The Abolitionist Civil War: Immediatists and the Struggle to Transform the Union

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In The Abolitionist Civil War, Frank J. Cirillo offers a much-needed study of abolitionist activity during the Civil War. In twelve tightly chronological chapters, he highlights the ideas, interventions, and arguments of abolitionists from Secession Winter through May 1865. Cirillo focuses on ten abolitionists ranging from well-known figures William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass to lesser-known folks such as George Cheever and Stephen and Abby Kelley Foster to the Virginia outlier Moncure Conway, and he sorts them into several fluctuating camps based on how they chose to engage with Civil War politics. Ultimately, he argues that in the majority’s wartime shift from moral reformers to political interest interventionists, their radicalism tempered. The story of wartime abolitionism, he thus argues, is not “an unalloyed arc of heroism” but “a tragedy,” as many abolitionists ceded an ideological commitment to Black rights and post-emancipation equality to a narrower wartime win of ending slavery. (p. 17)

Early in the war, interventionists from Garrison to Douglass to Wendell Phillips saw themselves as “instigators of moral revolution—cosmic agents who could nudge the nation onto higher ground from inside the war effort” and accordingly opted to engage in politics. (p. 25) When Union General Benjamin Butler (no abolitionist) declared enslaved people who had fled to Fort Monroe “contraband,” interventionists took heart that the war could bring revolution. Cirillo includes a great quote from Willie Garrison: when such times “‘compel a Breckenridge Democrat to preach abolition’” they needed not to “‘despair of the Republic.’” (p. 77) Bull Run,
too, convinced the core interventionists of the need to work for (and be willing to accept) incremental change. Bitter rivals Garrison and Douglass reconciled to push for military emancipation, with Garrison pivoting abruptly from burning to embracing the Constitution as a vehicle that allowed military emancipation. Moral purists Kelley, Foster, Parker Pillsbury, and Ann Phillips (who appears at various moments offering intriguing challenges to her husband’s stance) saw the war “as a siren that would lure reformers onto the rocks of moral decay” and argued that no good could come of wartime incursions into politics. (p. 3)

They proved both right and wrong, Cirillo argues, in the “abolitionist civil war” that followed. (p. 43) Driven in part by the necessity of compromise, some like Garrison tamped down their public critiques and championed Abraham Lincoln. At the same time, the never-popular abolitionists achieved something completely unexpected: celebrity. Their resulting capital gave them influence; it also delighted them. Cirillo credits them for helping to bring about the Emancipation Proclamation. At this point, however, they realized that emancipation—not full Black equality—may have been as far as they could push the majority of the white North. To some such as Garrison, emancipation itself became the endpoint, while Phillips and Douglass continued to position it as only their opening move. Cirillo stresses the conservative nature of emancipation policy, indicting Garrison for endorsing “the standard of the possible” instead of more radical postwar vision and to fully adopt Lincoln’s war as “a fight for partial emancipation, without consideration for post-emancipation Black rights.” (p. 180, 172) To counter Garrison’s trajectory, he highlights Charlotte Forten, whose war experience radicalized her vision of Black rights. Further abolitionist furor developed in choices about whether to support Lincoln in the 1864 election. Garrison’s pro-Lincoln stance appears as beyond strategic, revealing his shift from considering “Black inclusion a concurrent and co-equal demand of abolitionism alongside
emancipation.” (p. 238) By war’s close, Garrison moved to disband the American Anti-Slavery Society, deepening the abolitionist divide.

This book is deeply researched and engaging, offering much to abolitionist historiography. Cirillo engages thoughtfully with recent works from Manisha Sinha, Kate Masur, and James Oakes, offering further nuance to questions of how and why the Civil War became an emancipation war. Cirillo wisely chose to center his study on ten abolitionists and makes a great case for his selections. Well-known figures such as Garrison and Douglass stand alongside Kelley and the unique Conway introducing audiences to important but often-neglected figures. The Abolitionist Civil War also by necessity appraises Lincoln. Seen through the eyes of disappointed abolitionists, Lincoln’s progress through the war feels more uncertain and tepid, though like many historical accounts, Cirillo highlights a late war meeting between Douglass and Lincoln as one that gave Douglass renewed faith in the Commander in Chief’s real commitment to emancipation.

This is a book that I am so glad was written and one that I will long think about. One of the most thought-provoking pieces is Cirillo’s seeming positioning of wartime engagement with politics as one that in and of itself sullied the abolitionist cause. In this work, Abby Kelley appears as the moral center, particularly in the moment in the lead-up to the 1864 election where she warned abolitionists against accepting “‘the less of two sinners’” because that would allow “‘the serpent of compromise … into our midst.’” (p. 144) Cirillo argues that Garrison crossed “once-unthinkable tactical lines in deference to public relations” and that the influence of “unsavory alliances and expedient rhetoric” caused him to lose sight of his original goals. (p. 90, 104) But was it the choice to move into the realm of politics – a place where compromise is valued – that led Garrison to morph into a more conservative self, or did this wartime work...
reveal a conservatism that had always been there below the surface? One wonders what path Garrison might have taken if he had continued to disavow politics in favor of nonresistance, or if he (or Abby Kelley herself) could have become a political firebrand working for change from within. Too, this is a book that makes one consider age-old questions, particularly those about how to best advocate for change (both inside and outside of politics) and if the political process in a country that values compromise in and of itself demands too much in the way of concession.

Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz is a Professor of History and History with Teacher Licensure coordinator at Eastern Illinois University. Author of *The Tie That Bound Us: The Women of John Brown’s Family and the Legacy of Radical Abolitionism*, she is currently examining abolitionist discussions and invocations of history as part of a project on the long “history wars.”