

The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves

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Review

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Harrold , Stanley *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves.*
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Abolitionist heraldry

Speeches to the enslaved

Stanley Harrold's new book provides full texts of three abolitionist speeches that bear the distinction of having been addressed—at least as far as their titles go—to slaves: Gerrit Smith's Address of the Anti-Slavery Convention of the State of New-York to the Slaves in the U. States of America, delivered in Peterboro, New York in January 1842; William Lloyd Garrison's Address to the Slaves of the United States, presented in Faneuil Hall, Boston, in May 1843; and Henry Highland Garnet's An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America, delivered in August 1843, in Buffalo, New York at the first black national convention since 1835. In addition, Harrold supplements these slave speeches with two related works, also in full text versions, which analyze and extend various emergent themes of the primary three: Nathaniel E. Johnson's Rights of a Fugitive Slave, and Gerrit Smith's A Letter to the American Slaves from those who have fled from American Slavery, in which neither purported audience nor announced writers are actually operative. Abolitionist rhetoricians were eminently capable of imagining being heard by slave listeners, and they also believed they possessed the power to provide the words and thoughts of African Americans on either side of the slavery-freedom boundary.

On the basis of his detailed readings of these five central documents, Harrold puts forward a revisionist interpretation of the history of abolitionism, seeing the movement(s) in a fermenting state of ambiguity, indecisiveness, and virtual self-contradiction regarding many—or even all—the issues that abolitionists wished to address. The reformers who wanted to abolish the institution of slavery were anything but secure or stable in their beliefs. While they were usually extremely committed, their arguments among themselves

and—more seriously—within themselves were constantly changing. Harrold uses his selected documents to great effect in presenting a nuanced, many-faceted view of abolitionist attitudes.

The major contention of this book is that the three addresses to slaves represent stages in the development of greater aggressiveness in the antislavery movement—Harrold sees the law-abiding, pacifistic abolitionists gradually approaching the possibilities of breaking the law, employing violent means, and fomenting slave insurrections. The Addresses to the Slaves, he states, capture an American antislavery movement in tension between its peaceful past and violent future—between agitation and civil war. They are revolutionary, aggressive, and portentous in their consideration of violence. The addresses to slaves, he maintains, are pointing toward, preparing the way for John Brown's raid and the Civil War itself.

It is to Harrold's credit that he does not exactly insist upon a causal connection between the slave messages and later events. Rather, the abolitionists' speeches seem to be mile markers along the road to revolution. Smith, Garrison, and Garnet certainly influenced historical events in their day, but their advice to fictitious slaves at antislavery conventions were never very likely to have an impact upon the purported audience for their orations. None of the three was addressing an actual audience of slaves, and in any case, abolitionists themselves could not decide whether slaves in the South would ever hear their words, or read them.

For a while they could not even decide whether slaves should be addressed by abolitionists at all. The very concept of talking to slaves themselves was almost revolutionary for the abolitionist movement. Smith begins the series of addresses by saying, The doctrine obtains almost universally, that the friends of the slave have no right to communicate with him—no right to counsel and comfort him. We have, ourselves, partially at least, acquiesced in this time-hallowed delusion. He then spends a sizable proportion of his speech to slaves in justifying his speaking at all.

Abolitionism in its two basic forms (Garrisonian and radical political or Liberty are the terms Harrold uses) had been almost altogether a Northern phenomenon. Most antislavery thinkers argued that they should confront the North, convince Yankees of their guilt and responsibility in maintaining the national sin of slavery; it was considered impractical, inexpedient, or even

immoral to confront directly either the actual oppressors, slaveholders, or the oppressed, slaves. Abolitionists believed they should stay out of the South. The Garrisonian faction insisted that the end of slavery would come with disunion; when the North became a separate country repudiating the South, slaves would so outnumber the slaveholders that their freedom would come automatically. (The Garrisonians did not realize that Southerners who did not own slaves would still fight for the peculiar institution.) Slavery, according to Garrison's followers, would crumble as soon as the whole United States—with its slavery-supporting constitution—ceased to support it.

The three addresses to slaves turn their attention southward (even Garrison, whose followers ignored their leader's lead in this instance, abandoned his own usual stance)—more specifically, toward slaves, more specifically still, toward black men. Garnet, himself a former slave, especially advocates that male slaves should assert their manhood by attempting to save their wives and children from slavery. You had far better all die, Garnet proclaims, *die immediately*, than live slaves, and entail your wretchedness upon your posterity. . . . There is not much hope of Redemption without the shedding of blood. Garnet never actually says that a cause worth dying for is also worth killing for, but the imagery of his discourse is violent and aggressive throughout, and he does come very close to advocating direct insurrection: You should therefore now use the same manner of resistance, as would have been just in our ancestors, when the bloody foot prints of the first remorseless soul thief was placed upon the shores of our fatherland.

Garrison—pacifist or no—asserts, By precept and example, they [your masters] declare it is both your right and your duty to wage war against them, and to wade through their blood, if necessary, to secure your own freedom.

In his later work, the letter purported to be written by fugitive slaves, Gerrit Smith declares, By all the rules of war, you have the fullest liberty to plunder, burn, and kill, as you may have occasion to do to promote your escape.

It is amazing, given such language, that all three abolitionists are still arguing *against* revolutionary means of overthrowing slavery! But the divided mind of abolitionism is the clearest and most forceful image presented by this precise and incisive study. How gradual the immediatists were! How reluctant to confront or offend or upset the status quo! They argued for decades about the feasibility of approaching slaveholders (Should slaveowners be told they were

sinner?), slaves (Should slaves be told they were entitled to be free?), about going South (Too dangerous? Inexpedient?), about whether slaves should be given Bibles, about whether helping slaves to escape was justified. Should abolitionists go south to help slaves escape or should they only offer help once fugitives were across the Mason-Dixon line? Should escaped slaves be helped to settle in free states, or to reach Canada, or go back to Africa? Would the flights of relatively few slaves actually make the overthrow of the institution of slavery more or less difficult? Every point that could be argued was argued.

When the whole enormous controversy finally burst into action, it must have been simply overwhelming, partly because actual events settled so many issues so very decisively. Would non-slaveholders fight to maintain slavery? Yes. Would black men fight as courageously as white men? Yes. Would slavery end gradually by dint of moral suasion upon the North alone? No.

Harrold's book is concise, but thorough, his research is impeccable, his style readable, his insights convincing and important. *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves* details a fascinating new perspective upon the abolitionist movement and the overthrow of the institution of slavery.

Richard Sears, Ph.D., Chester D. Tripp Memorial Chair in Humanities at Berea College, is the author of several books on abolitionism and the Civil War in Kentucky, including The Day of Small Things, Kentucky Abolitionists in the Midst of Slavery, A Utopian Experiment in Kentucky, and Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History.