

# Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts

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### Recommended Citation

McDaniel, W. Caleb (2011) "Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 3 , Article 32.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss3/32>

## Review

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Summer 2011

**Minardi, Margot** *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts*. Oxford University Press, \$49.95 ISBN 978-0-19-537937-2

### Exploring the Intersection of Memory and History

On October 4, 1859, abolitionist lecturer Wendell Phillips came not to praise Daniel Webster, but to bury him again. Though Webster had died in 1852, he still lived in infamy among abolitionists for having endorsed the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. So when a bronzed statue of Webster was erected outside the Massachusetts State House in 1859, Phillips seized the chance to indict the fallen senator again. Speaking in a Boston lyceum, Phillips thundered that Massachusetts should not be constructing “statues for sinners” (*Speeches, Lectures and Letters*, 1863). If Webster deserved commemoration, he said, the state might as well build monuments to Milton’s Satan and Aaron Burr.

The question of who was deemed worthy of commemoration in antebellum Massachusetts is central to Margot Minardi’s engrossing new book. As she demonstrates, that question mattered deeply to contemporaries as different as Webster and Phillips, who argued that “the honors we grant mark how high we stand, and they educate the future.” Phillips took for granted that his audience agreed: after all, he reminded them, “you and I ... were born in Massachusetts,” a state whose landscape teemed with memories of the Revolution and whose citizens generally accepted “that the character of the State is shown by the character of those it crowns.” Indeed, Phillips rested his case against Webster’s statue by citing Webster’s own speeches in favor of a Bunker Hill Memorial in 1843: “monuments, anniversaries, statues, are schools, Mr. Webster tells us, whose lessons sink deep” (*Speeches, Lectures and Letters*). Webster and Phillips disagreed about what lessons history should teach, but both men had no doubt that history taught. As Minardi notes, their Massachusetts was “the nerve center of the nation’s historical production”—a state whose inhabitants were highly

conscious of their roles as actors in history and narrators of it (11).

For that reason, Minardi argues, Massachusetts offers a perfect place to examine how the making of history—in both senses—happens. Minardi guides readers across a wide terrain, ranging from early representations of Bunker Hill and the Boston Massacre to the earliest biographies of Phillis Wheatley, and from the historical works of black abolitionists like William Cooper Nell to abolitionist protests surrounding the Bunker Hill Memorial. But her purpose throughout is to show that historical “narratives have the power to facilitate certain historical events and hinder others.” Drawing on Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s observation that “human beings participate in history ...: as actors and narrators,” Minardi uses contests over the history of slavery in Massachusetts to demonstrate how narration came both to limit action and “contribute to historical transformation” (6).

*Making Slavery History* joins a growing body of scholarship that investigates antebellum historical writing and historical memory. Those fields have been deeply plowed by historians of the Civil War and Reconstruction, yet while Minardi acknowledges historians of Civil War memory as inspirations, her book also moves beyond their work in several ways. As Matthew Grow argued in a 2003 historiographical survey, studies of Civil War memory sometimes obscure the “causal relationships” between action and narration, to use Trouillot’s terms, or else embrace “a circular logic whereby racism drives memory which reinforces racism” (“The Shadow of the Civil War: a Historiography of Civil War Memory,” *American Nineteenth Century History*, 2003). Minardi, by contrast, focuses on the causal question of how history-making makes history. Each of her five chapters contains persuasive examples that the stories Bay Staters told about the past constrained and enabled certain actions. And whereas other historians often interpret historical memory and stories about the past “as reactions to or justifications of preexisting agendas or actions,” Minardi demonstrates that “tales of the past can also push action in unexpected directions” (33).

Chapter 1 begins by reconstructing how post-revolutionary historians like the Reverend Jeremy Belknap explained slave emancipation in Massachusetts; many whites, Minardi argues, accepted Belknap’s gratifying thesis that slavery had been quickly abolished during the Revolution by the force of “public opinion.” For people of color, of course, the actual process of emancipation was protracted and ambiguous. But by encouraging white Bay Staters to “see

themselves as accountable to something outside themselves," Minardi writes, Belknap's history sometimes influenced present actions in ways that benefited people of color in the state, as when the "public opinion" myth influenced state legislators to reject a proposed 1822 law banning free black immigrants to the state (33).

Chapter 2, however, shows that the opposite of exclusion was not full inclusion, either in the past or the present. Early representations of the state's Revolutionary past exalted elite martyrs like Joseph Warren while relegating men of color like Crispus Attucks to history's dustbins or margins. In an insightful analysis of John Trumbull's painting of Warren's death at Bunker Hill, Minardi shows how Trumbull literally marginalized the image's famous black figure, who was only associated many decades later with men who fought in the Revolution like Salem Poor and Peter Salem. Trumbull's depiction of this figure behind his white master was both a fitting symbol of the obstacles that real veterans of color like Edom London faced, as well as more than a symbol: elisions from the past hindered recognition in the present.

Elisions from history were never complete, however; the opposite of full remembering was not total forgetting. In parts of Chapter 2 and all of Chapter 4, Minardi considers eighteenth-century people of color who were remembered, including Primus Hall, Chloe Spear, and Phillis Wheatley, each of whom had posthumous lives in books and stories by white authors. Yet these histories of exemplary individuals, she shows, presented "black agency only within a carefully circumscribed sphere" (11). White biographers crafted narratives of "black history acceptable to white reformers" by praising the "respectability," deference, and feminized virtues of their subjects (11). In doing so they set the unequal terms on which antebellum free people of color could be recognized as respectable in the present; historical narration here constrained historical action.

