ISSUE 13

Were the Abolitionists "Unrestrained Fanatics"?

YES: C. Vann Woodward, from *The Burden of Southern History,* 3d ed. (Louisiana State University Press, 1993)

NO: Donald G. Mathews, from "The Abolitionists on Slavery: The Critique Behind the Social Movement," *Journal of Southern History* (May 1967)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: C. Vann Woodward depicts John Brown as a fanatic who committed wholesale murder in Kansas in 1856 and whose ill-fated assault on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859, while admired by his fellow abolitionists and many northern intellectuals, was an irrational act of treason against the United States.

NO: Donald G. Mathews describes abolitionists as uncompromising agitators, not unprincipled fanatics, who employed flamboyant rhetoric but who crafted a balanced and thoughtful critique of the institution of slavery as a social evil that violated the nation's basic values.

Opposition to slavery in the area that became the United States dates back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Puritan leaders, such as Samuel Sewall, and Quakers, such as John Woolman and Anthony Benezet, published a number of pamphlets condemning the existence of the slave system. This religious link to antislavery sentiment is also evident in the writings of John Wesley as well as in the decision of the Society of Friends in 1688 to prohibit their members from owning bondservants. Slavery was said to be contrary to Christian principles. These attacks, however, did little to diminish the institution. Complaints that the English government had instituted a series of measures that "enslaved" the colonies in British North America raised thorny questions about the presence of *real* slavery in those colonies. How could American colonists demand their freedom from King George III, who was cast in the role of oppressive master, while denying freedom and liberty to African American bondsmen?

Such a contradiction inspired a gradual emancipation movement in the North, which often was accompanied by compensation for the former slave owners.

In addition, antislavery societies sprang up throughout the nation to continue the crusade against bondage. Interestingly, the majority of these organizations were located in the South. Prior to the 1830s, the most prominent antislavery organization was the American Colonization Society, which offered a two-fold program: (1) gradual, compensated emancipation of slaves and (2) exportation of the freed men to colonies outside the boundaries of the United States, mostly to Africa.

In the 1830s, antislavery activity underwent an important transformation. A new strain of antislavery sentiment expressed itself in the abolitionist movement. Drawing momentum both from the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening and the example set by England (which prohibited slavery in its imperial holdings in 1833), abolitionists called for the immediate end to slavery without compensation to masters for the loss of their property. Abolitionists viewed slavery not so much as a practical problem to be resolved, but rather as a moral offense incapable of resolution through traditional channels of political compromise. In January 1831, William Lloyd Garrison, who for many came to symbolize the abolitionist crusade, published the first issue of *The Liberator,* a newspaper dedicated to the immediate end to slavery. In his first editorial, Garrison expressed the self-righteous indignation of many in the abolitionist movement when he warned slaveholders and their supporters to "urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD. . . ."

Unfortunately for Garrison, relatively few Americans were inclined to respond positively to his call. His newspaper generated little interest outside Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and other major urban centers of the North. This situation, however, changed within a matter of months. In August 1831, a slave preacher named Nat Turner led a rebellion of slaves in Southampton County, Virginia, that resulted in the death of fifty-eight whites. Although the revolt was quickly suppressed and Turner and his supporters were executed, the incident spread fear throughout the South. Governor John B. Floyd of Virginia turned an accusatory finger toward the abolitionists when he concluded that the Turner uprising was "undoubtedly designed and matured by unrestrained fanatics in some of the neighboring states." Moreover, it would be charged, these abolitionists contributed to a crisis environment that degenerated over the next generation and ultimately produced civil war.

One such abolitionist was John Brown who became a martyr in the antislavery pantheon when he was executed following his unsuccessful raid on the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1859. The late noted historian of the American South, C. Vann Woodward, explains that Brown had no qualms about using violence to conduct his fanatical war on slavery.

In the second selection, Donald Mathews insists that, although abolitionists often employed heated rhetoric in their condemnation of the slave system, they were neither irrational nor illogical. Instead, he concludes, the abolitionists were intelligent reformers whose opposition to slavery was presented in a thoughtful, balanced critique of slavery.

C. Vann Woodward

YES

John Brown's Private War

The figure of John Brown is still wrapped in obscurity and myth. . . . His fifty-nine years were divided sharply into two periods. The obscurity of his first fifty-five years was of the sort natural to a humble life unassociated with events of importance. The obscurity of his last four years, filled with conspiratorial activities, was in large part the deliberate work of Brown, his fellow conspirators, and their admirers. . . .

After 1855 John Brown abandoned his unprofitable business career when he was almost penniless and for the rest of his life was without remunerative employment. He depended for support upon donations from people whom he convinced of his integrity and reliability. Here and elsewhere there is strong evidence that Brown was somehow able to inspire confidence and intense personal loyalty.

The Kansas phase of Brown's guerrilla warfare has given rise to the "Legend of Fifty-six," a fabric of myth that has been subjected to a more rigorous examination than any other phase of Brown's life has ever received. [James C.] Malin establishes beyond question that "John Brown did not appear to have had much influence either in making or marring Kansas history," that his exploits "brought tragedy to innocent settlers," but that "in no place did he appear as a major factor." He also establishes a close correlation between the struggle over freedom and slavery and local clashes over conflicting land titles on the Kansas frontier, and he points out that "the business of stealing horses under the cloak of fighting for freedom and running them off to the Nebraska-Iowa border for sale" is a neglected aspect of the struggle for "Bleeding Kansas." John Brown and his men engaged freely and profitably in this business and justified their plunder as the spoils of war. Two covenants that Brown drew up for his followers contained a clause specifically providing for the division of captured property among the members of his guerrilla band.

