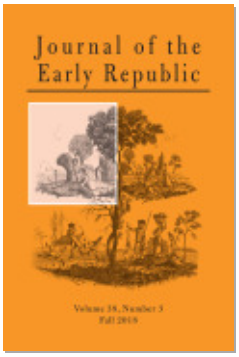
The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition by Manisha Sinha (review)



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impression, surely unintended, that black abolitionists followed up on, rather than shaped, the ideas of white abolitionists. Recent works by Vincent Carretta, Patrick Rael, Richard Newman, and Manisha Sinha, among others, show how early black antislavery arose in both Britain and America—at least one hundred years before the Civil War and well before that in imperial Spain. The still invaluable anthology, *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, edited by Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca, NY, 1994), explores many more elements of black women's protest and inter-racial cooperation of all kinds—including for free produce—among female abolitionists.

But Holcomb's study reveals how important shifting perspectives on transatlantic trade were to the course of abolition on both sides of the Atlantic. Beginning with Woolman's condemnation of commerce as a kind of sinful temptation to antebellum abolitionists' praise of *moral* commerce as a potential route to salvation, abolitionists were keenly aware of the tensions between economic activity and ethics within their movement. "[S]upporters of free produce never came close to displacing slave-labor goods from the Atlantic marketplace," Holcomb writes, nor were they able to resolve the question of whether or not free labor was in fact more profitable for staple-crop growers, as abolitionists so often argued (192). Indeed, consumer boycotts—then and now—demand that "moral" actors accept higher rather than lower prices for goods, the opposite of the promise of free trade. As such, it is not surprising that the free produce movement was an on-again, off-again phenomenon: peaking at key moments in antislavery and ultimately returning to its Quaker roots as a form of moral action in the marketplace. This story forms the core of Holcomb's fine study.

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The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition. By Manisha Sinha. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016. Pp. 768. Cloth, $37.50.)

Reviewed by Richard Bell

The Anti-Slavery Convention, 1840, Benjamin Haydon's monumental group portrait of more than 500 nineteenth-century abolitionists, occupies pride of place in a large, sky-lit gallery in one of London's most

popular art museums. The massive, ten-by-twelve-foot oil painting depicts a frail old man, Thomas Clarkson, summoning the energy to make an energetic address to the 1840 meeting of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, a global convention that brought together abolitionists from Britain, the United States, and elsewhere. Among the attendees whose heroic likenesses Haydon captured were ex-slaves such as Henry Beckford (who occupied a purposefully prominent position in the foreground), Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott (who met for the first time at this convention), James G. Birney, Wendell Phillips, the novelist and poet Amelia Opie, and the Irish radical Daniel O'Connell.

Haydon's effort to render such a large and broad array of abolitionist activists on a single canvas foreshadows Manisha Sinha's achievement in *The Slave's Cause*. Billed as a "comprehensive new history" of abolition in the United States, *The Slave's Cause* offers a wide-ranging, inclusive, transnational, and unabashedly laudatory account of the defining liberation movement of the modern world (1).

Clocking in at more than 700 pages and ten years in the making, *The Slave's Cause* offers an extraordinarily expansive history of abolition in North America. Sinha is at pains to emphasize the long history of antislavery radicalism prior to William Lloyd Garrison's emergence and devotes the first 200 pages to the century and a half before the mid-1820s. Christian universalism and black suspicion of colonization are the touchstones here, and the protagonists include Quaker activists, slave rebels and petitioners, free black authors, and a handful of politicians on both sides of the Atlantic. The remainder of the book tackles the subsequent three decades, concluding with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Sinha argues that during this second wave the evangelical imperative to expand the cause beyond its moral minority and to proselytize for the cause of black equality spurred activists to perfect the tactics pioneered by their first-wave predecessors and devote their energies to immediatism and to political antislavery.

