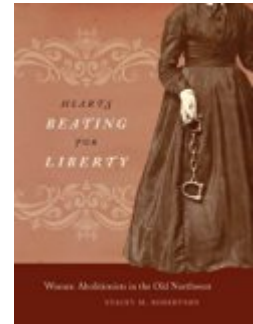


Stacey M. Robertson. *Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xiv + 303 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3408-4.

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Stitching Together an Antislavery West

“The cheese was enormous” (p. 1). So begins *Hearts Beating for Liberty*, Stacey M. Robertson’s lucid, engaging study of abolitionist women in the Old Northwest. And it is altogether fitting and proper (if I may borrow from a different sort of antislavery westerner) that Robertson’s narrative commences with, literally, a contribution from western women abolitionists—in this case an edible donation that Ashtabula County (Ohio) ladies provided for the delighted attendees of the 1846 Boston Anti-Slavery Fair. The myriad contributions of the women who people the pages of *Hearts Beating for Liberty* were far richer and more dramatic than even this most impressive offering from northern Ohio’s abolitionist dairies.

Readers of this book are likewise privileged to feast on Robertson’s contribution—a lively analysis of the midwestern women who provided an unheralded but significant portion of the abolitionist leadership. *Hearts Beating for Liberty* will introduce even most specialized readers to a new cast of unsung antislavery heroes. Robertson skillfully describes the sorts of grassroots mobilization that gave the antislavery movement much of its dynamism and also broke new ground in challenging institutionalized racism and stifling gender mores. In Robertson’s depiction, western abolitionist women were a diverse and occasionally discordant lot, but collectively they displayed a flexibility, generosity, and penchant for cooperation that stands in stark contrast to the sectarian divisions that plagued the eastern movement after 1840.

Hearts Beating for Liberty is also a book about region and place, and Robertson at times makes a case for the role of small town communities and the diversity of westerners’ regional origins in shaping the unique contours of midwestern abolitionism. Where I find her most persuasive in explaining what caused the distinctive regional character of western abolitionism, though, is in her attention to the relatively greater institutionalized racism that abolitionists in this region confronted and the unity that such a daunting obstacle elicited.

Robertson’s book is organized primarily around the antislavery activities that western women *did*, and this privileging of action over ideology or rhetoric (though she still has plenty to say about these) is among the book’s great strengths. Robertson successfully captures the breadth and variety of western women’s abolitionist activism. Among Robertson’s many protagonists are tireless organizer Betsey Mix Cowles, boycott coordinator Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, Garrisonian lecturer and newspaper editor Jane Elizabeth “Lizzie” Hitchcock, Cincinnati fair and national convention manager Sarah Otis Ernst, Underground Railroad operative and educator of fugitive slaves Laura Smith Haviland, and Illinois Liberty politician (conceived broadly) Mary Brown Davis.

Skillfully using brief biographical analyses to explicate particular tactical approaches, Robertson begins by introducing the extraordinary Cowles. With Cowles at the helm, the Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery So-

ciety developed a style of appropriately feminine antislavery “networking” that proved remarkably effective in proliferating Ohio abolitionist societies in the mid-1830s and at the same time brought numerous “women out of their homes and into civil society” (pp. 16-17). Ohio antislavery women quickly threw themselves with equal enthusiasm into the education of African American youths denied a public education by the state’s Black Law. Partly because teaching ostensibly qualified as proper women’s behavior, these progressive initiatives to instruct black students and support black schools energized western women abolitionists for years to come.

Many antislavery women further stretched, without entirely breaching, the limits of the women’s sphere by advocating antislavery partisan politics. Robertson builds on Michael Pierson’s work (*Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* [2003]) to show how the moral and religious impulses that inhered in Liberty partisanship, combined with the third party’s local organizing, made possible unique opportunities for women’s political mobilization. Robertson concentrates especially on Peoria’s women political abolitionists, led by Davis, who penned regular political contributions for Illinois Liberty papers. Davis and abolitionist women across the West enthusiastically attended Liberty political conventions, where prominent western Liberty men welcomed their involvement and the alleged moral presence they provided. Even though they could not vote, abolitionist women could influence loved ones. Consequently, Liberty journalists like Davis urged female readers to implore their men folk to cast antislavery ballots. Though this literally domestic lobbying may seem moderate and nonintrusive, it carried with it, Robertson notes, a radical implication that abolitionist “women understood the political system and knew better than men what was best for the nation” (p. 57). By illuminating the expectations and actions of the western “Liberty Lady,” Robertson adds much to our understanding of the burgeoning appeal of antislavery politics over the course of the 1840s (p. 45).

The radicalization of many western women over the course of the 1840s and 1850s provides a central focus of this book’s middle and later chapters. Many western women came to embrace the Quaker-led free produce movement to boycott slave-made goods. Some, including Cowles, endorsed William Lloyd Garrison’s rejection of American politics, yet they shunned eastern Garrisonians’ proscriptive dogmatism. Employing increasingly aggressive tactics, several western women took to the podium to address “promiscuous” mixed au-

diences, wrote for and disseminated radical publications, and zealously coordinated fund-raisers, emulating and reworking the antislavery fair strategy that had flourished in the hands of Boston’s Garrisonian women (such as those who had received the aforementioned “stupendous cheese”) (p. 1). Robertson particularly highlights antislavery fairs in her profile of Ernst, who westernized this fund-raising strategy through the work of her appropriately feminine Cincinnati Anti-Slavery Sewing Circle. Though a committed Garrisonian radical, Ernst remained careful to engage moderates in her border city of Cincinnati, where political abolitionists predominated. Ernst then utilized a substantial portion of her bazaars’ proceeds to spearhead a remarkable series of Cincinnati “Union Antislavery Convention[s]” in the early 1850s (p. 102). Submerging racial, gender, political, and tactical divisions, Ernst’s annual convention emerged “as a premier national reform gathering” that brought together devotees from across the antislavery spectrum (p. 104). Western women’s antislavery thus prospered by eschewing the strife that polluted the eastern movement.

