

**Julie L. Holcomb.** *Moral Commerce: Quakers and the Transatlantic Boycott of the Slave Labor Economy.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016. 272 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-5208-6.

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*Moral Commerce* offers a long-overdue comprehensive examination of the free produce movement. Unlike previous studies, which have tended to take narrower focuses, it presents a broad view of the movement, placing it within the Atlantic world while also tracing its development across the United States and Great Britain. At the same time, it traces the movement and its development through time, from the late 1700s to the 1860s. Just as importantly, this study considers the movement's Quaker origins and its development within the antislavery movement while also paying attention to the role of women and black abolitionists. Though Julie Holcomb takes a long, broad, and multipronged look at the free produce movement, she still manages to tell the story in a concise narrative that explains well the complexities of abstention and its legacy, yet remains accessible to a variety of readers, from undergraduates to established scholars.

The free produce movement has gained attention from a number of scholars over the past three decades, but most studies have maintained a narrow focus. Some have concentrated on the United States, or specific regions of the US, while others have been primarily concerned with Great Britain. Most have looked at specific periods of the movement, and others have highlighted the contributions of key leaders. Many of those works

have been excellent, and they have collectively laid the groundwork for just the type of comprehensive account Holcomb offers in *Moral Commerce*.

Holcomb uncovers both the breadth and the depth of the free produce movement by embracing a transatlantic framework that encompasses both the United States and Great Britain. She traces the movement from its origins in seventeenth-century Quaker meetinghouses to its decline in the late nineteenth century, revealing "the possibilities and the limitations of consumer activism" (p. 3). She points out early on that "free produce was the first consumer movement to transcend the boundaries of nation, gender, and race in an effort by reformers to change the conditions of production" (pp. 3-4). Supporters of the movement shared a "global vision" that allowed them to use the boycott as "a powerful material force that could transform the transatlantic marketplace" (p. 4). This dream of using "moral commerce" to hold producers accountable for immoral practices lives on today through the fair trade movement and other initiatives, such as the boycott of fast food chains with ties to antigay and antiworker organizations, and Holcomb maintains that understanding the free produce movement's successes and failures "has important implications for us as we continue to use the power

of commodity consumption to solve political problems" (p. 4).

Although some have assumed that free produce was a sectarian Quaker protest that carried narrow appeal, Holcomb argues that it was actually a wide-reaching movement that drew support from people across racial, gender, and political lines, appealing especially to politically marginalized groups, such as Quakers, women, and black abolitionists. "Not every abolitionist abstained from slave-labor goods," she claims, "but abstention attracted every kind of abolitionist: conservative and radical, Quaker and non-Quaker, male and female, white and black" (p. 4). She further explains that the rhetoric of free produce was pliable enough to appeal to conservative women, who appreciated and sought to uphold notions of separate spheres, and radical women, who saw in the movement an opening for their development as public activists. The boycott also gave black abolitionists a practical antislavery tactic that built upon their tradition of racial uplift while establishing an economic foundation for the black community to exercise a degree of autonomy that, in the 1850s, encouraged the growth of black nationalism. Importantly, these disparate groups came together through the free produce movement, creating diverse, biracial, "multivocal" networks that gave supporters a voice in the global movement to end slavery (p. 7).

Despite the movement's broad appeal, Holcomb points out that it did not attract all abolitionists. Indeed, some of the most respected and remembered American antislavery activists, including Samuel J. May and William Lloyd Garrison, rejected the movement. Some saw it as simply too impractical while others worried that it diverted attention from their main goal, the abolition of slavery. Holcomb disagrees with the harsh contemporary assessments, pointing out that well before Garrison and his supporters initiated the radical abolition movement of the 1830s, free produce advocates called for the immediate end of

slavery and challenged notions of racial inequality. She agrees with Garrison's own son and with historian Carol Faulkner that free produce advocates were indeed the most radical of all abolitionists.[1]

The question of abstention's impracticality depends on how one assesses the movement's goals, as Holcomb points out in her conclusion. While the movement brought various groups together to fight for a common cause—the abstention from using goods produced by slave labor—supporters' motives sometimes varied. The key point of division centered around whether abstention was primarily a moral rejection of tainted goods for the betterment of the individual who chose to forego using slave-produced goods, or an economic boycott that could ultimately hurt the bottom line of slaveholders by taking away their markets or reducing their profits. For economically minded supporters on both sides of the Atlantic, it was the latter, but for the most radical of abolitionists, like Lucretia Mott, it was the former. For some, it was both.

This debate matters in the historical analysis of the movement, because if viewed from the economic standpoint, the movement was an utter failure. When viewed from the moral perspective, however, as Holcomb ultimately does, the movement was one of "sheer audacity" that should be appreciated for setting a moral tone that forced others to stop and think about the goods they purchased and consider how those goods left them complicit in slavery. Taken from this perspective, the free produce movement made it impossible to be an innocent bystander. In the end, the success of the movement lies in the fact that "as supporters and opponents debated the meaning and the role of moral commerce in the fight for the abolition of slavery, they made it impossible to remain fully neutral in the slavery debate" (p. 193).

Holcomb does an excellent job of explaining the complexities of the free produce movement, and she offers the most comprehensive history

and assessment of this movement to date. *Moral Commerce* will appeal to a broad range of readers, from students in upper division undergraduate college courses to graduate students to informed readers in general. This account should certainly be read by every scholar of both American and British antislavery, black nationalism, African recolonization, and social reform movements.

Note

[1]. Wendell Phillips Garrison, "Free Produce Among the Quakers," *The Atlantic Monthly* 22, no. 132 (1868): 485-494; and Carol Faulkner, "The Root of the Evil: Free Produce and Radical Antislavery, 1820-1860," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Fall 2007): 377-405.

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