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No Taint of Compromise: Crusaders in Antislavery Politics

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Review

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Blue, Frederick J. *No Taint of Compromise: Crusaders in Antislavery Politics.*
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Assorted abolitionists

Foot soldiers of the antislavery movement

Frederick Blue's **No Taint of Compromise** traces the lives of eleven antebellum opponents of slavery. In concise, crisp, and compelling biographical sketches, Blue underscores the diversity within the antislavery ranks. The common thread in his subjects was their commitment to emancipation and abolition through conventional legal and political institutions. Rejecting both the apolitical reformism of William Lloyd Garrison and the revolutionary violence of John Brown, Blue's activists sought to yoke the Liberty, Free Soil, Democratic, Whig, and Republicans Parties to the cause of black freedom.

Striking similarities and interesting differences characterize the lives that Blue recounts. Most of the activists developed a deep suspicion of, if not outright hostility toward, slavery by early adulthood. For some of them, their evangelical Protestantism could not be reconciled with silence about the institution of slavery or its distortion of American life and values. For virtually all of them, slavery was antithetical to the nation's founding principles; unlike both Garrisonians and proslavery advocates, they rejected the proposition that the Constitution and national political traditions sanctioned and protected slavery. Blue's cadre of antislavery activists also shared revulsion over repeated instances of the dangerous influence of the Slave Power. The Fugitive Slave Law, in particular, was a grievous insult to liberty and freedom in the minds of these antislavery activists. Later, during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln's decision to rescind John C. Fremont's order to free the slaves in Missouri was another catalyst for activism. Fueled by fears about the power of the slaveocracy and frustration with the timidity of their contemporaries, these eleven abolitionists devoted their diverse talents and resources to insinuating their cause

into mainstream electoral politics.

For all of their similarities, important differences among the eleven figures are evident. Some of them committed to the antislavery cause during the 1840s, others during the early 1850s, and yet others at the time of the Kansas-Nebraska controversy and the founding of the Republican Party. Blue's three crusaders who joined the antislavery cause earliest--Alvan Stewart, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Charles Langston--never managed to develop enduring influence within the evolving political movement against slavery. Owen Lovejoy, Edward Wade, Sherman Booth, and Jane Swisshelm, all of whom joined the movement later, made important contributions to antislavery politics, and the Republican Party in particular. But it was late arrivers George Julian, David Wilmot, Benjamin Wade, and Jessie Fremont, who played central roles in defining the politics of emancipation during the 1850s and the Civil War.

Reformers also differed in their understanding of emancipation and the destinies of the nation's various races. Charles Langston, the son of a slave woman and a white planter, was acutely concerned with advancing racial equality. Benjamin Wade, in contrast, came to espouse civil and political rights for blacks even while he voiced aversion to personal contact with them. And David Wilmot ardently opposed slavery's expansion without displaying much concern for the rights of blacks. But Blue astutely points out that although some of the antislavery reformers in his study engaged in racial bigotry, they were far in advance of most of their white contemporaries in their contempt for human bondage. When they adopted their antislavery positions they risked property and life, as six of the eleven figures in **No Taint of Compromise** came to understand after they faced mob violence or the immediate threat of it.

By the end of Blue's study, it is hard not to admire the energy and dedication of his subjects. At the same time, it is also evident how complicated the moral landscape of the crusade against slavery was. Elijah Lovejoy combined impassioned denunciations of slavery with equally intense attacks on Catholicism. Jane Swisshelm shared Lovejoy's virulent anti-Catholicism, and added to it vengeance against the Native Americans of Minnesota, toward whom she advocated a policy of virtual extermination. Reform movements are typically untidy and contradictory, as Blue appropriately reminds us, and the antislavery movement was no different.

No Taint of Compromise offers neither a comprehensive nor revisionist reinterpretation of the antislavery movement. Previous scholarship has drawn attention to the diversity of motivation and aims within the movement. Blue himself provides only the briefest summation of the implications of his biographical sketches. He engages the vast scholarship on abolitionism only obliquely and only in the footnotes. Yet these qualities are not defects. Instead, his study offers elegant and cogent portraits of obscure or lesser known foot soldiers of the antislavery movement whose disparate lives, when viewed collectively, illustrate how much hard work, talent, and political maneuvering were necessary to uproot the institution of slavery.

W. Fitzhugh Brundage is William B. Umstead Professor of History at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and the author of a forthcoming study of white and black historical memory in the South from the Civil War to the present.