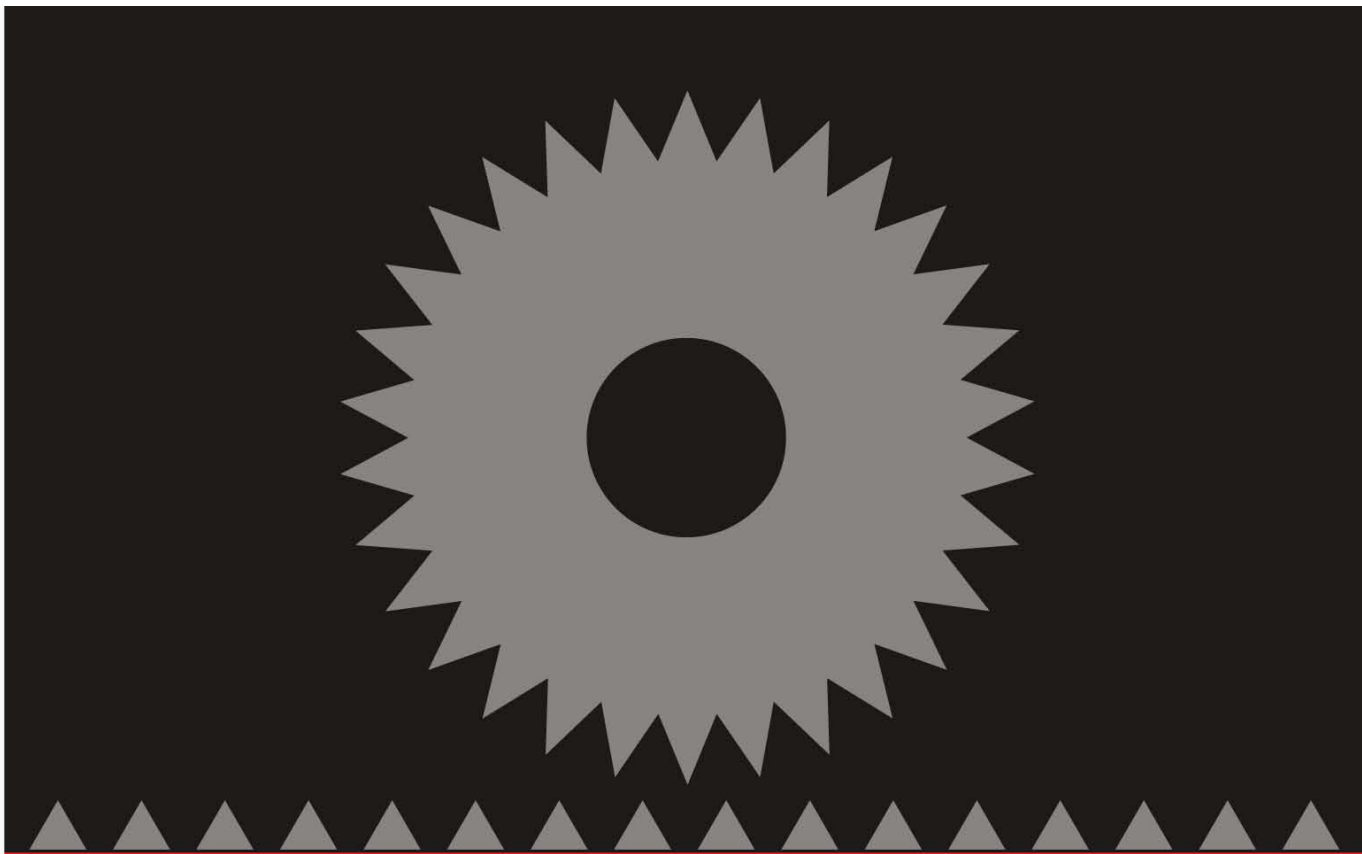


# {essays in history}

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## The Abolitionist Imagination



**THE ABOLITIONIST  
IMAGINATION**

*Andrew Delbanco*

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### Reviewed Work(s)

*The Abolitionist Imagination*. By Andrew Delbanco, with Commentaries by John Stauffer, Manisha Sinha, Darryl Pinckney, and Wilfred M. McClay (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Pp. 205. Cloth, \$24.95.

