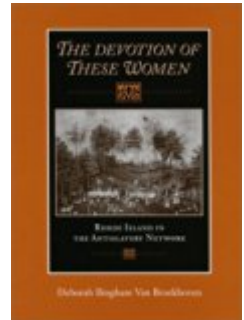


Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven. *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002. xiii + 283 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55849-363-6.



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It's Not About Boston

This captivating study of Rhode Island antislavery reminds us that there is still much local, grassroots research to be done in the field of abolitionism. Such studies help to complicate and enrich our understanding of antislavery, moving us toward a more holistic (less Boston-centered) sense of the movement. Historian Deborah Van Broekhoven's well written and thoroughly researched new book does this and more. Employing a thematic organization, Van Broekhoven highlights Rhode Island's distinct antislavery history and places women, deservedly, at the center.

Rhode Island antislavery did not follow the traditional trajectory of abolitionist activism. Although local abolitionists in the early 1830s organized, petitioned, and raised funds (as in other Northern states), they soon became focused on the single issue of defeating legislation that would have prohibited antislavery speech in the state. In February 1836, they won this battle and also organized a state antislavery society. Everyone expressed high hopes for the movement--dozens of female groups helped sustain the male leadership

as they sought to garner even stronger support across the state. The late 1830s and early 1840s, however, saw the decline of male-led Rhode Island antislavery. This was not due to Garrisonian radicals or the controversy over third-party politics, as was the case in many states across the North. Rhode Island antislavery declined because of the national depression, a sexual scandal, and the Dorr war.

The depression hit Rhode Island antislavery quite hard because many wealthy residents had links to Southern slavery and, as their financial situation declined, they became even more vocal in their opposition to abolition. Around the same time two prominent antislavery leaders, Reverend Ray Potter and Elder Henry Tatem, became embroiled in sexual controversies. Potter admitted to impregnating Abigail Bagley, an unmarried member of the female antislavery society in Pawtucket, while Tatem was suspected of having seduced an orphan left in his care. This left Rhode Island antislavery with an unsavory reputation. Last, the Dorr war of the early 1840s proved to be the final nail in the coffin for male-led antislavery

in the state. Thomas Dorr led a rebellion against the elite, politically dominant Whigs who persisted in allowing only landholders to vote in the state. At first abolitionists overwhelmingly supported Dorr and his democratic movement, but when he agreed to support a white-only plank in his proposed constitution many abolitionists, especially blacks, became critical of the Dorr movement. This led to a division among abolitionists and critically wounded the state organization.

Even as men abandoned the movement, however, women quietly continued to provide increasing financial, organizational, and political leadership. The political conflicts that destroyed the male-led movement did not affect women's antislavery because of the pervasive cultural assumption that women were not associated with politics. Thus protected, women continued to sustain their local auxiliaries across the state. Led by women like the amazingly devoted and energetic Amaranthy Paine, the movement remained alive even as male activism languished. Paine, who served as a state agent for the movement from 1843 to 1852, "circulated three antislavery newspapers and numerous tracts and books, organized a weekly sewing circle, aided fugitive slaves, and managed a statewide antislavery fair. She also attended public meetings, wrote reports, and evolved strong personal opinions about antislavery organizing" (p. 107). Perhaps more important, Paine managed to bridge the gap between radical and conservative abolitionists--working comfortably with the uncompromising Garrisonians even as she employed more moderate arguments against slavery.

In her exploration of Rhode Island women's antislavery activism in the 1840s and 1850s, Van Broekhoven offers insightful analyses of women's writings, petitioning, and fairs. In all of these chapters the author manages to complicate our understanding of the nature of women's participation in the movement. In her chapter on women's writings, for example, Van Broekhoven estab-

lishes that Rhode Island women focused more on "emotional, religious, and family concerns" while men tended to employ "logic and abstract political and legal arguments" (p. 110). These two categories were not mutually exclusive, however. In a sophisticated discussion of several essays and fictional stories, Van Broekhoven establishes that women's writings often incorporated clear political messages.

In her discussion of both petitioning and antislavery fairs, the author challenges popular scholarly arguments. She contends that, for Rhode Island women, the act of signing a petition was not an inherently political act, as many historians have asserted, but was grounded in evangelical tradition. Rhode Island female petitioners regularly ignored the political rule of signing one's own name to a petition in favor of the more evangelical tradition of allowing oneself to "be enrolled." This suggests that women "rejected the view of petitioning as an adjunct to voting" and perceived it more as a religious act (p. 162). Moreover, once Rhode Island petitions became too political, women retreated from this activity. Van Broekhoven further agitates the scholarly waters by arguing that antislavery fairs, in particular sewing societies, were more political than petitioning. "The message of fairs was ... political and understood as such by at least some female abolitionists. These activists, although not arguing that women should enjoy the same suffrage rights as male citizens, were suggesting that women were responsible for influencing public debate and policy on slavery" (p. 194). Sewing for the slave was also a more effective antislavery tool than petitioning--it helped to sustain the movement during lulls, it brought women together and allowed them to keep up with antislavery politics, and it helped them to confirm and expand their commitment to the movement.

In addition to challenging scholarly notions about the role of politics in women's antislavery activism, Van Broekhoven's book is important in

its comparison of male and female trajectories within Rhode Island antislavery. She convincingly argues that women's experience of antislavery differed from men's in distinct ways. Women managed to avoid the political conflicts that led to the demise of men's organizations by the early 1840s. The limited "female" framework that had kept women out of leadership positions in the 1830s allowed them to step up when men retreated from the movement. Women, in fact, became the heart and soul of abolitionism in Rhode Island during the 1840s and 1850s. This critical insight forces us to reconsider the important effect of gender on the antislavery movement as a whole.

The focus of *The Devotion of These Women* on grassroots antislavery also offers a vital reminder to historians that abolitionist leaders in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York simply do not represent the movement in its entirety. Rhode Island, with its controversial Dorr war and the early debate over freedom of speech, experienced a very different path than other Northeastern states did. Van Broekhoven highlights the experience of grassroots abolitionists who committed time, money, and labor to the movement but did not gain fame (or infamy). These women built their own movement with goals and methods geared toward their particular community and region. The famous debates between Garrisonians and Liberty Party advocates simply did not impact these activists in the same way they did the more well-known antislavery communities.

The Devotion of These Women would benefit from fewer subheadings, which tend to distract from the flow of the book, and more contextualization within the larger history of female antislavery. Aside from these minor issues Van Broekhoven's book is a welcome addition to antislavery scholarship and will be eagerly read by anyone interested in social reform in the antebellum period.

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