

The Liberty Party, 1840–1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the United States, by Reinhard O. Johnson. Antislavery, Abolition, and the Atlantic World Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. x, 500 pp. Tables, appendixes, notes, index. \$75.00 cloth.

Reviewer Dana E. Weiner is assistant professor of history at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. Her research and writing have focused on the antislavery movement in the Old Northwest.

Reinhard O. Johnson argues that the Liberty Party influenced both politics and antislavery reform in its short life from 1840 to 1848. In this, the first “national study of the Liberty Party” (1), Johnson also comprehensively documents the organization at the local and state levels, where he claims the party “had its greatest impact” (2) and where most control lay. The first four chapters are a chronological narrative of the birth of political abolition, the origins and difficult growth of the Liberty Party, debates over its platform and coalition politics, and its “absorption” (2) into the Free Soil Party.

The middle three chapters encompass the Liberty Party in the individual states, including many previously overlooked facets of the movement’s development. All are Northern states with the intriguing exception of Virginia. Although they make for dry reading, Johnson’s detailed state case studies of the Liberty Party will be vital for future research on political abolition and local politics. The author effectively claims that the party’s “motives and party philosophy” differed from place to place, and that it is best described as “a loose federation of state parties with certain core beliefs common to all” (3). He gives a strong sense of regional differences between New England, the Middle States, and the Old Northwest and of divisions within the regions and within states. Scholars of Iowa history will note Johnson’s finding of the Liberty Party’s limited and late efforts in the state; only in 1847 did the party found a state organization (in contrast to strong showings earlier in Illinois and Wisconsin).

Johnson’s tone and argument are much livelier in the final four chapters and the afterword, which place the Liberty Party in the context of the abolition movement. There he uncovers who joined the party and why, what they did, how they did it, and what made them unique. Johnson problematically refers to the party’s “use of” African American speakers as a political strategy (237, 250, 251), as opposed to those speakers’ own choices to contribute to the Liberty Party’s cause. Apart from that, his account of the Liberty Party is an inclusive one that ably engages recent historiography on marginalized groups in politics and questions the Garrisonians’ monopoly on welcoming women to antislavery. He details the party’s deliberate efforts to in-

corporate women and African Americans, especially through their involvement with auxiliary Liberty Associations. Those auxiliaries did not survive the transition to the Free Soil Party, so this history of relative inclusiveness ended rather abruptly.

The four appendixes — which present election returns, “banner Liberty counties,” the 1844 national party platform, and absorbing biographical notes for all Liberty members mentioned — further reveal the depth and breadth of Johnson’s research, although the biographical notes would be much more useful if they had citations, especially since some of his claims about individuals’ Liberty allegiances are controversial.

Johnson’s major contribution is his persuasive argument for the Liberty Party’s influence on the long-term trajectory of antislavery politics. He refutes arguments of its insignificance, especially in relation to Garrisonian abolitionism, a faction whose actual impact he minimizes. At least for the Old Northwest, this claim requires further research, for he only cites older literature for his assertion that the Garrisonians merely had strength in Ohio. Johnson makes a compelling case that Liberty Party members helped to bring slavery to center stage in the 1840s, and that the decade represents the pivotal turning point for antislavery. He readily acknowledges that the racial justice agenda of the Liberty Party and the diversity of its participants diminished over time, but claims that this was part of its activists’ adaptation to their changing political world.

With this book, Johnson achieves his goal of merging the often separated studies of antebellum political history and antislavery reform. In the process he makes a substantial contribution to both fields.

John Brown’s Trial, by Brian McGinty. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 350 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$27.95 cloth.

Creating the John Brown Legend: Emerson, Thoreau, Douglass, Child, and Higginson in Defense of the Raid on Harpers Ferry, by Janet Kemper Beck. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009. vii, 206 pp. Illustrations, timeline, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 paper.

Reviewer Galin Berrier is adjunct instructor in history at Des Moines Area Community College. He is the author of “The Underground Railroad in Iowa,” in *Outside In: African American History in Iowa, 1838–2000* (2001).

John Brown’s Trial, by Brian McGinty, is the first book in 150 years to deal exclusively with Brown’s trial for treason against the state of Vir-