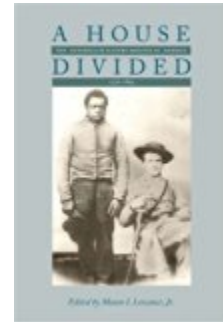
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mason I. Jr., Lowance, ed. *A House Divided: The Antebellum Slavery Debates in America, 1776-1865*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. lxxi + 492 pp. \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-00228-6; \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-00227-9.

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## Teachers be Wary, Scholars be Curious

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The first thing to be said about *A House Divided* is that two elements on the title page—the dates in the subtitle and the fact that Lowance is listed as sole editor—are misleading. These points relate to larger problems with the book.

This volume collects a large body of material from both sides in the debates over slavery leading up to the Civil War. But the “antebellum” part of the subtitle is more descriptive than the dates “1776-1865”; “1831-1865” would be more apt. For the period before 1831, the year William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator* introduced a new phase in the debates over slavery in the United States, the material in *A House Divided* is random and perfunctory. Chapter 1 and parts of chapter 2 claim to provide the “historical background” for the antebellum debates, but it is unclear how they do so. For instance, the editors include three documents from eighteenth-century New England (well before 1776, enough in itself to question the subtitle’s dates) in chapter 1, but how they connect with what follows is murky. Laws which predate 1831 appear in chapter 2; and an antislavery speech from 1820 (pp. 43-50), an antislavery sermon from 1802 (pp. 104-12), and the writings of Phyllis Wheatley (pp. 162-64) enter the scene later. But they do so seemingly at random, and without a sense of how they influenced the later debates. In short, the historical picture presented by *A House Divided* is of the antebellum era as the one

unchanging era in which slavery received sustained attention in the United States. This is not only dubious in itself, but it also belies the dates claimed for this book.

This may seem like a quibble, but it is symptomatic of some larger problems with history in this publication. There are historical errors, such as placing the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision “at the time of the Compromise of 1850” (p. xl), and stating that the Missouri Compromise outlawed slavery in the “territories west of the Mississippi” (p. 43). There is some historical confusion, such as over the date New York state abolished slavery (p. 423). There are doubtful, unsubstantiated historical claims, such as that “the Missouri Compromise of 1820 [was] at the time regarded to be a liberal, if not antislavery” measure (p. 159), and that after reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the 1850s “a nation rose up to embrace abolition” (p. 238). Furthermore, the editor occasionally fails to place key items in time, to give the direct context of certain documents, and/or to explain obscure terms and people (e.g. pp. 175-176, 193, 235). But there are plenty of other places in which appropriate context is given and valuable explanatory notes provided—these historical lapses do not form a consistent pattern.

Indeed, uniformity and consistency are not the hallmarks of *A House Divided*. While Lowance is listed as the editor, he is in fact but one of nine different contributors of sources and essays to this volume. This form of contribution by committee lends the book an uneven or, at

times, confused quality. It is a curious mix of primary sources with introductions of varying length and quality along with introductory and even stand-alone scholarly essays (most of which seem to have emanated from Lowance's graduate seminars in English at the University of Massachusetts) of varying length and quality. (For just one specimen of the variety of material, in terms of both type and value, see pp. 195-248.)

The number of contributors may be one explanation for one of the book's more serious problems—the repetitive nature of much of the introductory material. Much of what appears in the general introduction also appears in the material introducing various articles, and this repetition is startling. At times the contributors take a very good point and then repeat it incessantly, as with their argument that the defenders of slavery tended to use the Bible more directly and confidently than abolitionists (pp. 55, 56, 61, 88). At other times they repeat biographical details of their sources within just a few pages (pp. 327-337, 420-430). The essays introducing the sources sometimes needlessly quote those sources at great length (pp. 239-240, 355, 362-363).

The material in this work is also sometimes disconcertingly random. While some documents are over-introduced, others enter un-introduced (e.g. pp. 152, 420). Sometimes the points made by the contributors simply do not fit, as if cut and pasted from somewhere else (pp. 90, 126). A few of the documents, and even the pictures, appear with no sense that they relate to anything surrounding them (pp. 5-7, 78, 353, 450). At times it seems that the contributors have material they like but do not know quite where to place. Why, for instance, do a biography and speech of Frederick Douglass, and a speech by Joseph Story, belong in a chapter on "Acts of Congress Relating to Slavery" (pp. 33-50)? Chapter 8, "The Abolitionist Crusade," particularly seems like a catch-all chapter. It features writings of doubtful relevance to that title, most notably Roger B. Taney's opinion in the *Dred Scott* case (pp. 458-62). With this opinion, as with so much else in this volume, the material is valuable but the editorial method, the rule of selection, and the placement are mysterious.