The tale told here is impressively inclusive. Alongside the elite white men who presided at meetings, preached from pulpits, and ran for office on the Liberty Party, Free Soil, and Republican tickets, Sinha positions a roughly equal number of activists from other backgrounds, including a great many young people, working men, white women, and people of color. Enslaved people are first among equals in these pages; their repeated commitment to attaining liberty served, in Sinha's view, as the driving inspiration behind all organized abolition work in the northern

states and the Upper South. Free black activists loom almost as large, and Sinha is deeply invested in recovering the theoretical sophistication and radical purity of their writing and rhetoric. By such means, Sinha—adding substance to Ira Berlin's similar argument in *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 2015)—suggests that abolition was a meaningfully interracial mass movement that drew direction and drive from the black community. Garrison's rise, Sinha contends, was a case in point; "Four hundred and fifty of the five hundred subscribers to the *Liberator* in its first year were African Americans, sustaining the young editor with their financial, moral, and political support" (217).

A small army of white women also feature prominently (and divisively) in *The Slave's Clause*, combining with the diverse cast of male activists to repeatedly demonstrate that figures sometimes regarded as *sui generis*—Phillis Wheatley, David Walker, John Brown—were in fact representative products of larger activist communities that shared their backgrounds and politics. The long list of dramatis personae also ensures that Sinha repeatedly recovers the careers of activists that even specialists in the field might have overlooked. For this historian, those names included Jarvis Brewster, Elizabeth Heyrick, Jabez Delano Hammond, and Anna Maria Weems. Also appreciated are Sinha's efforts to draw attention to the career of Benjamin Lundy—"a John the Baptist to Garrison's Christ in the eyes of devout abolitionists"—an important transitional figure whose antislavery efforts deserve far greater notice (177).

Sinha's third accomplishment is to situate America's abolitionists in radical, transnational context. Challenging their lingering image in popular culture as dour, bible-bashing monomaniacs (see Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*, for example), Sinha locates them in the vanguard of the international movement for democratic reform, a movement that also encompassed pacifism, feminism, and utopian socialism, as well as anti-nativist, anti-capitalist, and anti-capital-punishment agendas. In constant contact and conversation with Anglophone radicals in Haiti, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and across the British Empire (including Clarkson in Britain and O'Connell in Ireland), American abolitionists regarded their dangerous and unpopular work as a part of a larger struggle to address "the entrenched problems of exploitation and disenfranchisement in a liberal democracy" (1). Indeed, in the book's

brief epilogue, Sinha draws a direct line between second-wave abolitionism and contemporary anti-imperial, anti-capitalist, and anti-trafficking human rights crusades.

As synthesis, then, this is exciting and provocative work. Chapter by chapter, however, *The Slave's Cause* is more problematic. For one thing, its epic scale means that individual chapters sometimes read like sections of a large and daunting set of biographical dictionaries. A critic of Haydon's 1840 painting dismissed it as a "wagon-load of heads," and some readers might voice similar frustrations with *The Slave's Cause*. Another issue is transparency. This valuable new history rests upon a large yet invisible corps of secondary work across a dozen or so subfields. Eschewing almost all historiographical commentary in the body text, and making use of endnotes rather than footnotes, Sinha offers non-specialist readers little sense of the enormous debt she owes to those scholars on whose shoulders she stands. Such elisions allow Sinha to make claims of originality and significance that don't always stand up. For instance, she describes the twenty-four years between 1808 and 1831 as a "neglected period" in abolition scholarship, before lavishing her own attention upon it (160). Yet, as readers of this journal are well aware, the phrase "neglected period" was coined back in 1908 by Alice Dana Adams. More recently, antislavery activity between 1808 and 1831 has been the focus of intense and substantial study by a host of scholars, including Richard Newman, Beverly C. Tomek, and Paul Polgar. A final issue concerns endpoints. Despite excellent secondary work on the contributions of slaves and soldiers during the Civil War years by Eric Foner, David Williams, Leslie Rowland, Christian G. Samito, Bob Luke, and John David Smith, the central narrative of *The Slave's Cause* concludes with the election of Lincoln and the secession of South Carolina, a bizarre and unexpected foreshortening.

These caveats aside, Sinha's work commands respect from beginning to end and pursues its claims with authority as well as conviction; *The Slave's Cause* stands as the best and broadest single-volume history of abolition in the United States.

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