It would be a gross distortion, however, to dismiss John Brown as a frontier horse thief. He was much too passionately and fanatically in earnest about his war on slavery to permit of any such oversimplification. His utter fearlessness, courage, and devotion to the cause were greatly admired by respectable antislavery men who saw in the old Puritan an ideal revolutionary leader.

One exploit of Brown in Kansas, however, would seem to have put him forever beyond the pale of association with intelligent opponents of slavery. This was the famous Pottawatomie massacre of May 24, 1856. John Brown, leading four of his sons, a son-in-law, and two other men, descended by night upon an unsuspecting settlement of four proslavery families. Proceeding from one home to another the raiders took five men out, murdered them, and left their bodies horribly mutilated. None of the victims was a slaveholder, and two of them were born in Germany and had no contact with the South. By way of explanation Brown said the murders had been "decreed by Almighty God, ordained from Eternity." He later denied responsibility for the act, and some of the Eastern capitalists and intellectuals who supported him refused to believe him guilty. In view of the report of the murders that was laid before the country on July 11, 1856, in the form of a committee report in the House of Representatives, it is somewhat difficult to excuse such ignorance among intelligent men. . . .

In the spring of 1858 plans for a raid on Virginia began to take definite shape. To a convention of fellow conspirators in Chatham, Canada, in May, John Brown presented his remarkable "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States." It represented the form of government he proposed to establish by force of arms with a handful of conspirators and an armed insurrection of slaves. Complete with legislative, executive, and judicial branches, Brown's revolutionary government was in effect a military dictatorship, since all acts of his congress had to be approved by the commander-in-chief of the army in order to become valid. Needless to say, John Brown was elected commander-in-chief.

By July, 1859, Commander-in-Chief Brown had established himself at a farm on the Maryland side of the Potomac River, four miles north of Harpers Ferry. There he assembled twenty-one followers and accumulated ammunition and other supplies, including 200 revolvers, 200 rifles, and 950 pikes specially manufactured for the slaves he expected to rise up in insurrection. On Sunday night, October 16, after posting a guard of three men at the farm, he set forth with eighteen followers, five of them Negroes, and all of them young men, to start his war of liberation and found his abolitionist republic. Brown's first objective, to capture the United States arsenal at Harpers Ferry, was easily accomplished since it was without military guard. In the Federal armory and the rifle works, also captured, were sufficient arms to start the bloodiest slave insurrection in history.

The commander-in-chief appears to have launched his invasion without any definite plan of campaign and then proceeded to violate every military principle in the book. He cut himself off from his base of supplies, failed to keep open his only avenues of retreat, dispersed his small force, and bottled the bulk of them up in a trap where defeat was inevitable. "In fact, it was so absurd," remarked Abraham Lincoln, "that the slaves, with all their ignorance, saw plainly enough it could not succeed." Not one of them joined Brown voluntarily, and those he impressed quickly departed. The insurrectionists killed one United States Marine and four inhabitants of Harpers Ferry, including the mayor and a Negro freeman. Ten of their own number, including two of Brown's sons, were killed, five were taken prisoner by a small force of Marines commanded by Robert E. Lee, and seven escaped, though two of them were later arrested. John Brown's insurrection ended in a tragic and dismal failure.

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When news of the invasion was first flashed across the country, the most common reaction was that this was obviously the act of a madman, that John Brown was insane. This explanation was particularly attractive to Republican politicians and editors, whose party suffered the keenest embarrassment from the incident. Fall elections were on, and the new Congress was about to convene. Democrats immediately charged that John Brown's raid was the inevitable consequence of the "irresistible-conflict" and "higher-law" abolitionism preached by Republican leaders William H. Seward and Salmon P. Chase. "Brown's invasion," wrote Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, "has thrown us, who were in a splendid position, into a defensive position. . . . If we are defeated next year we shall owe it to that foolish and insane movement of Brown's." The emphasis on insanity was taken up widely by Wilson's contemporaries and later adopted by historians.

It seems best to deal with the insanity question promptly, for it is likely to confuse the issue and cause us to miss the meaning of Harpers Ferry. In dealing with the problem it is important not to blink, as many of his biographers have done, at the evidence of John Brown's close association with insanity in both his heredity and his environment. In the Brown Papers at the Library of Congress are nineteen affidavits signed by relatives and friends attesting the record of insanity in the Brown family. John Brown's maternal grandmother and his mother both died insane. His three aunts and two uncles, sisters and brothers of his mother, were intermittently insane, and so was his only sister, her daughter, and one of his brothers. Of six first cousins, all more or less mad, two were deranged from time to time, two had been repeatedly committed to the state insane asylum, and two were still confined at the time. Of John Brown's immediate family, his first wife and one of his sons died insane, and a second son was insane at intervals. On these matters the affidavits, signers of which include Brown's uncle, a half brother, a brother-in-law, and three first cousins, are in substantial agreement. On the sanity of John Brown himself, however, opinion varied. Several believed that he was a "monomaniac," one that he was insane on subjects of religion and slavery, and an uncle thought his nephew had been "subject to periods of insanity" for twenty years. . . .

