Civil War Book Review

Fall 2014 Article 19

Quakers and Abolition

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Recommended Citation
Minardi, Margot (2014) "Quakers and Abolition," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 4 .
DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.4.20
Available at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss4/19

Review

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Carey, Brycchan and Plank, Geoffrey. *Quakers And Abolition.* University of Illinois Press, $45.00 ISBN 978-0-252-03826-6

New Scholarship Produces a More Nuanced Look at Quakers and Antislavery

“Go to a free state and live among Quakers." So Samuel Ringgold Ward, black abolitionist, minister, and newspaper editor, explained was his family’s goal when they ran away from slavery in 1820 (quoted on p. 120). The enslaved Ward family’s impressions of Quakers resemble those of many modern historians: members of the Society of Friends were reliably antislavery. This well-curated collection of lively and original essays confirms that antislavery sentiment was widely shared among eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Friends, but it also shows that Quakers’ relationship to slavery and abolitionism is a subject worthy of continuing consideration. Taken together, the essays reveal the varied and complex reasons that individual Friends chose to act (or not to act) on their antislavery principles. All told, this volume presents a rich and rewarding take on the varieties of Quaker religious experience and social vision.

The fourteen essays presented here were culled from an interdisciplinary conference in 2010 jointly sponsored by Bryn Mawr College, Haverford College, Swarthmore College, and the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. The volume begins with a brief but useful introduction by the editors, themselves authors of notable studies of early Quaker antislavery thought and activism (Brycchan Carey’s *Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1658-1761* and Geoffrey Plank’s *John Woolman’s Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire*). J. William Frost’s confusingly titled “Why Quakers and Slavery? Why Not More Quakers?" is the second essay in the book but might profitably be read first; it offers a cogent and concise overview of the evolution in Quaker thinking on slavery from the 1670s through 1865. Six other essays

focus on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century topics, including the Quaker influence on early mobilization against the transatlantic slave trade and the antislavery thought of both celebrated and lesser-known Friends (such as Anthony Benezet and Joshua Evans, respectively).

Five essays center on abolitionism in the nineteenth-century United States. Several of these highlight individuals whose influence has not been adequately reflected by previous scholarship. Thomas D. Hamm examines the career of George Fox White, a prominent Hicksite Quaker whose preaching provoked wildly divergent reactions from contemporary Friends. Hamm's essay shows how a hatred of slavery coexisted for many Quakers with staunch opposition to active abolitionism, a position rooted in fears about the corruption that could come from associating with evangelical reformers and in "a quietism that eschewed undertaking any action without a clear divine leading" (p. 46). Nancy A. Hewitt turns readers' attention to the "spiritual journeys" of Amy Kirby Post, an abolitionist and woman's rights advocate who turned from the Quakerism of her youth to help found the more socially engaged Congregational Friends in 1848. Post later embraced spiritualism at the same time as she remained in connection with reform-oriented Quaker groups; by the end of her life, she attended a Unitarian church. Hewitt argues that Post "was committed to finding a spiritual home that not only *allowed* her to pursue social justice on this earth, but also *required* her to do so" (p. 74). James Emmett Ryan traces a very different journey in his analysis of Quaker apothecary, "everyman," and autobiographer Charles Edward Pancoast. In *A Quaker Forty-Niner*, his memoir of his travels in the West, Pancoast revealed his distaste for slavery and reported with horror on the abuses it generated, such as a lynching he observed in St. Louis. Still, throughout his sojourn in the West, he was never disturbed enough by slavery "to publicize his morality when it might reduce his profits" (p. 157). Taken together, Hamm's, Hewitt's, and Ryan's essays show the variety of Quaker engagement (or lack of engagement) with abolitionism.

Two more essays on the antebellum period examine the interactions between Quakers (an overwhelmingly white religious community) and African Americans. Building on the experiences of Samuel Ringgold Ward and other slaves who sought refuge in or near Quaker communities, Christopher Densmore concentrates on the intersections between Quaker and African American antislavery networks in Chester County, Pennsylvania, and Cumberland County, New Jersey. Importantly, Densmore also considers how both Quakers and African Americans have been *represented* in scholarly and popular accounts of

abolitionism, concluding that "the mythology of the good Quaker in the antislavery movement and in the Underground Railroad often underplays African American agency" (p. 130). Andrew Diemer examines interracial antislavery on a broader plane in his essay, which draws on a fascinating trove of letters between Moses Sheppard, a white Quaker colonizationist, and Samuel Ford McGill, a black emigrant to Liberia. The essay reveals Sheppard's and McGill's very different reasons for supporting colonization, and it highlights McGill's frank rejection of his patron's (Sheppard's) paternalistic views of blacks and conciliatory approach to slaveowners. A final essay likely to be of interest to scholars of the Civil War era is Anna Vaughan Kett's analysis of Quaker women's involvement in the free produce movement, via their championing of free-labor cotton. Although Kett focuses on a family of British Friends (the Clarks of shoe store fame), the transatlantic orientation of the free produce movement connects her narrative with recent work by American historians such as Carol Faulkner.

In a generally well-rounded collection, there are a few curious omissions. Despite the title, the book focuses more on sentiment and action against slavery than on actual acts of abolition. The American Civil War is mentioned only incidentally, and the Emancipation Proclamation not at all. The fact that American slavery ended in the context of war—in violation of the Quaker peace testimony—presented moral and spiritual anguish for antislavery Friends in the nineteenth century, and it poses powerful interpretive challenges for historians looking back on this period. Readers interested in these crucial questions will have to look elsewhere, perhaps to Edward Needles Wright's old but still useful *Conscientious Objectors in the Civil War* (1931) and Ryan P. Jordan's *Slavery and the Meetinghouse: The Quakers and the Abolitionist Dilemma, 1820-1865* (2008). Indeed, the latter book is the best current starting point for antebellum and Civil War-era historians interested in Quaker antislavery.

The brevity of the essays (12 to 15 pages apiece) leaves little space for the development of sophisticated arguments, and readers may find themselves wishing for more substantial historiographical engagement. Nearly forty years after the ground-breaking *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (1975), what are scholars to make today of David Brion Davis's argument about "the Quaker ethic and the anti-slavery international"? Gary Nash's culminating essay focuses on the representation of Quakers, African Americans, and abolitionists in school textbooks from the late nineteenth century to the present. This piece admirably captures Nash's trademark concern for

bringing critical, inclusive historical scholarship into the consciousness of a wider American public. But this collection would have benefited from a more synthetic essay to cap it off (perhaps by the book's distinguished editors). Without the benefit of having attended the conference that provoked this volume, readers may find themselves longing for more conversation among the different authors and more connections among the individuals, events, and sources discussed in the various essays.

Still, if much of the work of assembly is left to the reader, this book nonetheless puts on the table numerous richly detailed pieces of the puzzle that is Quaker antislavery. The essays are a pleasure to read, both individually and as a group, and they are indicative of the exciting directions in which scholarship at the intersection of Quaker and abolitionist historiography might be headed.

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DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.4.20