The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism, by Julie Roy Jeffrey, is an important contribution to nineteenth-century Women and Gender Studies, and the history of abolitionism in the United States. This focus on the women who composed the grassroots rather than the elite and leading figures illuminates ways in which ordinary women’s lives were transformed, and the invaluable service they rendered to the rise of antislavery sentiment in the north and west.

Jeffrey combines the insight uncovered by numerous secondary studies on leading women abolitionists and female antislavery organizations over the past three decades, with a creative and skillful analysis of primary materials on ordinary women who have not been examined previously. The result is a very useful study illuminating how for many of the women who participated in abolitionist activities in the early nineteenth century, their perspectives and actions transcended the prescribed female sphere of the antebellum period. Like their foremothers of the era of the American Revolution, without becoming feminists, the women foot soldiers of the abolitionist campaign were politicized and began to move into the public arena beyond domesticity. Jeffrey’s study illustrates that while supported by the conventional early nineteenth-century view of women as moral missionaries, charged by God and nature to uplift humanity and society, these women were able to challenge both secular and religious patriarchal authority and still claim to conform to the gender status quo. The impact, of course, was that as they challenged the status quo regarding race they inadvertently eroded the gender status quo.

In the introduction, Jeffrey explains that her discussion of the role and contributions of African American women, impeded somewhat by the relative scarcity of materials, was not as thorough as that of her examination of white women abolitionists. And this is a minor criticism. There could have been a greater discussion of one major obstacle African American women abolitionists encountered — that is, the racism within the abolitionist community, prejudices of both males and females. Despite these limitations, Jeffrey does manage to convey some of the unique challenges and the special role played by African American women. For example, black abolitionists, like some white abolitionists, were just as motivated by the desire to free the slaves as to eliminate racial discrimination in the nominally free parts of the country. One chief means of accomplishing this was for African Americans to participate on an equal basis with whites in the antislavery campaign.

Jeffrey’s study is particularly useful because of the insight it provides into the role white and black women abolitionists, both prominent figures like Lydia Maria Child and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and the army of female abolitionist general troops, played in disseminating antislavery sentiments in the North and West in the 1840s and 1850s. Despite the obvious formal disadvantage of not having the franchise, women continued to play a very special function in partisan politics by their public addresses and appeals to male voters and politicians to support abolitionism. Also many became accustomed to attending political rallies and playing an active role. In addition to a growing number of women abolitionist lecturers, the literature and antislavery fairs sponsored by women, as well as boycotts by women in their homes of items produced by slave labor, encouraged a resistance to slavery among many who were not formal members of abolitionist societies or active in the antislav-
ery movement. Ordinary women had a profound impact on the antislavery attitudes and views of the general public that would bear fruit during the Civil War.

*The Great Silent Army* is an excellent history of American female abolitionism. Julie Roy Jeffrey presents very important information about the contributions of ordinary women who played a pivotal role in a pivotal era in American history which still resonates in gender and race relations, religion, and politics in contemporary society.

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