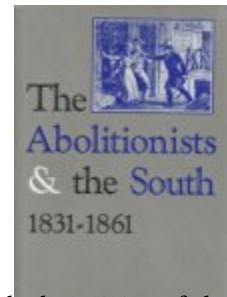


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stanley Harrold. *The Abolitionists and the South, 1831-1861*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995. x + 245 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-1906-9.

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Stanley Harrold's impressive and thought-provoking study of the relationship between abolitionists and the South in the late antebellum period challenges head-on reigning interpretations of that movement. Critical of historians who treat abolitionism more as a symptom of social change in the urban North's middle class than as a significant challenge to slavery, Harrold seeks to return the proponents of immediate emancipation to the center of discussion of sectional conflict and the Civil War. By bringing to light abolitionist activities in the upper South, Harrold convincingly demonstrates that northern antislavery societies took their cause into the slave states and through these efforts shaped the debate over slavery in both sections. This book's incisive critique of current scholarship and its stimulating analysis of individuals who risked all under dangerous circumstances to free slaves make valuable reading for students of the Civil War.

Although sometimes skeptical of historians' categorizations of the varieties of antislavery sentiment, Harrold accepts the definition of abolitionists as a small minority of antislavery Americans "who advocated – on the basis of moral principle – the immediate emancipation of the slaves and equal rights for blacks in the United States" (p. 2). Harrold's focus on the "scope of northern abolitionism" (p. 44) confines his study to the efforts of northern immediatists and like-minded southerners. These self-imposed restrictions enable detailed exploration of the extent to which immediatists put their principles to the ultimate test by attacking slavery on its home ground.

Contemporary critics disparaged abolitionists for their apparent unwillingness to back up their inflammatory rhetoric with direct action in the slave states. Lending credence to this impression, by the 1980s most his-

torians argued that coterminous with the origins of the immediate emancipation movement, associated with the publication of William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* in 1831 and the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society two years later, growing proslavery sentiment in the South made abolition efforts in that region suicidal. The absence of northern immediatist activity in the slave states constitutes an important proof for what Harrold terms "a pervasive view of abolitionism as a movement more concerned with the North than with the South, a movement in which slavery had acquired largely symbolic meaning in the context of northern psychological, social, and political development" (p. 11). Showing extensive abolitionist activity in the slave states, and thereby amending this impression, comprises the main task of this study.

Two chapters on the image northern abolitionists constructed of southern white and black emancipators show that immediatists were absorbed with the career of their cause in the South and used southern abolitionists as evidence that their efforts could triumph. In the 1830s and 40s, abolitionists regarded the South's few outspoken white supporters of immediate emancipation, such as Liberty party presidential candidate James Birney and Kentucky missionary John Fee, as proof that peaceful moral persuasion had gained a foothold in the upper South and would eventually reform the whole region. In regard to African Americans, Harrold contends that long-standing abolitionist interest in slave revolts was tempered by the influence of antebellum racial assumptions about slaves' submissiveness. He argues that abolitionist focus on the South generated these images in the 1830s and led to their reversal in the 1840s and 50s. Kentucky's defeat of a gradual emancipation amendment to its constitution in 1849 and the resurgence of

the slave economy in the 1850s diminished abolitionist hopes that whites like Kentucky Whig Cassius Clay could convert the upper South. Harrold shows how maritime slave uprisings aboard the *Amistad* in 1839 and the *Creole* in 1841 increased discussions of the capacity of slaves to win their own freedom. Critics might give more emphasis to the role of northern cultural conventions about race and southern inferiority in shaping these images, but Harrold, at the minimum, shows that antislavery activity in the South attracted the sustained attention of northern abolitionists.

Surprising and intriguing analyses of abolitionist efforts in the upper South to help slaves escape, preach an antislavery gospel, and establish free labor colonies provide perhaps the most compelling evidence for Harrold's thesis that abolitionism "was not a movement turned inward or on the periphery of the sectional conflict but one with a tradition of forcing the issue upon the South and the nation" (p. 83). In a discussion of white abolitionists who helped slaves to escape in the 1840s, Harrold convincingly shows that men like Charles Torrey, a New York Liberty party activist who died in a Maryland jail in 1846 after his arrest for assisting runaway slaves, had close ties to abolitionism's radical political wing and received support from most abolitionist factions. Similarly, northern abolitionist leaders like New York's Lewis Tappan, the head of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, organized the American Missionary Association to support Fee and other Kentucky antislavery evangelicals in their endeavors to give slaves Bibles, establish integrated churches, and preach against the sin of slavery. Historians such as Eric Foner treat the American Emigrant Aid and Homestead Company, organized to establish free labor colonies in the upper South in 1857, as a Republican-led promotion of northern economic interests unconcerned with the abolitionist goals of immediate emancipation and improving African-American living conditions. Harrold challenges this view by demonstrating that colonizers in Virginia and Kentucky had long-standing ties with abolitionist groups and, along with most abolitionists, viewed economic success as compatible with the ethical project of emancipation. An image of abolitionists as pragmatic and daring strategists who experimented with every possible means of undermining slavery where it existed emerges from these three chapters on immediatist activities in the South.

