

Book Reviews

Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s, by Tyler Anbinder. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. xv, 330 pp. Illustrations, tables, maps, notes, graph, appendix, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

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Historians have seldom accorded the Know Nothing party the attention it deserves. Instead of recognizing it as one of the most important third parties in American history, they have instead tended to treat the political career of the Know Nothings as a kind of bizarre footnote to the events of a crucial decade. Because Know Nothingism ostensibly sought to protect the nation from alien influences (particularly as represented by Catholics and immigrants), it understandably has drawn more than a little attention from students of American nativism. But these studies have not done much to clarify the critical role of the Know Nothings in the political transformations of the 1850s. State and local chroniclers have added bits and pieces to our storehouse of information, but seldom have they helped us to understand how a party that advocated proscriptive principles could attract, even temporarily, such an extensive following. In recent years, this state of affairs has begun to improve. Historians such as William Gienapp (*The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* [1987]) have critically revisited the story of party realignments during the 1850s, and, in the process, have given renewed attention to the role of the Know Nothings. Nevertheless, we are still without a general history of the Know Nothing party; and, until the publication of this study by Tyler Anbinder, we have had nothing even resembling a comprehensive survey of Know Nothingism in the North.

Nativism and Slavery makes a major contribution to our understanding of mid-nineteenth-century American politics. It is an absorbing account of the spectacular rise and fall of the Know Nothing party in the northern states, especially during the critical years of 1854-1856. Anbinder, however, not only tells the story; he makes sense of it—more sense, in fact, than any previous historian. Time after time he provides interpretive insights of the first order.

While *Nativism and Slavery* is not, as the book's dust jacket proclaims, "a major reinterpretation of the political crisis that led to the Civil War," it is clearly a work of major proportion that anyone wishing to comprehend that crisis will need to take into account.

Anbinder understands Know Nothingism to have been one of the major expressions of reform in antebellum America. It had more in common with the temperance and the antislavery movements than we are generally inclined to admit, and it regularly attracted adherents who supported those other crusades as well. Indeed, for Anbinder, the Know Nothing movement in the North was as much antislavery as it was anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant. It was this antislavery reputation which in 1854 "played the key role in transforming the Know Nothings from a small nativist organization into a national political power" (99). Paradoxically, it was the same issue—slavery—that contributed in 1855–1856 to the "speedy demise" of the Know Nothing party. In fact, Anbinder's discussion of the process whereby one-time Know Nothings moved into the ranks of the Republicans is particularly insightful. By and large, Republicans managed to recruit Know Nothings into their organization without having to make concessions of consequence to the nativist agenda. In the process, the Republican party became within a few short years the dominant party in American politics.

Occasionally, Anbinder provides grounds for minor complaint. His efforts to distinguish the views of other historians from his own result in some distortion and become a bit tiresome after awhile. He is not consistent in his use of the word "nativism." Initially, he limits it to anti-immigrant sentiment; subsequently, he uses it to encompass anti-Catholicism as well. Students of Iowa history will be disappointed to discover that the Hawkeye state figures almost not at all in Anbinder's account. On more than one occasion he appears to forget that Iowa was a part of the North and, as a result, finds it possible to assert (inaccurately) that "Ohio was the only northern state in which the Know Nothings would gain a significant number of recruits after the elections of 1854" (68).

Nevertheless, *Nativism and Slavery* is a superb account of that strange Know Nothing brew of idealism, frustration, and political opportunism that played such a vital role in the mid-nineteenth-century transformation of American politics. The book is solidly researched, cogently argued, and a delight to read. It promises to be the standard work in its field for years to come.

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