

The Man With the Branded Hand: The Life of Jonathan Walker, Abolitionist

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Review

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Oickle, Alvin F. *The Man with the Branded Hand: The Life of Jonathan Walker, Abolitionist*. Westholme Publishing, \$28.00 ISBN 978-1-59416-136-0

Elevating Jonathan Walker

The past three decades have seen an extraordinary proliferation of scholarship on American antislavery activism. Many of these works have ranged beyond famous abolitionist figures like William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Beecher Stowe to foreground lesser-known members and aspects of the movement; by highlighting the impact of African-American lecturers, writers, and community leaders, detailing the centrality of women's associations and local organizational activities, and linking abolitionism in the United States with international antislavery trends. Taken together, these studies have complicated conventional interpretations of the sources, tactics, and political impact of the abolitionist movement. Moreover, by offering readers a much more nuanced portrait of antislavery activism, these studies have ultimately expanded the cast of characters associated with the campaign to end slavery in the United States.

Alvin F. Oickle's *The Man with the Branded Hand: The Life of Jonathan Walker, Abolitionist*, contributes to this ongoing project by tracing the life story of an abolitionist who, though quite famous in his own time, is largely unknown today. A sailor and boatwright from Massachusetts with strong abolitionist sentiments, Jonathan Walker gained notoriety for an unsuccessful slave rescue in 1844. Using a small open-air sailing vessel, Walker attempted to ferry seven enslaved men from Pensacola, Florida to freedom in the Bahamas. After being apprehended, arrested, and tried in territorial court, Walker was convicted of the crime of "slave stealing," and pilloried, jailed, fined, and branded on the right hand with the letters "S S" as part of his sentence. Walker's case quickly garnered international interest, making him a *cause célèbre* for the abolitionist movement, and the subject of a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier. Images of his

disfigured hand, meanwhile, continued to circulate in antislavery circles long after his release from prison, symbolizing, for abolitionists, both the violence at the heart of the system of slavery, and their own deep commitment to fight for the “salvation of the slave.”

Oickle’s biography – a revised edition of his 1998 biography, *Jonathan Walker, The Man With the Branded Hand* – is a serviceable introduction to Walker’s life story. Oickle provides an outline of Walker’s path as he moves from Massachusetts to Texas and back, then between Massachusetts and Florida. He also details Walker’s trial proceedings, and offers coverage of the reception he received from famous abolitionists and citizens of his native Massachusetts. Oickle’s discussion of Walker’s later years on the abolitionist lecture circuit, his attempts to work with freedmen in contraband camps during the Civil War, and his final years in Wisconsin are well-conceived. These last chapters make clear that Walker’s efforts on behalf of the freedom struggle were not limited to his courtroom branding, but rather, continued through the Civil War and beyond.

At the same time, *The Man with the Branded Hand* lacks depth of analysis. For most of the text, Oickle sticks very closely to Walker’s own account of events as published in his 1845 narrative, *Trial and Imprisonment of Jonathan Walker*. Consequently, the text often feels more like a series of quotations or summaries of Walker’s writings than a thorough analysis of Walker’s life, activism, and impact on the abolitionist movement. Additionally, there are some factual errors and unlikely interpretive conclusions that will be disconcerting for readers well-versed in the historiography of abolitionism and slavery. For example, Oickle counts the number of enslaved Africans transported to the United States at five million, rather than the 11 million figure commonly accepted by today’s professional historians (9). Oickle also suggests that Walker’s actions reminded the whites of Pensacola of the “slave uprising in the island nation of San Domingo only two years before,” a revolt leading to the creation of “the Dominican Republic” (169). Scholars, however, will understand that when Jonathan Walker referred to his captors’ invocation of “that old St. Domingo hobby horse,” he most likely referenced the anxieties exhibited whenever slaveholders recalled the late eighteenth-century slave uprising in St. Domingue that led to the creation of the republic of Haiti (169). Missteps like these might have been avoided had Oickle utilized a more extensive pool of scholarship to shape his narrative – indeed, Oickle’s selected bibliography reveals that most of his secondary sources were published in the middle of the twentieth century. This limited source base leaves him unable to take advantage

of the many developments in the historiography of the field, and therefore, unable to fully situate Walker's life story in the rich abolitionist political culture that undoubtedly shaped his worldview.

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