Western abolitionists of all stripes especially found reason for cooperation in contesting the discriminatory Black Laws and in aiding fugitive slaves. Though some national Garrisonian leaders disparaged such endeavors as distractions, the vast majority of western abolitionists championed these pressing, tangible local battles against slavery and racism. Broadly shared commitments to freedom and equality enabled western Garrisonians and political abolitionists, men and women, to transcend tactical disagreements. Nearly all members of the western antislavery community found common ground in the fight for Black Law repeal and in efforts to conceal, supply, and, on rare occasions, rescue fugitive slaves. Despite receiving limited attention in histories of the Underground Railroad, numerous midwestern women eagerly, often thanklessly, undertook the sometimes dangerous labor of sheltering, feeding, and clothing fugitives.

Western women’s involvement in abolitionist activism, much like that of better-studied, eastern counterparts, precipitated a reevaluation of women’s rights in antebellum America. In the early 1850s, Ohio women organized several women’s rights conventions that exerted national influence on par with the more famous 1848 Seneca Falls conclave. Some midwestern women’s rights enthusiasts demanded radical changes like immediate enfranchisement, while others sought more modest gender reforms, but as in their antislavery work, a “basic belief in equality held them together” (p. 184). Continuing their tradition of appealing to a broad-based

reform constituency, many radical women's rights proponents in the West directed substantial attention to the widely acceptable demand for equal educational opportunities, a goal in keeping with their longstanding support of African American education. Through the varied tactics abolitionist women had employed for years, though, they had publicly tested the boundaries of the antebellum women's sphere and laid the groundwork for future feminist politics in the Old Northwest.

The book ends with a brief afterword that recounts highlights in the postbellum reform careers of several key protagonists. I would have welcomed a lengthier concluding reflection on how this history of western women's activism might now be mobilized to help us better understand American antislavery and gender relations more broadly. Also missing, in my view, is an exploration of how western women responded when political abolitionists moved from the Liberty Party to the Free Soil Party and then the Republican Party. Given, as Robertson repeatedly notes, the vastly greater numbers of midwestern political abolitionists,[1] disproportionate emphasis on western Garrisonians in the second half of the book might have been tempered by more detailed discussion of women who continued to espouse political solutions to the slavery problem.

Also, it may be quibbling, but Wisconsin barely appears, and Michigan goes unmentioned for long stretches. Given their roles as Republican bellwethers in 1854, a more thorough examination of antislavery in those upper northern states seems warranted. The book concentrates overwhelmingly on the more populous Ohio. Robertson's introduction explains that abolitionists further north and west took cues from "trends" pioneered in Ohio, but I sometimes found myself wanting to see more about how this dynamic operated on the ground (p. 8).

Minor criticisms aside, Robertson's analysis of lesser-known antislavery activists offers a model history of grassroots organizing and a fine example of the sort of careful attention to community-level political leaders advocated by many attendees at the opening plenary of last summer's SHEAR (Society for Historians of the Early American Republic) conference.[2] By elucidating the work of these dynamic women middle-managers of the abolitionist movement, Robertson not only has enriched and clarified our understanding of midwestern antislavery, but also suggests how we might better recognize the

role of local organizers in initiating, sustaining, and expanding American social movements more generally.

The stories unearthed in *Hearts Beating for Liberty* illustrate how philosophical and tactical differences broadened and enriched antislavery reformers' contributions to American social and political thought. I often suggest to students that unbending rhetorical opposition to all oppression by Garrisonians; radical activism to directly combat slavery in the Upper South by Gerrit Smith and his allies (not a subject of this book); and Liberty and Free Soil partisans' anti-Slave Power political action on the part of Liberty and Free Soil partisans interacted to shape the course, and promote the growth, of American antislavery.[3] Robertson underscores the formidable potential of diverse antislavery strategies, particularly when abolitionists were not merely doing complementary work grudgingly but were instead intentionally collaborating to promote the widest possible mobilization against southern slavery and northern racism. Perhaps the example of western abolitionist women's ecumenical, cooperative strategy might help us become better attuned to the presence and value of inclusive, flexible approaches to social reform elsewhere.

Notes

[1]. It should perhaps be noted that the West was not unique in this regard. Even in Garrison's home state of Massachusetts, Liberty men clearly outnumbered Garrisonians, as Bruce Laurie, *Beyond Garrison: Antislavery and Social Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), shows convincingly.

[2]. This point, raised initially by Benjamin Carp, was echoed by many at the session entitled "The Populist Temper in Early America: Is It Real or Is It Memory" (Society for Historians of the Early American Republic conference, University of Pennsylvania Law School, Philadelphia, PA, July 14, 2011).

[3]. The aggressive actions of Smith allies, who came to be known as "radical political abolitionists," are well chronicled in the works of Stanley Harrold, including *Abolitionists and the South, 1831-1861* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), *Subversives: Antislavery Community in Washington, D.C., 1828-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), and *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004).

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