Still, Minardi cautions against viewing narratives like Margaretta Matilda Odell's biography of Wheatley solely as examples of whites' "mastery" outliving the lives of slaves, controlling memory as they had controlled the way people remembered (125). First, insofar as books like Odell's were "reviews of real people's performances of respectability," they testified, however imperfectly, to the history people of color like Wheatley made; there was a reason these books appealed to abolitionists as well as those whites nostalgic for slavery days (111). Moreover, people of color were also narrators of their own pasts and could sometimes compel action on their behalf, as when the veteran Hall, by telling his

personal story of service to the nation, secured a pension from Congress. More importantly, as Chapter 5 details, antebellum black abolitionists like David Walker and William Cooper Nell used narratives to advance more radical possibilities. By “representing black men as actors in the Revolutionary past,” for example, Nell’s *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* claimed “manhood” and “citizenship” for black men in the present (133). Nell’s “research and writing” about historical actors like Attucks and Salem, argues Minardi, ultimately helped enable black men like the soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts “to make history” in ways that overran the parameters set by white writers from Belknap to Odell (165).

Minardi is careful, however, not to drop narratives by Belknap, Odell, Hall, and Nell into sharply drawn categories; hers is not a story of mainstream white memories paralleling an emancipationist memory of the Revolution kept alive by blacks and their white abolitionist allies. In the first place, Nell’s efforts “to craft a heroic narrative of black participation in American military history” were designed as much to shape the present as to represent a documented past (148). Second, by centering protests around the Bunker Hill Memorial or using images like Trumbull’s for their own purposes, Nell and abolitionist allies like William Lloyd Garrison often drew on broader commemorative traditions to make their case for different futures. Finally, as Minardi argues in her pivotal third chapter, what distinguished abolitionists from mainstream narrators of the Massachusetts past was not simply the content of what they remembered but also the way they thought about history itself. By braiding together the story of George Latimer’s rescue with the simultaneous building of the Bunker Hill Memorial, Minardi argues that while many whites viewed the past as fixed, like a monument, abolitionists recognized “mutually generative relationships between the past and the present” (171). They saw the past both as an ongoing process, like a movement, and as a way, in Phillips’s words, to educate the future. And according to Minardi, this understanding of “the relationship between the present and the past,” as much as the version of the past abolitionists remembered, was responsible for enabling a future in which the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts could exist (11).

This abbreviated summary of *Making Slavery History* hardly does justice to its many strengths. The text is filled with jewels like Minardi’s close reading of the illustrations to Nell’s *Colored Patriots*, or her observation that Roger B. Taney’s Dred Scott decision was a “historical” judgment as well as a “normative” one. Her introduction also usefully frames the book as a way forward for social

historians who agree with Walter Johnson's influential argument that "agency" has outlived its usefulness as a master trope for the field. Finally, Minardi's book admirably integrates the history of abolitionism by placing white and black actor-narrators side-by-side in her narrative.

At times, Minardi may risk overdrawing the preference of abolitionists for "movements" over "monuments." Phillips, Nell, and other abolitionists supported the erection of a monument to Crispus Attucks in the 1850s and were not always critical of monuments like the Bunker Hill Memorial, but this does not undermine her point that abolitionists imagined Revolutionary history as a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a static past. The book also sometimes overemphasizes the categorical differences between white and black abolitionists. Minardi herself questions the idea that black and white reformers represented "two abolitionisms"—"there were more than two abolitionisms in nineteenth-century America," she notes, "and the lines dividing the different ideologies and factions were hardly strictly black and white" (93). Yet when contrasting the differences between narratives of "feminized," "respectable" people of color and narratives of "manly" people of color who embraced armed resistance to slavery, Minardi depicts white abolitionists as usually more attracted to the former than the latter.

Minardi might have incorporated more evidence that challenges that generalization, like Phillips's glowing antebellum and wartime speeches on Attucks and the Haitian Revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture, or Garrison's relationships with Walker and Revolutionary War veteran James Forten, or the attraction of Thomas Wentworth Higginson and other white abolitionists to John Brown's exploits in Kansas and his plans to rally and arm black men in the South. *Making Slavery History* might have benefitted especially from more attention to Brown and his afterlife as other factors enabling the later creation of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts, especially since Brown found much support for his plans in Massachusetts and also was adept at invoking the state's past, as shown by his 1857 "Farewell to The Plymouth Rocks, Bunker Hill Monuments, Charter Oaks, and Uncle Thoms Cabbins."

Still, at least some of these omissions are understandable byproducts of Minardi's focus on post-revolutionary Massachusetts, a focus more than justified by the dividends it pays. The book allows and encourages readers to think about how its points apply to other settings and about the role that stories of other revolutions—especially the Haitian Revolution—played in facilitating or

hindering historical transformation in nineteenth-century America. These further elaborations of Minardi's argument would only complement and strengthen her central point that "the multilayered past" often does "animate the future," though in what direction depends, as Phillips recognized in 1859, on what sorts of stories and statues people build (171). Appearing as it does in the midst of the Civil War's sesquicentennial and the Tea Party's appropriation of Revolutionary symbols, Minardi's book is a passionate and much-needed reminder both of "the power of memory to move us, hopefully and purposefully, through a broken and tumultuous world," as well as the power of memory to sharpen resistance to change and hinder some futures (172).

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