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Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest

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Review

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Robertson, Stacey M. *Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest.* University of North Carolina Press, $39.95 ISBN 978-0-8078-3408-4

Shifting the Focus of Abolition History

Stacey M. Robertson's latest book is a welcome addition to a new, lively, and diverse literature on abolitionism. Where many recent contributors have looked into African-American communities or at antislavery in a greater trans-Atlantic context, Professor Robertson turns her gaze westward, away from the much-studied East Coast hotbeds of abolition, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. They are the geographic periphery in her account, and the old Northwest and women abolitionists are its center. Signs of the book's focus abound in the Index, where Josephine Griffing rates more entries than William Lloyd Garrison and the Ashtabula (Ohio) Female Anti-Slavery Society looms larger than the American Anti-Slavery Society and the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society combined.

Of course, the many contributions of women to antebellum reform generally, and antislavery in particular, are well-acknowledged in the work of, for example, Lori Ginzberg, Julie Jeffrey, and Anne Boylan (who praises *Hearts Beating for Liberty* on the jacket blurb). Robertson, however, asserts that "By taking up the perspective of western women, this study forces a reconsideration of antislavery history" (2). Such a claim may seem a little grandiose given the wealth of recent scholarship on emancipation and abolition in the Atlantic world, but the book does make a strong case for the importance and distinctiveness of antislavery in the old Northwest and for the centrality of women within it.

The book's structure is clever, complicated, and well-executed by the author. The seven chapters are roughly in chronological order, but also focus on a particular topic or issue, beginning with "Grassroots Activism and Female

Antislavery Societies" and concluding with “Woman’s Rights and Abolition in the West." Along the way, other chapters deal with the Liberty Party, the free produce movement, antislavery fairs, women lecturers, and fugitive slaves. In addition, the chapters often hone in on particular geographic sites of antislavery activism in the old Northwest and tell the stories of individual women, some relatively well-known, like Abby Kelley Foster, and others less familiar (but important in their own right) such as “Lizzie" Hitchcock, who for a time co-edited the Salem, Ohio, *Anti-Slavery Bugle* and balanced radical abolitionism with career as a lecturer on hygiene.

Robertson has interesting things to say about all of the topics she addresses, although, naturally, some of her claims are more novel (or debatable) than others. I was especially engaged by Chapter 2 on the Liberty Party and Chapter 3 on the free produce movement. Robertson claims that the latter gained much-needed energy from western women, linked local communities to the moral consequences of a global economy, and cast women in the dual roles of producers and consumers. For its part, the Liberty Party, Robertson argues, did not alienate women, but rather “offered women an ideal entrance into the political sphere" (39).

The book is full of suggestive assertions like these, but ones that also sometimes need more nuance or further development. In the case of the “political sphere" comment, two problems come to mind. The first is a quotation from a female abolitionist that “among Liberty party generally women, are an non-entity...." (155). How that squares with the argument roughly a hundred pages earlier requires explanation. A second caveat has to do with notion of a “political sphere" and a comment that abolition “brought [western] women out of their homes and into civil society," a term reiterated three pages later (17). Here the author might push the analysis of her rich material further. What is the relation between the “political sphere" and “civil society?" Is the latter term another way of evoking a “public sphere," something usually associated with urban areas? If so, how different might such a “sphere" or “society" be in the West, with its large rural area, small towns, and fewer cities than the East?

To raise such questions is less to criticize the book than to say that there is a lot here for further thought. It is also to slight what makes *Hearts Beating for Liberty* an intriguing meditation on nineteenth-century social movements. Running throughout the book is Robertson’s admiration for a particular style of reform. She does not appear to agree with William Lloyd Garrison or Barry

Goldwater that extremism in the defense of liberty is a virtue. Her heart is with, as she puts it, a "cooperative, pragmatic abolitionism" that ignored, negotiated, or transcended eastern schisms and followed "a different trajectory" (13, 5). It was, in this account, a style of abolitionism in which men and women, African American and white, worked together in mutual respect, and Garrisonians and anti-Garrisonians got along reasonably well. There are signs in *Hearts Beating for Liberty* that things became a little testier in the 1850s, but Robertson's focus is on one side of old debate among reformers: are coalitions and cooperation more effective than confrontation and standing on the moral (often self-righteous) higher ground? She clearly and smartly weighs in on the side of the former position.

This is an appealingly readable corrective to eastern-centric antislavery scholarship, with multiple suggestions for rethinking abolitionism and antebellum reform more broadly. It is also—less obviously—a reminder that as we increasingly think about the articulation between the local and the transnational, the concept of regions still has analytical bite.

Ronald G. Walters is a Professor of History at the Johns Hopkins University. His current research focuses on political extremism in the U.S., 1870-1920, and, in a separate project, the rise commercial popular culture.