“The Status of Former Slaves and the Fate of Antislavery History: Race, Democracy, and the Memory of Abolitionism after the Civil War”

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Introduction

During the last half of the nineteenth century most veteran antislavery activists would witness the culmination of their abolitionist efforts in the late 1860s, many the demise of their humanitarian expectations by the late 1870s, and some the return of legalized racial subordination in the South beginning in the 1890s. That is, amidst the process of Radical Reconstruction, the development called “Redemption,” and the era of Jim Crow, aged antislavery crusaders confronted a rapidly changing post-Civil War political environment that only fleetingly benefitted African Americans. How transformations in the status and condition of former slaves affected the historical memory of abolitionists is the subject of this paper. What role race relations played in the movement recollections of white abolitionist agitators is of particular analytical significance because understanding the nuanced and dynamic ways in which the present shaped memories of the past sheds insight into a crucial problem addressed in this symposium. Since postbellum antislavery memorial literature often intersected with turning point moments in the history of race in the United States the question becomes: to what extent did elderly white antislavery advocates remain loyal to racial justice while preparing reminiscences for present and future generations of Americans. If these most outspoken champions of racial egalitarianism directly and/or indirectly abandoned black rights when they became movement historians it should then come as no surprise that the experiment in biracial democracy in the South was short-lived. Indeed, the rise and fall of that short-lived experiment impacted how post-Civil War abolitionists remembered the pre-Civil War antislavery past.

Texts and Contexts

Three book-length pieces of abolitionist memorial literature constitute the basis of this brief investigation of race and the construction of antislavery history after the Civil War. Lewis Tappan recalled the humanitarian contributions of his older brother Arthur in the 1870 publication, *The Life of Arthur Tappan*. Oliver Johnson reflected on the history and legacy of abolitionism in the 1880 publication, *William Lloyd Garrison and His Times; or, Sketches of the Anti-Slavery Movement in America, and of the Man who was its Founder and Moral Leader*. And Aaron Macy Powell remembered things antislavery past in the 1899 publication, *Personal Reminiscences of the Anti-Slavery and Other Reforms and Reformers*. Collectively, those publications illustrate abolitionist historical memory over time—a nearly thirty-year period. They also respectively coincided with pivotal developments in the history of race relations in the United States.

Lewis Tappan's memorial biography of his elder sibling appeared shortly following the February 1870 ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution, which enfranchised African American men because it forbade federal and state governments from denying citizens the right to vote based on "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." The Fifteenth Amendment thus represented the apogee of the forty-year abolitionist campaign for racial justice. The 1865 ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, which forever prohibited human enslavement in the United States, and the 1868 ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted national citizenship to the freedmen and guaranteed them equal protection of the laws, represented for veteran abolitionists significant humanitarian achievements along the way.

Unlike Tappan's brotherly biography, Oliver Johnson's memorial sketches of antislavery people, issues, and events did not appear at a triumphant moment in abolitionist history. On the

contrary, the contested 1876 presidential election resulting in a specially appointed electoral commission that declared Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes the victor over Democratic rival Samuel J. Tilden essentially marked the collapse of Radical Reconstruction and ended the promise of biracial democracy in the South. The newly-named President Hayes's subsequent refusal to use federal troops to protect the remaining Republican governments in South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana enabled self-proclaimed redeemers in those states to restore white supremacist Democratic rule in early 1877, thereby completing a region-wide process that began in Georgia in 1870. After 1876 southern race relations were primarily a local matter; they would remain so well into the next century.

