

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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JAMES BREWER STEWART'S *HOLY WARRIORS:*
*THE ABOLITIONISTS AND AMERICAN SLAVERY*¹

Stewart's revised edition of *Holy Warriors* takes account of a number of interpretive works on the abolitionist movement that appeared over the twenty years after its initial publication in 1976 (see his bibliography, 207-227). But the text itself does not show his reliance on these newer works, since he omits notes. His revised edition consequently reads like a broad sociological treatise on varying aspects of the abolitionist crusade. The work also comes across as principally narrative, as Stewart's style of writing tends to cleverly hide his agenda with opulent prose. For example, he introduces a topic but does not clarify his argument until two or three pages later (see 43, 45). This type of writing—"sneaking through the back door"—is okay if not done too frequently. But Stewart seems to relish this organizational pattern, and often the reader cannot discern the point of the complex story he is telling. This makes *Holy Warriors* a difficult read for those who are uninitiated in the knotty evolution of the abolition movement in antebellum America.

Most assuredly, for the reader who is familiar with abolitionism and its literature, Stewart presents an argument on every page. But he begins with an unfounded caricature about Western Europeans (3), a simplistic demographic analysis of the colonial New England economy (5), and questionable generalizations about slavery's effect on culture in the South (6-9). His main thesis

¹1976; revised edition, New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1996; 244 pages with preface, bibliography, and index.

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unfortunately is nowhere lucid, as he interweaves cultural, economic, and political themes of the abolitionist cause. He elaborates early beginnings of abolition during the Revolutionary Era that sprang from two important sources—the political ideas of the Enlightenment and the religious ideas of Protestant evangelicalism (12-13). But he oversimplifies the Christian impulse with his dichotomous explanations of theology’s effect on society (i.e., determinism versus free will, 14) and Quaker anti-slavery (i.e., economic versus moral motivations, 16-18). Rightly, he identifies seeds of abolitionism in the rationalism of the patriot cause, the apocalyptic responses of New England Calvinists, and the confusion of the Revolutionary War itself (19-22). But his use of these incipient beginnings as an overarching framework for revolutionary abolitionism is hardly convincing. He affirms that “the Revolution endowed the planter elites and their slave-labor system with a powerful new legitimacy” through the constitutional sanction of owning slaves (26-28). But other assertions—that “the Revolution created enormous problems” for southern slaveholders, yet “in the Deep South, slavery retained its supremacy, for it proved an exceptionally adaptable system”—seem to be too much of a contradiction (23-25).

Without a definite thesis, the relevancy of Stewart’s “immediate emancipation,” advanced by abolitionists in the 1820s, appears less than obvious. He offers an interesting survey of revivalism during the period (37-40). But he misses the point entirely on the meaning of the shift in the occupation of ministry itself (i.e., from elites to commoners and “most important to abolitionism”) by a lack of specificity in geographic locale and denominational allegiance (39). Such vagueness substantially weakens Stewart’s argument, as he links promotion of the “market

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revolution” with its “cosmopolitan forces of economic interdependence, urbanization, class differentiation, and democratic politics” to “pious moralists who so feared social disruption” (36). He similarly sees as causative of “a radical religious vision, out of which a militant abolitionist movement began to take shape” the “powerful combination” of “Yankee conservatism, revivalist benevolence, New England upbringing, and social unrest” (42). Regrettably, by trying to say too much, Stewart often says too little, since his supposed connections between cultural realities and the decline of gradualism do not necessarily follow. A good example of this is his belief that “the abolitionists launched their crusade on a note of glowing optimism. Armed with moral certitude, they were also politically naive. . . . All the same, there was power in the naivete. Without this romantic faith that God would put all things right, abolitionists would have lacked the incentive and creative stamina for sustained assaults on slavery” (50). Does this not imply that, in the case of abolitionism, “incentive and creative stamina” resulted from naivete—a curious conclusion from “scholarly” opinion?

With little damage to his overall assessment of the abolition movement, Stewart could have begun *Holy Warriors* with the discussion of “moral suasion” (51-74) and the beginning of the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia in December 1833. Here, Stewart is on more solid ground with his survey of William Lloyd Garrison’s contributions, *The Liberator*, the Society’s Declaration of Sentiments, the role of the American Colonization Society, and the work of black abolitionists. But generally, his conclusions about economic factors, the impact of riots, social perceptions, and aggressive projects like “the great postal campaign” are matter-of-fact and

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uninspiring. He even takes at face value a defensive quote from Garrison without due regard for the strong abolition sentiments of its author: “When we first unfurled the banner of *The Liberator*, we did not anticipate that, in order to protect southern slavery, the free states would voluntarily trample under foot all order, law and government, or brand the advocates of universal liberty as incendiaries” (73). This lack of critical judgment causes Stewart to assume, “Judged by its initial aims, moral suasion had failed utterly; yet the opposition it had provoked was opening new possibilities, suggesting new tactics and new goals” (74). Contrary to Stewart, the abolitionists did not turn to new strategies so much as intensify the old ones, which still clung to deeply held moral underpinnings. Further, their ultimate aim always remained consistent—the equality and freedom of the slaves.

Next, Stewart looks at repercussions from the large number of anti-slavery petitions to Congress in the late 1830s (over 415,000 by May 1838) and schisms in the movement due to sectional trends, religious iconoclasm, and women’s rights (75-96). In the “Politics of Freedom” (97-125), he details the Presidential election of 1840, the confluence of religion and politics in the Liberty Party, the role of the Seneca Falls Convention in the alignment of feminism with radical abolitionism, and Congressional amendment of the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law. A section on “Races, Classes, and Freedom” (127-149) belabors the clash of abolitionist resistance with pro-slavery politics based on flawed perceptions of racial superiority, elevated social status, and paternalistic religious and political values. “Abolitionists and the Coming of the Civil War” (151-180) traces the growth of violence among abolitionists after the Compromise of 1850, as

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well as the incendiary effects of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision, the rise of the Know-Nothings, and John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry.

Stewart concludes with his assessment of the abolition movement as one of "triumph and tragedy" (181-206). He illustrates the shift in the federal perspective about the rationale for the Civil War (i.e., from secession to slavery), and he highlights the uncertain status of slaves in the border states and in southern areas occupied by Union troops. But pessimistically, he diminishes the work of the abolitionists in that "emancipation led to sharecropping, segregation, and the terrors of white vigilantism" (182). And he reluctantly concedes, "There was no mistaking the enormous changes in politics brought on by the war" (184). He chides Garrison for abandoning the abolitionist effort in late December 1865 just after ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment (195). But he notes, "Most abolitionists followed Garrison in making their easy peace with the post-emancipation world. . . . [But] those abolitionists who terminated their affiliations with the antislavery societies did not believe that they were retiring entirely from the field. They saw themselves as shifting their priorities to meet the demands of a new time" (196). Again, Stewart reproves President Johnson for his repressive policies after the War, but then he admits that "radical Reconstruction was characterized not by severity but by mildness and brevity" (202-203). This diametric ambiguity invariably characterizes the major part of Stewart's *Holy Warriors*. To Stewart's credit, the conflictive nature of the subject matter lends itself to this type

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approach. But the difficulty for the reader remains what it is that Stewart hopes to inspire by his appeal to “the legacy of these holy warriors” (206).