"John Brown may be a lunatic," observed the Boston *Post,* but if so, "then one-fourth of the people of Massachusetts are madmen," and perhaps three-fourths of the ministers of religion. Begging that Brown's life be spared, Amos A. Lawrence wrote Governor Wise: "Brown is a Puritan whose mind has become disordered by hardship and illness. He has the qualities wh. endear him to our people." The association of ideas was doubtless unintentional, but to the Virginian it must have seemed that Lawrence was saying that in New England a disordered mind was an endearing quality. The Reverend J. M. Manning of Old South Church, Boston, pronounced Harpers Ferry "an unlawful, a foolhardy, a suicidal act" and declared, "I stand before it wondering and admiring." Horace Greeley called it "the work of a madman" for which he had not "one reproachful word," and for the "grandeur and nobility" of which he was "reverently grateful." And the New York *Independent* declared that while "Harpers Ferry was insane, the controlling motive of this demonstration was sublime." It was both foolhardy and godly, insane and sublime, treasonous and admirable.

The prestige and character of the men who lent John Brown active, if sometimes secret, support likewise suggest caution in dismissing Harpers Ferry as merely the work of a madman. Among Brown's fellow conspirators the most notable were the so-called Secret Six. Far from being horse thieves and petty traders, the Secret Six came from the cream of Northern society. Capitalist, philanthropist, philosopher, surgeon, professor, minister—they were men of reputability and learning, four of them with Harvard degrees.

With a Harvard Divinity School degree, a knowledge of twenty languages, and a library of sixteen thousand volumes, Theodore Parker was perhaps the most prodigiously learned American of his time. In constant correspondence with the leading Republican politicians, he has been called "the Conscience of a Party." What Gerrit Smith, the very wealthy philanthropist and one-time congressman of Peterboro, New York, lacked in mental endowments he made up in good works—earnest efforts to improve the habits of his fellow men. These included not only crusades against alcohol and tobacco in all forms, but also coffee, tea, meat, and spices—"almost everything which gave pleasure," according to his biographer. Generous with donations to dietary reform, dress reform, woman's rights, educational and "non-resistance" movements, Smith took no interest whatever in factory and labor reform, but he was passionately absorbed in the antislavery movement and a liberal contributor to John Brown. Dr. Samuel G. Howe of Boston, husband of the famous Julia Ward Howe, was justly renowned for his humanitarian work for the blind and mentally defective. In his youth he had gone on a Byronic crusade in Greece against the Turk. These experiences contributed greatly to his moral prestige, if little to his political sophistication. The most generous man of wealth among the conspirators was George L. Stearns of Boston, a prosperous manufacturer of lead pipe. In the opinion of this revolutionary capitalist, John Brown was "the representative man of this century, as Washington was of the last." Finally there were two younger men, fledgling conspirators. The son of a prosperous Boston merchant who was bursar of Harvard, Thomas Wentworth Higginson became pastor of a church in Worcester after taking his divinity degree at Harvard. Young Franklin B. Sanborn was an apostle of Parker and a protégé of Emerson, who persuaded Sanborn to take charge of a school in Concord.

The most tangible service the Secret Six rendered the conspiracy lay in secretly diverting to John Brown, for use at Harpers Ferry, money and arms that had been contributed to the Massachusetts-Kansas Aid Committee for use in "Bleeding Kansas." . . . By this means the Kansas Committee was converted into a respectable front for subversive purposes, and thousands of innocent contributors to what appeared to be a patriotic organization discovered later that they had furnished rifles for a treasonous attack on a Federal arsenal. . . .

The Secret Six appear to have been fascinated by the drama of conspiratorial activity. There were assumed names, coded messages, furtive committee meetings, dissembling of motives, and secret caches of arms. And over all the romance and glamor of a noble cause—the liberation of man. Although they knew perfectly well the general purpose of Brown, the Secret Six were careful to request him not to tell them the precise time and place of the invasion. The wily old revolutionist could have told them much that they did not know about the

psychology of fellow travelers. Brown had earlier laid down this strategy for conspirators who were hard pressed: "Go into the houses of your most prominent and influential white friends with your wives; and that will effectually fasten upon them the suspicion of being connected with you, and will compel them to make a common cause with you, whether they would otherwise live up to their professions or not." The same strategy is suggested by Brown's leaving behind, in the Maryland farmhouse where they would inevitably be captured, all his private papers, hundreds of letters of himself and followers, implicating nobody knew how many respectable fellow travelers. . . .

The assistance that the Secret Six conspirators were able to give John Brown and his Legend was as nothing compared with that rendered by other Northern intellectuals. Among them was the cultural and moral aristocracy of America in the period that has been called a "Renaissance." Some of these men, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau among them, had met and admired Brown and even made small contributions to his cause. But they were safely beyond reproach of the law and were never taken into his confidence in the way that the Secret Six were. Their service was rendered after the event in justifying and glorifying Brown and his invasion.

In this work the intellectuals were ably assisted by a genius, a genius at self-justification—John Brown himself. From his prison cell he poured out a stream of letters, serene and restrained, filled with Biblical language and fired with overpowering conviction that his will and God's were one and the same. These letters and his famous speech at the trial constructed for the hero a new set of motives and plans and a new role. For Brown had changed roles. In October he invaded Virginia as a conqueror armed for conquest, carrying with him guns and pikes for the army he expected to rally to his standard and a new constitution to replace the one he overthrew. In that role he was a miserable failure. Then in November he declared at his trial: "I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make an insurrection." He only intended to liberate slaves without bloodshed, as he falsely declared he had done in Missouri the year before. How these statements can be reconciled with the hundreds of pikes, revolvers, and rifles, the capture of an armory, the taking of hostages, the killing of unarmed civilians, the destruction of government property, and the arming of slaves is difficult to see. Nor is it possible to believe that Brown thought he could seize a Federal arsenal, shoot down United States Marines, and overthrow a government without committing treason. . . .