Similar to the context surrounding the preparation of Johnson's recollections, Aaron Macy Powell's personal reminiscences of abolitionism appeared during a time of general northern white indifference, if not hostility, to racial justice. Unlike both Johnson and Tappan, however, the project of reconstructing the former Confederate States did not frame Powell's writing. Widespread disillusionment with the results of Radical Reconstruction had long taken hold when he offered his memorial portraits and autobiographical observations. Instead, Powell mused over antislavery history when state and local Jim Crow practices recently received national legitimization. The Supreme Court sanctioned the constitutionality of the formal system of racial segregation and discrimination emerging in the South when it announced "the separate but equal" doctrine in the 1896 case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The separate railcars, separate schools, separate bathrooms, and other separate facilities that spread across the former slaveholding states were but additional reminders that the spirit of white supremacy that abolitionists originally sought to vanquish remained entrenched.

The Problem of Race and the Memory of Abolitionism

Amidst such alterations in the status and condition of former slaves abolitionist-memoirists remembered the antislavery past in strikingly divergent ways, as well as from diverse motivations. True, Tappan, Johnson, and Powell respectively sought to secure a favorable historical reputation for the abolitionist movement. Each one also envisioned his memorial enterprise as serving a useful didactic function. This paper will briefly consider not so much how the subject of abolitionism was similarly or differently portrayed in the memorial literature under investigation. Of particular importance is to ascertain what type of legacy elderly antislavery activists hoped to bequeath to posterity. Whether or not that heritage, or heritages, represented a retreat from the ideals and beliefs of the abolitionist crusade depends on when a particular memoir was published.

Lewis Tappan's 1870 memorial biography has much to say about the life of Arthur Tappan. Arthur the abolitionist indeed figures prominently in this brotherly reminiscence. So too does Arthur the successful New York City silk merchant, Arthur the liberal benefactor of educational institutions and other benevolent causes, Arthur the temperance (that is, anti-alcohol) and anti-vice reformer, and, most importantly, Arthur the devout evangelical Christian. Quite simply, Lewis's rendition of the life and career of his elder sibling highlights the biographical fact that Arthur, in his brother's judgment, was a model Christian philanthropist and entrepreneur. In these pages, Arthur Tappan thus transcended the specific boundaries of abolitionism, for his life-long obedience to fulfilling a Good Samaritan ethos is the prevailing theme and lesson.

It does not follow, however, that biographical subject or biographer abandoned antislavery commitment to racial justice. On the contrary, the dutiful Christian whom Lewis

honored was also remarkable for his anti-racism. "Mr. Tappan," Lewis avowed, believed "that the total abolition of the caste feeling is for the welfare of the whole community, white and colored." The author thereupon demonstrated in detail how his brother consistently promoted efforts to uplift African Americans and destroy ant-black prejudices. From supporting free black schooling projects to opposing the bigoted American Colonization Society (founded 1816) that intended to relocate the nation's black populations to Africa, from funding African-American newspapers to working on behalf of slave emancipation—Lewis Tappan's fundamental point was that Arthur's humanitarianism was colorblind. "Happily slavery is abolished," the memorialist observed at one point in the narrative, but "the prevalence of caste has been very great, and exists at the present day." For biographer Lewis white Americans still needed Arthur's example to combat notions of white supremacy and to ensure black equality.[1]

Such a plea and summons for continued vigilance on behalf of black rights was largely and noticeably absent from the book-length recollections of both Oliver Johnson and Aaron Macy Powell. Johnson's 1880 publication reveals his virtually all-consuming quest of contesting abolitionism's past, present, and future detractors and critics. His intent was not to revive flagging, if not nonexistent, northern white interest in Radical Reconstruction. Indeed, Johnson did not remember antislavery in order to right the wrongs suffered by emancipated African Americans. His self-appointed mission was to correct a historical record that, in his estimation, grossly misrepresented and negatively evaluated the abolitionist movement and individual abolitionists.

