Elizabeth J. Clapp & Julie Roy Jeffrey (eds.)

*Women, Dissent, and Anti-Slavery in Britain and America, 1790–1865.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. x + 214 pp. (Cloth US$110.00)

As an international phenomenon, the movement to abolish the transatlantic slave trade—and later to end slavery itself—drew adherents from all walks of life. For decades, scholars have chronicled the effort’s wide-ranging popularity in Europe and the Americas, as well as the numerous reasons inspiring those who rallied against the sale and oppression of their fellow humans. Religious conviction, economic self-interest, personal advancement, and political calculation have all been attributed to the movement’s inception. Those with an interest in women’s history and gender studies, for example, have long understood that abolitionism allowed women the opportunity to participate in a political public sphere generally restricted to men. *Women, Dissent, and Anti-Slavery in Britain and America, 1790–1865* takes that as a starting point to sort through the specific religious rationales that attracted nonconformist and other pious women to oppose slavery. Bridging between the United States and Britain, as well as between the abolitionist and emancipationist movements, this collection has ambitious aims. By no means attempting to be exhaustive, it instead presents eight strong essays that provide snapshots into the religious lives of female reformers.

Timothy Whelan deftly redirects attention away from antislavery writers, and toward those who published their pamphlets. He discusses Martha Guerney, one of only three women in Britain to publish tracts related to the slave trade at the end of the eighteenth century. Guerney used her status within London’s Baptist community to vault William Fox’s essay calling for a sugar boycott into one of the most widely distributed pamphlets of the period. Unlike his fellow authors, Whelan is not principally concerned with the exact theological underpinnings of his subject’s actions. Nevertheless, his delineation of Guerney’s social network in the capital reinforces the importance of personal connections for abolitionists with religious sympathies.

The same held true across the Atlantic decades later. In a highly engaging essay, Stacey Robertson explains how women of the Old Northwest managed to construct strong associations across great distances and multiple denominations. Robertson reminds readers that coreligionists often disagreed about emancipation, resulting in congregants leaving churches, or being forced out of them. Indeed, one gets a better sense in her chapter of the many personal battles raging over the westward expansion of slavery in the United States.

Most of the remaining essays focus on the religious ideals inspiring female abolitionists. Alison Twells argues convincingly that theological specificity has
been lost in scholarship on abolitionism and Christianity. She contrasts the humanitarian goals of English congregations in urban Sheffield with those in the rural West Country. These geographic differences produced distinct abolitionist efforts as did the difference between the two areas’ Congregational and Baptist proclivities. Moreover, Twells orients her subjects’ calls for reform within a larger cosmology of religious and political thought. Julie Roy Jeffrey extends this approach to the antebellum United States, contending that abolitionist work fell into a broader regime of religious activism—so much so that women viewed the slow progress of antislavery as part of the normal routine of divine trial.

In a similar plea for specificity, Claire Midgley intricately reconstructs the life of Elizabeth Heyrick to uncover British reformers’ turn toward immediate emancipation. Heyrick’s groundbreaking 1824 essay, *Immediate, Not Gradual Abolition*, came after a complicated series of life events, originating in rational dissent, and culminating in her conversion to Quaker radicalism. Midgley shows that without properly understanding that biographical context, or the intricate evolution of religious ideology, abolitionist reforms in the nineteenth century become crudely homogenized. Likewise, her essay provides refreshing new evidence on the thoroughly understudied transition from abolitionism to emancipationism.

Judie Newman also exalts biography in her analysis of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s writings. Stowe underwent her own changes in religious outlook, and an uncanny ability to meld contemporary political debates with ecclesiastical life allowed her to produce some of the most popular antislavery works in the Atlantic world, even after the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Despite all of this attention to religious and individual detail, some equally important contexts are left out. Carol Lasser, for instance, elegantly dissects the reasons why reformers in the United States did not adopt consumer boycotts to the same degree as those in Britain and contends that North America’s public sphere was gendered against female participation. But she avoids discussing the economic distinctions between the Old World and New. Not only did women in the United States live in much closer proximity to enslaved individuals, but the products of bound labor in mainland America were entirely different—as was their profitability—from those in Britain’s Empire. This hints at another major problem in the volume: the absence of attention to free and enslaved individuals of African descent. Both Elizabeth J. Clapp in her introduction, and David Turley in his opening historiographical chapter, advocate for the inclusion of black and mixed-race agents in the story of abolitionism, but surprisingly none of the contributors take up their invitation. Scholars of slavery, including readers of this journal, have published numerous works
demonstrating how the enslaved helped to effect their own emancipation. Even those studying female dissenters in England have shown the participation of women of color (Jennings 2006). Those stories are not separate from the ones this volume hopes to tell.

Although it occasionally reads like much older histories exalting the work of abolitionist “Saints,” this collection makes an important plea for greater attention to religious diversity in the effort to end slavery. In the process it provides vital new insights, and even more detail, into the unfolding complexities of transatlantic abolition. Scholars of slavery and gender alike will find it a welcome addition to their bookshelves.

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