Emerson seemed hesitant in his first private reactions to Harpers Ferry. Thoreau, on the other hand, never hesitated a moment. On the day after Brown's capture he compared the hero's inevitable execution with the crucifixion of Christ. Harpers Ferry was "the best news that America ever had"; Brown, "the bravest and humanest man in all the country," "a Transcendentalist above all," and he declared: "I rejoice that I live in this age, that I was his contemporary." Emerson quickly fell into line with Thoreau, and in his November 8 lecture on "Courage" described Brown as "the saint, whose fate yet hangs in suspense, but whose martyrdom, if it shall be perfected, will make the gallows as glorious as the cross." Within a few weeks Emerson gave three important lectures, in all of which he glorified John Brown.

With the Sage of Concord and his major prophet in accord on the martyr, the majority of the transcendental hierarchy sooner or later joined in—William E. Channing, Bronson and Louisa May Alcott, Longfellow, Bryant, and Lowell, and of course Wendell Phillips and Theodore Parker. Parker pronounced Brown "not only a martyr . . . but also a SAINT." Thoreau and Henry Ward Beecher frankly admitted they hoped Brown would hang. To spare a life would be to spoil a martyr. They were interested in him not as a man but as a symbol, a moral ideal, and a saint for a crusade. In the rituals of canonization the gallows replaced the cross as a symbol. . . .

The task to which the intellectuals of the cult dedicated themselves was the idealizing of John Brown as a symbol of the moral order and the social purpose of the Northern cause. Wendell Phillips expressed this best when he declared in the Boston Music Hall: "'Law' and 'order' are only means for the halting ignorance of the last generation. John Brown is the impersonation of God's order and God's law, moulding a better future, and setting for it an example." In substituting the new revolutionary law and order for traditional law and order, the intellectuals encountered some tough problems in morals and values. It was essential for them to justify a code of political methods and morals that was at odds with the Anglo-American tradition.

John Brown's own solution to this problem was quite simple. It is set forth in the preamble of his Provisional Constitution of the United States, which declares that in reality slavery is an "unjustifiable War of one portion of its citizens upon another." War, in which all is fair, amounted to a suspension of ethical restraints. This type of reasoning is identical with that of the revolutionaries who hold that class struggle is in reality a class war. The assumption naturally facilitates the justification of deeds otherwise indefensible. These might include the dissembling of motives, systematic deception, theft, murder, or the liquidation of an enemy class. . . .

The crisis of Harpers Ferry was a crisis of means, not of ends. John Brown did not raise the question of whether slavery should be abolished or tolerated. That question had been raised in scores of ways and debated for a generation. Millions held strong convictions on the subject. Upon abolition, as an *end*, there was no difference between John Brown and the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. But as to the *means* of attaining abolition, there was as much difference between them, so far as the record goes, as there is between the modern British Labour Party and the government of Soviet Russia on the means of abolishing capitalism. The Anti-Slavery Society was solemnly committed to the position of nonviolent means. In the very petition that Lewis Tappan, secretary of the society, addressed to Governor Wise in behalf of Brown he repeated the rubric about "the use of all carnal weapons for deliverance from bondage." But in their rapture over Brown as martyr and saint the abolitionists lost sight of their differences with him over the point of means and ended by totally compromising their creed of nonviolence.

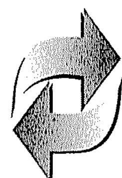
But what of those who clung to the democratic principle that differences should be settled by ballots and that the will of the majority should prevail? Phillips pointed out: "In God's world there are no majorities, no minorities; one, on God's side, is a majority." And Thoreau asked, "When were the good

and the brave ever in a majority?" So much for majority rule. What of the issue of treason? The Reverend Fales H. Newhall of Roxbury declared that the word "treason" had been "made holy in the American language"; and the Reverend Edwin M. Wheelock of Boston blessed "the sacred, and the radiant 'treason' of John Brown."

No aversion to bloodshed seemed to impede the spread of the Brown cult. William Lloyd Garrison thought that "every slaveholder has forfeited his right to live" if he impeded emancipation. The Reverend Theodore Parker predicted a slave insurrection in which "The Fire of Vengeance" would run "from man to man, from town to town" through the South. "What shall put it out?" he asked. "The White Man's blood." The Reverend Mr. Wheelock thought Brown's "mission was to inaugurate slave insurrection as the divine weapon of the antislavery cause." He asked: "Do we shrink from the bloodshed that would follow?" and answered, "No such wrong [as slavery] was ever cleansed by rosewater." Rather than see slavery continued the Reverend George B. Cheever of New York declared: "It were infinitely better that three hundred thousand slaveholders were abolished, struck out of existence." In these pronouncements the doctrine that the end justifies the means had arrived pretty close to justifying the liquidation of an enemy class.