No figures have undergone a more pronounced reinterpretation in the historical literature than American abolitionists, those men and women who fought for both the immediate end of slavery and for African-American equality before and during the Civil War. Whereas scholarship once cast antislavery activists as obstinate instigators who helped fuel the rise of sectionalism, and thus the Civil War itself, modern historiography has placed them in a more positive light. Studies in the past few decades have depicted abolitionists as a diverse set who kept up the fight against a moral evil when no one else would, and who pioneered a number of innovative public-relations tactics along the way. The most recent scholarship has highlighted not how the abolitionists caused the Civil War, but rather how they helped bring about the end of the peculiar institution.

*The Abolitionist Imagination*, a slender volume consisting of essays by Andrew Delbanco and responses by four other historians of the American antislavery movement, seeks to engage with these prevailing historiographical trends. In his opening essay, Delbanco seeks to qualify the recent lionization of abolitionism, by observing that though William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and their associates attempted to rid the world of a “patent and entrenched evil,” theirs was a deeply flawed movement (1). Delbanco stresses how American abolitionism was hopelessly fragmented, highlighting the myriad divisions within the movement over “how to analyze the problem of slavery” and “how to

attack it” (6-7). Some saw the peculiar institution as problematic because of its effects on blacks, whereas others focused on its consequences for whites. Whereas certain abolitionists fought for full racial equality within the United States, others advocated the emigration of African Americans as their end game. The movement splintered over opposing tactics as well: political abolitionists, led by such figures as William Goodell and, after the early 1850s, Douglass, sought to change the status quo via participation in the electoral system, while moral suasionists, led by Garrison, opposed the Constitution and the American political system as corrupt, and focused instead on persuading the larger public to turn against slavery.

For Delbanco, the lack of internal coherence was not the only problem with American abolitionism. Antislavery activists combined an impractical “millenarian dreamer” streak with a moral intransigence born of their religious zealotry (23-24). Given their belief that their actions represented “God’s will,” abolitionists refused to consider the larger political ramifications of their agitations (48). Indeed, the polarization that abolitionism inspired helped destroy what Delbanco referred to as the “liberal aesthetic”—the antebellum “middle ground” of “compromise and moderation,” represented by such figures as the authors Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville (39-40). By forswearing projects of “incremental reform” such as compensated emancipation and by demanding a “radical break from the past,” abolitionists made a horrific civil war the only possible solution to the problem of slavery (51). The abolitionists were thus not only disorganized and inflexible, but had the blood of Union and Confederate soldiers on their hands.

Wilfred M. McClay is the only respondent to defend the Delbanco interpretation of immediatism. In his essay, McClay details abolitionism as a “master concept”—an expression of a more general “cultural dynamic” of religiously inspired reform (139). Through their single-minded assault on slavery as a moral evil, the abolitionists “changed the terms of cultural engagement” and thus opened up new possibilities in American society (143). Yet their reform arose from an unsettlingly “rigid theological” worldview. Their peculiar interpretation of Protestant Christianity bestowed abolitionists with “rock-hard certainty and overweening confidence” in their fight against slavery. While such traits

were their “indispensable strength,” they were also their “besetting fault,” in that abolitionists refused to consider the “immensely high human costs” through which reform would come (145-148). The abolitionists’ zealotry helped cause a war that cost hundreds of thousands of lives. McClay thus cautions against regarding the troublesome abolitionist movement as a “master pattern for American reform” (152).

As the other respondents in the remainder of the volume correctly explain, however, Delbanco and McClay’s studies of the abolitionists’ flaws are themselves problematic. John Stauffer counters the notion of abolitionism as a fragmented and out-of-touch movement. For Stauffer, the differences among immediatists masked their fundamental unity around the concepts of emancipation and racial equality. Abolitionists of all stripes pursued a vision of integration at great personal cost. Moreover, they did so with a spirit of flexibility, rather than the intransigence described by Delbanco and McClay. They employed “numerous strategies,” including a compromising stance towards sympathetic southerners, in an attempt to end the peculiar institution (73-74). While abolitionists eschewed the centrist liberal aesthetic, they did so because such a “largely *white*” middle ground refused to deal with slavery at all. If Hawthorne and other liberal aestheticians had had their way, no civil war would have occurred, but neither would have emancipation (61-67).

