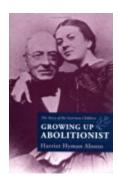
H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Harriet Hyman Alonso. *Growing up Abolitionist: The Story of the Garrison Children.* Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002. viii + 409 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-233-2; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-381-0.

Reviewed by Valarie H. Ziegler (Department of Religious Studies, DePauw University) Published on H-Peace (April, 2004)



Bringing Up Baby Abolitionists

Reeling from the reams of prose he had digested when he reviewed volume 3 of William Lloyd Garrison's collected letters in 1976, James Brewer Stewart titled his essay "Garrison Again, and Again, and Again, and Again." The character Stewart discovered in Garrison's 1841-1849 correspondence was not so much a fiery young zealot as a father figure who had created a religious community among immediatist abolitionists and who, in his role as chief arbiter, managed to preserve the traditions of abolitionism at the same time that he sustained spiritual consensus in the immediatist ranks.[1] The question that Harriet Hyman Alonso poses in her study of the Garrison children is whether "Father Garrison" was as successful in maintaining unity of political thought and group loyalty in the five children that he and his wife Helen raised to adulthood. On the whole, she finds that while filial devotion and an appreciation of their father's legacy were critical to their own identities, the next generation of Garrisons also inherited his outspokenness and occasionally clashed with him on political issues.

As Alonso describes life in the Garrison household, she stresses the joy that Lloyd and Helen Garrison found in their children as well as the efforts they made to educate them broadly. The family was never affluent, and Helen frequently was burdened not only with house-keeping and the care of seven children (two of whom died before maturity) but also with feeding and entertaining the many guests that her husband invited to their home. Lloyd was outspoken in his defense of women's rights, but as Alonso notes, his wife Helen settled into a tradi-

tional gender role, leaving political organizing and public speaking to Lloyd. Alonso also points out that neither parent expected their one surviving daughter to pursue a career; that was a path they expected of their four boys. Nevertheless, Alonso argues that for the most part the young Garrisons enjoyed considerable freedom and permissiveness as children and that they learned early on to treasure their father's legacy as a fearless crusader for human rights.

Reconstructing the domestic life of a nineteenthcentury family is not easy, and at times Alonso is reduced to speculation. To cite but a few instances, in discussing George Garrison, the oldest child, Alonso reckons that the fugitive slave case that "might" have made the biggest impact on George was that of Anthony Burns in 1854 (p. 140); that "if" any member of the vigilance committee who attempted to free Burns served as a role model for George, it was "probably" Thomas Wentworth Higginson (p. 141); that the Dred Scott decision in 1857 "must" have interested George considerably and "may have arisen" as a topic of discussion at the Nininger Lyceum that George frequented (p. 148); and that although George did not describe how he spent his Sundays in this period, "it is likely that he sometimes joined friends at church and often for dinner" (p. 149).

The reader cannot help but wish for less speculation on such matters and more attention to family dynamics. There is, for example, a well-known event in Garrison family history that Alonso chooses to underplay. Those who have read Garrison's letters will remember that Garrison wrote of inadvertently scalding one of his children to death. Always a fan of alternative medical treatments, Lloyd had arranged for his six-year-old son Charley to sit on a steam chair when Charley suffered from a fever. Before the treatment ended, Charley cried out that the steam was too hot. Lloyd explained later that in answer he had "appealed to his little manhood" and persuaded Charley to remain on the chair.[2] That decision proved fatal, as Lloyd discovered when he helped Charley off the chair at the conclusion of the session. The skin on poor Charley's backside was seared. Infection set in, and Charley died four days later.

These are the kinds of scenes that send biographers racing to their word processors, as it is hard to imagine an episode more stunning or more potentially revealing of family dynamics and the practical application of gender roles. Alonso recounts this story in an early chapter, noting that Helen fell into a deep depression after Charlie's death and that she was furious with Lloyd. Surprisingly, Alonso then drops the subject, declining to use this startling tale as a window into Garrison family relationships. What effect did this event have on the children's understanding of their father? Or on Lloyd's relationship to Helen? What does it tell us about the dynamics of power in the Garrison home? What can we learn about how the Garrison family dealt with anger? In what ways did this trauma influence the children later in life when they became parents? Alonso does not say. Since she is willing to speculate on other issues, such as how George Garrison spent his Sundays in the 1850s, it is odd that Alonso pulls back from a closer examination of family dynamics. Particularly since Wendell and Frank Garrison wrote a biography of their father, Alonso had opportunities to see not only how Lloyd's sons sought to tweak his public image but also how their published descriptions of their father matched up with their private experiences with him.

Throughout her study, Alonso avoids psychologizing the Garrisons. The result is a rather flat narrative, given that her goal is to explicate how "growing up abolitionist" shaped the children's sense of self. Alonso's basic premise is that Lloyd's high ideals gave his children a sense of calling as well as providing them with a family identity. The challenge the children faced as adults was to combine filial piety with the trademark Garrisonian determination never to waver in one's opinions, no

matter what others (even Lloyd) thought.

In Alonso's telling, the eldest son, George, struggled most with the family legacy. He was often dependent on his younger siblings for financial support and, alone among the Garrisons, he renounced pacifism and enlisted in the Union army in the Civil War. His brother Wendell wrote for the Nation, taking political stands that Lloyd often found too conservative. Brother Frank worked at the Houghton Mifflin publishing company, and brother William, who made a name for himself in the wool business, found in Henry George's single-tax movement a cause just as compelling as abolitionism had been for Lloyd. Sister Fanny married a German immigrant named Henry Villard, who in time earned enough money to lift Fanny out of Garrisonian poverty into fabulous wealth. After her children were raised and her husband had died, Fanny became a patron of a number of political reforms, most famously in her work against militarism during World War I.

William Lloyd Garrison is one of the most fascinating figures of American history, and generations of scholars have tried to penetrate his psyche to explain the incredible energy and dogged determination that Garrison brought to the antislavery and peace movements of the nineteenth century. Alonso has chosen to examine Garrison family life in an effort to show readers how Lloyd's children carried on his legacy. Readers will wish that she had told us more about the dynamics between the children and their parents as well as about the ways in which the children negotiated, individually and collectively, the burden of living up to a father who was a famous political radical. Any light that Alonso can shed on this question is valuable, and historians are indebted to her for this study. Readers will come away from this book glad to have become better acquainted with the inner workings of this singular American family, but also aching to know more.

Notes

- [1]. James Brewer Stewart, "Garrison Again, and Again, and Again," *Reviews in American History* 4 (December 1976): pp. 542-543.
- [2]. William Lloyd Garrison in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 3., ed. Walter M. Merrill and Louis Ruchames (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 269.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-peace

Citation: Valarie H. Ziegler. Review of Alonso, Harriet Hyman, *Growing up Abolitionist: The Story of the Garrison Children.* H-Peace, H-Net Reviews. April, 2004.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9229

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.