The reactions of the extremists have been stressed in part because it was the extremist view that eventually prevailed in the apotheosis of John Brown and, in part, because by this stage of the crisis each section tended to judge the other by the excesses of a few. "Republicans were all John Browns to the Southerners," as Professor Dwight L. Dumond has observed, "and slaveholders were all Simon Legrees to the Northerners." As a matter of fact Northern conservatives and unionists staged huge anti-Brown demonstrations that equaled or outdid those staged by the Brown partisans. Nathan Appleton wrote a Virginian: "I have never in my long life seen a fuller or more enthusiastic demonstration" than the anti-Brown meeting in Faneuil Hall in Boston. The Republican press described a similar meeting in New York as "the largest and most enthusiastic" ever held in that city. Northern politicians of high rank, including Lincoln, Douglas, Seward, Edward Everett, and Henry Wilson, spoke out against John Brown and his methods. The Republican party registered its official position by a plank in the 1860 platform denouncing the Harpers Ferry raid. Lincoln approved of Brown's execution, "even though he agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong." Agreement on ends did not mean agreement on means. "That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason," said Lincoln. . . .

Among the Brown partisans not one has been found but who believed that Harpers Ferry had resulted in great gain for the extremist cause. So profoundly were they convinced of this that they worried little over the conservative dissent. "How vast the change in men's hearts!" exclaimed Phillips. "Insurrection was a harsh, horrid word to millions a month ago." Now it was "the lesson of the hour." Garrison rejoiced that thousands who could not listen to his gentlest rebuke ten years before "now easily swallow John Brown whole, and his rifle in the bargain." "They all called him crazy then," wrote Thoreau; "Who calls him crazy now?" To the poet it seemed that "the North is suddenly all Transcendentalist." On the day John Brown was hanged church bells were tolled in commemoration in New England towns, out along the Mohawk Valley, in Cleveland and the Western Reserve, in Chicago and northern Illinois. In Albany one hundred rounds were fired from a cannon. Writing to his daughter the following day, Joshua Giddings of Ohio said, "I find the hatred of slavery greatly intensified by the fate of Brown and men are ready to march to Virginia and dispose of her despotism at once." It was not long before they *were* marching to Virginia, and marching to the tune of "John Brown's Body." . . .



Donald G. Mathews

NO

The Abolitionists on Slavery: The Critique Behind the Social Movement

The abolitionists as agitators and moralists tried to change the mind of the American democrat. They appealed to his better nature and thundered against his fallen condition in pulpit, press, and petition in order to obtain for Negroes the same opportunity that white men had to participate in the nation's destiny. The goal was noble indeed, but the movement which tried to change American society was, as all human enterprises, compromised by the diverse motives, ideologies, and activities of its adherents. . . . Part of the ambiguity that supposedly shrouds antislavery history involves the assumption of many scholars that, since abolitionists were trying to destroy slavery, they could not have understood it. Careful investigation, however, will show that this assumption is untrue. . . .

[I]n reading what abolitionists said about slavery and slaveholders, one gets the distinct impression of exaggerated rhetoric and elaborate condemnation on the one hand combined with astute insight, humane sympathy, and wide knowledge on the other. In fact, if one takes Herbert Butterfield's advice to practice "imaginative sympathy" in dealing with the past, he may almost conclude that abolitionists were right when they claimed to be able to understand slavery better than anyone else since they were "uncorrupted by a bribe." In any event, behind the flamboyant rhetoric and beyond the vicious allusions of popular oratory there was a legitimate critique of slavery. In order to discuss this critique it will not do to make distinctions between rational and irrational, sensible and nonsensical, sober and emotional abolitionists, since these categories are too vague and invidious for serious discussion. But it might be useful for the historian to make a distinction between the various functions of abolitionism, between its functions as a social movement, as a large-scale agitation, and finally as a legitimate and thoughtful critique of the institution of slavery. Once these distinctions are made, it may be easier to see that abolitionists held a balanced view of slavery even as they attempted to change prevalent attitudes towards it. . . .

[T]housands of people joined the abolition movement in some capacity. They were encouraged to do so by itinerant organizers who built up a network of local and state agencies and saw to it that the ideas of the movement were broadcast and perpetuated by subscription to one of the many antislavery periodicals. Slogans such as "immediate emancipation without expatriation" emerged from the endless discussions and articles which poured forth from the publicists who shaped the ideas of the movement. Along with the slogans often came the same lack of humor and viciousness of language which characterized the Great Revival's attack upon sin, the Democrat's attack upon Whig, and the rhetoric of many social movements which aimed at conversion either in religion or politics. Thus, when reading abolition literature, one is not called upon to explain away its exaggerations, but to understand them as a function of a movement which existed to perpetuate itself regardless of the value of its goals. As revivalists had been taught to be specific and harsh and to allow no "false comforts for sinners," so abolitionists acted in relation to slaveholders and slavery as they labored to build a movement. When they addressed those whom they hoped to convert they were as uncompromising as William Lloyd Garrison promised to be in the first edition of his *Liberator.* Unconditional attack was simply the approved method of the temperance reformation and the revivals; abolitionist crusaders saw no reason to discard weapons that had been so successful in previous sallies against evil. . . .

Nevertheless, when one takes into account how much abolitionist rhetoric had to accomplish and goes behind the functionally angry words to investigate what the historical evidence reveals, he finds a balanced, intelligent, and sometimes sophisticated understanding of the world which the antislavery radicals were trying to change. Historians divide abolitionists into Garrisonians, New Yorkers, denominationalists, and many more subgroups beloved of the specialist. But whether one does this or simply takes them straight as noncolonizationist, antislavery moralists (not politicians or nonextensionists), he will see that abolitionists (1) thought of slaveholders not merely as sinners but also as good men; (2) thought slavery a complex institution; but (3) understood it primarily as arbitrary and absolute power.