Indeed, slavery was a unique evil that only inspired idealism could combat. In the wake of the Missouri Compromise, southerners embraced an ethos of slavery as a positive good, and began to “envision an empire” of global proportions founded on the peculiar institution. The radical agitation of the immediatists, who came to have a marked influence on the northern public over time, helped prevent such a scheme from taking hold (73). In pursuing their noble intentions, then, abolitionists had a positive effect on the course of American history.

In the next essay, Manisha Sinha criticizes Delbanco and McClay for blaming the abolitionists for the Civil War. According to Sinha, the “question of abolitionist responsibility” for the war is “moot,” since it stemmed from a cause—slavery—that they did not create (107). By including protections for slavery in the Constitution, the Founders set the stage for an eventual sectional clash. Indeed, “racial slavery,” and not abolitionism, became the “major problem confronting antebellum

Americans.” In confronting the peculiar institution, abolitionists were “prophetic” visionaries who looked to a time when the United States would fulfill its own principles (83). It was an absolute “commitment to black freedom” and citizenship, rather than a fanatical “moral rigidity,” that united the various camps of abolitionism and distinguished them from other Americans (90).

Sinha posits that abolitionists alone were able to “imagine” an American future in which African Americans were “fellow citizens of the republic” (98), and that they pursued concrete plans for emancipation and “interracial democracy” (95). Just as the abolitionists were not naïve dreamers, they also were not the unyielding and crazed zealots of Delbanco and perhaps McClay’s telling. Indeed, many abolitionists were committed pacifists who refused to “put abolition above their peace principles” until the outbreak of civil war (94). Nevertheless, their self-circumscribed actions made abolitionists the “ideological vanguard of an increasingly anti-slavery North,” as their agitation turned public opinion against the peculiar institution and set the stage for the rise of Abraham Lincoln and the moderately antislavery Republican Party (104-105). As did Stauffer, Sinha thus aligns with modern historiographical trends in championing the abolitionists against the attacks of Delbanco and McClay.

Finally, Darryl Pinckney continues the pro-abolitionist line of scholarship, discussing how the “courage” of abolitionists in opposing a system “seemingly confirmed by history as being permanent” influenced the civil rights movement of the 1960s (132-133). He focuses on a subject largely ignored by Delbanco: the vital role of black abolitionists in the antislavery movement. Drawing on the earlier work of Benjamin Quarles, Pinckney details how Frederick Douglass and others shaped the events of the antebellum era and beyond for the better.

Stauffer, Sinha, and Pinckney’s essays are not without their flaws. Stauffer and Sinha overemphasize the effects of abolitionists within northern society. Although membership in abolitionist societies grew over time, it remained a fringe movement through the start of the Civil War and beyond. Abolitionists did help turn northern public opinion against slavery, but a variety of other factors, such as southern political aggression in the form of the Fugitive Slave Act and territorial expansion, also deserve prominent recognition. At the same time, none of the

essays discuss the pragmatic streak of abolitionism that accompanied the idealistic vision of the movement. Abolitionists from Garrison to Goodell sought to gain support for their movement through savvy public relations strategies. At least partly in the name of public relations, many appealed to patriotic motifs and invoked the Founders in order to cast abolitionism as the extension of the spirit of 1776. Such efforts merit recognition in the volume, as they provide a strong example of how the abolitionists were not just idealistic dreamers.

Nevertheless, the critics of Delbanco offer persuasive arguments overall. These contributors recognize the positive contributions of the movement and call into doubt the idea that abolitionists and their single-minded zealotry engineered the Civil War. In sum, this collection of essays, including those of Delbanco and McClay, encapsulates an important historiographical debate, illustrating the recent scholarly trends—and the resistance to them—in a well-written and provocative manner. The volume thus comes recommended for scholars and the interested public alike.

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