The aged agitator specifically devoted much memorial space to vindicating the genuine and pure Christianity of antislavery crusaders, particularly those abolitionists who identified with the radical William Lloyd Garrison. In contrast to supposedly irreligious Garrisonians, some of

[1] Lewis Tappan, *The Life of Arthur Tappan* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1870), 145, 151.

whom came to question the divine inspiration of the Bible and the heavenly authority of the clergy, northern churches and ministers, for Johnson, indisputably betrayed the spirit of Christianity. They were without question, the memoirist asserted, morally delinquent because they refused to renounce human enslavement as an utterly sinful practice, maintaining instead denominational ties with their southern slaveholding counterparts, and directly and indirectly apologizing for the South's "peculiar institution." Quite simply, constructing a usable past that might encourage younger Americans to extend the abolitionist tradition of racial justice activism did not prompt Johnson's remembrances. Exonerating the religiosity of Garrison and his cohort, and exposing the spiritual bankruptcy of their opponents, did. Moreover, securing the central role of William Lloyd Garrison in the expansion of antislavery and in the ultimate overthrow of human bondage motivated the dedicated Garrisonian Johnson. The memoirist was certain that, "When all the animosities excited by the great conflict have passed away, and the historian comes to tell the story with perfect impartiality, the character and fame of Garrison will shine forth with new luster, and he will take the place among the greatest of the world's heroes and philanthropists." Johnson's history-making memorial publication would, it was hoped, contribute to that assessment.[2]

In hindsight, Aaron Macy Powell's 1899 reminiscences constitute a significant departure in abolitionist memorial literature. For Powell himself, however, the scope and content of his personal recollections were logical and consistent. Since he entered organized abolitionism as a young man in the early 1850s, Powell outlived most others who espoused the cause beginning in the 1830s. The former antislavery agitator thus embraced other pursuits after slave emancipation and universal manhood suffrage were written into the Constitution. What makes this particular

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[2] Oliver Johnson, *William Lloyd Garrison and His Times; or, Sketches of the Anti-Slavery Movement in America, and of the Man who was its Founder and Moral Leader*, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1881), 454.

memorial publication so remarkable in comparison to others is that Powell essentially utilized the antebellum abolitionist past to legitimize his humanitarian interests in the postbellum present.

By the late 1870s and for the remainder of the nineteenth century Aaron Powell was among the leading American exponents of what he and other transatlantic philanthropists called the new abolitionist crusade—that is, the campaign against prostitution. He did not simply reserve a special place for reformers of that ilk in his memoir, a discussion that was supposed to comprise the second half of a book that was left incomplete at the author's 1899 death. Rather, Powell—intentionally or not—sought to combine the memory of his pre and postwar reformist activities in such a way that the earlier crusade against black slavery prefigured, indeed led to and culminated in, the later movement against the white slavery of prostitution. The recollected old abolitionist careers of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, for example, are abbreviated in this account. Powell instead accented how Garrison and Phillips championed the new abolitionist cause that emerged after the Civil War. In emphasizing that aspect of their reformism, as well as by his continually referencing how other original abolitionists supported the new antislavery endeavor, Powell effectively demonstrated that a symbolic, and arguable actual, passing of the humanitarian torch had taken place. The new abolitionists were therefore the rightful historical successors of Garrison and company—at least in this narrative. Yet, such memoires came at the expense of African Americans, whose post-Reconstruction struggles seemingly no longer resonated with an Aaron Macy Powell preoccupied by a different form of enslavement that required eradication.

Conclusion

Lewis Tappan's memorial biography was written on the cusp of biracial democracy's ascendency. Oliver Johnson's remembrances were composed in the aftermath of biracial

democracy's downfall. Aaron Macy Powell's reminiscences were authored during biracial democracy's long eclipse. Each historical context had a profound and complex impact on the construction of each abolitionist's memorial text. After 1880, however, the published memoirs of elderly white antislavery agitators generally muted the racial egalitarian story of abolitionism and failed to call upon a new generation of Americans to work on behalf of racial justice and against anti-black prejudices. That neglect, and arguably desertion, of core abolitionist principles occurred alongside broader northern white disillusionment with federal intervention in southern race relations. The death of Reconstruction, the decline of a racially inclusive democracy in the South, did not simply alter the status and condition of former slaves, but the history of antislavery as well.