One of the basic charges leveled against abolitionists has been that they were morally simplistic in their condemnation of slaveholders. Repudiating social complexity as a legitimate vindication of slaveholding, they demanded that the abolition of slavery be begun at once. Years of waiting for conscientious Southerners to find a way to ease slavery out of existence had produced nothing to convince radical antislavery men that Negro servitude would die without purposeful action. The matter was made urgent for the revivalistically oriented abolitionists by their conviction that slavery was a sin: it was not a moral evil which everyone could regret and for which no one was responsible; it was not a political evil to be left to compromising politicians; it was not an economic evil to be left to self-interested slaveholders to manage—it was a sin. It broke the laws of God. It made man into merchantable property and deprived him of his humanity—his freedom to make of himself what he would. Thus, anyone involved in slavery as a master was culpably responsible to God. This conclusion put abolitionists in the position of calling decent, churchgoing Southerners sinners. Even though they worshiped three times a day, attended prayer meeting on Wednesday night, took their slaves with them

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to camp meeting, paid their debts, and gave money to foreign missions, slaveholders were sinners. This view became for many contemporaries as well as for historians the hallmark of abolitionist attitudes towards the South: abolitionists thought of slaveholders and their advocates as evil people.

In reaction to what they supposed was moralistic simplicity, antiabolitionists and later-day historians committed what could be called "the fallacy of misplaced righteousness." That is, by implication they attributed the personal moral respectability of individual Southerners to the institution of slavery. They pointed out that abolitionists were disastrously overstating their case by neglecting the complexities of the historical process, human motivation, and institutional entrenchment. Actually, the South was peopled, not by sinners as abolitionists so self-righteously assumed, but rather by good men caught in a difficult situation. Many Southern slaveholders were decent people, it was said, who secretly regretted the deep injustices of slavery, who treated their slaves well, and sent them to church on Sunday. Some Negroes even attained some status within the system. One ought not to curse good masters who were unfortunately involved in slavery, but praise them for responsibility in the midst of unjust institutions. These good men—reluctant and kindly slaveholders trying to make slavery as easy as possible for the slaves—were the tragic victims of a cruel and unjust fate. Furthermore, those people who believed the abolitionists irresponsible pointed out that slavery was not so bad as Theodore Dwight Weld claimed it to be in his pamphlet of 1839, *American Slavery as It Is.* As all sections, the South had its evil men (such as slave traders) who gave its peculiar institutions a bad name. The good, however, should not be confused with them and called sinners.

The "fallacy of misplaced righteousness" obscures what reformers are talking about in times of social change. Good men, abolitionists pointed out, were the chief vindicators of American Negro slavery. Had the antislavery vanguard been totally unaware of the moral character of slavery and its relationships, they could justly be accused of being irrelevant fanatics. But the abolitionists were not content with middle-class morality as some historians have been. The simple assumption that abolitionists thought of Southern slaveholders only as unregenerate sinners needs to be challenged to reveal what they did in fact say and simply to set the story straight.

The Missouri controversies had educated thoughtful Southerners to believe that Northern interest in slavery was primarily political. Therefore, they were in no mood to appreciate the care with which some abolitionists attempted to explain that slavery was a national problem and that sectional power or virtue was not really at issue. Abolitionists did maintain, however, that their not being from the South was an aid in gaining perspective. Mrs. Lydia Maria Child wrote in her pamphlet on slavery in 1833:

> It would be very absurd to imagine that the inhabitants of one State are worse than the inhabitants of another, unless some peculiar circumstances, of universal influence, tend to make them so. Human nature is everywhere the same; but developed differently, by different incitements and temptations. . . . If we were educated at the South, we should no doubt vindicate slavery, and inherit as a birthright all the evils it engrafts upon the character. If they lived on our rocky soil, and under our inclement skies, their shrewdness would sometimes border on knavery, and their frugality sometimes degenerate into parsimony. We both have our virtues and our faults, induced by the influences under which we live. . . .

Abolitionists were willing to admit the obvious: that people accustomed to slavery would be inclined to vindicate it.

In spite of this fact, there were Southerners to whom antislavery men thought they might effectively appeal—the responsible, churchgoing, humane slaveholders who would be sensitive to an honest discussion of slavery. Wrote a Methodist: "I sincerely sympathize with the slave, and as truly with many masters. I believe that northern men would be southern men in their circumstances; and that southern men would be northern men in ours, where moral principle was equally felt." The operative words were "where moral principle was equally felt." Abolitionists believed (or at least a great many of them did) that the moral regeneration of America institutionalized by steady increases in church membership would be the energizing force of abolition. They had seen this moral regeneration become moral action in the creation of new benevolent societies, and they saw no reason why slaves could not be helped just as much as drunkards, prostitutes, and the heathen. Thus they preached a new gospel because, as Orange Scott, the Methodist antislavery leader, wrote, it was "by preaching against great and destructive evils, *particularly, pointedly,* and *perseveringly,* that the world [was] to be reformed."