The argument that the abolition and proslavery extremes in the sectional controversy used southern abolitionists for partisan advantage runs throughout this work

and is best illustrated in Harrold's chapter on political antislavery in the late antebellum South. Political abolitionist Gerrit Smith recruited Kentuckians Fee and William S. Bailey, the editor of the antislavery *Kentucky News*, to the small Radical Abolitionist party in 1856. Smith used southern criticism of the Republican party's nonextensionist policy to push northern Republicans toward a more direct opposition to slavery. Proslavery politicians pointed to the *Kentucky News* and Washington's antislavery *National Era* as abolitionist propaganda organs operating within their section and gained support for the creation of proslavery journals to combat them. In his conclusion, Harrold argues that the actions of abolitionists in the upper South, the region where slavery's economic vitality most appeared to be waning, gave a rational basis to proslavery fears that the border states would slip away from the plantation South's political and economic orbit. Southern white paranoia about abolitionist-assisted slave insurrection, best manifested in the South's reaction to John Brown's raid, had a foundation in reality stretching back to the 1840s.

Critics of *The Abolitionists and the South* may question the extent of abolitionist activity in the border states. Although Harrold disclaims any effort at an exhaustive examination of the topic, his use of a limited number of southern abolitionists, some of whom, like Fee, serve as exemplars of more than one brand of immediatist action, raises questions about the impact these reformers had on their region. Part of this problem of numbers lies in Harrold's self-imposed restriction to "individuals and groups who, while acting in the South, had close ties to northern immediatism" (p. 6). His treatment of reformers like Clay, conventionally regarded as a gradual emancipationist and therefore outside the pale of abolitionism, shows that these sectarian labels were in flux and may obscure the extent and character of antislavery sentiment as much as they illuminate it.

African-American abolitionists are glaringly absent because of Harrold's focus on the efforts of white abolitionists with ties to northern immediatist organizations. His chapter on abolitionist images of southern black emancipators is no substitute for an extended analysis of the role that southern African-Americans, free and slave, played in the abolition movement. For more on that subject, readers should consult Merton Dillon's *Slavery Attacked: Southern Slaves and Their Allies* (Baton Rouge, 1990), which Harrold cites often.

This constricted focus also largely ignores abolitionism in southern cities that were home to immigrants, free

blacks, and wage-labor manufacturing. For example, a German language newspaper, *Der Wecker*, and a German rabbi, David Einhorn, were among Baltimore's most outspoken critics of slavery in 1861. During a riot against Union troops on April 19, 1861, southern sympathizers destroyed *Der Wecker's* presses and chased Einhorn from the city. In late-antebellum Baltimore, Louisville, New Orleans, and other southern cities, sizable numbers of wage-laboring immigrants replaced slaves in the urban economy, and a few of them carried radical political traditions from Europe to the South. Slave owners regarded southern cities with large immigrant and free black populations as potential havens for abolitionism. Their fear of cities might have been as well grounded as their fear of abolitionists operating south of the Mason-Dixon line. Harrold's work leads to questions about northern abolitionist contact with other potential allies in the South like immigrants, free blacks, other gradualists like Clay, and even conservative groups like the American Colonization Society.

These questions in no way diminish Harrold's challenging revision of abolitionism's role in the Civil War. Tightly argued, well-written, and filled with absorbing case studies, *The Abolitionists and the South* opens new paths for research into the antislavery movement in both sections. Harrold makes a convincing case for abolitionism's primary focus on confronting slavery and its sig-

nificance in the sectional conflict. His work also suggests that the antislavery and proslavery movements had intersectional appeal and that conventionally northern and southern cultural and political practices permeated across sectional lines more readily than historians have assumed.

Since the 1970s, insights into the racism, economic self-interest, and conservatism of the antebellum North have increased scholarly emphasis on the Republican party's opposition to slavery's expansion into western lands as an explanation for unifying northern opinion against the South. Nonextensionism attacked slave owners and slaves alike as threats to the economic future of white northerners. While historians of the Republican party's origins have debated the importance of ethnocultural forces on the one hand and economic opposition to slavery on the other, most discount the force of the abolitionists' moral critique of slavery. Harrold's research on abolitionist activity in the South not only re-opens consideration of their role in this debate, but also asks for a reexamination of the moral component of antislavery's general appeal.

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