Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism

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Recommended Citation

Young, Jeffrey Robert (2011) "Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.4.17

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss4/39>

Review

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Fall 2011

Abruzzo, Margaret *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism*. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$55.00 ISBN 978-0-8018-9852-5

Exploring the Human Side of Slavery

Margaret Abruzzo's first book explores the impact of humanitarian thought on attitudes towards American slavery during the colonial and antebellum eras. For some twenty years, this topic has received considerable attention from both historians of antislavery thought (such as David Brion Davis and Thomas Haskell) and historians of proslavery thought (including Joyce Chaplin and Lacy Ford). By exploring the dialectical relationship that developed between pro- and antislavery humanitarian thinkers as they grappled with shifting definitions of pain and cruelty, Abruzzo offers a fresh perspective on this very complicated, significant question.

Combing through a vast array of published and manuscript sources written over several centuries, Abruzzo articulates a thesis that pays appropriate attention to the historical complexity informing the twists and turns of these ideological developments. Abruzzo grounds her argument in the contention (presented in her first two chapters) that eighteenth-century humanitarian thought emerged from two distinct wellsprings. On one hand, Quakers and other eighteenth-century religious reformers increasingly protested the cruelties of slavery because their ascetic sensibility associated the institution with the sinful pursuit of earthly pleasure. At the same time, secular Enlightenment thinkers were beginning to complain about slavery's cruelty, characterizing it as a debasement of the natural inclination to feel sympathy towards fellow humans. These distinct movements had, to some extent by the end of the eighteenth century, "joined together to reshape American moral thinking," but Abruzzo takes pains to demonstrate the ongoing ideological complications engendered by the contradictory roots of humanitarian thought (58).

Abruzzo not only examines new ideas about suffering that were emerging in the early modern Anglo-American world, she also considers the timing by and manner in which such notions directly influenced the thinking of slaveholders and their political opponents. Her third chapter (covering the first three decades of the nineteenth century) makes the case that this process of sectional delineation was significantly delayed by the creation of a muddled “humanitarian consensus” on the benefits of African-American removal from the United States and (re-colonization in Africa, a movement which allowed both critics and defenders of the institution to find common ground in an early national language of sympathy and benevolence (86). Episcopal figurehead William Meade epitomized the champions of a new perspective decrying slave suffering and walking “a fine line between challenging and supporting slavery” (104). According to Abruzzo, the tensions lurking in this conversation between antislavery activists and initially reluctant defenders of the plantation order rendered the colonization coalition fundamentally unstable.

In her pivotal fourth chapter, Abruzzo establishes the chronology by which the conversation between anti- and proslavery humanitarian viewpoints degenerated into strident sectional discord. With the onset of radical abolitionism in the 1830s, humanitarianism split into an antislavery movement that asserted that slavery’s inherent cruelties required its immediate cessation and a proslavery movement that mobilized its own denunciation of cruelty on behalf of an aggressive campaign to defend slavery as a truly humane enterprise. Here, Abruzzo offers compelling insight into the ways in which the participants in this debate self-consciously deployed theories about the role of distant suffering in the campaign for benevolence. Scholars of proslavery thought, however, might question Abruzzo’s claim for the delayed emergence of aggressively proslavery rhetoric predicated on imagery of happy slaves. In making the case that such thinking became significant in the 1830s, Abruzzo does not engage eighteenth-century evidence that potentially undermines her timeline. For example, Abruzzo refers to the eighteenth-century South Carolina minister Alexander Garden to make the point that early proslavery thinkers were more interested in protecting their reputations as morally refined individuals than they were invested in the project of defending slavery as a humane institution. “Cruelty, not slave happiness, proved the real issue,” writes Abruzzo (74-5). Garden’s claims, however, seemed to collapse any such distinction, for he asserted in his *Six Letters to the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield* (1740) that “the generality of Slaves in these Colonies” were “more happy and comfortable in all

temporal Respects (the Point of Liberty only excepted) than" most farm workers in the free English world. Of course contextualizing such evidence in broader ideological developments that were, by anyone's estimation, sprawling and contradictory, is a dicey business. Still, more attention on Abruzzo's part to eighteenth-and early-nineteenth-century proslavery humanitarian rhetoric would have reassured her readers that she had come to a measured conclusion that such statements were atypical or peripheral to the cultural currents on which she is focusing her account.

Abruzzo's final chapters trace the widening chasm that opened between slavery's critics and defenders even as they were engaging each other's invocation of the humanitarian ideal. In chapter five, Abruzzo demonstrates how competing humanitarian assumptions about slavery were dividing families (such as the Gorhams of Louisiana and Massachusetts, whom Abruzzo explores in fascinating detail) into sectional camps warring over the very meanings of "philanthropy, reform, and benevolence" (165). Moreover, the role of racism in southern proslavery thought receives thoughtful treatment in this chapter, as Abruzzo contemplates the ways in which scientific racism reinforced core proslavery humanitarian assumptions yet also was counteracted by mainstream southern Christian theology. In Abruzzo's final chapter, the tensions that she painstakingly traces throughout the book reach their breaking point as the nation fractures over slavery. Abruzzo effectively chronicles the antislavery movement's dilemma concerning its focus on the cruel physical treatment of slaves. As opponents of slavery continued to make dramatic charges about the hideous abuse of slaves at the hands of sadistic slaveholders, some reformers sought to emphasize instead the theme of autonomy as a critical element of human happiness. The onset of photographic evidence of slave abuse, Abruzzo argues, tipped the antislavery rhetorical scales in favor of the physical cruelty argument as slaveholders responded with strident (and absurd) claims of slave happiness and well-being. Long after the violent dismantling of slavery during the Civil War, the contradictions engendered by competing strands of humanitarian thought continue to influence contemporary understandings of slavery. As Abruzzo suggests in her epilogue, proslavery humanitarian thought survived the institution itself and colored white attitudes toward the freed population which, from the former masters' view point, had been ill-advisedly cast into a condition of freedom that it was unequipped to endure. And as slavery receded further into the American past, such assumptions actually gained currency across the nation's white population in the early twentieth century.

Writing with clarity and grace, Abruzzo makes a persuasive case for the paradoxical role that humanitarian thought played in the sectional battles over slavery. The more that antebellum American thinkers sought to frame their ideas about bondage in terms of a shared humanitarian vocabulary, the more those tangled humanitarian conceptions of pain and cruelty led them to attack each other with rhetorical and, eventually, physical force. Her book will fascinate not only scholars exploring slavery and sectionalism but also historians examining the emergence of new definitions of cruelty and benevolence at the advent of the modern world.

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