Preaching even to "good men" did not work. James G. Birney's special pilgrimage demonstrates what it did not take abolitionists everywhere long to find out: that the so-called good people of the South would not listen. As a colonization agent in the South in 1833, Birney, the owner of several slaves and heir to many others, found that the more he condemned slavery the less enthusiasm he engendered among his listeners. Nevertheless, he persisted in his efforts to convince the respectable portion of the community that it ought to think about abolishing slavery as soon as humanly possible. After his own conversion to abolitionism, Birney tried to convince the Kentucky Presbyterian clergy to urge abolition—but the result was a mild and evasive answer. He then tried to reach the community by reasonable discussion in an antislavery paper—but he was driven from Kentucky as a traitor. Even in the North, Birney's appeal to the churches as America's great moral institutions was repudiated by those whom he had hoped to convert. Not surprisingly, Birney and most of his abolitionist confreres were convinced that the good people were the bulwarks of slavery.

The morality ascribed to responsible people in the South did not impress abolitionists. Some conservative antislavery men tried to develop theories of moral responsibility which allowed for "moral men in immoral society," but most insisted that all slaveholders would have to be held responsible for their status. In this conclusion they denied the relevance of explanations deriving from the "fallacy of misplaced righteousness." Abolitionists admitted that slaveholders might be humanely motivated, that they might treat slaves well, that they might preach the Gospel (however mutilated) to them; but, in all cases, the Negroes were still slaves. This fact alone ran contrary to any concept of freedom, human dignity, and Christian love. Slavery was too evil in principle

to be vindicated by the heroic sadness of a conscience-stricken master or by the sympathy of the most gentle mistress. "In the hand of a good man or a bad man . . . *this principle is the same*;" wrote one abolitionist, "it [slavery] possesses not one redeeming quality." In other words, the fact that Southern slaveholders were good men was not relevant in the discussion of slavery. . . .

When abolitionists turned from the slaveholder to the system he represented they were no more simplistic behind their bombastic rhetoric than when they were dealing with the Pollyanna propriety of the "fallacy of misplaced righteousness." They could all agree that slavery was a complex, well-developed social and economic institution which could not be destroyed in one day. In fact, it would take so long to extinguish the psychological, moral, and cultural scars of slavery that its abolition should be begun immediately. Whether the abolitionist wanted "immediate emancipation gradually accomplished" or "immediate unconditional emancipation," he had no intention of irresponsibly turning the slaves loose without some guidance. From the beginning of their agitation abolitionists could agree with William Lloyd Garrison's plea that Negro slaves be emancipated according to carefully worked out and equitably executed legal procedures which would in the end guarantee Negroes the equality they had been so long denied. The immediacy in immediate emancipation referred to the revivalist-agitator's desire to begin at once in order that something might be done eventually; but the formula in no way contradicted the abolitionist's belief that slavery was not a simple institution. . . .

They maintained that their agitation and ethical importunity was justified because of slavery's effect upon the Negro and its ultimate character as absolute power. It was understood as absolute power because the slave had no legal claim upon the white man with which he could protect himself and because that most precious of American possessions, the right to one's own labor, was denied him. Slaves worked not because they would be better off if they did, but because they would be worse off if they did not. Force, fear, and fraud made slavery operate, abolitionists charged, and what they meant was that men's labor was extracted from them by an inherited system of bondage which ultimately relied upon brute force. They meant that men faced the future not with the hope and courage of the American Hercules but only with despair. And by fraud they meant that the church's Gospel had been used to enslave not free men's minds, that the law and planned ignorance which perpetuated slavery deprived Negroes of the same kind of advancement enjoyed by other Americans. They meant that the Negro was, for all intents and purposes, completely in the hands of the white man.

The best evidence of this fact, abolitionists thought, was the cruelties inflicted by whites on Negroes. Every discussion of the abolitionist attack on slavery includes an appropriate section for atrocities; and this was certainly a major aspect of antislavery propaganda. Everyone who has read this material is well acquainted with the vivid portrayal of all the infamies men can inflict upon their fellows, a striking method by which antislavery publicists could "clank the chains" of slavery in the ears of indifferent Americans. The atrocity stories, while possibly interesting in themselves to some abolitionists and historians, were printed not merely to arouse hatred of the kindly old slaveholder but also to demonstrate that slavery ultimately meant absolute and unchecked power. Abolitionists knew that some slaves were better treated than others—house servants and artisans were assumed to be safer than slaves less visible to the public—and they admitted that some slaveholders could be kind to their servants. But the significant aspect of slavery was not kind treatment. And cruelty was considered not as an exception to kind treatment, but as the natural result of the power to give or withhold kind treatment. With no effective way to defend themselves against the masters, Negroes bore mutilations, brands, and scars as identification not only of runaways in advertisements but also of the entire slave system. Men owned slaves not for altruistic purposes but to exploit their labor; and since the incentive to work was the thoroughly negative one of force not wages, since Negroes as men would intentionally frustrate the masters, and since men with absolute power used it, the natural result of slavery was cruelty. This was of course an abstract argument, but mutilated runaways seemed convincing empirical proof of its truth. Halos there were over the heads of some slaveowners; but scars on the backs of runaways were more significant. . . .

Corruption of people was a primary concern in the abolitionists' scheme of values, but slavery also corrupted the nation and the South. It became abstracted as diabolical power which stripped Americans of the security of their persons. It deprived them of their rights to petition Congress, to assemble peaceably, to publish freely, to dissent from majority opinion. And when the fugitive slave law was passed in 1850, the South's peculiar institution was interpreted as undermining the security of Northern legal processes. Southerners' fear of slaves, of new ideas, and of other white men was weakening the entire nation. Not only was this insecurity affecting freedom, but also the national defense. For if Americans were ever called to fight a strong foreign enemy, their efforts would be endangered by limiting available manpower to white men and limiting those whites' effectiveness by the necessity of policing slaves.

