

### Abolitionists Remember: Antislavery Autobiographies and the Unfinished Work of Emancipation

Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Oertel, Kristen Tegtmeier (2008) "Abolitionists Remember: Antislavery Autobiographies and the Unfinished Work of Emancipation," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.10.4.4

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss4/4>

## Review

Oertel, Kristen Tegtmeier

Fall 2008

**Jeffrey, Julie Roy** *Abolitionists Remember: Antislavery Autobiographies and the Unfinished Work of Emancipation*. University of North Carolina Press, \$24.95 softcover ISBN 9780807858851

### Abolitionism and Emancipation

In *Abolitionists Remember*, Julie Roy Jeffrey builds on the growing body of scholarship on historical memory to demonstrate how abolitionists used the medium of autobiography to persist in their fight for racial justice during the post-war period. She finds that abolitionists who wrote their autobiographies often did so in the context of larger political and cultural trends that tried to salve the wounds of war by rewriting the history of slavery as a benign and nostalgic institution. Abolitionist writings, anniversary reunions, and reminiscences served to counter the reconciliation narrative propagated by popular monthly magazines and reminded Americans that, "If slavery had corrupted the nation's conscience, prejudice, its stepchild, continued to blight national life" (6). These autobiographies also aimed to secure abolitionism a permanent place in the history of the sectional crisis and the Civil War, and they highlighted the heroism and sacrifice made by the men and women who combated the slave power off the battlefield.

Jeffrey intersperses detailed and incisive analyses of several individual autobiographies with explorations of what she calls "ritual remembrances" or the reunions and gatherings held in the post-war years by the abolition old guard. But she also—and perhaps most importantly—explains that these remembrances, both written and lived, took place within an increasingly disinterested and even hostile cultural context. As Reconstruction waned and as more Americans embraced reconciliation with former Confederates, concerns about black civil rights, political violence and wholesale black disenfranchisement lost cultural capital. Instead, northerners and southerners grabbed up issues of popular magazines like *Scribner's* and the *Century* and consumed stories that cast blacks

as ignorant, unworthy recipients of freedom while depicting southern whites as victims of harsh Reconstruction policies. Jeffrey writes that “The pages of *Century* were filled with fictional blacks whose eagerness to take care of former masters and mistresses implicitly challenged abolitionists’ view of slavery and the necessity of emancipation. . . .These loyal blacks had little interest in freedom and none in equality” (219). Fictional depictions of slavery and of Reconstruction-era race relations minimized the need for reform and pointed to issues besides slavery as the cause of the Civil War.

But abolitionists like William Still, Levi Coffin, and Jane Swisshelm countered these conciliatory narratives with their autobiographies, in which they argued that slavery was a national sin, that it corrupted both black and white lives, and that its “stepchild,” racism, continued to impede black progress in the post-bellum world. What is most valuable about Jeffrey’s work is that she mines several texts written by lesser-known abolitionists, like Swisshelm and Samuel J. May, and reveals common threads among them, such as their emphasis on abolitionism as God-inspired work and their criticism of the clergy. May’s book even challenged the Quakers’ commitment to immediatism and in it he indicted his own sect, the Unitarians, arguing that they were “‘pre-eminently guilty’ in the sin of slavery” (43). Still placed African Americans at the center of abolitionist work, highlighted the brutality of the slave system, and lauded the strength and courage of black fugitives. Swisshelm was perhaps one of the most radical post-bellum voices, especially considering the gender obstacles she had to overcome and the era in which she wrote, the 1880s, when sentimental pictures of happy slaves and kind masters proliferated. She mocked these fictions and even criticized Lincoln, calling him “an obstructionist instead of an abolitionist,” and questioned his moral foundation and his motives for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation (180).

Jeffrey adds dozens of voices to this chorus of critique, and proves that abolitionists approached their “unfinished work” with the same commitment and moral strength that was required of them prior to the war. The book lacks cohesion and focus at times because of these diverse goals—uncovering abolitionist autobiographies, exploring the context in which they were published, and detailing the challenges of the publishing process itself—but *Abolitionists Remembers* adds an important chapter to the history of the movement. Jeffrey and the defiant voices she unearths remind us that abolitionism’s ultimate goals of racial justice were not fulfilled after emancipation, nor after the passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments. Indeed, perhaps there is still unfinished work to do.

*Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel is associate professor of history at Millsaps College and the author of Bleeding Borders: Race, Gender, and Violence in Pre-Civil War Kansas, forthcoming from Louisiana State University Press.*