

The Abolitionist Imagination

By Andrew Delbanco

(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. xi, 205. Notes, index. \$24.95.)

This odd little book deals with the radical antebellum movement to abolish slavery throughout the United States and its legacy in American reform. It centers on two issues: whether or not the abolitionists caused the death and destruction wrought by the Civil War, and whether or not American culture favors single-minded radical movements that cause as much harm as good.

The book is odd in two respects. First, the title page lists Andrew Delbanco as the principal author and John Stauffer, Manisha Sinha, Darryl Pinckney, and Wilford M. McClay as providing “commentaries.” But the commentaries comprise two-thirds of the book. Second, there is exceptional disagreement among contributors. Delbanco and McClay essentially stand on one side, Stauffer and Sinha on the other. Pinckney’s essay—based largely on Benjamin Quarles’s *Black Abolitionists* (1969) and *Lincoln and the Negro* (1962)—seems barely relevant to the debate.

Delbanco’s essay begins “with a quick tour of the [abolition] movement” from the 1830s through the Civil War. He frames the “movement as an instance of a recurrent American phenomenon [in which] a determined minority sets out . . . to rid the world of what it regards as a patent and entrenched evil” (p. 3). In Delbanco’s view, such groups

demand rapid change without regard to consequences. He favors those who, during the 1850s, sought through compromise to preserve the Union (the “vital center”) against an abolitionist agenda that was bound to cause disunion and war. Delbanco asserts that abolitionists anticipated today’s extremist religious right.

Essays by Stauffer and Sinha follow. Stauffer rejects “Delbanco’s argument that idealism and utopian thought necessarily” have brutal and dangerous results and contends that Delbanco’s “centrist point of view” is essentially a “white . . . point of view” (p. 61). Stauffer points out that antebellum white northern compromisers, unlike abolitionists, did not interact with former slaves and did not understand the outrageous brutality of American slavery. Stauffer also notes that abolitionists started out as pacifists. Proslavery extremism and violence pushed them toward aggressive measures.

Sinha maintains that slavery, not abolitionists, caused the Civil War. She also contends that since that time, the “recurrent problem in American history has been racial inequality,” not radical reform movements. More directly than Stauffer, she links Delbanco’s outlook to the discredited pro-southern “Revisionist” historians of the 1920s and 1930s (p. 85). She distinguishes abolitionist religious

views from those of today's religious right. It was the Civil War, she writes, that led abolitionists "to put abolition above their peace principles" (p. 94). (In fact, with a few exceptions, abolitionists endorsed violent means against slavery during the 1850s.)

Pinckney and McClay are not as well versed in abolitionist/Civil War historiography as Stauffer and Sinha. Pinckney (based on Quarles) mainly discusses the relationship between black and white abolitionists and black influences on Abraham Lincoln. However, toward the end of his essay, he observes that "nothing gets started without rebels" (p. 132). McClay, with a few caveats, endorses Delbanco's interpretation. He mistakenly links abolitionism, a movement that included evangelicals, Quakers,

Unitarians, and what contemporaries called "infidels," with Puritanism. But he also suggests that abolitionism's legacy lies in recognizing the "universal dignity of all human beings" (p. 149).

The divisions of opinion represented in this book are not new, but Stauffer and Sinha deserve praise for refuting Delbanco's conservative thesis. All of the essays, with the possible exception of McClay's, are too discursive. Nevertheless, those who like clashes of ideas may enjoy reading them.

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Battle Hymns

The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War

By Christian McWhirter

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. Pp. vii, 321. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95.)

The first Civil War song appeared three days after the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter, South Carolina. By war's end four years later, more than two thousand new melodies had been composed. No other event in history has made such an impact in the field of music. Yet the vast library of Civil War literature rarely contains any reference to the songs of that unforgettable war. Indeed, the only scholarly study in the

field—Willard A. Heaps and Porter W. Heaps's *The Singing Sixties* (1960)—appeared a half-century ago. Now the longstanding gap has been filled in praiseworthy style. The eighty-five pages of notes and bibliography that follow eight easy-to-read chapters suggest that Christian McWhirter is now the premier authority in the field of Civil War music.

Music possessed a special appeal in the Civil War; it became a language