Slavery had corrupted the American economy even as it had its politics and security. It endangered all property by using arguments based upon property rights to defend holding men as slaves. The repugnancy men had for slavery could conceivably be transferred to property, thus devaluing the foundation of American wealth and stability. This consideration was overshadowed by the much more important concern for the economic disadvantages of slavery. Although an economic argument was never emphasized to the exclusion of others, it was usually present in abolitionist literature. Richard Hildreth was particularly eloquent in his *Despotism in America*, where he argued that slavery was a bad labor system which crippled American economic growth. Labor (the principal source of value) was not free to produce and consume at full capacity in a slave society. Slave laborers were presumed to be less productive than free because the former had no positive incentive. Only force and authority kept them at their tasks whereas wages and the hope of advancement would increase productivity if they were free.

Not only were the South and nation deprived of the full labor of the Negroes, but also of the whites. The low status of labor as being proper only to slaves supposedly paralyzed the poor whites as well as enervated the masters, whose disdain for work precluded the full utilization of labor resources. Slavery

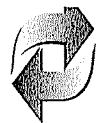
not only penalized the poor white man by devaluing labor, but also by requiring greater capitalization for expansion in the South than in the North. Since Southerners bought their laborers instead of hiring them, only the rich could increase their power appreciably. These supposed limitations on economic expansion were linked also with the fact that slaves did not consume as much as free laborers since their desires were so curtailed. With consumption at a low point, there was consequently less prosperity. This theory that slavery hindered optimum economic growth was complemented by other economic arguments. Most posited the superiority of industrial over agrarian society or accepted slavery as a single explanation of even those economic problems which derived from a one-crop economy. But in the economic and political sphere as in the personal, abolitionists understood slavery to be an unwarranted delimitation of freedom—arbitrary power.

There are many deficiencies in the arguments that abolitionists directed against slavery. Their data may have been faulty, but not the direction in which their understanding was taking them—towards an emphasis on social justice. Their objectivity was of course compromised by their partisan activity; but with all of the scientific knowledge of the twentieth century they would have come essentially to the same conclusions they reached a hundred years earlier. They would have admitted all the findings of historical investigation because they had a great appreciation for facts. But they would also have insisted that slavery, for all of its variety and complexity, still meant the white man's absolute power over the Negro.

Reflecting upon this view, one is struck by the contrast between the abolitionists' understanding of complexity and social determinism as opposed to their much-emphasized voluntarism. They were impressed by the effects of man's social situation in determining his values, goals, and general understanding, and yet they expected some men somehow to transcend their social context and by a sheer act of will break the chains binding their minds as well as their slaves. Frustrated in this, abolitionists retreated either to politics or to the mental and moral utopia of being "right" in a world that was wrong. Their "realism" in doing this is not so important as their pioneering attempt to understand social determinism and at the same time to thwart it. . . .

This kind of thinking about slavery, linked as it was with social agitation, personal frustration, civil war, and incomplete understanding was never fulfilled by a purposive and just transition from slavery to freedom. . . . But unlike most Americans, the abolitionists had at least tried to understand slavery in a new perspective even if with old formulae. And their attempt made them a vanguard in the fight to abridge the complexity of slavery by willful destruction of its absolute power.

POSTSCRIPT



Were the Abolitionists "Unrestrained Fanatics"?

One of the weaknesses of most studies of abolitionism, which is reflected in both of the preceding essays, is that they are generally written from a monochromatic perspective. In other words, historians typically discuss whites within the abolitionist crusade and give little, if any, attention to the roles African Americans played in the movement. Whites are portrayed as the active agents of reform, while blacks are the passive recipients of humanitarian efforts to eliminate the scourge of slavery. Students should be aware that African Americans, slave and free, also rebelled against the institution of slavery both directly and indirectly.

Benjamin Quarles in *Black Abolitionists* (Oxford University Press, 1969) describes a wide range of roles played by blacks in the abolitionist movement. The African American challenge to the slave system is also evident in the network known as the "underground railroad." Larry Gara, in *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (University of Kentucky Press, 1961), concludes that the real heroes of the underground railroad were not white abolitionists but the slaves themselves who depended primarily upon their own resources or assistance they received from other African Americans, slave and free.

Other studies treating the role of black abolitionists in the antislavery movement include James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton University Press, 1964), Jane H. and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830–1861* (Atheneum, 1974), Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown* (Oxford University Press, 1974), R. J. M. Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall: Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830–1860* (Louisiana State University Press, 1983) and *Beating Against the Barriers: The Lives of Six Nineteenth-Century Afro-Americans* (Louisiana State University Press, 1986), Ronald K. Burke, *Samuel Ringgold Ward: Christian Abolitionist* (Garland, 1995), Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (W. W. Norton, 1997), and Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (2004). Frederick Douglass' contributions are evaluated in Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (Atheneum, 1968; originally published 1948), Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Slave and Citizen: The Life of Frederick Douglass* (Little, Brown, 1980), Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (University of North Carolina Press, 1984), and William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (W. W. Norton, 1991).

Conflicting views of the abolitionists are presented in Richard O. Curry, ed., *The Abolitionists: Reformers or Fanatics?* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965). For general discussions of the abolitionist movement, see Gerald Sorin, *Abolitionism: A New Perspective* (Praeger, 1972), Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the*