The problem of quality material introduced to uncertain effect continues elsewhere. For instance, chapter 6 ("Writers in Conflict") features excellent sources. It is evident, however, that in this chapter the editors' eyes are more on what canonical literary figures (Dickinson, Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau) had to say about slavery than on whether or how they influenced the debates

treated elsewhere. On the other hand, they introduce the writings of James Russell Lowell, not because he is canonical, but rather because he was influential at the time (p. 188). This again raises the question of whether one overarching vision or principle guides this book.

All this said, however, *A House Divided* deserves attention because of its contributions as a source book. Its contributors cast a wide net, bringing in not only both antislavery and proslavery voices but also voices from a broad spectrum of disciplines—politicians, economists, preachers, scientists, and literary figures as well as abolitionists and the standard advocates of slavery. The breadth of their coverage conveys a sense of how broad-ranging the antebellum debates over slavery were and how they engaged every form of inquiry.

Another significant contribution lies in the chapter on science and the debates over slavery. In the most valuable part of this chapter, we get an excellent and insightful essay by Christopher Hanlon on the power and prestige of phrenology in antebellum America, as well as a series of rich documents which provide examples of the variety of uses to which the science of the day was put (pp. 284-326). For our own age, in which science's prestige is enormous, this extended passage has much to offer that is both interesting and instructive.

Some of the editorial decisions make for good groupings, in good order. For instance, the choice to place Biblical proslavery arguments (chapter 3) before Biblical antislavery arguments (chapter 4) was a good one. After reading the arguments for slavery in chapter 3, the reader is left wondering how abolitionists could contest such arguments in a society in which the Bible was the central text. Later, the reader is treated to a trio of selections demonstrating the abolitionists' internal debates over whether the Constitution was antislavery or proslavery; although they are separated from William Lloyd Garrison's thoughts on the subject, they form a valuable series of points and counterpoints (pp. 437-449, 345-346). Finally, by presenting the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 alongside preceding acts of Congress relative to slavery, the editors make it clear that this notorious law was different in degree but not in kind from the many other federal enactments which had consistently protected Southern masters from the loss of fugitive slaves (pp. 20-30).

In the end the strength of this book lies in its documents. The editors bring together in one volume many sources that should be of great value to scholars. The Acts of Congress gathered in chapter 2, from the North-

west Ordinance to the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850, are useful for scholars who wish to consult their exact wording (if deathly boring reading for students). The collection of “essential Biblical texts used by proslavery [and antislavery] advocates” is also a useful reference (pp. 56-59). Most, if not all, of the standard proslavery and antislavery texts are here.

Many of these individual documents would also be valuable if assigned to students. So many of them are powerful, emotionally and in what they accomplish by way of encapsulating huge, ongoing arguments. Just a few examples should suffice. Thornton Stringfellow’s “Slavery, Its Origin, Nature, and History...” features a wide range of quintessential proslavery arguments. It also is as clear a statement of white supremacy and how it supports slavery as one could ask for (pp. 67-81, esp. 72). Similarly, Frederick Douglass’s “The Claims of the

Negro Ethnologically Considered” is a cogent, straightforward, and powerful exploration of how the humanity of “the Negro” bore on the debates over slavery (pp. 279-282). Another gem is William Lloyd Garrison’s sardonic “Truisms” concerning American slavery, a concise, hard-hitting mockery of the claims of slaveholders and their allies (pp. 343-344). And on it goes, scattered throughout this lengthy tome.

In short, *A House Divided* has much of value to offer if adapted to the needs of scholars and teachers. It could be used as a reference work to good effect by scholars. It is too long and repetitive for classroom use as a straight text, but if the teacher is willing to go to the effort of judiciously selecting documents from it, she or he will be rewarded with some excellent texts. Reading it cover to cover can be an exasperating experience, but it will remain on the reader’s shelf for future use.

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